



University  
of Cyprus



ARISTOTLE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF THESSALONIKI

P.PORTO

HOGESCHOOL  
**ipabo**



VYTAUTAS  
MAGNUS  
UNIVERSITY  
MCMXXII

**apei** Associação  
de Profissionais  
de Educação de Infância

# EDUPLAY TRANSNATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

A Snapshot of Play in ECEC through  
Policies, Research, and Perspectives

Sara Barros Araújo, Sofia Magalhães,  
Sandra Nogueira & Sílvia Barros

31/12/2025



Co-funded by  
the European Union

**e  
d  
u  
p  
l  
a  
y**



## DOCUMENT INFORMATION

<b>Project title:</b>	Promoting High-Quality ECEC through Education and Play in all-day settings
<b>Project acronym:</b>	EDUPLAY
<b>Call:</b>	Call: ERASMUS-EDU-2024-PEX-TEACH-ACA Action Type: ERASMUS Lump Sum Grants
<b>Project number:</b>	101196299
<b>Document name:</b>	Eduplay Transnational Needs Assessment Report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policies, research, and perspectives
<b>Related WP and Activity:</b>	WP2: T2.7. Consolidation & Translation of the Transnational needs assessment report
<b>Deliverable:</b>	Deliverable D2.3
<b>Document authors:</b>	Sara Barros Araújo, Sofia Magalhães, Sandra Nogueira, Sílvia Barros
<b>Contributors:</b>	Cyprus: Eleni Loizou, Victoria Michaelidou, Sofia Piripitsi Greece: Maria Birbili, Georgia Natsiou Lithuania: Milda Brėdikytė, Agnė Brandišauskienė, Giedrė Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė Netherlands: Annerieke Boland, Marjan Kan, Elizabeth Wynberg Portugal: Sara Barros Araújo, Sofia Magalhães, Sandra Nogueira, Cristina Mesquita, Luís Ribeiro, Sílvia Barros

Final version prepared on 31/12/2025

© 2025, Polytechnic Institute of Porto - IPP

All rights reserved.

Written and compiled by the Polytechnic Institute of Porto - IPP

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	6
SECTION I. TRANSNATIONAL DESK RESEARCH: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT POLICIES ....	7
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	7
1.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSNATIONAL ECEC SYSTEM IN THE 5 COUNTRIES .....	7
1.3 TRANSNATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' CAREERS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT .....	9
1.4 TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES.....	12
1.4.1 Concept and definitions of play .....	12
1.4.2. Importance and goals of play .....	13
1.4.3. Recommendations/orientations on pedagogical practices .....	14
1.4.4. References to resources or support for play.....	16
1.4.5. Role of the teacher.....	17
1.4.6. Monitoring and/or evaluation practices .....	18
1.4.7. Importance of play in the document's organization.....	19
1.4.8. Terminology and translation issues .....	20
1.4.9. Transnational-specific considerations or unique initiatives .....	23
1.5. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF CURRENT POLICIES .....	24
1.6. REFERENCES .....	25
SECTION II. TRANSNATIONAL DESK RESEARCH: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE .....	29
2.1. INTRODUCTION .....	29
2.2. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC PRACTICES.....	30
2.2.1 Teacher education and training .....	30
2.2.2 Conceptions about the role of adults and beliefs about play.....	31
2.2.3 Structural and systemic constraints.....	32

2.2.4 Diversity and equity in play.....	33
2.2.5 Specific country results .....	34
2.3. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY .....	34
2.3.1 Need for initial and continuing training focused on the pedagogy of play.....	35
2.3.2 Need for sustained opportunities for reflection and cooperation between professionals .....	35
2.3.3 Need for clarification of concepts and teachers' role .....	36
2.3.4. Need for adequate resources and educational environments conducive to play.....	36
2.3.5 Specific country results .....	37
2.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS .....	37
2.4.1 Implications for ECEC practices .....	37
2.4.2 Implications for educational policy.....	38
2.4.3 Implications for future research .....	39
2.5. IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF PLAY IN ECEC .....	39
2.5.1. Concept and definitions of play .....	39
2.5.2. Documented impact/benefits of play on learning and development.....	40
2.5.3. Practices, projects, or initiatives promoting play .....	41
2.5.4. Role of professionals in creating play opportunities.....	42
2.5.5. Family participation in play .....	43
2.5.6. Research gaps.....	44
2.6. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF LITERATURE REVIEW .....	44
2.7. REFERENCES .....	46
SECTION III. TRANSNATIONAL FIELD RESEARCH: INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, FIELD OBSERVATIONS.....	54
3.1. INTRODUCTION .....	54
3.2. PROCEDURES OF THE FIELD RESEARCH .....	54

3.3. MAIN FINDINGS..... 57

    3.3.1. Challenges/barriers in incorporating play into ecec ..... 57

    3.3.2. Needs of professionals in incorporating play ..... 60

    3.3.3. Practices, projects, or initiatives promoting play ..... 62

3.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS ..... 65

3.5. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF FIELD RESEARCH ..... 67

CONCLUSIONS ..... 69

ANNEX A - Research Protocol for Desk and Field Research ..... 71

ANNEX B – Policy Documents Identified in the Review and Analysis of Current Play Policies..... 91

ANNEX C – Empirical Studies Included in the National Systematic Reviews (five countries)..... 107

ANNEX D – SPIDER Tool | Definition of Search Terms..... 110

ANNEX E – Data Extraction Template for Literature Review..... 111

ANNEX F - Research Sample and Fieldwork Participants ..... 112

ANNEX G - Data Collection Databases and Coding Frameworks..... 114

ANNEX H - Observation Tool for Pre-Service Teachers ..... 115

## INTRODUCTION

This transnational report provides a comprehensive analysis of the status of play in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal, based on the triangulation of three sources of evidence: a review of current policy frameworks, a review of national research literature, and field research involving interviews, focus groups and classroom observations. Its overarching aim is to inform the EDUPLAY project by mapping cross-national systemic conditions, professional needs and pedagogical challenges that shape the integration of play-based practices in ECEC, while identifying both convergences and context-specific divergences that are relevant for implementation at scale. The report is structured into three main sections.

- **Section I – Transnational Desk Research: Review and Analysis of Current Policies** examines key legal, regulatory and curricular documents across the five countries to explore how play is defined, valued and positioned within national policy frameworks. It analyses how play is linked to curriculum goals, educators’ roles, inclusion and equity, the availability of resources and supports, and approaches to monitoring and evaluation, while also considering terminology, translation issues and country-specific initiatives that shape policy enactment.
- **Section II – Transnational Desk Research: Review and Analysis of Research Literature** synthesizes empirical studies on play in ECEC from the five national contexts, focusing on teachers’ conceptions and roles, documented benefits of play, barriers to implementation, professional needs, pedagogical practices and initiatives, family participation, and identified research gaps. The section distils cross-country implications for practice and policy.
- **Section III – Transnational Field Research: Interviews, Focus Groups and Observations** presents cross-country findings from headteachers, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers, mapping current practices, training gaps, and the organizational and contextual factors that influence the integration of play in everyday ECEC settings.

This transnational report is grounded in a shared methodological framework, presented in Annex A, developed by the Polytechnic Institute of Porto team and agreed upon by all project partners. The framework ensured conceptual coherence across countries while allowing sensitivity to national specificities. Each partner conducted targeted national work, including a review of selected policy documents, a synthesis of the identified research literature, and field activities (interviews, focus groups and classroom observations), which resulted in five national reports (Araújo et al., 2025, in Portugal; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025, in Greece; Boland et al., 2025, in the Netherlands; Brėdikytė et al., 2025, in Lithuania; Loizou et al., 2025, in Cyprus). Accordingly, this transnational synthesis does not aim to represent the full empirical reality of each country. Rather, it offers a systematic interpretation and comparative reading of the national reports, with the purpose of illuminating cross-national patterns, convergences and divergences in relation to play in ECEC, while acknowledging the contextualized and interpretative nature of the evidence.

## SECTION I. TRANSNATIONAL DESK RESEARCH: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT POLICIES

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This section examines how play is addressed within current policy frameworks for ECEC in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal, based on a thematic analysis of policy documentation gathered across the five countries (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025). The analysis covers a total of 67 key documents, including laws, curriculum guidelines, specific guidelines/brochures supporting curriculum implementation, policy recommendations, and governmental reports, distributed as follows: Cyprus ( $n = 15$ ), Greece ( $n = 8$ ), Lithuania ( $n = 10$ ), the Netherlands ( $n = 10$ ), and Portugal ( $n = 23$ ) (full list of documents, per country, is available in Annex B).

The section presents a brief introduction to each country's ECEC systems, as well as a synthesis of core characteristics of ECEC teachers' careers and professional development in each country. Next, a transnational analysis of current play policies is presented, encompassing central themes: how play is defined and conceptualized, how national policies frame play in relation to educational goals, teacher roles, available support and resources, and evaluation and monitoring practices. Country-specific terminology and initiatives are considered to highlight the unique features of national contexts.

### 1.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSNATIONAL ECEC SYSTEM IN THE 5 COUNTRIES

Across Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal, ECEC reflects distinct governance arrangements, regulatory traditions and provider landscapes, while sharing a common orientation toward access expansion, quality improvement and play-based pedagogy.

Lithuania operates an integrated ECEC system within the education sector under the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, with no division between care and education at the ministerial level. The Law on Education (No. I-1489) and national curricula for pre-school (MoESS, 2023) and pre-primary (MoESS, 2022) provide the regulatory framework. ECEC is almost entirely center-based and delivered in kindergartens, school-multifunctional centers, general schools and departments within higher or vocational institutions. Pre-school education covers children from birth until entry into the one-year compulsory pre-primary program; municipalities guarantee a place from age three and, under a joint ministerial procedure, pre-school may become compulsory for children in low-SES contexts. Pre-primary is compulsory in the calendar year children turn six (with optional entry at five), primary education begins at seven and compulsory education continues until sixteen. Municipalities plan and manage provision, organize admissions and co-finance institutions alongside state grants.

Provision is predominantly public, complemented by a growing private sector eligible for per-child subsidies; around 89% of expenditure on pre-primary education is publicly funded.

Cyprus presents a split system comprising a pre-school sub-sector supervised by the Social Welfare Services of the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and a pre-primary sub-sector under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth. The pre-school care system includes nurseries and home-based childminders serving children from birth to age four, regulated through instruments such as the Children's Act, the Nursery Schools Regulations 2011 and the Private Schools Act 2019; providers are not required to follow a formal curriculum but must notify authorities of their daily programs. Public, community and private nurseries co-exist, with community provision eligible for state subsidies. The pre-primary system covers ages three to six in public, community and private kindergartens; compulsory attendance now begins at age four years and eight months for children who reach that age before 1 September, following Law 30(I)/2024, and is being extended progressively toward two compulsory years by 2031. Staffing and group size regulations are detailed and age-specific, and local authorities play an active role alongside the state and parents' associations in planning and operating provision.

Greece also operates a split system. Services for children under four falls under the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs and include municipal infant care centers, infant/childcare centers and childcare centers regulated by the Standard Regulation of Operation (Government Gazette FEK B' 4249/05.12.2017, as amended). These settings develop their own programs within regulatory guidelines, emphasizing free play, group activities and daily routines, and include public, private and non-profit providers. For children aged four to six, pre-school education ("nipiagogio") forms part of primary education under the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports, is provided free of charge in public settings, follows a national program of studies and has been compulsory for two years from age four following recent reforms. The literature cited in the national report highlights consequences associated with split governance, including weaker regulation and investment in childcare, workforce undervaluation, discontinuities for families and tendencies toward *schoolification* that may reduce time for play.

The Netherlands maintains a split model, with childcare for children aged 0–4 overseen by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and education from age four under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Centre-based provision consists of privately operated childcare centers offering full-day care and playgroups for children aged 2½ to 4, including preschools for underprivileged children and those with language delays, often supported or regulated at municipal level. All provisions require government accreditation. At age four, children may enter publicly funded primary school, where the first two years (kindergarten) typically group four- to six-year-olds together; compulsory schooling begins at five, and participation at age four is nearly universal. Approximately 94% of children attend some form of daycare or playgroup before primary school. Pedagogically, both

phases are characterized by a holistic, play-based approach. There is no prescribed national curriculum; instead, broad intended outcomes (“kerndoelen”) are defined nationally and translated by the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) into non-mandatory content strands widely used by preschools and schools, alongside an optional national pedagogical framework for childcare.

Portugal organizes ECEC as a split model in which provision for children under three is overseen by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security and delivered mainly through private non-profit and for-profit centers regulated primarily for accessibility, health and safety. Pre-school education for children aged three to six falls under the Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation and is recognized in law as the first stage of the education system, guided by the Curricular Guidelines for Pre-school Education and anchored in Law No. 46/1986 and subsequent amendments. Universal access to pre-school has been progressively expanded, with public provision integrated into school clusters and offered free of charge from age three, subject to vacancies in public provision. Recent measures for the 0–3 sector include free access to daycare and family daycare services and the introduction of national pedagogical guidelines for infant-toddler settings, alongside Decree-Law No. 105/2025 assigning responsibility for the pedagogical component across the 0–6 continuum to the education ministry. Participation rates are high (94.1% for ages three to six and 55.2% below age three), and the Autonomous Region of Madeira operates an integrated 0–6 system.

Across the five countries, ECEC is structured in two broad phases that differentiate an earlier, predominantly care-oriented and generally non-compulsory stage, from a later pre-school or pre-primary stage that prepares children for primary education. Curricular regulation is strongest in the pre-school years, with national curricula in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal and non-prescriptive national frameworks in the Netherlands. For children under three, pedagogical guidance varies across split systems: Greece has no national curriculum, the Netherlands applies optional national guidance, Portugal has introduced dedicated pedagogical guidelines, and Cyprus requires notification of daily programs without a formal curriculum, while Lithuania’s integrated model embeds both stages within the education system under a single ministry. Participation is consistently high in the pre-school years, enrolment below age three is more uneven, and mixed public, community and private provision characterizes all five systems, with municipalities and local authorities playing particularly prominent roles in Lithuania, Portugal and Cyprus.

### 1.3 TRANSNATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS’ CAREERS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood teachers’ careers in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal are organized through diverse qualification pathways, professional development arrangements and

career structures, reflecting national ECEC governance contexts while facing similar challenges in recruitment, retention and professional recognition.

In Cyprus, early childhood careers are differentiated between the care sector for children under three (nurseries and home-based childminders) and kindergartens for children aged three to six, with distinct qualification routes and employment conditions. Initial professional education is mainly provided through four-year university degrees in Pre-Primary Education or Early Childhood Studies, complemented in care-based settings by a two-year Nursery Education diploma as the minimum qualification. Staff qualifications are legally regulated across settings. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is coordinated primarily by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute and consists of compulsory and optional seminars and school-based training; participation is largely voluntary and often takes place outside working hours, with greater employer dependence in the private sector. Workforce retention remains challenging due to low wages, limited recognition and restricted career progression, particularly outside public provision, although newly appointed public principals receive compulsory in-service leadership training.

In Greece, kindergarten educators qualify through four-year university programmes (240 ECTS) offered by university departments of Early Childhood Education and may work in public or private kindergartens or progress to administrative roles. Their remuneration and employment conditions are aligned with those of primary school teachers, with teaching time set at 25 hours per week. CPD combines mandatory and voluntary components delivered through schools, regional authorities, higher education institutions, the Institute of Educational Policy and teachers' unions. Nursery and childcare educators are also degree-qualified and employed under civil-service conditions in the social welfare sector, with legislation recognising introductory training and ongoing CPD as a right. Key challenges include workforce ageing, declining birth rates, persistently high child–staff ratios, increasing administrative demands and constrained salaries and pensions.

Lithuania operates a unified and highly professionalised model in which all early childhood and pre-primary pedagogues must hold at least a bachelor's degree, a requirement in place since 2009. Initial preparation typically consists of 3–4-year degree programmes (180–210 ECTS) with a strong emphasis on developmental psychology, inclusive education and play-based pedagogy. Teacher education is framed as a continuum linking initial preparation and CPD, with teachers entitled and obliged to undertake regular training, including mandatory CPD every three years in nationally defined priority areas. Career progression follows a national ladder linked to appraisal, responsibilities and salary supplements. Despite this structured framework, Lithuania faces teacher shortages, an ageing workforce and low perceived social status, alongside relatively modest pay, even though intrinsic motivation and overall job satisfaction are reported as high.

In the Netherlands, qualification requirements differ across the split system: centre-based childcare for children aged 0–4 is mainly staffed by professionals with vocational-level qualifications, while teachers in primary education, including kindergarten, must hold a bachelor's degree. Specialisation in early childhood is optional, and many professionals pursue further training while in service. Staff working in playgroups for underprivileged children must complete additional programme-specific training. Both childcare and primary education face significant workforce shortages, particularly in urban and disadvantaged areas, with shortages more clearly documented in primary education than in childcare.

In Portugal, early childhood teachers are regulated under the Teaching Career Statute and must hold a master's degree to enter the profession. Initial preparation follows a two-cycle model comprising a bachelor's degree and a specialised master's degree, aligned with nationally defined professional profiles. Infants' rooms are often staffed by other childcare professionals. Career progression depends on the sector and is influenced, in the public sector, by experience, performance evaluation and CPD, which is both a right and an obligation under the Basic Law on the Education System, although national priorities do not always align closely with ECEC-specific needs. Despite high qualification requirements, early childhood teachers report lower professional status than teachers in compulsory education, alongside salary stagnation, heavy workloads and persistent staffing shortages, which have led to temporary recruitment measures and constrained access to CPD.

Across the five countries, arrangements for initial education, CPD and career progression closely reflect broader ECEC governance models and the distinction between care and education. Integrated or education-led systems, most clearly represented by Lithuania, tend to set uniform degree-level entry requirements across the ECEC workforce and embed CPD within structured career ladders linked to appraisal and salary progression. In contrast, split systems show greater differentiation between staff working with children under three and those in pre-primary or kindergarten settings, both in qualification levels and in access to CPD and career advancement.

Despite these structural differences, several common challenges emerge. All countries report difficulties in attracting and retaining early childhood professionals, linked to comparatively low remuneration, heavy workloads, limited career progression and uneven professional recognition, particularly in the care-oriented segments of ECEC. Workforce ageing and shortages are evident in multiple contexts, while CPD is widely recognised as important but is unevenly resourced, variably mandatory and not always aligned with the specific pedagogical needs of early childhood settings. Overall, the national profiles point to a shared tension between rising qualification expectations and persistent constraints on status, working conditions and long-term sustainability of the ECEC workforce.

## 1.4 TRANSNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

### 1.4.1 CONCEPT AND DEFINITIONS OF PLAY

The policy analyses carried out found variations on the definition and conceptualization of play across the five countries. The Pre-School Curriculum Guidelines from Lithuania and Portugal offer explicit definitions of play. The Lithuanian guidelines use two interrelated concepts, playfulness and play, the former being defined as "a child's relationship with the world" and "a feature of all their activities and learning" (Ministry of Education, Science and Sports [MoESS], 2023). Moreover, playfulness constitutes one of the key principles of preschool education and an integral part of exploration, experimentation, imagination, and creativity (MoESS, 2023). Terms used in Lithuanian guidelines include "playfulness", "sensomotor play", "directorial play", "role-play", "sociodramatic role-play", "imaginary play", "narrative play", but no reference is made to "free play". The Portuguese guidelines also emphasize play as a foundational principle of early childhood education. This document defines play as a spontaneous activity of the child, characterized by intrinsic interest, pleasure, freedom of action, imagination, and exploration (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Play is described as a natural and essential activity for learning and development, which emphasizes its role in fostering autonomy, creativity, and social interaction.

While no single formal definition is presented in policy documents from Cyprus, play is described through its forms, types, and purposes, with play being described as the principal vehicle for holistic development and a mechanism to promote quality, inclusion, and equity (Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth [MoESY], 2025). The curriculum differentiates between free play and structured play. While in free play children choose activities, materials, partners, and duration; during structured play, the teacher has a focal role, guiding and extending the play (MoESY, 2024). Policy analysis undertaken in Greece found no stable or consistent formal definition of play across Greek curricula and the accompanying Educator Guides. The national curriculum states that "Play remains the main 'avenue' for learning and development in kindergarten, as it is at the heart of the Curriculum either as a free activity or as a key component of the character of the structured activities in the context of the explorations taking place in kindergarten" (Penderi et al., 2022, p. 51).

Finally, the exploration of policy documents published in the Netherlands found scarce references to play, with no references being identified in the legislation for both ECEC systems. Exceptions are documents that provide curriculum advice for ECEC (Fukkink, 2017; SLO, 2025) and evidence-informed recommendations for supporting a good start in primary education at age 4 for all children (Jepma & Vander Heyden, 2022). These documents describe play as an important way for young children to explore and make sense of the world; as a spontaneous, voluntary, and meaningful activity that drives children's learning and development. Similar to the Cypriot curriculum, an explicit distinction is made between free play (child-led open exploration) and structured play (guided or supported by adults).

In sum, policy analyses revealed a cross-national panorama characterized by differences regarding the way play is defined and conceptualized, with variations on the clarity, consistency, and on the forms and types of play highlighted.

#### 1.4.2. IMPORTANCE AND GOALS OF PLAY

In line with the previous section, policy analyses indicates that play is positioned as a central activity in young children's lives across all five countries, albeit with differences in definition, emphasis and conceptual framing. National curricula from Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal, as well as curriculum recommendations from The Netherlands agree on considering play a fundamental "avenue" for children's learning and development. Moreover, curriculum guidelines for pre-school education in Cyprus and Portugal recognize play as a fundamental right, enshrined on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) and closely associated with children's wellbeing. Greek curriculum guidelines stress playfulness as a pedagogical orientation, while Dutch policies describe play "as a central way in which young children explore and understand the world" (Boland et al, 2025, p. 11). National guidelines in Lithuania emphasize that children's need to play must be met, specifying that this need is associated with children having freedom, sufficient time, space, playmates, and the opportunity to create a children's culture through shared play.

The five national reports consistently highlight the central role of play in supporting children's holistic development. The ECEC curriculum in Cyprus emphasizes dispositions and competencies that are cultivated through rich play environments, such as curiosity, creativity, persistence, problem-solving, risk-taking, and the ability to cope with mistakes (MoESY, 2024). Portuguese policies foresee play as integral to meaningful learning, identity formation, autonomy, critical thinking, and democratic participation. Lithuanian policies emphasise that children learn through play and that children's engagement in diverse forms of play (e.g., sensorimotor exploration games, imaginative sociodramatic role-play, didactic games) is essential for overall development and the acquisition of specific skills. Moreover, the Lithuanian national curriculum is unique within the consortium in highlighting the importance of supporting children in developing play skills. Greece's current curriculum conceptualizes play both as a learning objective and as a means of achieving educational outcomes, whether through free play or as an integral component of structured activities. The national report from the Netherlands acknowledges that play strongly shapes children's overall development and learning across cognitive, social-emotional and psychomotor domains. Dutch policy-related documents identify key developmental areas supported through play, including motor development, early numeracy, emerging mathematical thinking, language, social interaction, and artistic expression. Through play, children engage with and learn about major systems (biological, physical, earth-space, technical, mathematical).

The five national reports converge in acknowledging play as a strong pedagogical strategy. The Greek curriculum, grounded in a theoretical framing of *playfulness*, presents a dual conceptualization of play,

both as an objective and as a means for designing learning situations. Furthermore, the Greek document offers a distinctive perspective by positioning play as an “assessment context”, allowing for gaining information about the way children use the available objects, develop their ideas and communicate. Cyprus policy documents acknowledge the substantial value of play pedagogy and the creation of a rich play learning environment, which “(a) offers opportunities for engagement in all types of play (e.g., symbolic, sociodramatic or imaginative, creative, constructive, exploratory-experimental, kinesthetic, or rule-based); (b) connects learning to children’s everyday experiences, interests, and needs; (c) provides access to learning in a cross-curricular and interdisciplinary way; (d) allows each child to make their own choices, following their own pace; and (e) is combined with appropriate support, guidance, and encouragement from adults.” (Loizou et al., 2025, p. 15). The Lithuanian report similarly conceptualises play both as a learning context and as a skill that should be intentionally practiced and developed. In either case, the adult’s role is quite relevant through attentive observation and sensitive engagement with play. The Portuguese report also acknowledges the central role of the pre-school teacher in organizing inclusive environments that enable equitable participation through play, while the Dutch report emphasises hands-on, experiential approaches that allow children to explore, experiment and learn about different systems in the world through play.

Reports from Cyprus and Portugal further stress the contribution of play to the promotion of social inclusion, equity and participation. Indeed, policy documents from the Cyprus Ministry explicitly link play-centred preschool experiences to social inclusion and as a preventative measure against educational disparities. Likewise, the Portuguese report brings inclusion and equity to the forefront, with play supporting interactions among children from diverse cultural, linguistic, socio-economic backgrounds. In this perspective, play is framed as a democratic social space where children negotiate roles, responsibilities, and relationships. More broadly, play is recognized as an essential dimension of childhood citizenship, with a relevant role in identity formation and democratic participation, as children negotiate rules, share responsibilities, and build social belonging through play.

### 1.4.3. RECOMMENDATIONS/ORIENTATIONS ON PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

The analysis of the five national reports on the policy documents revealed that play is recognized as a central element in early childhood learning and holistic development; however, they differ in how explicitly this written principle is translated into pedagogical practice. In Cyprus, national policies provide guidelines grounded in a play-centred pedagogy that includes project work, play-based approaches, learning centres (e.g., atelier, dollhouse, thematic play areas), and a balance between free and structured activities. Time for play is institutionalized in national guidelines, with a minimum of 80 minutes allocated to free and structured play in the morning, 40 minutes to outdoor play, and 40 minutes to free and structured play at midday, while adopting a flexible approach that remains sensitive to children’s interests.

Lithuania provides detailed descriptions of the steps involved in developing play skills in one section of The Pre-School Achievement Inventory (PAI) (MoESS, 2023). Emphasis is placed in the support of teachers to the development of play skills by engaging sensitively in children's play when appropriate, constantly observing and documenting children's play, particularly the dynamics of play and the pedagogical strategies that encourage growth in play skills. Portuguese policy documents similarly acknowledge the importance of pedagogical scaffolding in play, emphasizing teachers' responsibility for creating appropriate conditions of time, space, and resources to support free play, while also integrating guided and structured play to enrich learning (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Teachers are positioned as facilitators who observe, plan, and intervene thoughtfully to ensure that play contributes meaningfully to each child's development. Documents produced to support the implementation of curriculum guidelines highlight the investigative, creative, and exploratory nature of play, encouraging playful inquiry, problem-solving, and holistic development across educational contexts (Cardona et al., 2021; Conde et al., 2017).

The report from the Netherlands identifies recommendations on pedagogical practices in ECEC in most policy documents analysed, while recognizing that not always an explicit reference to play is made. Recommendations include: the need for settings to use play and learning materials tailored to toddlers' developmental stage; to design group rooms and learning/play environments attractive and suitably challenging; and organizing both free and guided play to be organized with appropriate tasks and clear explanations (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025b); the importance of a balanced pedagogical approach that combines teacher-directed play with opportunities for free play, in which children make their choices (Fukkink et al., 2017); the need for teachers to guide interactions sensitively and promote peer engagement.

Despite the recommendations in the different countries, the report from Cyprus offers valuable insights into the tensions and gaps between the formal recognition of play in ECEC public policies and its translation into practice. The report emphasizes: "there is no systematic practical guidance on how to support play in order to achieve specific learning outcomes, nor any institutional framework or policy document that clearly regulates how play should be implemented in preschools" (Loizou et al. 2025, p. 16). As a result, responsibility for implementing play practices is primarily left to individual educators, which contributes to variability in the quality of play-based experiences in ECEC. The report from the Netherlands also acknowledges shortcomings in the translation of policy principles into pedagogical practices, noting that teaching practices often fail to align with the developmental needs of young children (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025a), alongside structural constraints such as large group sizes, inadequate professional preparation in early childhood education, especially regarding multilingualism (Onderwijsraad, 2023).

The Greek report made visible the discrepancies between policy initiatives, specifically the tension between the emphasis the Greek curriculum places on play and Ministry directives, such as operational timetable in kindergartens that prescribe strict playtime (Eurydice Unit Greece, 2022) or the fragmented approach to supporting children with special needs that fails to provide educators with the necessary context for inclusive play opportunities and spaces (Lenakakis et al., 2018).

This analytical exercise suggests that, despite the rhetorical endorsement of play-based pedagogy in policy documents, an attentive focus is needed on the clarity, coherence, and sustainability of pedagogical guidance and professional support systems in order to ensure meaningful and equitable play-based practices in ECEC.

#### 1.4.4. REFERENCES TO RESOURCES OR SUPPORT FOR PLAY

The references to resources to support play follow the tendency identified in the previous section. Overall, the national reports acknowledge a lack of resources to support play in everyday practices, mirroring the persistent gap between the policy discourse and the concrete conditions available to professionals and settings to implement play practices.

The report from Cyprus states that, despite the national curriculum providing general guidance, exemplars, and suggested organizational formats for play, there is a lack of publicly accessible resources that offer concrete and practical strategies for implementing play pedagogy (MoESY, 2024). Furthermore, although in-service professional development initiatives are provided by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, including training modules and workshops focused on play, as well as EU-funded projects and Erasmus+ initiatives promoting teachers' engagement with innovative play-based methodologies, these opportunities remain limited and unevenly distributed across regions and sectors (Loizou, 2024). A similarly critical stance is identified in the Greek report, which points to existing policies (e.g., those concerning school yards and play spaces, child-related issues, and the National Action Plan for the Rights of Children) that are not aligned under a unified vision and guidelines that define their roles and responsibilities in supporting children's play (Birbili & Natsiou, 2025). This misalignment is also evident in the lack of play policies at the local level, as well as the insufficient funding for developing and maintaining play spaces in the Greek context.

The Lithuanian report outlines investments in the development of resources, such as the educational portal of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, and a monitoring tool. However, it clearly states that targeted professional development training initiatives on play for teachers are sporadic or non-existent. The lack of in-service professional development opportunities for implementing play in daily practices is also identified in the Portuguese context. Portuguese policies and regulations emphasise that supporting play requires sustained investment in teacher education, CPD, and adequate resources. While national CPD priorities include supervision, inclusion, and innovative uses of play (DGAE, 2024), concrete CPD initiatives remain very scarce. The lack of references for specific resources in policy documents is also acknowledged in the report from the Netherlands. An exception is the website of the SLO, which provides an overview of different resources to support play and ECEC.

In synthesis, the national reports identify tensions between national policies on play and the concrete measures to guarantee its implementation. Thus, a lack of CPD initiatives on play practices is acknowledged in the reports from Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal, while the scarcity of open-

access widely available pedagogical resources is highlighted in the reports from Cyprus and the Netherlands.

#### 1.4.5. ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Across the national reports, the teacher is recognized as a core supporter and enabler of children's play. However, the different dimensions of this role are distinctly characterized in terms of intentionality, orientation, and pedagogical framing.

One of the key aspects of the educator's role relates to responsibility in the design of a pedagogical environment that facilitates children's play. The Cypriot ECEC curriculum states that teachers are expected to design stimulating and developmentally appropriate learning environments and foster a positive social climate, as well as adapt daily routines to children's idiosyncrasies (MoESY, 2024). The 2003 Greek curriculum's Educator Guide (Dafermou et al., 2006) also refers to the teacher's responsibility for "planning flexible play spaces" and "ensuring enough time for children's play" (p. 71). Likewise, the Portuguese Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) emphasize the importance of creating stimulating environments, enriched with diverse materials. The Portuguese report brings unique recommendations on the teachers' role in supporting outdoor and risky play under safe conditions, promoting autonomy, exploration and inclusion (UNICEF Portugal, 2020). The report from the Netherlands highlights that the teacher's role is primarily to create a pedagogical environment that balances care with development-oriented interaction, involving intentional environment design, providing space for free exploration and guided activities that stimulate children's development (Fukkink et al., 2017). The report from Lithuania provides a more generic approach to this role, emphasizing that teachers follow the Pre-School Curriculum Guidelines (PCG) and Pre-School Achievement Inventory (PAI) that stress the need to create conditions for children to play and to develop their play skills.

The majority of reports acknowledges the centrality of the teachers' role during play, reinforcing the quality of interactions as a cornerstone of play-based practices. Transversally, the five national reports converge on the need to mobilize a diverse and complex set of pedagogical competences during children's play. However, national policies show differences in the depth with which they address the teachers' role during play, with the reports from Cyprus and the Netherlands demonstrating a more explicit and sustained focus on this aspect. Thus, the report from Cyprus states that teachers "observe, organize, mediate, guide, and participate when appropriate, using these interactions to assess abilities, provide feedback, and enhance learning experiences." (Loizou et al., 2025, p. 18). The report from the Netherlands likewise provides explicit recommendations on the role of the teachers during play, pointing to a critical balance that should be created between children's autonomy and adult's input and scaffolding (Boland et al., 2025). The Dutch policies bring centrally the concept of "guided participation" to refer to adults' active involvement in children's meaningful

activities, enabling children’s learning through social interaction and shared play experiences (Fukking, 2017). These policy documents also recognize that a play-rich pedagogy requires teachers to offer relevant feedback on children’s play and learning processes.

The reports from Greece, Lithuania, and Portugal present less explicit guidelines on teachers’ role in play compared to other countries. The Greek curriculum does address the educator’s role and even proposes multiple roles such as instructor, playmaker, guide, and evaluator (Penderi et al., 2022, p. 132). The Portuguese report acknowledges that teachers observe, plan, and intervene to support play. Similarly, the Lithuanian report focuses on teachers’ responsibility for planning and creating conditions for play. Yet, these reports provide less detailed guidance on the teachers’ role during play.

The national reports highlight the teacher’s responsibility for attentive and systematic observation of children’s play. The Cypriot report stresses the importance of “listening” to children and interpreting their expressions as part of a broader process of systematic data collection and analysis which informs curriculum planning. In the same direction, the Portuguese report states that teacher’s intentionality is defined by careful observation and planning, with observation being a core process to connect play with curricular goals (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Moreover, play observation is recognized as a tool for documenting learning and guiding pedagogical decisions. The report from the Netherlands also attributes critical importance to careful observation and formative assessment, both in ECEC contexts for children aged 2 to 4, and for children aged 4 to 6, as a privileged means to balance play-based learning with targeted instruction, while avoiding “school-like” approaches (Boland et al., 2025). As stated before, the Greek curriculum recognizes play as an assessment context, as do the Lithuanian guidelines, which emphasize the need for continuous observation of the children’s play. In fact, Lithuania is the only country of the consortium in which a specific assessment instrument, the Pre-School Achievement Inventory (PAI) is used to monitor, among others, the development of play skills by children.

Importantly, issues of professional development emerge in some of the reports when characterizing the teacher’s role. The report from Cyprus positions teachers as educator-researchers who, through documentation, reflection and collaboration, contribute to knowledge development and educational research within a professional community. The Portuguese report also emphasizes reflective practice as a cornerstone of professional intentionality and professional development, while policy frameworks from the Netherlands emphasize a dual process that combines formative assessment with inspection standards. In this section, the reports from Greece and Lithuania mention aspects of teachers’ professional development in general, but do not provide specific guidance or recommendations on professional development directly related to their role in supporting play.

#### 1.4.6. MONITORING AND/OR EVALUATION PRACTICES

The analyses of the national reports on monitoring and evaluation practices reveal a diverse panorama, ranging from country policies that explicitly recommend formative assessment and evaluation practices to policies that offer a limited guidance on these processes.

ECEC policy frameworks in Cyprus and Portugal strongly advocate formative assessment and evaluation. Both countries draw heavily on observation and documentation to monitor children's progress, pedagogical practices and overall program development. The Cypriot report details some ways to support the formative assessment, such as portfolios, photographs, individual progress reports, and ongoing informal observations throughout the year. The Portuguese report, for instance, refers that "Observation is part of a reflective cycle of observing, planning, acting, and evaluating, where documentation supports understanding and intentional decision-making. In this view, monitoring play becomes a reflective act that links spontaneous activity with curricular aims, recognizing the child as an active and competent learner" (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016, pp. 10–11, 13–14). Furthermore, the *Planning and Evaluation in Preschool Education* (Cardona et al., 2021), a document to support the implementation of the Portuguese pre-school curriculum guidelines, explicitly recommends incorporating play into formative assessment, and encourages teachers to document play episodes as evidence of creativity, self-regulation, and social participation. The Greek report addresses play as an assessment context, allowing for collecting information on children's development, communication, and the way they use objects and develop ideas (Dafermou et al., 2006; Penderi et al., 2022).

The monitoring and evaluation practices that are presented in the Lithuanian and Dutch reports stress the use of structured observation instruments. In the former, the Pre-School Achievement Inventory (PAI) supports teachers in systematically monitoring, documenting, and recording each child's and group of children's educational achievements and progress, using it to plan further educational steps for each child. The PAI defines the ability to play as (1) ability to stick to the role assumed in the play; (2) ability to coordinate play actions with other players; (3) ability to organize the play space; (4) ability to create a play storyline (MoESS, 2023). The teacher continuously monitors and documents children's ability to play, with PAI being usually filled out twice a year (October and May). In the Netherlands, the Education Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025b) foresees the monitoring of children's development by preschools as a basis for a cyclic process of quality development. As stated previously, the SLO (2025) provides an overview of available observation instruments for carrying out developmental assessment. In contrast to Lithuania's PAI, Dutch instruments either do not include or only marginally address children's play development. Overall, despite existing orientations regarding monitoring and evaluation in ECEC contexts, the analyses of national reports reveal the limited existence of specific guidelines, and the lack of comprehensive national policies focused on the monitoring and evaluation of play in ECEC contexts.

#### 1.4.7. IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN THE DOCUMENT'S ORGANIZATION

Desk research carried out in the five countries reveals that play has become more prominent in policy documents in recent years. However, this tendency is largely confined to national curriculum

guidelines, with limited or no explicit attention to play in other public policy frameworks. Thus, in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal, play is given due relevance in specific and detailed sections of the national curriculum guidelines and/or throughout the entire document. More specifically, the Cypriot curriculum demonstrates a strong structural embedding of play, acknowledging it as a core organizing principle, while also dedicating specific sections explicitly to play (e.g., “Play,” “Learning Centres,” “Free Play,” and “Structured Play,”) (MoESY, 2024, 2025). The new Greek curriculum follows a similar tendency, with greater prominence afforded to play, as reflected in the frequency of references to play and playful learning, as well as in detailed discussions on what playful learning is (e.g., section “Playful Learning”, what play means for young children, how educators can promote playful learning, what the “capacity to play” means, what a ‘play scenario’ is (Penderi et al., 2022). The Portuguese curriculum guidelines (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) also include sections where play is discussed in detail, including its role in learning, observation, planning, and assessment. Play is positioned as a key organizing principle in ECEC that informs the overall pedagogical approach. Additionally, Decree-Laws No. 240/2001 and 241/2001 refer to play in relation to pedagogical practice and to the professional profile of ECEC teachers, play does not occupy a structurally central role in the organization of these documents. Less prominence of play is identified in the Lithuanian policy documents, with only three sources explicitly referring to play. The Pre-primary School Curriculum (MoESS, 2022) regards play exclusively as an educational instrument, that is, as a didactic play form. In the Netherlands, in the three documents referred to in Section 1.4.1, play is found throughout the document, explicitly acknowledging its relevance in ECEC.

#### 1.4.8. TERMINOLOGY AND TRANSLATION ISSUES

National reports point to the existence of culturally bounded terminology, which suggests a careful approach in the translation of terms in the semantic domain of “play”. Analysis of some of these reports also identified variations in terminology within countries themselves, which turns the translation of specific terminology into a complex and sensitive process. Because this section is strongly rooted in national particularities, we opted to include more extensive excerpts from the national reports.

Thus, the Cypriot report (Loizou et al., 2025, pp. 19-20) states: *“Policy texts in Cyprus are primarily produced in Greek; official English translations or summaries are available but sometimes use varying terminologies for play-related concepts (e.g., “free play,” “structured play,” “play-based learning”). These translation nuances can affect comparative reading and interpretation by international audiences. The curriculum’s Greek phrasing that children “learn through exploration, play, and dialogue” carries connotations of rights, process, and pedagogy that should be carefully retained in translations to preserve the integrated conception of play as both a right and a method (MoESY, 2024)”*.

Although it does not refer to translation issues, the Greek report (Birbili & Natsiou, 2025) presents a set of key-terms used in the Greek curriculum that are central to understanding the conceptualisation presented in the country's public curriculum documents. Specifically, the author emphasises the *“detailed discussions on what playful learning is (...), what the “capacity to play” means (...), what a ‘play scenario’ is. (...) A relatively new concept is the ‘play scenario’, which is extensively used to indicate that the scenario can “function as the bridge between free play and organised play and children’s inquiries in the learning centres and areas of play in the classroom” (Penderi et al. 2022b, p. 202)*”.

The Lithuanian report (Brėdikytė et al., 2025, pp. 16-17) provides a particularly relevant socio-historical context for understanding the specificities of Lithuanian play-related terminology:

“Some of the terms used in Lithuanian to describe play and play types differ from the terms used in many other countries and in English. In Vygotsky's terms, this is closely related to changes in the country's history that are still evident today in the use of certain concepts, perceptions, and everyday practices. Play is one such phenomenon. After 1944, kindergartens and the entire education system in Lithuania were guided by curriculums developed in Moscow, so the concept of play and types of play were based on Russian formulations and were translated from Russian. The play was said to be the first form of autonomous activity that develops a child's independence. At the same time, it was said that adults should guide children through developmental stages. In practice, many teachers began "training" children by assigning roles and requiring them to follow given play scripts. According to Shchedrovitsky (1995), this type of play activity resembles "pure pedagogical formation."

After regaining independence in 1991, Lithuania's approach to children's play evolved into a blend of various theoretical perspectives, pedagogical systems, and educational practices, a trend that continues to this day. This is particularly evident in the treatment of "free play". In fact, the concept of free play did not exist in Soviet preschool pedagogy, and it was not included in the daily schedules of children's groups. Children were permitted to play for 10–15 minutes between organized activities or routines. Perhaps because of this historical tradition, Lithuania still has a culture of direct adult guidance during playtime. The most common type of play observed in groups is educational, didactic play, which is a structured activity. Free play causes concern among teachers, who constantly emphasize that "children do not know how to play on their own."

The terms used to describe the types of play are: "directorial play" – “režisūrinis žaidimas”; "role-play" – “vaidmenų žaidimas”; “sociodramatic role-play” – “siužetinis vaidmenų žaidimas”; “collective directorial play” – “kolektyvinis režisūrinis žaidimas”; "narrative play” – naratyvinis žaidimas”.

The criteria for evaluating the quality of different types of play may also vary slightly. For example, advanced role play abilities are evaluated based on four important criteria: (1) ability to stick to the role assumed in the play ("gebėjimas žaidime laikytis prisiimto vaidmens"); (2) ability to coordinate play actions with other player ("gebėjimas koordinuoti žaidimo veiksmus su kitais žaidėjais"); (3) ability

to organize the play space ("gebėjimas įvaldyti ir organizuoti žaidimo erdvę"); (4) ability to create a play storyline ("gebėjimas kurti žaidimo siužetą")."

The report from Portugal (Araújo et al., 2025, pp. 13-14) acknowledges some terminological variations within the country, as well as the need to preserve cultural idiosyncrasies in translation:

"Portuguese educational documents refer to "brincar" (play) and "jogo" (play/game) with varying levels of conceptual clarity assigning different pedagogical meanings to each. This distinction is often unclear or inconsistently applied, as the two terms are frequently used interchangeably across policy and curricular texts. The Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016) stand out as an exception, explicitly defining "brincar" as a spontaneous, symbolic, and imaginative activity that is natural to children and central to their development, while "jogo" refers to structured, rule-based activities with specific goals (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). However, this conceptual differentiation is not consistently reflected in other official educational documents. References in Decree-Law No. 241/2001 and in the Basic Law of the Education System (Law No. 46/1986) use the term "jogo" more generically, encompassing both structured activities and spontaneous play. This lack of terminological precision blurs conceptual boundaries and may weaken the pedagogical recognition of "brincar" as a fundamental context for children's learning and holistic development, as emphasized in the Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (Lopes da Silva et al., 2016). Decree-Law No. 241/2001 and the Framework Law of the Education System (Law No. 46/1986) refer to "jogo" and "atividade lúdica" (ludic activity) as pedagogical tools, but do not elaborate on the broader concept of "brincar". The Pedagogical Guide for Inclusion and Promotion of Well-being (Cardona et al., 2021) and the Pedagogical Guidelines for Centre-Based Infant-Toddler Education (Marques et al., 2024) extend the notion of "brincar" to early identity and communicative experiences, reinforcing its relevance from birth. The Gender and Citizenship Guide for Pre-school Education (Cardona et al., 2015) highlight the social and interpretive dimensions of play, including how it reflects gender roles and inclusion dynamics. From a translation perspective, maintaining the "brincar/jogo" distinction is important to preserve the pedagogical and cultural specificity of Portuguese early childhood education. The concept of "brincar" reflects a holistic approach that integrates imagination, expression, and learning."

Finally, the Dutch report (Boland et al., 2025, pp. 14-15) provides a clear account of play-related terminology used in the Netherlands:

"In Dutch, different terminology is used to describe play, depending on the balance between child initiative and teacher initiative. If children play on their own initiative, and follow their own choice, the term free play ("vrij spel") is used. When teachers 'teach a lesson', but incorporate toys, rule-based games or imaginative elements, this is often referred to as playful learning ("speels leren"). In the Netherlands, there is confusion about the often used phrase "spelend leren" (which may translate as playing while learning or learning while playing). It can be interpreted either as 'real play' in which children also learn or as play that is deliberately structured by the teacher to achieve learning goals. Some people use the term "lerend spelen" instead, to refer to the former interpretation. Either semantic interpretation is possible in the Dutch grammar. This distinction matters because teachers may hesitate to guide play, fearing they will disrupt children's play. Conversely, teachers may hesitate to focus on play at all, worrying they will not meet learning objectives if they spend too much time on play."

#### 1.4.9. TRANSNATIONAL-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS OR UNIQUE INITIATIVES

The policy analysis carried out in the five countries brings country-specific considerations and initiatives. The Cypriot report stresses country-specific features: 1) the explicit legal and curriculum link to children’s rights (UNCRC Article 31) that situates play not only pedagogically but as a public obligation (Επίτροπος Προστασίας των Δικαιωμάτων του Παιδιού, 2018); 2) the combination of central curriculum prescriptions with substantive teacher autonomy that creates a policy environment in which play is both mandated and locally interpreted (Loizou, 2024), enabling local and institutional innovations but also producing variability in practice depending on teacher expertise, CPD access, and resource availability; 3) mismatch between policy expectations and support for play (in materials, consistent CPD, and systematic monitoring focused on play outcomes) that remains uneven and dependant on the engagement of school leaders and local authorities.

The Greek report states that “*references and discussions within curricular documents do not constitute a national ‘vision’. Rather, they primarily serve as guidelines for how play should be integrated in pedagogy, as determined by the authors of each curriculum (...). in the absence of a national vision, different authors will emphasize different aspects of play, approaching it from their own perspectives, philosophies, and experiences. This also underscores the need for a nationwide, coherent policy on early childhood education and care: how can play be separated from the country’s vision or aspirations for its children?*” (Birbili & Natsiou, 2025, p. 14). Additionally, the Greek report draws attention to inconsistencies between what is established in the national curriculum regarding play and government guidelines that oppose or limit the practical implementation of those guidelines.

From Lithuania, an initiative funded by the Vilnius City Municipality, in collaboration with EDU Vilnius, is recognized, related to the implementation of narrative play in Vilnius kindergartens. The project provides training and consultation to preschool teachers on narrative play and learning method. Between 2019 and 2021, 114 teachers from 25 Vilnius City Municipality preschools participated in the training, involving more than 1,300 children. From 2023 to 2025, 17 new preschool institutions participated in the project, that continues in 2025-2026.

The Portuguese report stresses more recent national policy documents that reflect national priorities and cultural specificities in the promotion of play. Thus, some curricular frameworks integrate play into broader educational goals. *The Environmental Education Framework for Sustainability* (Camara et al., 2018) conceptualise play as a strategy for experiential learning and environmental awareness. The *Pedagogical Guidelines for Centre-Based Infant-Toddler Education* (Marques et al., 2024) present play as a means of fostering communication, participation, and socio-emotional development from infancy. A particularly context-specific initiative is the *Pedagogical Guide for the Inclusion and Promotion of Roma Communities in Preschool Education* (ME, 2021), which frames play as a tool for cultural expression and intercultural dialogue. It encourages shared play experiences among Roma children, families, and educators to strengthen belonging and mutual understanding. Other frameworks, such as *Learning with the School Library* (Conde et al., 2017) and the *Physical Education Guidelines for Preschool Education* (Quitério et al., 2024), promote play through inquiry-based

learning movement, and creative expression. These initiatives illustrate Portugal's commitment to inclusive and holistic pedagogical approaches, where play is used not only as a learning strategy but also as a means of fostering participation, cultural responsiveness, and social cohesion.

The national report from the Netherlands explicit highlights a focus on transitions and a concern over the preservation of play throughout ECEC. Boland and collaborators (2025) state: *"In recent years, increasing attention has been given to creating a smoother transition between ECEC before age 4 and ECEC after age 4. The same applies to the transition from grade 2 to grade 3, which typically marks a sharp shift from a play-oriented curriculum to a more academic approach to learning. To support continuity and ensure ongoing development, ECEC for children under 4 is increasingly integrated into primary school buildings, resulting in 'integrated child centres'. In some cases, mixed age groups for 3- and 4-year-olds are formed, or joint activities are organized to allow these age groups to play together. Schools also aim to incorporate more play in grade 3 and sometimes create combined groups for grade 2 and 3 (ages 5-7)."* (p. 15).

Thus, a part of the national reports brings a clear characterization of macrosystemic possibilities and constraints at the level of national policies for implementing play-based practices in ECEC. At the same time, some national initiatives are presented with a potential to inspire and influence other national contexts.

## 1.5. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF CURRENT POLICIES

Desk research focusing on policy documents pertaining to play conducted in the five countries allowed for initial conclusions regarding the number and date of publication of the selected documents. Differences were identified in the number of documents selected in each country, ranging from eight to 23 documents, which seems to point to differences across countries in the production of policy documents that explicitly address play. The cross-country analysis further indicates that the core national policy frameworks that focuses more markedly on play tend to be recent, suggesting a growing reinforcement of the attention to play within national policies over the past few years. This tendency is particularly evident in national curriculum guidelines for ECEC, with more limited or absence of attention to play in other public policy frameworks. Indeed, national curricula from Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal and curriculum recommendations from the Netherlands position play as a central activity in young children's lives and as a fundamental "avenue" for children's well-being, learning and holistic development. In line with Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, play is explicitly acknowledged in the majority of national reports as a child's right. At the same time, notable variations were identified in how play is defined and conceptualised across the five countries, particularly with regard to the clarity, consistency, and types or forms of play emphasised.

National policies acknowledge play as a strong pedagogical strategy and recognize the ECEC teacher as a core supporter and enabler of children's play. The educator's role is strongly highlighted in the design of pedagogical environments that facilitate children's play, as well as in attentively observing and documenting children's play. Teachers' role during play is also acknowledged, with the quality of

interactions being recognized as a cornerstone of effective play practices. However, national policies show differences in depth while approaching the role of the teacher during play.

Similarly, while national policies tend to provide orientations regarding monitoring and evaluation in ECEC contexts, the analyses carried out point to limited availability of specific guidelines and to the absence of comprehensive national policies focused on the monitoring and evaluation of play in ECEC contexts.

Overall, the analyses of policy documents in the five countries reveals a clear rhetorical endorsement of a play-based pedagogy, but underline that an attentive focus is needed on the clarity, coherence, and sustainability of pedagogical guidance and resources to implement play in everyday practices. For instances, a lack of CPD initiatives specifically focused on play practices is acknowledged in the reports from Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Portugal, while the scarcity of open-access, widely available pedagogical resources is highlighted in the reports from Cyprus and the Netherlands. The policy analyses further show that, in the absence of a systematic practical guidance on how to support play in preschools, the implementation of play-based practices is under the responsibility of individual teachers and headteachers, and largely depends on these professionals' vision on play, professional preparation and the resources available to support their pedagogical practices.

## 1.6. REFERENCES

- Araújo, S. B., Magalhães, S., Nogueira, S., Mesquita, C., Ribeiro, L., & Barros, S. (2025). Portugal national needs assessment report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policy, research and perspectives. School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Porto.
- Birbili, M., & Natsiou, G. (2025). Greece national needs assessment report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policy, research and perspectives. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.
- Boland, A., Kan, M., & Wynberg, E. (2025). Netherlands national needs assessment report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policy, research and perspectives. Hogeschool IPABO.
- Brėdikytė, M., Brandišauskienė, A., & Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, G. (2025). Lithuania national needs assessment report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policy, research and perspectives. Vytautas Magnus University.
- Câmara, A. C., Proença, A., Teixeira, F., Freitas, H., Gil, H. I., Vieira, I., Pinto, J. R., Soares, L., Gomes, M., Gomes, M., Amaral, M. L., & Tavares de Castro, S. (2018). *Referencial de Educação Ambiental para a Sustentabilidade para a Educação Pré-Escolar, o Ensino Básico e o Ensino Secundário [Environmental Education Framework for Sustainability for Preschool, Basic and Secondary Education]*. J. V. Pedroso (Coord.). Ministério da Educação / Direção-Geral da Educação.

- Cardona, M. J. (coord.), Lopes da Silva, I., Marques, L., & Rodrigues, P. (2021). *Planning and evaluation in preschool education [Guião pedagógico para a inclusão e promoção do bem-estar]*. Ministry of Education / Directorate-General for Education. <https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/planeaaravaliar.pdf>.
- Conde, E., Mendinhos, I., & Correia, P. (Eds.). (2017). *Learning with the school library: Framework of learning outcomes associated with the work of school libraries in preschool and in basic and secondary education* (2nd ed., revised and expanded). School Libraries Network. [https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B\\$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&fileName=referencial\\_2017\\_impres.pdf](https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&fileName=referencial_2017_impres.pdf)
- Dafermou, Ch., Koulouri, P., & Bassagianni, E. (2006). *Educator's guide: Educational planning – Creative learning environment*. O.E.D.B. [in Greek]
- Decree-Law no. 240/2001. Aprova o perfil geral de desempenho profissional do educador de infância e dos professores dos ensinos básico e secundário [Approves the general professional performance profile of preschool teachers and teachers of basic and secondary education]. *Diário da República*, série I-A, 201, 5532–5537. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/240-2001-373095>
- Decree-Law no. 241/2001. Regulamenta a formação inicial de educadores de infância e professores dos ensinos básico e secundário [Regulates the basic training of preschool teachers and teachers of basic and secondary education]. *Diário da República*, série I-A, 201, 5538–5543. <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/241-2001-373096>
- DGAE (Direção-Geral da Administração Escolar). (2024). *National priorities for continuous professional development [Prioridades nacionais de formação contínua de docentes]*. <https://www.dgae.medu.pt/download/recrutamento-2/notas-informativas/202425-ni-recrutamento/ni-manif-cirr24.pdf>.
- Eurydice Unit Greece (2022). *Greece: 21st century Skills Labs (Ergastiria Dexiotiton)*. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news/greece-21st-century-skills-labs-ergastiria-dexiotiton>
- Fukkink, R. (ed.) (2017). *Pedagogisch curriculum voor het jonge kind in de kinderopvang*. Bureau kwaliteit kinderopvang.
- Inspectie van het onderwijs. (2025a). *De staat van het onderwijs 2025*. Ministerie van onderwijs, cultuur en wetenschap.

- Inspectie van het onderwijs (2025b). Onderzoekskader 2021 voor het toezicht op de voorschoolse educatie en het primair onderwijs. Versie per 1 augustus 2025. Ministerie van onderwijs, cultuur en wetenschap.
- Jepma, IJ., & Vander Heyden, K. (2022). *Verbeteren start in het basisonderwijs. Een wetenschappelijk kader*. Sardes.
- Lenakakis, A., Howard, J. L., & Felekidou, K. (2018). Play and inclusive education: Greek teachers' attitudes. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 3(3), 129-163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1243040>
- Loizou, E. (2024). *Cyprus – ECEC workforce profile*. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), *Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe: 33 country reports with key contextual data*. Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.
- Lopes da Silva, I., Marques, L., Mata, L., & Rosa, M. (2016). *Curriculum guidelines for preschool education [Orientações curriculares para a educação pré-escolar]*. Ministry of Education. [https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes\\_Curriculares.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf).
- Loizou, E., Michaelidou, V., & Piripitsi, S. (2025). *Cyprus national needs assessment report: A snapshot of play in ECEC through policy, research and perspectives*. University of Cyprus.
- Onderwijsraad. (2023). Adviesbrief over voorzieningen voor het jonge kind. 21 september 2023. [Education Council. Letter of advice about facilities for young children].
- Marques, A., Azevedo, A., Marques, L., Folque, M. A., & Araújo, S. B. (2024). *Pedagogical guidelines for centre-based infant-toddler education [Orientações pedagógicas para creche]*. [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes\\_pedagogicas\\_para\\_creche\\_para\\_consulta\\_online.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes_pedagogicas_para_creche_para_consulta_online.pdf).
- ME (Ministry of Education). (2021). *Pedagogical guide for the inclusion and promotion of Roma communities in pre-school education [Guião Pedagógico para a Inclusão e Promoção das Comunidades Ciganas na Educação Pré-Escolar]*. Directorate-General for Education. [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao\\_pedagogico\\_comunidades\\_ciganas\\_pre-escolar.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao_pedagogico_comunidades_ciganas_pre-escolar.pdf).
- Minister of Education, Science and Sports [MoESS]. (2022). *Priešmokyklinio, pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio ugdymo bendrosios programas [General curricula for pre-primary, primary, primary and secondary education]*. Order No. V-1269 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, 24 August 2022. <https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/1a764050239511edb4cae1b158f98ea5/asr>

Minister of Education, Science and Sports [MoESS]. (2023). *Ikimokyklinio amžiaus vaikų ugdymosi pasiekimų aprašas* [Pre-School Achievement Inventory] (2024). Order on the Amendment of Order No. V-1142 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sports of September 4, 2023, “On the Approval of the Pre-School Curriculum Guidelines.” February 5, 2024, No. V-131. <https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/projektai/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ikimokyklinio-amziaus-vaiku-ugdymosi-pasiekimu-aprasas.pdf>

Minister of Education, Science and Sports [MoESS]. (2023). *Ikimokyklinio ugdymo programos gairės* [Guidelines for the Pre-School Education Curriculum]. Order No. V-1142 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sports of September 4, 2023. <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/76bb8f404b5911ee8185e4f3ad07094a/asr>

Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth [MoESY]. (2024). *Preschool education curriculum* [Αναλυτικό Πρόγραμμα Προσχολικής Εκπαίδευσης]. Nicosia: Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth.

Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth [MoESY]. (2025). *General information on pre-primary education*. Retrieved September 15, 2025, from [https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/en/infoserv\\_preprimary\\_general\\_information.html?utm\\_source](https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/en/infoserv_preprimary_general_information.html?utm_source)

Penderi, E., Chlapana, E., Melliou, K., Fillipidi, A., & Marinatou, Th. (2022). *Odigos nipiagogou, Ypostirictiko yliko, Pixida: Theoritiko kai methodologico plaisio, Didaktiki shediasmoi* (Kindergarten educator’s guide. Supporting material. Compass: Theoretical and methodological framework. Instructional designs) (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Institute of Educational Policy.

Quitério, A., Ferro, N., & Alexandre, R. (2024). *Physical Education in Preschool Education*. Ministry of Education, Directorate-General for Education (DGE) and Association of Early Childhood Education Professionals (APEI). [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a\\_educacao\\_fisica\\_na\\_educacao\\_pre-escolar.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a_educacao_fisica_na_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf).

SLO. (2025). Het jonge kind. <https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/jonge-kind/>

UNICEF Portugal. (2020). *Measures for local action [Medidas para a Ação Local]*. [https://www.unicef.pt/media/2976/unicef\\_medidas-para-a-acao-local.pdf](https://www.unicef.pt/media/2976/unicef_medidas-para-a-acao-local.pdf) Pedagogical Guide for Inclusion and the Promotion of Well-Being f.

## SECTION II. TRANSNATIONAL DESK RESEARCH: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION

This section of the report results from the integrated analysis of the literature review conducted in each participating country (Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal), examining the status of play in ECEC in that national context, with a particular focus on the challenges, barriers, and professional needs associated with the integration of play into pedagogical practice. The transnational synthesis builds on the national literature reviews developed by the project partners (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025) and was conducted within the framework of the EDUPLAY project, with the aim of informing professional development, institutional practices and educational policies at both national and European levels.

Across the five countries, a total of 58 empirical studies were identified and included in the national systematic literature reviews (Annex C). These studies consist of journal articles, book chapters, monographs, and doctoral dissertations, reflecting both the diversity and the uneven development of research on play in ECEC. The number of empirical studies varies across national contexts: Cyprus ( $n = 13$ ), Greece ( $n = 15$ ), Lithuania ( $n = 7$ ), the Netherlands ( $n = 11$ ), and Portugal ( $n = 12$ ).

To ensure consistency and comparability across national reviews, all partners agreed upon a shared methodological framework guided by the SPIDER protocol (Annex D). Partners agreed to search primarily for publications from the previous ten years. However, due to the limited availability of empirical studies on play in ECEC in some national contexts, earlier publications were included when necessary to ensure adequate coverage of the field. Inclusion criteria focused on studies addressing play within country-specific ECEC contexts, with relevance to teachers' practices, professional conceptions, and systemic or institutional conditions influencing the integration of play into pedagogy.

Data extraction followed a common analytical template, which captured key information on each study, including document type, research aims, theoretical frameworks, participants, methods and instruments, main findings, and implications for practice, policy, and future research (Annex E). This structured approach enabled a transparent and systematic synthesis of findings across heterogeneous national contexts.

While the evidence base remains relatively modest, it provides valuable insights into multiple dimensions of play in ECEC. The 57 publications identified range from small-scale qualitative and observational studies to intervention programs, action research, and cross-sectional designs. This diversity enriches the analysis but also highlights the fragmented nature of the field, with limited longitudinal, large-scale, or comparative empirical research.

The sections that follow present the main findings of this transnational synthesis. The analysis begins with themes common to all five countries, namely the challenges and barriers faced by professionals in incorporating play into ECEC practices and the needs identified in relation to training, reflection, and systemic support. This is followed by a discussion of implications for practice, policy, and future research.

## 2.2. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC PRACTICES

A comparative analysis of the national reports (Araújo et al., 2025, in Portugal; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025, in Greece; Boland et al., 2025, in the Netherlands; Brédikytė et al., 2025, in Lithuania; Loizou et al., 2025, in Cyprus) shows common challenges that may hinder the integration of play as an important pedagogical practice in ECEC in the five countries. Although the value of play is recognized across all countries, challenges persist in terms of teacher education and training and professional skills, structural conditions, pedagogical conceptions, and diversity and equity in play. This section summarizes the main transnational similarities, and identifies some specific barriers and challenges noticed in research in each country.

### 2.2.1 TEACHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The analysis of the national literature indicates that, across the five countries, a key challenge to the implementation of play as a central practice in ECEC lies in fostering teachers' competence to support play in an intentional and pedagogically consistent manner, while responding to children's interests and needs. This challenge seems to appear both in initial teacher education and training, as well as in ongoing professional development opportunities.

Research in Cyprus highlighted the limited professional development opportunities focusing on play pedagogy and limited pedagogical skills of pre- and in-service teachers particularly in the use of techniques for engaging in sociodramatic and constructive play (Loizou, 2017; Loizou & Loizou, 2022; Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; Michaelides & Loizou, 2024). Teacher training does not appear to offer sufficiently consistent models of intervention, thus contributing to practices that show to be overly dependent on structured activities. Furthermore, research pointed to a difficulty in translating theoretical knowledge into practice (Loizou & Michaelides, 2020).

Although the Greek national report does not explicitly refer to this topic, a clear link may be established, since misconceptions appear as early as university training, where many students conceive of play as separate from children's learning (Kambeza et al., 2020; Vellopoulou & Georgopoulou, 2022). The limited understanding of the adult's role in free play also reflects training vulnerabilities that persist in the transition to professional practice (Vellopoulou et al., 2024).

Lithuania literature review shows gaps in both initial and continuing training. Studies included in the review reveal that future teachers do not adequately master co-construction strategies for play, do not use appropriate emotional signaling, and transmit misconceptions about the value of play for learning (Bredikyte et al., 2015; Bredikyte & Brandisauskienė, 2023; Juodaityte et al., 2015; Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, 2022). However, it is also noted that some changes in higher education institutions over the past decade may affect preparedness to integrate and combine children's play and digital technologies (Brandisauskiene et al., 2025).

In the Netherlands, research showed that many teachers were uncertain about their role during play or felt insufficiently skilled to fulfil it (Prins et al., 2025; Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum, et al., 2025). Moreover, it is noted that implementation of play-based pedagogy requires robust, long-term training processes, not always available (Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Teachers report a lack of time to develop skills to recognize, interpret, and sustain meaningful moments of play (Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013).

In Portugal, several studies report limitations in teachers' education as well. Teachers report difficulties in managing their role during play, including knowing when to intervene, how to balance their leadership with child autonomy, and how to align play with curricular goals (Coelho et al., 2023). Furthermore, research reveals challenges related to training that prepare teachers for participatory practices, for the inclusive use of play, and for the pedagogical integration of digital technologies (Barros et al., 2024; Monteiro et al., 2022). Structural constraints such as workload, bureaucracy, and limited budgets are also reported. Continuing education is described as insufficient and insufficiently coordinated with the real needs of the context.

Insufficient training in play-based pedagogy is a common barrier that compromises teachers' ability to plan, mediate, participate in and evaluate play effectively within inclusive educational settings.

## 2.2.2 CONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE OF ADULTS AND BELIEFS ABOUT PLAY

The national reports converge in highlighting difficulties in defining the role of adults in play in ECEC and on consistently pursuing a play-based pedagogy. This theme appears either as an autonomous topic pointed out in the literature or as a theme related to teachers' training. Some evidence in each country reports contributing to this conclusion is presented below.

In Cyprus, studies reveal that many teachers hesitate between overly directive or overly passive interventions, hesitating about when and how to intervene (Loizou, 2017; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020). A study with pre-service teachers showed that they frequently entered play in a way that undermined child autonomy (Loizou & Michaelides, 2020). The dichotomy between play and learning prevails in Greece (Kambeza et al., 2020; Vellopoulou & Georgopoulou, 2022), with more emphasis among pre-service teachers. This conception may contribute to practices focused on structured play,

as in-service teachers link this type of play as an educational tool to cognitive and physical benefits, with little value placed on free play (Lenakakis et al., 2016). So, understanding the potentials of free play and teacher's role in free play is a challenge (Vellopoulou et al., 2024). Inclusive perspectives are limited, with teachers rarely considering children with disabilities in definitions of play, and gender stereotypes influence toy choices (Lenakakis et al., 2018; Gonitsioti & Magos, 2016).

In Lithuania, the national report highlights a study showing that teachers tend to structure play for educational purposes and that they defend that (a) children are more interested in learning when play involves rewards; (b) children are focused on results; (c) play structured and oriented by adults is more effective; (d) play may be pleasurable for children but has little educational value (Juodaityte et al., 2015). Moreover, lack of cooperation with children during play and difficulty involving children in teachers' actions were noted (Bredikyte & Brandisaukienė, 2022).

In the Netherlands, uncertainty about when and how to intervene during play appeared in several studies (Prins et al., 2025; Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum, et al., 2025). Furthermore, the questions about play and teachers' role in play are translated into prioritizing administrative or vigilant behaviors over participating in play, with little interaction that promotes learning (Leseman et al., 2001; Van Rossum et al., 2025). For example, teachers report they find it difficult to sit with children when they are playing. Observational findings supported these difficulties noting that teachers' verbal (63%) and nonverbal (82%) behaviors during play were classified as distracted or procedural (Leseman et al., 2001).

In Portugal, teachers report difficulty in balancing adult leadership and child autonomy, with a predominance of structured, adult-led activities (Coelho et al., 2018), and the undervaluing of play (in one study; da Silva Pinto, 2025). In some of the countries, specific results of interest for project activities concern the challenges related to risky and/or outdoor play. The Greek national review showed that both pre-service and in-service teachers face difficulties in including diverse types of play in their practices, with a prevalent perception that outdoor spaces serve merely as "recess space", not as important contexts for learning through play (Kalpogianni, 2019). Teachers seem to restrict play options to avoid risk (risky-play) (Birbili & Kyriakidou, 2024; Kalpogianni, 2019). In the Netherlands, teachers described difficulty allowing children full freedom in natural outdoor play, tending to protect children from bad weather and risky play (Prins et al., 2025). In Portugal, the disinvestment in outdoor spaces and cultural resistance to risk-taking play was underlined (da Silva Pinto, 2025).

### 2.2.3 STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

According to national reports on the literature review, several structural features appear to be limiting the quality and frequency of play, such as restricted materials and spaces, time constraints, and

institutional decisions or policies. Lithuanian report was the exception, as specific resource /material conditions of implementing play did not appear in the literature review.

In all four other countries, time constraint was one of the barriers. Although national reports pointed out to diverse motives for these specific constraints, a common tendency seems to be the competition between pedagogical time devoted to play and time devoted to functional activities such as administration, hygiene, preparation of meetings (Netherlands: Prins et al., 2025; Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum et al., 2025; Portugal: Coelho et al., 2023; Cyprus: Rentzou et al, 2019).

Another critical issue concerns the importance attributed to academic results, especially those linked to cognitive skills, in some circles known as the *schoolification* of ECEC. This trend is due to factors such as family expectations, administrative priorities, or other pressures (Cyprus: Rentzou et al., 2019; Shiakou & Belsky, 2013; Lithuania: Juodaityte et al., 2015; Netherlands: Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Portugal: Coelho et al., 2023).

Restricted materials and spaces are also a common challenge. Lack or inadequacy of spaces and specialized materials (Greece: Birbili & Kyriakidou, 2024; Kalpogianni, 2019; Gessiou, 2019; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020c; Zafeiroudi, 2021; Netherlands: Aalsvoort et al, 2015; Portugal: Afonso & Mamede, 2018; da Silva Pinto, 2025; Gomes et al., 2024; Monteiro et al., 2022) limit types and contexts of play. Greece and Portugal report restrictions related to outdoor spaces.

Family expectations or difficulties in their participation are also presented as a challenge, either because families value different dimensions of child development or hold different perspectives about play (e.g., Cyprus: Shiakou & Belsky, 2013; Netherlands: Aalsvoort, et al., 2015), because they are uncomfortable with risky outdoor play (Greece: Gessiou, 2019) or due to broader cultural resistance to risky play (Portugal: da Silva Pinto, 2025).

#### 2.2.4 DIVERSITY AND EQUITY IN PLAY

Literature reviews showed that ECEC settings face challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This specific topic did not appear only in the Lithuanian literature review.

The national report from Greece summarized as key finding that children with disabilities remain passive or play secondary roles (Lenakakis et al., 2018). Moreover, teachers seem to value less the importance of play for those children (Lenakakis et al., 2018). Pre-service teachers also seem to lack an inclusive perspective (Vellopoulou et al., 2024). The Netherlands report underlined significant difficulties in integrating multilingual children, with language barriers reducing participation and the complexity of play (Thieme et al., 2025). Portugal highlights barriers to the participation of children with sensory or emotional needs (Coelho et al., 2018; Mira et al., 2019). Gender-related beliefs and

stereotypes about play were identified in Portugal (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017) and also highlighted in a Greek study (Gonitsioti & Magos, 2016).

### 2.2.5 SPECIFIC COUNTRY RESULTS

Despite the similarities, each country's literature review presents further specific challenges.

In the review of Cypriot literature, unique aspects that emerged included a strong reliance on restricted techniques in play and a more common focus on socio-dramatic and constructive play (Loizou et al., 2017), and consistent problems in the practical application of teacher training contents (Loizou & Michaelides, 2020). The last was visible in studies with pre-service teachers.

In Greece, a unique contribution was the reluctance of in service and pre-service teachers to evaluate play and its connection to children's learning (Sakellariou & Banou 2020b, 2021). In Lithuania, the report clearly identifies the lack of studies on spaces, materials, and family involvement (Brandisauskiene et al., 2025).

Although it was included above as a challenge related to inclusion, it is interesting to note that research in the Netherlands highlighted specificities related to multilingualism in ECE classrooms (Thieme et al., 2025). Although migration rates are increasing in many countries, this did not appear in other national literature reviews.

In Portugal, the literature review highlights the difficulty in valuing child participation (Barros et al., 2024), as well as inequalities in access to digital resources that can support play-based practices (Monteiro et al., 2022).

### 2.3. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

A comparative analysis of the five national reports (Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal) reveals a set of common structural and professional needs. Before presenting the systematization of needs, it is relevant to note that the studies included in the literature review focused more on problems and barriers than on the formulation of needs, although the study of challenges/barriers allows us to infer the needs for improvement. In Greece, only one study was included in this section, three in Lithuania, five in the Netherlands, six in Portugal, and eight in Cyprus, though mostly conducted by the same team.

Although the value of play for child development is recognized, global and specific needs were identified in terms of initial and continuing training and education (ongoing professional development), opportunities for reflection and for cooperation between professionals, and pedagogical concepts and beliefs.

### 2.3.1 NEED FOR INITIAL AND CONTINUING TRAINING FOCUSED ON THE PEDAGOGY OF PLAY

The national literature analysed consistently underscores both the need to improve or adapt initial and continuing training to support educators/future educators in incorporating play in pedagogical practices. In some countries, specific, yet complementary, topics and/or strategies for training and education have even been identified, as outlined below.

In Cyprus, both pre- and in-service teachers express the need for professional development programs that articulate the theoretical foundations of play with practical pedagogical intervention strategies, including creative drama (Loizou et al., 2017), scaffolding, play-facilitation skills and creative approaches (Loizou et al., 2017; Loizou & Loizou, 2022; Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020; Michaelides & Loizou, 2024), and diverse play types (Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023).

In Greece, studies highlight the need for training that deepens understanding of the complexity of play, moving beyond simplified dichotomies between play and learning, and between free and structured play (Papadopoulou et al., 2024). In Lithuania, the literature review points to the need for more comprehensive training on play, including narrative play and the active teacher's participation in play (Bredikytė et al., 2015; Hakkarainen et al., 2015).

In the Netherlands, several studies identify the need to modernize the training of teachers, reinforcing skills and knowledge related to pedagogical interaction and child development namely of concepts, language, and managing linguistic diversity (Prins et al., 2025; Thieme et al., 2025; Van Schaik et al., 2018).

In Portugal, the need for continuing education is associated with play-based-pedagogy (Coelho et al., 2023), relational competences (Barros et al., 2024; Coelho et al., 2023), inclusive strategies (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017), and emotional development support (Coelho et al., 2018; Coelho et al., 2023). There is also a call for specialized training in educational technology, particularly for adequately integrating digital tools into play-based learning (Monteiro et al., 2022).

Overall, it is emphasized that initial education and in-service, ongoing professional development should be grounded in theoretically sound perspectives and research, ensuring consistency between teachers' beliefs and competences, classroom practices and curriculum (Rentzou et al., 2019).

### 2.3.2 NEED FOR SUSTAINED OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION AND COOPERATION BETWEEN PROFESSIONALS

The literature from the five countries concurs in identifying the need for spaces, opportunities and tools for reflection supported by practice.

In the reports from Cyprus and Lithuania, the strategy of video analysis, systematic observation, and guided reflection emerged as strategies to promote reflection and support understanding of the adult's role in play (Loizou et al., 2017; Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; and Bredikytė & Brandisauskiene, 2025). Moreover, in Cyprus it was highlighted that involving experts in the areas of drama or play pedagogy in reflection with teachers brings gains to bridge theory and practice (Loizou, 2017; Michaelides & Loizou, 2024). Teachers in Lithuania also emphasised the need for consultation to master narrative play (Bredikytė & Brandisauskiene, 2025).

In the Netherlands, studies point to the need for structured opportunities for professional reflection based on real episodes of pedagogical practice (Aalsvoort et al., 2010; Tajik & Singer, 2021). Similarly to the previous countries, using video episodes also appeared as a positive strategy for reflection in the literature review in the Netherlands.

In Portugal, a review of the literature highlighted the need for collaborative networks, pedagogical leadership, and institutional spaces for critical reflection that align values, discourses, and practices (Barros et al., 2024; Coelho et al., 2023; Oliveira & Mendes, 2017).

### 2.3.3 NEED FOR CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS AND TEACHERS' ROLE

The five contexts highlighted the need for conceptual clarification and shared understandings of play, supporting intentional and consistent pedagogical practices that recognize the value of play for learning and the role of the adult. In Cyprus, studies stress the need to support educators in making meaningful pedagogical decisions during play, particularly in balancing adult support and child autonomy (Loizou, 2017; Loizou & Loizou, 2022; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020). The Greek report highlights the need to revisit conceptions of play that still rigidly separate it from learning, especially in the case of free play (Papadopoulou et al., 2024). The Dutch report notes a needed shift in teachers' mindset regarding risky play (Prins et al., 2025). In Portugal, several studies highlight the need for institutional frameworks that recognize play as a central pedagogical practice and a child's right (Pinto, 2022; Oliveira & Mendes, 2017).

### 2.3.4 NEED FOR ADEQUATE RESOURCES AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS CONDUCIVE TO PLAY

Transnational analysis shows that, although this need is not explicitly stated in all countries, several national contexts emphasize the importance of having more adequate material resources, physical spaces, and educational environments to support the adequate integration of play into pedagogical practices. In Cyprus, although the literature focuses predominantly on teacher training and ongoing PD, some studies emphasize the need for pedagogical resources and structured tools that support adult participation in play and the translation of theory into practice (Loizou, 2017; Loizou & Olymbiou,

2023). In this context, resources are understood not only as physical materials, but also as cultural and pedagogical instruments that structure teachers' mediation and stimulate creativity (Loizou & Loizou, 2022). In Portugal, the literature points to the need for adequate teaching resources, and more flexible educational environments for play, with a special emphasis on outdoor spaces (da Silva Pinto, 2025; Monteiro et al., 2022). Studies indicate the importance of investing in outdoor environments that include natural elements, loose parts, and opportunities for meaningful play experiences.

### 2.3.5 SPECIFIC COUNTRY RESULTS

Although the need for more training and education was common to all countries, the Portuguese report specified the need for inclusive strategies related to gender, functional diversity, emotional profiles, and communication needs (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017; Coelho et al., 2018), and the Dutch report specified the need for a specific preparation to deal with linguistic diversity (Thieme et al., 2025). In Cyprus, the need to reconcile play with curricular requirements and sociocultural expectations is explicitly mentioned (Rentzou et al., 2019). In Greece, studies indicate the need to strengthen collaboration with families around the value and roles of play (Papadopoulou et al., 2024).

## 2.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The analysis of the five national reports reveals a consistent set of implications for pedagogical practice, educational policy, and future research. These reports converge on several key points: (i) strengthening play-based pedagogies, by improving teacher education and professional development to promote teachers' professional skills for intentional and inclusive play; (ii) aligning educational policies and institutional frameworks, to ensure adequate time, space, resources, and institutional support for play-based approaches; and (iii) advancing research focusing on underexplored dimensions of play in ECEC.

### 2.4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR ECEC PRACTICES

In terms of ECEC practices, the reports emphasize the crucial role of teacher education and professional development that support professional capacity to promote and participate in play. The literature review highlights the need to move beyond spontaneous or marginal use of play, and emphasize the teacher's role as a co-player, planner, and reflective practitioner, capable of scaffolding play while observing and safeguarding children's autonomy (Brandisauskienė et al., 2025; Coelho et al., 2023; Kyriakou, 2018; Loizou, 2017; Loizou & Loizou, 2022).

Previous research shows that although many professionals acknowledge the value of play, its implementation in ECEC faces challenges. One key reason lies in implicit conceptions that oppose play to learning, associate play exclusively with leisure or restrict play opportunities to certain children,

contexts, or types of play (e.g., Pinto, 2022; Shiakou & Belsky, 2013). Overall, there is a strong emphasis on clarifying the adult's role in play, ensuring intentional pedagogical interventions that respect the child's agency and the need for inclusive practices (Bredikyte & Brandisauskiene, 2022; Coelho et al., 2023; Kyriakou, 2018; Loizou, 2017). The national reports also stress the importance of recognizing play as a universal and inclusive practice, accessible to all children, regardless of disability, gender, cultural background, or linguistic profile. This requires supporting not only teachers, but also families and society in general, in assuming play as central in the early years, and in promoting practices that value diversity in playful and expressive forms (Mira et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024). Expanding teacher education and professional development appears as a key strategy for developing a complex, reflective, and contextualized understanding of play that informs planning, intentional pedagogical practices, and everyday decision-making.

The national reports further indicate the need for spaces, time, and materials that reflect a view of play as a complex and extended process, encompassing outdoor play, risky play, and many other forms of play activity. In several countries, these practices remain constrained by concerns related to safety, behavior management, or pressure for visible/academic results (da Silva Pinto, 2025; Rentzou, 2013; Tajik & Singer, 2021). More specifically, digitalization emerges as a contemporary cross-cutting issue, highlighting the need to integrate digital tools in ways that foster imagination and symbolic play, rather than displacing it since digitalization is a pervasive presence (Brandisauskienė et al., 2025; Monteiro et al., 2022). The literature review also identified some strategies relevant to promote play, such as programs focusing on creativity (Loizou, 2023) and drama / drama techniques (Georgiou, 2022; Michaelidou, 2022).

#### 2.4.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY

In terms of educational policy, the evidence included in the national reports points to the need for regulatory frameworks that explicitly affirm the centrality of play as a fundamental right and as a core element of ECEC, not only in curriculum documents, but also in the symbolic messages conveyed to institutions, professionals, and families.

Studies show that even when play is enshrined in curriculum guidelines, its implementation is often diluted by social conceptions that prioritize early academic preparation (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017; da Silva Pinto, 2025; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020). Therefore, valuing play in public discourse and regulation is still needed across all countries. Policies must therefore respond to the need to build a shared vision of play as a practice with social value, recognizing it as an essential component of children's development, well-being, and participation. This dimension is particularly relevant in relation to families, ensuring the alignment between families and teachers' perspectives (e.g., Rentzou, 2013; Shiakou & Belsky, 2013). Educational policies should also guarantee coherence throughout the teacher training continuum, promoting both initial and in-service professional development programs

(e.g., Aalsvoort et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2024). This includes clarifying definitions of play, integrating play-based pedagogies (such as including educational drama and creative play), and supporting reflective practices (Barros et al., 2024; Georgiou, 2022; Loizou et al., 2017). Furthermore, national reports point out that conditions for play-based pedagogies need to be safeguarded by regulations, including the adequate allocation of time, space and resources for play (e.g., Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Leseman et al., 2001).

### 2.4.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In the field of implications for future research, the reports systematize studies pointing to the need to deepen our understanding of conceptions and uses of play. The importance of investigating the beliefs of educators, families, and policymakers, as well as the tensions between diverse conceptions is highlighted (Birbili & Christodoulou, 2018; Rentzou, 2013). Another priority is the need for longitudinal studies analyzing how changes in conceptions of play influence pedagogical practices, child participation, and developmental trajectories (Coelho et al., 2023; Veiga et al., 2017). Taken together, the reports highlight the need for research on outdoor play, risky play, inclusive play, multilingualism, and the critical integration of digital technologies, which is also identified as a priority, always linked to the meanings attributed to play by children and adults (Brandisauskienė et al., 2025; Monteiro et al., 2022; Pinto, 2022). Finally, the relevance of collaborative research between scholars and practitioners is emphasized, to enable the co-creation of knowledge and to support processes of sustained change and problem solving, particularly in contexts marked by educational borrowing or strong normative pressures (e.g., Birbili & Christodoulou, 2018; Lee et al., 2024).

Peer-reviewed publications remain scarce across these countries, at least over the last 10 years. Thus, a clear need to focus more on this theme is underscored. Moreover, it is worth noting that among the publications, many do not correspond to empirical research, thus reinforcing the importance of investing in rigorous research in this area.

## 2.5. IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF PLAY IN ECEC

The partners from Cyprus, the Netherlands, and Portugal conducted an in-depth analysis, optional in the EDUPLAY project, to identify in recent scientific literature: (a) concepts and definitions of play, (b) documented impact/benefits of play on learning and development, (c) practices, projects, or initiatives promoting play, (d) role of professionals in creating play opportunities, (e) Family participation in play, and (f) research gaps.

### 2.5.1. CONCEPT AND DEFINITIONS OF PLAY

Even though many of the studies included in the literature review in Cyprus, the Netherlands, and Portugal did not provide an explicit definition of play, the ones that did (seven in Cyprus and the

Netherlands, six in Portugal) revealed shared understandings of play as a fundamental component of ECEC. In the literature review of the three countries, play is consistently conceptualized as a child-centred, intrinsically motivated, voluntary, and pleasurable activity, characterized by freedom of choice and active participation (Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Antunes & Luís, 2018; Leseman et al., 2001; Loizou, 2021; Singer et al., 2014). Play is understood as a process, assuming an essential role in child development. It is also understood as a socially and culturally situated activity, involving peer interaction, symbolic use of materials, construction of shared meanings, and flexible rules (Leseman et al., 2001; Oliveira & Mendes, 2017; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Play is recognized as a context for imagination, narrative, symbolic representation, self-regulation and identity construction (e.g., Oliveira & Mendes, 2017; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Van Rossum et al., 2025). The three reports highlight that publications recognize play as a pedagogical process, which can be supported and enriched by the teachers' actions, on the condition that teacher participation respects children's autonomy and agency (Coelho et al., 2023; Loizou, 2017; Van Schaik et al., 2018).

The literature review in each country also offers specific contributions to better understand play and its conceptualization, highlighting some specific points. The Cypriot report on the literature review includes the distinctions between constructive, sociodramatic, and creative play (Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020; Loizou & Loizou, 2022). Play is described as an evolutionary continuum, from simple to mature play (Loizou, 2017; Rentzou et al., 2019; Loizou, 2025). The Dutch report identifies various forms of play, including symbolic, construction, pretend, and rule-based play (Leseman et al., 2001; Van Rossum et al., 2025). Play is framed within a sociocultural practice that promotes collaborative learning and self-regulation (e.g., Singer et al., 2014; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). In Portugal, the concept reflects theoretical plurality, integrating developmental psychology, sociology of childhood, gender studies, and children's rights. It is seen in the literature as an intentional pedagogical process (Coelho et al., 2023), a developmental activity (Coelho et al., 2018; Veiga et al., 2017), a right and form of citizen participation (Pinto, 2022; da Silva Pinto, 2025), and a space for cultural negotiation (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017). A distinction between social and non-social play also appears (Coelho et al., 2018; Veiga et al., 2017), with subtypes of play behaviours identified as reticent, solitary-passive, and solitary-active, linked to emotional knowledge and social competence.

## 2.5.2. DOCUMENTED IMPACT/BENEFITS OF PLAY ON LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Across all three countries' reports, it is possible to recognize that the literature frequently mentions the impact or benefits of play, although few publications actually correspond to empirical designs employed to measure the impact of play on learning and development. Nevertheless, some evidence indicates that play has multidimensional positive impacts on child development, encompassing cognitive, social and emotional domains. Taken together, studies from Cyprus, the Netherlands, and

Portugal converge in indicating that play contributes to the development of social skills, self-regulation, language, task persistence, and learning in key areas (e.g., Afonso & Mamede, 2018; Coelho et al., 2018; Loizou, 2017; Loizou et al., 2017; Michaelides & Loizou, 2024; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Veiga et al., 2017).

Despite differences in the volume and type of empirical evidence mentioned in each country report (nine in Cyprus, one in the Netherlands, six in Portugal), all three converge on signalling play as a central factor for meaningful learning and the development of the child, reinforcing its relevance as a crucial pedagogical practice in ECEC. Moreover, the scarcity of empirical studies to determine the effects of play positions this topic as a priority in future research.

### 2.5.3. PRACTICES, PROJECTS, OR INITIATIVES PROMOTING PLAY

In this section of the report, we have chosen to include the entire contribution of each national report, as they share specific experiences and programs that can enrich the next activities of the EDUPLAY project and the educational practices cross-countries. Thus, the texts are quoted, crediting the authorship specified in the technical details of this transnational report (see “Document information”).

#### Cyprus (Loizou et al., 2025)

“Creative drama techniques—including teacher in role, improvisation, mantle of the expert, thought tracking, and phone conversations—have been widely used to enhance children’s socio-dramatic and imaginative play, supporting role enactment, scenario development, and creative problem-solving (Loizou, Michaelides, & Georgiou, 2017; Loizou & Michaelides, 2020; Loizou, 2017). Structured pedagogical tools, such as the Teacher Play Guide and Constructive Play Teacher Guide, have been applied in teacher education and school experience programs, combined with seminars, workshops, and reflection activities to scaffold teacher involvement and strengthen practical skills (Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; Loizou, 2017). Additionally, programmatic initiatives, including multi-week Creative Play Programs and Drama-based Professional Development Programs (DPDPs), have integrated free and structured play, cultural tools, arts, and creative drama techniques, guided by strategies such as Solve, Reflect, Share, and Connect, to foster children’s creativity and scaffold play experiences (Loizou & Loizou, 2022; Michaelides & Loizou, 2024). Beyond Cyprus, international comparative projects have examined how cultural factors influence play practices, highlighting the variability in play conceptualization and teacher involvement across countries (Rentzou et al., 2019).”

#### Netherlands (Boland et al., 2025)

“Four studies reported findings that highlighted that teachers’ physical and relational presence is central to high-quality play (Leseman, et al., 2001; Singer et al., 2014; Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum et al., 2025). When teachers remained close and consistently available, children were over three times more likely to achieve strong play engagement (Singer et al., 2014). Two-sided interactions, where both teacher and child contribute, were especially associated with deep and meaningful play (Leseman, et al., 2001;

Van Rossum et al., 2025). Rearranging play spaces to encourage “just being and sitting” with children fostered trust, safety, intimacy and authentic communication (Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum et al., 2025). The study by Prins et al. (2025) noted that teachers benefit from taking ownership of their pedagogical approach, particularly in language development. Moving learning activities outdoors encouraged teachers to follow children’s curiosity and engage in spontaneous dialogue about natural events. These unplanned encounters gave teachers opportunities to use interactional language skills and support concept-building through embodied experiences. Culturally and linguistically responsive practice also emerged as important. Teachers who welcomed home languages and incorporated culturally familiar play forms helped multilingual children feel safe and included (Thieme, et al., 2025). Such strategies supported peer interactions and contributed to more equitable play opportunities. Specific pedagogical tools were identified as promising. The *Impulse* framework as introduced in the study by Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) offered teachers structured ways to extend children’s play into meaningful learning experiences, by orienting, structuring and deepening, broadening, contributing, and reflecting. Similarly, video-based reflection exercises helped teacher trainees uncover implicit beliefs about play, recognize areas for growth, and build a stronger knowledge base for future practice (Aalsvoort et al., 2015).”

#### Portugal (Araújo et al., 2025)

“Four studies describe concrete practices or initiatives promoting play. Coelho et al. (2023) evaluated the Playing-2-Gether professional development model, which trains teachers in relational play-based strategies. Gomes et al. (2024) implemented an 8-week motor games program (*Jogamos Tudo, Brincamos Todos*) designed to foster autonomy, inclusion, and cooperation among children. Pinto (2022) created the website *Vamos Lá Para Fora?*, aimed at disseminating outdoor play practices in Portugal. Afonso and Mamede (2018) developed playful mathematical tasks using manipulative and natural materials, promoting exploration, pattern recognition, and collaboration. Other studies, such as Barros et al. (2024), Oliveira and Mendes (2017), and Mira et al. (2019), do not report concrete initiatives explicitly focused on play. Nevertheless, they provide insights into pedagogical practices, reflective approaches, and participatory strategies that could support playful learning, inclusion, and child engagement.”

Overall, the national reports present various practices and initiatives implemented to promote and enrich play in ECEC, including structured interventions/programs and reflective pedagogical changes. However, it is also possible to note that these projects or initiatives remain relatively limited and/or infrequently disseminated in the scientific literature, reinforcing the need to develop more programs, expand implementation, and conduct systematic evaluations to strengthen the play-based pedagogy in ECEC settings.

#### 2.5.4. ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS IN CREATING PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

The national literature review reports from Cyprus, the Netherlands, and Portugal converge in recognizing the intentional and central role of ECEC professionals in creating, maintaining, and enriching opportunities for play. Teachers are viewed as pedagogical agents whose actions influence the quality and complexity of play. The publications reviewed in the three countries – eight in Cyprus,

seven in the Netherlands and nine in Portugal – describe professionals as taking on multiple and flexible roles, which include observing, facilitating, mediating, planning, organizing the environment, participating as co-players and critically reflecting on their own practice (e.g., Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Antunes & Luís, 2018; Loizou, 2017; Loizou et al., 2017). Promoting and participating in children's play require pedagogical sensitivity to decide when to intervene, when to support from a distance, and when to withdraw, while ensuring children's agency, enriching play and responding to child interests and needs (Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023; Pinto, 2022; Tajik & Singer, 2021).

The three reports taken together point out that sensitive, non-invasive and sustained adult involvement provide a secure basis supporting child engagement and promote the development of play, from simple to more complex forms of play (e.g., Leseman et al., 2001; Loizou, 2021; Singer et al., 2014; Tajik & Singer, 2021). Therefore, teachers are seen as co-creator of the playful context, creating conditions of time, space, emotional security, and relationships that enable play to develop in an extended and meaningful way (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; da Silva Pinto, 2025). The need for pedagogical intentionality is emphasized, assuming play as a process that benefits from flexible planning, systematic observation, and continuous response to the needs and interests of children (Afonso & Mamede, 2018; Loizou & Olymbiou, 2023). Across all countries, studies also highlight the importance of professional reflection and the continuous development of relational, observational, and interpretive skills to sustain this complex role (Barros et al., 2024; Michaelidou, 2025).

Regarding national specificities, the Cyprus report explicitly emphasises drama and creativity as pedagogical tools (Loizou & Michaelides, 2020; Loizou & Loizou, 2022). The Netherlands report underscores the importance of sensitive and stable professional presence, as well as co-constructing the curriculum with children, particularly in symbolic, linguistic, and outdoor play contexts (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Prins et al., 2025). In Portugal, studies place great emphasis on the teachers' role in creating open environments, especially outdoors, and on critical reflection on inclusion, diversity, and gender stereotypes (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017; Pinto, 2022).

#### 2.5.5. FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN PLAY

Most of the reviewed studies do not focus on family participation in play. In Cyprus, Shiakou and Belsky (2013) note that parents acknowledge their role in supporting learning through play; however, structured after-school activities often take precedence, leaving limited time for free play.

In Portugal, family involvement was largely procedural as described in a paper by Veiga et al. (2017), where parents were informed about the project, provided consent for their children's participation, and completed background questionnaires. Beyond these formal tasks, families were not actively engaged in observing, evaluating, or promoting children's play. Nevertheless, some studies recognize the potential role of families in fostering playful and inclusive practices, whether by encouraging their involvement in shaping norms and behaviours or by identifying this as an area for future research.

While direct participation is rarely documented, these reflections suggest family engagement is considered relevant for sustaining play-based pedagogies. The national reports highlight a significant gap in understanding how families can effectively contribute to play-based learning and underscore the need for further research in this area.

### 2.5.6. RESEARCH GAPS

As already mentioned, a key finding of the literature review in the five countries was the variation in the number of published studies on play in ECEC and the different aspects of play that were explored. Among the participating countries, only Cyprus and Portugal included the optional section explicitly dedicated to research gaps in their national reports. Nevertheless, the analysis of the implications for educational practice and policy presented in the transnational report (section 2.4) allows us to identify additional gaps in the literature, reinforcing the relevance of a more consistent and coordinated research agenda at the European level.

The Cypriot and Portuguese national reports on the literature review suggest that research agendas should prioritize longitudinal and multidimensional approaches, reinforcing the recognition of play not only as an effective pedagogical practice, but as a fundamental right of children and a structural priority in early childhood education. Furthermore, robust empirical studies are needed.

Recent research in Cyprus highlights persistent conceptual and methodological fragmentation in studies on play, which have often examined it in isolation and overlooked its broader impact on learning and development (Michaelidou, 2025). Future work should adopt multidimensional frameworks combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess implementation processes, interaction quality, and developmental outcomes (Michaelidou, 2025), and explore links between parental beliefs, home practices, and children's play experiences (Shiakou & Belsky, 2013). The Cypriot report underscores the need to develop a coordinated approach integrating professional development, curricular support, resources, and research-informed policy to embed play meaningfully in ECEC.

In Portugal, key gaps include longitudinal studies on developmental impacts (Coelho et al., 2023; Veiga et al., 2017), deeper exploration of outdoor and risky play linked to sustainability and citizenship (Pinto, 2022; da Silva Pinto, 2025), and systematic analysis of play and gender equality (Oliveira & Mendes, 2017), the examination of screen-time effects (Monteiro et al., 2022), and the development of inclusive play strategies for children with specific needs (Mira et al., 2019; Gomes et al., 2024).

## 2.6. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The transnational literature review confirms that play is widely acknowledged as a fundamental dimension of ECEC in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal. Across all five

contexts, play is recognized as central to children’s holistic development and learning. However, the review also demonstrates that its effective and sustained integration into pedagogical practice remains uneven and constrained by a combination of conceptual, structural, and professional challenges. Persistent tensions between play and learning, alongside systemic pressures for early academic achievement, continue to limit the implementation of play-based pedagogies, particularly when play is perceived as secondary to structured or outcome-driven activities.

A recurring issue identified across countries concerns teachers’ conceptions of play and the role of adults within it. Implicit beliefs that separate play from learning, prioritize adult-led or instrumentalized forms of play, and undervalue free, child-initiated play remain influential in both pre-service and in-service contexts. These conceptual challenges are compounded by structural constraints, including limited time, inadequate spaces and materials, especially outdoors, and institutional priorities that restrict opportunities for extended, meaningful, and inclusive play experiences. The review also highlights persistent equity challenges, with barriers to inclusive play for children with disabilities, multilingual learners, and those affected by gender stereotypes, reinforcing the need for pedagogical strategies that promote participation for all. Moreover, effective teacher involvement in play emerges as a shared challenge across contexts, indicating the need to clarify and mobilize positive, context-sensitive strategies that support intentional yet responsive adult participation in children’s play. The absence of a shared conceptual framework for the role of the adult in play is evident across all participating countries, and these difficulties do not appear to be exclusive to pre-service teachers, underscoring the importance of addressing this issue in both initial and continuing teacher education.

At the same time, the review reveals considerable thematic diversity in how play is researched across national contexts. Studies from Cyprus predominantly focus on socio-dramatic and constructive play, teacher involvement, and professional development, often adopting intervention-oriented designs. Greek research places stronger emphasis on outdoor and risky play, curriculum integration, teacher conceptions, children’s perspectives, and gender-related issues. In Lithuania, the literature is largely centered on pretend play, narrative play worlds, and processes of self- and emotional regulation within sociocultural frameworks. Research from the Netherlands contributes a broad range of studies addressing teacher roles and interaction quality, play-based curricula, multilingual peer interactions, outdoor and nature-based play, and reflective pedagogical practices. In Portugal, empirical work explores play behaviors, emotional and social development, participatory and inclusive practices, gender, outdoor play, and the contextual influence of digital technologies. While this thematic diversity enriches transnational understanding and reflects distinct cultural, curricular, and policy priorities, it also contributes to fragmentation in the field and limits cumulative knowledge building.

A central conclusion of this review is the limited and fragmented nature of the existing research base. Peer-reviewed empirical studies on play in ECEC remain scarce across all participating countries, and many available publications rely on non-empirical or methodologically limited designs. This

situation underscores the need for a more robust, coherent, and coordinated research agenda at both national and European levels. In addition to longitudinal and multidimensional studies examining the impact of play on learning and development, future research should explicitly focus on the design, implementation, and evaluation of teacher education and professional development models in play-based pedagogy. This includes intervention studies that examine how different forms of initial training, in-service education, coaching, mentoring, and reflective practices (e.g., video-based reflection, collaborative inquiry) contribute to changes in teachers' beliefs, pedagogical decision-making, and everyday practices related to play.

Despite these limitations, the transnational analysis reveals strong convergence regarding professional and systemic needs. Teacher education, both initial and continuing, emerges as a critical lever for change, requiring coherent programs that bridge theory and practice, clarify the pedagogical role of the adult in play, and support intentional, inclusive, and reflective practice. Sustained opportunities for professional reflection and collaboration, supported by strategies such as video-based analysis, guided observation, and pedagogical dialogue, are consistently identified as essential for developing teachers' competence and confidence in play-based approaches.

At the systemic level, the findings highlight the importance of educational policies and institutional frameworks that explicitly position play as a core pedagogical principle and as a fundamental right of the child. Such policies must ensure adequate time, space, material resources, and organizational conditions for play, while also addressing broader societal expectations that prioritize early academic outcomes over children's well-being, agency, and participation.

Overall, the literature review underscores the urgency of integrated and coherent strategies that connect research, professional development, and institutional and policy support. Only through such alignment can play be effectively repositioned, not as an optional or peripheral activity, but as a central, intentional, and inclusive pedagogical practice that supports children's learning, well-being, participation, and citizenship in early childhood education.

## 2.7. REFERENCES

The full list of empirical studies included in the national systematic literature reviews (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brėdikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025) is provided below:

### 2.7.1 CYPRUS

Georgiou, A. E. (2022). *Εφαρμόζοντας ένα πρόγραμμα εκπαιδευτικού δράματος για την ενίσχυση δεξιοτήτων κοινωνικοδραματικού και φανταστικού παιχνιδιού παιδιών προδημοτικής ηλικίας*

[Implementing an educational drama program to foster pre-school children's play skills in socio-dramatic and imaginative play] (Doctoral dissertation). University of Cyprus.

Kyriakou, M. A. (2018). *Μια έρευνα δράσης για την υποστήριξη της παιδαγωγικής του παιχνιδιού στο νηπιαγωγείο: Δράσεις νηπιαγωγού και ανάπτυξη δεξιοτήτων παιχνιδιού σε παιδιά 3–6 ετών* [An action research study for supporting play pedagogy in kindergarten: Teacher actions and development of play skills in children aged 3–6 years] (Doctoral dissertation). University of Cyprus.

Loizou, E. (2017a). Towards play pedagogy: Supporting teacher play practices with a teacher guide about socio-dramatic and imaginative play. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(5), 784–795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1356574>

Loizou, E. (2017b). Children's socio-dramatic play typologies and teacher play involvement within the breadth of the zone of proximal development. In T. Bruce, P. Hakkarainen, & M. Bredikyte (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of early childhood play* (pp. 151–166). Routledge.

Loizou, E., & Loizou, E. K. (2022). Creative play and the role of the teacher through the cultural-historical activity theory framework. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 30(3), 527–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2022.2065248>

Loizou, E., & Michaelides, A. (2020). Socio-dramatic play: Scenario and role development as enacted by children and as facilitated by pre-service early childhood teachers through drama. In Z. Kingdon (Ed.), *A Vygotskian analysis of children's play behaviours: Beyond the home corner* (pp. 93–110). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429027369>

Loizou, E., Michaelides, A., & Georgiou, A. (2017). Early childhood teacher involvement in children's socio-dramatic play: Creative drama as a scaffolding tool. *Early Child Development and Care*, 189(4), 600–612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1336165>

Loizou, E., & Olymbiou, M. (2023). Constructive play: Exploring pre-service early childhood teachers' play involvement. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 22(3), 329–342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231210642>

Michaelides, A., & Loizou, E. (2024). The development of early childhood teachers' sociodramatic and imaginative play skills through a drama-based professional development program. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32(6), 994–1013. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2024.2369515>

Michaelidou, A. M. (2022). *Το εκπαιδευτικό δράμα ως μέσο ανάπτυξης δεξιοτήτων παιχνιδιού στις νηπιαγωγούς* [Educational drama as a means of developing play skills in preschool teachers] (Doctoral dissertation). University of Cyprus.

Michaelidou, V. (2025). Searching for effective teacher practices during play to promote student learning outcomes. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 86, Article 101473. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2025.101473>

Rentzou, K., Slutsky, R., Tuul, M., Gol-Guven, M., Kragh-Müller, G., Foerch, D. F., & Paz-Albo, J. (2019). Preschool teachers' conceptualizations and uses of play across eight countries. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-018-0910-1>

Shiakou, M., & Belsky, J. (2013). Exploring parent attitudes toward children's play and learning in Cyprus. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 27(1), 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2012.739593>

## 2.7.2 GREECE

Birbili, M., & Kyriakidou, M. (2024). Risky play in Greek kindergarten: Perspectives and practices. *Erevnontas ton kosmo tou pediou [Investigating the child's world]*, 20, 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.12681/icw.35417>

Gessiou, G. (2019). *The pedagogical reconfiguration of kindergarten outdoor environments into places of learning and play through pedagogical approaches* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Ioannina, Greece. <https://freader.ekt.gr/eadd/index.php?doc=46111&lang=el#p=1>

Gonitsiotti, C., & Magos, K. (2016). "Car for boys, doll for girls?" Researching preschool-teachers' perceptions of toy-object in kindergarten. *Erevnontas ton kosmo tou pediou [Investigating the child's world]*, 15, 11–21. <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/omep/article/view/22185/19042>

Kalpogianni, D. E. (2019). Why are the children not outdoors? Factors supporting and hindering outdoor play in Greek public day-care centres. *International Journal of Play*, 8(2), 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2019.1643979>

Kambeza, M., Vellopoulou, A., Koufou, A., Raikou, N., & Filippidis, A. (2020). Kindergarten teacher trainees' views on play in the context of the Practical Exercise of T.E.E.A.P.H. In *Teacher education and pedagogical departments, 30 years on: Meeting new challenges* (pp. 145–159). [https://todiktyo.ecedu.uoi.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EBOOK\\_Praktika\\_2-Synedrio\\_Diktyou\\_Praktikon-147-161.pdf](https://todiktyo.ecedu.uoi.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/EBOOK_Praktika_2-Synedrio_Diktyou_Praktikon-147-161.pdf)

- Kolovou, S., Koutsolabrou, I., Lavidas, K., Komis, V., & Voulgari, I. (2021). Digital games in early childhood education: Greek preschool teachers' views. *Mediterranean Journal of Education*, 1(2), 30–36. <https://pasithee.library.upatras.gr/mje/article/view/3764/3807>
- Lenakakis, A., Howard, J. L., & Felekidou, K. (2018). Play and inclusive education: Greek teachers' attitudes. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 3(3), 129–163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1243040>
- Papadopoulou, K. (2019). “There is no play in worksheets and play does not have worksheets”: Children talk about play and lessons in kindergarten. *Epitheorisi Ekpedeftikon Thematon [Review of Educational Issues]*, 18, 20–27.
- Papadopoulou, K., Sfyroera, M., & Tsermidou, L. (2024). Reflections on the effects of training preservice early childhood educators in children's play. *Erevnontas ton kosmo tou pediou [Investigating the child's world]*, 20, 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.12681/icw.35369>
- Rentzou, K. (2013). Greek preschool children's playful behavior: Assessment and correlation with personal and family characteristics. *Early Child Development and Care*, 183(11), 1733–1745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2012.752736>
- Rentzou, K., Tsiara, E., & Christina, V. (2025). Exploring Greek children's views and perceptions about their play: A comparison between preschool and primary school age children. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2025.2522091>
- Sakellariou, M., & Banou, M. (2020a). Planning and evaluating the educational process of play within Greek preschool learning environments – A comparative study on present and future educators. *European Journal of Social Sciences Studies*, 4(6), 83–108. <https://www.oapub.org/soc/index.php/EJSSS/article/view/739>
- Sakellariou, M., & Banou, M. (2020b). Play within outdoor preschool learning environments of Greece: A comparative study on current and prospective kindergarten educators. *Early Child Development and Care*, 192(6), 887–903. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1813123>
- Sakellariou, M., & Banou, M. (2021). Present and future educators' views on planning and evaluation of play didactics within preschool learning environments. *Erevnontas ton kosmo tou pediou [Investigating the child's world]*, 18, 71–82. <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/omep/article/view/30242>
- Vellopoulou, A., Kampeza, M., Skopeliti, I., Fyssa, A., & Fotopoulou, V. (2024). Play in heterogeneous classrooms for children with and without disability: Perspectives of student early childhood

education teachers. *Erevnontas ton kosmo tou pediou [Investigating the child's world]*, 20, 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.12681/icw.37082>

### 2.7.3 LITHUANIA

Brandisauskiene, A., Daugirdiene, A., Cesnaviciene, J., & Jarasiunaite-Fedosejeva, G. (2025). Improving young children's self-regulation skills in pretend play in the digital age. *Acta Psychologica*, 260, 105605. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105605>

Bredikyte, M., & Brandisauskiene, A. (2022). Adult actions supporting narrative playworlds in the classroom. *Forum Oświatowe*, 35(2), 53–67.

Bredikyte, M., & Brandisauskiene, A. (2023). Pretend play as the space for development of self-regulation: A cultural-historical perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1186512. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1186512>

Brėdikytė, M., Brandišauskienė, A., & Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, G. (2015). The dynamics of pretend play development in early childhood. *Pedagogika*, 118(2), 174–187. <https://doi.org/10.15823/p.2015.013>

Juodaitytė, A., Malinauskienė, D., & Šiaučiulienė, R. (2015). Žaidimas kaip vaiko kūrybos ir gyvenimo filosofija [Game as the philosophy of a child's creation and life]. *Pedagogika*, 118(2), 159–173.

Hakkarainen, P., Brėdikytė, M., Brandišauskienė, A., & Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, G. (2015). *Ikimokyklinio amžiaus vaiko raida: Žaidimas ir savireguliacija* [The development of a preschool child: Play and self-regulation]. Lietuvos edukologijos universitetas.

Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė, G. (2022). *Ankstyvosios emocinės reguliacijos formavimasis žaidybinėje veikloje* [Early development of emotional regulation in play] (Doctoral dissertation). Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas.

### 2.7.4 The NETHERLANDS

König, A. & van der Aalsvoort, G. M. (2009). Attitudes of Dutch and German preschool teachers towards professional childcare: A cultural comparison. *Early Years*, 29(3), 249–260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140903253151>

Leseman, P. P., Rollenberg, L., & Rispens, J. (2001). Playing and working in kindergarten: Cognitive co-construction in two educational situations. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16(3), 363–384.

- Prins, J., Gaikhorst, L., & Hovinga, D. (2025). Nature as a co-teacher in early childhood language education. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-025-01854-6>
- Singer, E., Nederend, M., Penninx, L., Tajik, M., & Boom, J. (2014). The teacher's role in supporting young children's level of play engagement. *Early Child Development and Care*, 184(8), 1233–1249. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.862530>
- Tajik, M., & Singer, E. (2021). Collaborative research between academics and practitioners to enhance play engagement in the free play of two- and three-year-olds. *Early Years*, 41(1), 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2018.1478391>
- Thieme, A.-M. M. M., Kuiken, F., Andringa, S., & Verhagen, J. (2025). Teachers' reported experiences with emergent multilingual children's peer interactions in early childhood education and care in the Netherlands. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2025.2506701>
- Van der Aalsvoort, G., Prakke, B., Howard, J., König, A., & Parkkinen, T. (2015). Trainee teachers' perspectives on play characteristics and their role in children's play: An international comparative study amongst trainees in the Netherlands, Wales, Germany and Finland. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 23(2), 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2015.1016807>
- Van der Aalsvoort, G., Prakke, B., König, A., & Goorhuis, S. (2010). Preschool teachers' and students' attitudes towards playful preschool activities: A cross-cultural comparison between Germany and the Netherlands. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18(4), 349–363. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2010.535322>
- Van Oers, B., & Duijkers, D. (2013). Teaching in a play-based curriculum: Theory, practice and evidence of developmental education for young children. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(4), 511–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2011.637182>
- Van Rossum, E., van der Wilt, F., de Schipper, C., van der Veen, C., & Dobber, M. (2025). How day-care practitioners support children's language and play development. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 9, 100539.
- Van Schaik, S. D., Leseman, P. P., & de Haan, M. (2018). Using a group-centered approach to observe interactions in early childhood education. *Child Development*, 89(3), 897–913.

## 2.7.5 PORTUGAL

- Afonso, A., & Mamede, E. (2018). Brincando com padrões na educação pré-escolar [Playing with patterns in preschool education]. *Jornal das Primeiras Matemáticas*, (10), 5–15.
- Antunes, R., & Luís, I. (2018). Brincar na educação de infância: Conceções e intencionalidade educativa dos/as educadores/as de infância [Play in early childhood education: Conceptions and educational intentionality of early childhood educators]. *Revista da UIIPS*, 6(1), 126–138. <https://revistas.rcaap.pt/uiips/>
- Barros, S., Coelho, V., Wysłowska, O., Penderi, E., Taelman, H., Barros Araújo, S., Correia, N., Markowska-Manista, U., Petrogiannis, K., Boderé, A., Pessanha, M., Guimarães, C., & Aguiar, C. (2024). A focus group study on participatory practices in early childhood education and care across four European countries. *Early Education and Development*, 35(6), 1292–1315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2024.2360868>
- Coelho, L., Guedes, M., & Veríssimo, M. (2018). Perfis de comportamentos de brincadeira e conhecimento emocional em crianças de idade pré-escolar [Play behavior profiles and emotional knowledge in preschool children]. *Análise Psicológica*, 36(1), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.14417/ap.1357>
- Coelho, V., Araújo, S. B., Sanches-Ferreira, M., & Vancraeyveldt, C. (2023). PLAYING-2-GETHER: Can brief in-service training influence preschool teachers' awareness of play-based strategies for improving relationships? *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(2), 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2022.2037078>
- da Silva Pinto, J. (2025). Brincar ao ar livre em educação de infância: Possibilidades de participação das crianças [Outdoor play in early childhood education: Possibilities for children's participation]. *Revista Portuguesa de Educação*, 38(1), e25008. <https://doi.org/10.21814/rpe.33384>
- Gomes, S., Antunes, R., Sales, I., Marques, R., & Oliveira, A. (2024). Enhancing autonomy in preschoolers: The role of motor games in development. *Education Sciences*, 14(5), 524. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14050524>
- Mira, C., Veiga, G., Mendes, B., Silva, C., & Pereira, C. (2019). As crianças com perdas auditivas nas escolas de referência para a educação bilingue de alunos surdos: Uma análise dos comportamentos de jogo [Children with hearing loss in reference schools for bilingual deaf education: An analysis of play behavior]. In K. O'Hara, B. Travassos, & C. Lourenço (Eds.), *Estudos em desenvolvimento motor da criança XIV* [Child motor development studies XIV] (pp. 287–295). UBI Edições.

- Monteiro, R., Fernandes, S., & Rocha, N. (2022). What do preschool teachers and parents think about the influence of screen-time exposure on children's development? Challenges and opportunities. *Education Sciences*, 12(1), 52. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12010052>
- Oliveira, C. S., & Mendes, A. (2017). Brincar ao género: Socialização e performatividade de género numa sala de educação pré-escolar [Playing at gender: Gender socialization and performativity in a preschool classroom]. *Ex æquo*, (36), 167–186. <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2017.36.10>
- Pinto, J. da S. (2022). *A criança participa brincando: Educação de infância ao ar livre* [The child participates playing: Outdoor early childhood education] (Doctoral dissertation). University of Minho. RepositóriUM.
- Veiga, G., de Leng, W., Cachucho, R., Ketelaar, L., Kok, J. N., Knobbe, A., Neto, C., & Rieffe, C. (2017). Social competence at the playground: Preschoolers during recess. *Infant and Child Development* 26(1), e1957. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.1957>

## SECTION III. TRANSNATIONAL FIELD RESEARCH: INTERVIEWS, FOCUS GROUPS, FIELD OBSERVATIONS

### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

This section summarizes the transnational field research conducted in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal, which maps and assesses the needs and challenges faced by pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as headteachers, in integrating play in ECEC (Araújo et al, 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al, 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025).

The specific objectives of the field research were to: (a) identify current challenges and gaps within ECEC systems regarding the use of play pedagogy; (b) identify the training needs of pre-service and in-service teachers and headteachers for the effective use of play in promoting children's learning; and (c) identify existing play practices in all-day ECEC settings.

A multi-informant research strategy was employed to provide a comprehensive mapping of needs, challenges, and current practices related to play pedagogy across institutional, professional, and classroom levels of ECEC. Data triangulation aimed to generate complementary insights into how play is currently conceptualized and enacted by different professional groups, as well as to offer a deep understanding of the organizational, contextual, and training-related factors perceived as facilitating or constraining its pedagogical use.

### 3.2. PROCEDURES OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

The transnational field research was implemented using a mixed-methods design across all participating countries, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture multiple perspectives on the integration of play as a pedagogical approach in ECEC. Data collection was organised around three complementary components: (i) semi-structured interviews with ECEC headteachers, (ii) focus-group discussions with in-service teachers, and (iii) structured classroom observations conducted by pre-service teachers who were either completing their practicum placements or volunteering.

Data collection followed a common protocol, approved by all partners. It took place in October and November 2025, with slight variations across countries. Interviews and focus groups were conducted either online or in person, depending on national conditions and participants' availability, while classroom observations were carried out in ECEC settings where pre-service teachers were either engaged in supervised practicum placements or volunteering to observe the classrooms.

The study comprised three groups of participants: ECEC headteachers, in-service early childhood teachers, and pre-service teachers involved in classroom observations either during their practicum or as volunteers. Across the five participating countries, the final sample included 25 headteachers (5 in each country), 106 in-service teachers (21 in Cyprus, 20 in Greece, 24 in Lithuania, 19 in the Netherlands, and 22 in Portugal), and 52 pre-service teachers (19 in Cyprus, 10 in Greece, 10 in Lithuania, 3 in the Netherlands, and 10 in Portugal) (see Annex F for an overview). It is worth noting that in the Netherlands, in addition to the three pre-service teachers who conducted the classroom observations, a further 6 participants contributed by completing the open-ended reflection component of the observation instrument. Classroom observations were conducted in 52 ECEC settings. Participants' selection was intended to assure representation of a wide range of professional roles, levels of experience, institutional types (predominantly public provision, with some private settings), and socio-geographical contexts, including urban, suburban, rural, mainland, and island locations. Across countries, the field research primarily focused on ECEC settings serving children aged 3–6 years, while also including professionals working with younger age groups or within integrated early childhood centres where relevant.

Headteachers were selected based on their active pedagogical leadership roles and direct responsibility for supervising and supporting teaching staff within ECEC institutions. In-service teachers were recruited through institutional and professional networks, open calls for participation, and partner ECEC settings, ensuring diversity in professional experience, educational backgrounds, and pedagogical approaches. Pre-service teachers were recruited through initial teacher education programmes and participated in the study either as part of their supervised practicum placements or as volunteers, following institutional and, where required, ministerial approvals. All participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation.

Semi-structured interviews with headteachers followed a shared protocol (Annex A). It explored institution-level perspectives on the pedagogical use of play, including leadership practices, organisational conditions, resource availability, professional development needs, policy and curriculum influences, and collaboration with families and communities. Interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Focus-group discussions with in-service teachers supported collective reflection on everyday play practices in ECEC settings, addressing conceptualisations of play, pedagogical strategies, perceived benefits and challenges, enabling and constraining factors, professional development needs, curriculum and policy frameworks, and monitoring practices. A shared protocol guided all focus groups (Annex A), which lasted between 60 and 120 minutes depending on group size, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Classroom observations were conducted by pre-service teachers using a standardised observation tool developed within the project (Annex H). Observations focused on the organisation and quality of play episodes, types of play, teachers' roles and levels of involvement, environmental affordances, group composition, and contextual constraints. Observations took place during free or structured play time and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. In several countries, observations were carried out in two phases, an initial observation phase followed by a second phase after reflective discussion with the in-service teacher. In addition, pre-service teachers completed questionnaires and/or open-ended written reflections addressing their beliefs, perceived competencies, and training needs related to play-based pedagogy.

All research instruments, including interview guides, focus-group protocols, observation grids, questionnaires, and informed consent forms, were jointly developed by the EDUPLAY consortium, standardized across countries, and translated and culturally adapted to ensure conceptual equivalence. The study complied with international ethical standards for research involving educational professionals and children. Ethical approval was secured by each participating country by one of the local partners, in accordance with national regulations (e.g., in Portugal, ethical approval was issued by the Centre for Research and Innovation in Education Ethics Committee, Report Reference PA08/CE/24). For classroom observations, parental consent and child assent were obtained where required. All data were anonymized, securely stored, and processed in line with national and international data protection regulations.

Data analysis in each country followed shared project-wide protocols (Annex G). Quantitative data from questionnaires and observation tools were analyzed descriptively. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns, shared challenges, and context-specific features. Observation data were further examined through category-based content analysis, focusing on play types, teacher roles, and contextual factors shaping play practices. Throughout the analysis, national contextual characteristics, such as governance structures, curriculum frameworks, professional preparation models, and material conditions, were considered to ensure that findings were both cross-nationally comparable and sensitive to local specificities. For this transnational report, the authors conducted a comparative and integrative analysis based on the five national reports (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025). The main findings are organized under three themes: Challenges/barriers in incorporating play into ECEC; Needs of professionals in incorporating play; Current play status and practices, and needs and challenges identified by pre-service teachers. Subsequently, implications derived from the five reports are synthesized and discussed.

### 3.3. MAIN FINDINGS

#### 3.3.1. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC

Across the five national samples (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025), participants described a set of challenges/barriers to incorporating play into ECEC that cluster into interrelated physical, organizational, cultural, and policy-related domains. These challenges/barriers were reported as intersecting and mutually reinforcing, shaping teachers' everyday possibilities for implementing play-based pedagogy within their specific institutional contexts.

First, the design, quality, maintenance, and resourcing of play environments, including physical spaces and material conditions were frequently described as constraining play. Participants across the five country samples referred to small or inflexible classrooms, indoor spaces dominated by fixed furniture, and outdoor areas characterized by cemented surfaces or traditional, fixed play structures. In several reports, toy provision was described as standardized, insufficiently renewed, and limited in open-ended or sensory materials. Financial and resource constraints were also described as limiting the provision and renewal of play materials, with participants in different country reports referring to reliance on outdated resources and to personal expenditure by teachers as a means of maintaining engaging play environments. Accessibility was also raised as a concern, particularly regarding the availability of specialized equipment and the suitability of physical environments for children with disabilities, with some participants noting the absence of systematic monitoring of accessibility standards. Teachers across contexts reported compensatory strategies, such as rearranging furniture, reusing materials, or personally funding resources, while emphasizing that these practices cannot substitute for well-designed, flexible, and inclusive play environments. This context was described as reinforcing the continued use of traditional equipment and limiting the diversity and richness of play opportunities, particularly outdoors.

Second, time allocation, routines, and organizational structures were consistently identified as barriers to sustained and meaningful play. Participants described rigid schedules, frequent interruptions linked to routines or planned activities, and administrative demands that fragment children's play, even when play is formally included in daily planning. Heavy workloads, staff shortages, and limited opportunities to preserve play set-ups over time were also reported as restricting teachers' capacity to observe, extend, and connect play with curricular intentions in practice.

Third, professionals' work conditions and group composition were reported as factors limiting individualized support during play. Across the samples, participants referred to high teacher-child ratios, mixed-age groupings, poor acoustic conditions, and increasingly heterogeneous groups of

children in terms of needs and developmental levels. These characteristics were not presented as inherently problematic; rather, they were described as becoming significant barriers when a single educator is required to simultaneously supervise, manage routines, scaffold multiple play experiences, and mediate conflicts.

Fourth, institutional culture, professional beliefs, and leadership practices were described as central in shaping the pedagogical status of play. Participants across several national samples emphasized that where a shared vision of play and supportive pedagogical leadership were present, play was more likely to be treated as a core learning process. Conversely, in some settings, play was described as secondary to more visible or product-oriented activities. Prescribed themes, standardized schedules, and externally initiated projects were reported as limiting teachers' autonomy to follow children's interests, while limited peer support and pedagogical guidance reinforced reliance on routinized practices.

Fifth, policy frameworks, inspection systems, and administrative procedures were also linked to barriers, particularly when curricular references to play were perceived by participants as misaligned with accountability or inspection priorities. While all national curricula formally acknowledge the educational value of play, participants across the five country samples described notable differences in how these references are enacted in practice, depending on national policy frameworks, curricular emphases, and governance arrangements. In several samples, inspection processes were reported to privilege visible academic outputs, thereby reinforcing pressure to prioritize structured activities over play. This tension was especially evident in the Greek and Dutch samples, where participants described curricula that, despite explicit references to play-based learning, coexist with strong accountability mechanisms and mandatory academic requirements, which were perceived as compressing time for free play. In contrast, in the Cypriot and Portuguese, participants placed comparatively greater emphasis on governance and inspection-related arrangements as shaping the enactment of play, rather than on explicit curricular prescriptions. In the Lithuanian sample, policy-related barriers were described primarily in relation to regulatory frameworks, hygiene norms, and a historically entrenched academic tradition, which continue to shape how curriculum guidelines are interpreted and implemented. Across several contexts, bureaucratic delays in repairing or upgrading indoor and outdoor spaces were also mentioned, alongside reliance on municipal or state-level procedures, both of which were perceived as constraining institutional autonomy and long-term planning for play environments.

Finally, family and community expectations were identified by participants in several national samples as an additional barrier. Some families were described as valuing visible academic work and expressing concerns about school readiness, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. Participants reported that communication and concrete examples of learning through play can support parental understanding; nevertheless, the ongoing need to explain and justify play was experienced

as a practical constraint. Participants also referred to contextual factors related to children's backgrounds, such as limited prior play experiences, extensive screen use, poverty, and challenges in peer relations, which were described as influencing play quality and increasing the need for adult mediation.

Although common categories of challenges were identified across the five national reports, closer examination of the country-specific data revealed meaningful differences in how participants framed, experienced, and prioritized these barriers within their respective national and local contexts. In the Cypriot sample, participants emphasized the role of leadership stance and administratively prescribed themes in limiting pedagogical autonomy, together with procedural delays in upgrading outdoor spaces, insufficient renewal of materials, accessibility challenges, and high ratios. Additionally, participants noted the absence of covered or enclosed common areas, which restricts year-round outdoor play during both hot summers and winter months, and significant variability between urban and rural settings in the size and quality of outdoor spaces. In the Greek sample, participants drew attention to infrastructural disparities, high teacher-child ratios in small classrooms, and curriculum-related pressures that, in their view, compress time for free play despite its explicit recognition within national curriculum guidelines and its formal allocation in the daily program. Some kindergartens also share outdoor yards with primary schools, constraining access to outdoor play, and participants reported disparities between public and private (and daycare) settings in the adequacy of indoor and outdoor spaces. In the Lithuanian sample, participants emphasized cultural and attitudinal barriers, referring to a longstanding academic tradition in which play, and learning are perceived as separate, combined with limited professional competence in play-based pedagogy and regulatory constraints affecting materials and time use. In the Dutch sample, participants particularly highlighted performance and accountability pressures related to language and mathematics outcomes, alongside heavy administrative workloads and the absence of a shared pedagogical vision around play. They also pointed to parental attitudes (e.g., a "fear of dirt") and to difficulties translating curricular goals into observable, assessable play-based approaches. In the Portuguese sample, participants highlighted structural and institutional constraints, including funding mechanisms, certification requirements, and municipal dependency, alongside small or inadequate spaces, rigid schedules, inspection practices perceived as misaligned with curricular guidelines, and the challenges of working with large, heterogeneous groups. Further barriers included insufficient preparation of support staff, whose role is essential for enabling play, and architectural decisions made without consultation of ECEC specialists, resulting in environments misaligned with pedagogical needs.

Across the five national samples, differences also emerged according to participants' professional roles. Headteachers tended to foreground systemic and structural barriers, including policy frameworks, inspection regimes, funding mechanisms, staffing ratios, and bureaucratic or municipal procedures that limit institutional autonomy and long-term planning for play environments. In-service

teachers focused more strongly on everyday, practice-based constraints, such as limited space, rigid schedules, interruptions to play, large and heterogeneous groups, and the difficulty of sustaining and extending play within existing organizational routines. Pre-service teachers, in turn, emphasized barriers related to their position within institutions, highlighting limited opportunities to implement play-based approaches during practicum, lack of mentoring or modeling by experienced teachers, insufficient access to materials and play spaces, and challenges in managing conflicts and diverse play levels among children. While these emphases differ, they reflect complementary perspectives on how material, organizational, cultural, and policy-related constraints are experienced at different levels of the ECEC system.

Overall, contributions from the five national samples suggest that barriers to incorporating play in ECEC are not primarily located at a single level but emerge from the interaction of material conditions, organizational arrangements, professional cultures, and policy frameworks. While participants across contexts described similar categories of constraints, the ways in which these are experienced and prioritized vary according to local institutional and cultural configurations. Taken together, these findings underline the importance of coherent, multi-level approaches that align policy, leadership, professional development, and learning environments in order to support the sustained integration of play in everyday ECEC practice.

### 3.3.2. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

Moving beyond the identification of barriers, participants across the national samples articulated a range of needs they consider crucial for enabling the meaningful integration of play in ECEC practice. The analysis highlights forms of support, knowledge, organizational conditions, and policy alignment that professionals perceive as necessary to sustain play-based pedagogy over time. These accounts shift the focus from constraints alone to the conditions under which play can be confidently enacted in everyday practice.

A first and widely shared need concerns the development of a solid and shared understanding of play and play-based learning. Participants across countries highlighted the importance of deepening theoretical knowledge about play, including its developmental, social, and educational dimensions. This need was expressed not only in relation to teachers' individual knowledge, but also as a collective requirement for building a common professional language that supports consistent pedagogical decisions across teams and institutions.

Closely connected to this, participants consistently emphasized the need for practical, experience-based professional learning opportunities. Headteachers, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers stressed that learning about play is most effective when theory is directly connected to practice through observation, modelling, mentoring, and supervised experimentation in real classroom settings. Participants highlighted the value of learning how to participate in play, scaffold children's initiatives, manage conflicts, document learning processes, and support inclusion within

play. Several accounts specifically called for “in-classroom” coaching, small-group mentoring, and opportunities to observe colleagues who effectively implement play-based pedagogy, rather than one-off seminars. Sustained coaching, peer learning, and collaborative reflection were viewed as particularly valuable in supporting professional confidence and change over time.

A further shared need relates to organizational conditions that allow teachers to engage meaningfully in play. Participants emphasized the importance of having sufficient time for uninterrupted play, flexible routines that can respond to children’s initiatives, and working conditions that reduce the dominance of administrative tasks. In several accounts, the availability of additional adult support in classrooms was described as a key factor enabling teachers to move beyond supervision and engage more actively in children’s play.

Analysis of the five national reports also revealed that participants consistently highlighted material and spatial needs as critical for supporting richer play experiences. These include access to diverse, open-ended, sensory materials, as well as indoor and outdoor spaces that can be reorganized to accommodate different forms of play. Many participants emphasized the educational value of simple, natural, or low-cost materials, alongside the need for ongoing maintenance, renewal, and accessibility adaptations to ensure that all children can participate fully in play. Examples included moveable furniture to reconfigure play areas, costumes for role play, adaptable outdoor spaces, and additional room for storing and using play props.

Another recurring theme concerns the need to improve communication and a shared understanding with families, schools, and the wider community. Participants expressed the need for tools and strategies to make learning through play visible and understandable to parents, primary school teachers, and local authorities. Building shared expectations around play was perceived as particularly important during transitions and in contexts where academic outcomes are highly valued.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of coherent leadership and supportive policy frameworks. The in-service teachers highlighted the role of pedagogical leadership in legitimizing play, fostering shared visions, and creating conditions for collaboration and professional learning. Participants pointed to the need for alignment between curriculum guidance and certification/procurement procedures, and for leadership strategies that embed a shared vision of play across whole-school teams. Alignment between curriculum frameworks, inspection practices, professional development provision, and institutional priorities was described as essential for sustaining play-based approaches beyond individual initiatives.

An analysis across participant groups further indicates that these needs are articulated differently depending on professionals’ roles and positions within the ECEC system. Headteachers tended to emphasize systemic and structural needs, including coherent policy frameworks, sustained and practice-oriented professional development, adequate staffing conditions, investment in infrastructure and materials, and leadership strategies that build shared pedagogical visions around play. In-service teachers focused more strongly on needs related to everyday practice, such as concrete pedagogical tools, opportunities for coaching and collaborative reflection, flexible routines, additional classroom

support, and guidance on documenting and communicating learning through play. They also asked for help using observation frameworks effectively and for schedules that protect extended play. Pre-service teachers, in turn, foregrounded needs linked to their training and positioning within institutions, highlighting the need for stronger emphasis on play within initial education, clearer guidance on integrating curricular goals into play, opportunities to observe and practice play-based pedagogy under supervision, and support in managing diverse play situations, inclusion, and conflict during play. In some samples, limited practicum time (e.g., two days per week) and a lack of modelling/mentoring were reported as restricting implementation and confidence.

While these needs were broadly shared, participants in different countries highlighted distinct needs shaped by their professional and institutional contexts. In the Cypriot sample, participants emphasized needs related to staffing conditions, reduced class sizes, and sustained, practice-oriented professional development that connects beliefs about play with classroom implementation. In the Greek sample, participants focused strongly on the need for systematic, dedicated professional development in play and for school cultures that collectively support play-based learning. In the Lithuanian sample, participants particularly emphasized the need to strengthen theoretical and methodological knowledge about play, develop practical tools, and improve communication with parents and local authorities. In the Dutch sample, participants highlighted the importance of shared pedagogical visions, structured coaching, and concrete tools for guiding play, alongside organizational support that enables teachers to actively engage in play. In the Portuguese sample, participants highlighted the need for comprehensive professional development that involves the whole educational community, strengthened collaborative cultures, improved play environments, and greater alignment between policy frameworks, institutional practices, and community engagement.

Taken together, the data provided by the five national reports suggest that professionals across contexts have a clear sense of what would support more effective, confident, and sustainable integration of play in ECEC. Their accounts point to the importance of investing not only in resources and education/training, but also in shared understandings, collaborative cultures, organizational conditions, and policy coherence. Addressing these needs in a coordinated and sustained manner appears central to embedding play as a meaningful and enduring component of everyday ECEC practice.

### 3.3.3. PRACTICES, PROJECTS, OR INITIATIVES PROMOTING PLAY

Analysis of the national reports indicates that participants across the samples describe play-promoting practices primarily in terms of how everyday pedagogical work is organized, through space, time, adult participation, and collaboration, rather than as a set of discrete activities or programs. Play is presented as an activity embedded in daily routines and relationships, shaped through ongoing pedagogical decisions and adjustments.

A central feature of these practices is the intentional organization of environments that invite exploration, imagination, and social interaction. Indoors, teachers commonly refer to differentiated

play areas (e.g., role play, construction, sensory or movement spaces) that are adapted over time and often co-constructed with children. Outdoor spaces are used regularly where possible, with some teams extending play through open-ended materials or small natural elements. Across reports, the arrangement of space is closely linked to pedagogical intent, with teachers describing how materials and situations are deliberately introduced to stimulate roles, dialogue, and problem-solving.

Another recurring theme concerns the way adults position themselves in relation to play. Participants describe a responsive stance in which teachers observe children's initiatives, enter play selectively, and support interaction, language, and negotiation without taking control of the play narrative. In many settings, this approach is supported through thematic or project-based work that draws on children's interests and, at times, on real-world experiences, allowing socio-dramatic play to develop with greater coherence and depth.

Participants also emphasize the role of observation and documentation in sustaining play as a pedagogical focus. Practices such as photographs, drawings, short narratives, and observation tools are used to revisit play experiences with children, inform planning, and support team reflection. Documentation is further described as a means of communicating with families and maintaining continuity around children's interests, helping to anchor play within the broader curriculum.

Play-promoting practices are frequently linked to professional learning situated in practice. Teachers value opportunities for peer observation, mentoring, and collaborative reflection, as well as concrete tools that support play guidance in daily routines. Pre-service teachers highlight the importance of practicum experiences and modelling through experienced teachers in developing confidence to engage with and extend children's play.

Family and community involvement also appears as a supportive dimension of practice. Participants describe initiatives such as shared play events, sharing materials for home use, and regular communication that illustrates learning through play. In some cases, families and community partners contribute materials, expertise, or contexts that connect play to children's everyday lives outside the institution.

Finally, some reports point to institutional or policy conditions that support play-promoting practices by providing an explicit framework of legitimacy for teachers' pedagogical choices. Where curriculum frameworks or local guidelines clearly recognize play as a central component of children's learning and development, participants describe feeling more authorized to reorganize spaces, adapt routines, design play invitations, and engage more actively in children's play without fear of misalignment with institutional expectations. Such policy signals were not described as prescribing specific practices, but rather as creating a supportive backdrop that validates professional judgment and encourages reflective decision-making. In this sense, curricular and policy recognition of play is seen as reinforcing teachers' daily pedagogical work, offering symbolic and institutional support that strengthens, rather than substitutes for, the ongoing work carried out in classrooms.

Differences in emphasis emerged when considering participants' professional roles. Headteachers most often referred to play-promoting practices in terms of how conditions for play are created and sustained at an institutional level. Their accounts focused on organizing environments and routines, supporting project-based work, facilitating collaboration among staff, and engaging families and community partners, as well as on legitimizing play through leadership decisions and organizational priorities.

In-service teachers, by contrast, described practices that unfold within the immediacy of classroom life. They highlighted the ongoing organization and adaptation of play areas, the use of thematic or project-based play connected to children's interests, and their own positioning as attentive observers and selective participants in play. Observation and documentation were frequently mentioned as practical tools for making play visible, guiding planning, and supporting shared reflection within teams.

Pre-service teachers placed particular emphasis on practices that supported their learning to work with play within real educational settings. Their accounts highlighted the importance of opportunities to observe experienced practitioners enacting play-based pedagogy in everyday routines, including how teachers organize environments, respond to children's initiatives, and make moment-to-moment decisions about when and how to enter play. Participating in play alongside children under the guidance of mentors was described as especially valuable, allowing pre-service teachers to gradually experiment with adult roles in play while receiving feedback and support. Practicum experiences were also seen as key contexts for experimenting with the organization and adaptation of play environments, materials, and routines, and for reflecting on how these choices influence children's engagement. Across the reports, developing confidence in responding flexibly to children's ideas, managing group dynamics and conflicts, and balancing adult involvement with respect for children's agency was described as central to pre-service teachers' engagement with play-promoting practice.

Within this shared picture, participants from different countries highlight context-specific enactments of play-promoting practice. In Cyprus, participants describe play integrated across the daily schedule through learning centers and project-based work, supported by classroom organization strategies and regular communication with families. In Greece, play-promoting practices are often linked to family engagement initiatives, material renewal, and efforts to diversify outdoor play. In Lithuania, participants report a wide range of practices, from didactic educational games to free, creative play with natural or recycled materials, with recent national guidelines described as strengthening the status of play. In the Netherlands, participants emphasize thematic socio-dramatic play, progressive enrichment of materials, and adult modelling supported by professional learning structures. In Portugal, participants highlight the intentional organization of spaces and routines, a responsive adult role grounded in observation and co-play, and the use of pedagogical documentation and team reflection.

Overall, the practices described across the five national samples indicate that play is promoted through everyday pedagogical choices that align environments, adult roles, observation, and collaboration with families and communities. While the specific forms of implementation vary across

contexts, participants consistently portray play as an intentional and meaningful component of ECEC practice, sustained through reflective teamwork, professional learning, and supportive institutional conditions rather than through isolated activities or prescribed models.

### 3.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This section synthesizes implications identified through the analyses conducted by the national research teams, drawing on interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations (Araújo et al, 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al, 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025). The implications reflect a cross-national interpretation of the field research and highlight directions for practice, policy, and future development that are grounded in the empirical findings.

A consistent implication for professional practice concerns the need to move beyond ad-hoc initiatives toward sustained, practice-oriented professional learning that explicitly connects theoretical perspectives on play with classroom enactment. Across national analyses, effective support is associated with context-based coaching, peer observation, mentoring, and communities of practice that clarify teachers' roles in child-initiated and adult-guided play. The reports point to the value of shared frameworks and practical tools, such as observation criteria, planning guides, and heuristics for material selection, to support leaders, in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and communication with families about how play functions as a learning process.

At the organizational level, the synthesized analyses indicate that time, staffing, and routine design function as key enabling conditions. Sustained play appears more feasible where schedules are flexible, administrative demands are moderated, and staffing arrangements allow teachers to engage actively in play rather than primarily supervising. High teacher–child ratios, limited space, and the inability to maintain play set-ups across sessions are identified in the analyses as recurring constraints, suggesting that adjustments to ratios, routines, and continuity of play environments represent practical levers for improvement.

Implications for the learning environment point to the importance of targeted investment in infrastructure and maintenance. The national syntheses link disparities in indoor and outdoor spaces to uneven play opportunities and highlight the role of flexible layouts, enriched outdoor areas, diverse and open-ended materials, and accessibility adaptations in supporting inclusive play. Upgrading and maintaining play environments, particularly outdoor spaces, emerges as a cross-cutting priority in the analyses.

At the policy and inspection level, the reports suggest that alignment between curriculum frameworks, inspection criteria, and accountability mechanisms is critical for legitimizing play-based approaches. Where inspection priorities emphasize visible academic outputs, the analyses indicate a risk that child-led play and guided socio-dramatic learning are marginalized in practice. Embedding play more

explicitly in inspection frameworks, addressing municipal or state dependencies that delay infrastructural improvements, and allocating resources through targeted funding mechanisms are identified as directions that could support more consistent implementation.

In relation to family and community engagement, the synthesized findings indicate the importance of sustained and structured communication about learning through play. The analyses point to the value of co-developed activities, workshops, and collaborative documentation that make children's learning visible across home and educational settings, particularly during transitions and in contexts where academic expectations are prominent.

Looking for future agendas, the national reports converge on the need to build coherent ecosystems for play. The analyses highlight systematic professional development across career stages; initial teacher education that integrates laboratory-based activities, observation and assessment of play, classroom and behavior management, and inclusive play strategies, practicum experiences, and approaches that are responsive to cultural, socio-economic, and developmental diversity. Several teams also identify the potential of modular and scalable training formats, including blended or online models, to support sustained learning across professional roles.

Within this shared analytical framework, the national syntheses identify context-specific emphases. In Cyprus, the analysis points to strengthening coherence between theoretical preparation and classroom implementation of play within teacher education, particularly regarding assessment, inclusion, and classroom management. In Greece, the synthesis highlights the need for more systematic professional development, policy measures to rebalance curriculum priorities, regulation of teacher-child ratios, and national investment in infrastructure, especially outdoor environments. In Lithuania, the analysis emphasizes the development of clear theoretical frameworks and practical tools to clarify teachers' roles in different forms of play, guide material selection, address the educational use of technology, and support communication with families. In the Netherlands, the synthesis points to embedding play more firmly within curriculum and inspection frameworks, strengthening professional learning communities and leadership development, and resourcing materials and outdoor spaces. In Portugal, the analysis outlines a systemic agenda that includes strengthening initial and continuing professional development, reorganizing routines and group structures to protect extended play, investing in flexible and accessible environments, consolidating collaborative professional cultures, and leveraging existing institutional strengths.

In sum, these findings outline a strong agenda for consolidating play pedagogy in early childhood education and guiding the next phases of the EDUPLAY project. Key priorities include developing professional preparation aligned with the identified needs of headteachers, in-service teachers and pre-service teachers; strengthening professional collaboration to support coherence across ECEC

teams; and disseminating evidence to broaden societal and policy-level recognition of play as a foundational educational value and practice.

### 3.5. TRANSNATIONAL CONCLUSIONS OF FIELD RESEARCH

The transnational field research conducted in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Portugal provides a situated and multi-perspective account of how play is currently understood and enacted within a range of ECEC settings. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations with headteachers, in-service teachers, and pre-service teachers, the findings do not aim to represent national systems as a whole, but to identify patterns and tensions that emerged across the participating contexts.

Within this scope, participants consistently recognized play as a meaningful component of children's learning and well-being. At the same time, their accounts highlight how the pedagogical use of play is shaped by intersecting material, organizational, cultural, and policy-related conditions. Constraints related to space, time, staffing, routines, and administrative demands interact with institutional cultures and governance arrangements, influencing how play is prioritized and sustained in everyday practice.

A key insight from the comparative analysis concerns perceived misalignments between curricular intentions and their enactment. While national curricula formally acknowledge the educational value of play, participants in several contexts described tensions linked to inspection priorities, accountability mechanisms, and administrative procedures that shape pedagogical decision-making. These tensions were not interpreted as a rejection of play, but as reflecting broader structural arrangements that may privilege visible or easily measurable outcomes.

Alongside these challenges, participants articulated a coherent set of needs related to the conditions required to support play more effectively. These include shared conceptual understandings of play, sustained and practice-based professional learning, organizational conditions that protect continuity and flexibility, access to adaptable environments and materials, and leadership practices that legitimate play as a core pedagogical process. These needs emerged as interconnected and systemic rather than individual or isolated.

The analysis further indicates that professional role and positioning shape how play is experienced and addressed. Headteachers tended to emphasize institutional leadership, resource allocation, staffing, and policy alignment; in-service teachers focused on the organization of everyday classroom practice and adult roles in play; and pre-service teachers foregrounded the conditions under which play-based pedagogy is learned through observation, mentoring, and practicum experiences. Together, these perspectives illuminate how play is negotiated across different layers of the ECEC system.

Importantly, the field research also documents a range of practices through which play is actively promoted in everyday pedagogical work. Across contexts, play is sustained through ongoing pedagogical choices related to the organization of environments, responsive adult participation, observation and documentation, collaboration within teams, and engagement with families and communities. Where institutional leadership and curriculum or policy frameworks are perceived as supportive, participants describe greater professional confidence to adapt routines and environments in ways that sustain children's play.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the integration of play in ECEC is best understood as a situated and negotiated practice shaped by the interaction of professional knowledge, institutional conditions, and policy environments. While the configurations identified cannot be generalized beyond the participating contexts, they offer analytically grounded insights to inform reflection, professional learning, and policy dialogue within the EDUPLAY project and related initiatives.

## CONCLUSIONS

This transnational report offers a structured synthesis of available evidence on the status of play in ECEC across Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Portugal, drawing on an integrated analysis of policy documents, research literature and fieldwork conducted within the framework of the EDUPLAY project. By bringing together these three analytical strands, the report highlights recurring patterns, shared challenges and points of convergence across the material reviewed, while remaining attentive to the diversity of national contexts and institutional arrangements in which play is enacted. Importantly, the analysis is grounded in selected policy texts, published empirical studies and purposefully constructed fieldwork samples (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brédikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025), offering an evidence-informed perspective without claiming to represent national ECEC systems in their entirety.

The desk review of public policies shows that the national curricular and guidance documents included in the analysis consistently position play as a central element of ECEC and, in several cases, explicitly recognize it as a child's right. At the same time, differences are evident in how play is defined and operationalized, particularly regarding the balance between child-initiated and adult-guided forms of play, the level of pedagogical specificity, and the availability of practical resources and monitoring tools focused on play. In several cases, policy frameworks appear to provide strong rhetorical endorsement of play, while offering more limited guidance on teachers' roles, access to open-access resources and procedures for formative assessment of play, pointing to the need for greater coherence between curricular intentions and implementation supports.

The transnational literature review complements this analysis by confirming the widely documented benefits of play for children's learning and development across social, emotional, and cognitive domains. At the same time, the reviewed studies reveal persistent conceptual and practical tensions, including dichotomies between play and learning, the tendency to prioritize structured or outcome-oriented activities, and ongoing uncertainty regarding the pedagogical role of adults in different forms of play. Structural constraints (such as limited time for uninterrupted play, inflexible routines, under-resourced environments and high child-adult ratios) also emerge across the literature, alongside recurring equity concerns related to inclusion, multilingualism and gender. While the evidence base remains uneven across countries and themes, the literature points to consistent professional and systemic challenges that warrant attention.

Findings from the field research further contextualize these issues by illuminating how play is experienced and negotiated within participating ECEC settings. Across institutions, professionals describe interrelated constraints linked to space, materials, routines, staffing and accountability pressures. At the same time, the field data make visible enabling conditions for play-based pedagogy, including pedagogical leadership that protects time for play, shared professional language around purposes and adult roles, intentional environment design, formative observation and documentation practices, and sustained, practice-embedded professional learning through modelling, coaching and collaborative reflection. Communication with families also emerges as an important factor in aligning

expectations around play, particularly in relation to outdoor and risky play and notions of school readiness.

The report also acknowledges the limitations inherent in a transnational synthesis based on national reports (Araújo et al., 2025; Birbili & Natsiou, 2025; Boland et al., 2025; Brėdikytė et al., 2025; Loizou et al., 2025) rather than pooled primary datasets. Despite efforts to preserve contextual specificity and to triangulate across sources, heterogeneity in samples, methods and analytical focus constrains direct comparability across countries, and some field-based indicators remain descriptive rather than quantified. These limitations, however, reinforce rather than diminish the report's central conclusion: moving from rhetorical endorsement of play to its sustained, intentional and inclusive implementation requires coherent and coordinated action across multiple levels of the ECEC system.

On this basis, the report provides a clear foundation for the next work packages of the EDUPLAY project. EDUPLAY will build on the identified needs and promising practices to develop coherent, practice-oriented resources that support educators and leaders in strengthening play-based pedagogy in diverse contexts. Through accessible professional learning opportunities, the project aims to support teachers and headteachers in protecting time for play, redesigning environments, and aligning routines and assessment with play-centered curricular intentions. More broadly, in a context of growing public and professional attention to play, outdoor play and children's autonomy, EDUPLAY is well positioned to contribute to both professional development and wider recognition of play as a core educational value in early childhood education and care.

## ANNEX A - RESEARCH PROTOCOL FOR DESK AND FIELD RESEARCH

This annex corresponds to the main sections of the Guidelines prepared by the team at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (Araújo et al., 2025) and discussed and reviewed by all partners from the five countries. It was drawn up in line with the application designed and approved by the Erasmus+ Agency.

The complete reference for that document is as follows:

Araújo, S. B., Magalhães, S., Nogueira, S., & Barros, S. (2025). *EDUPLAY Project - Promoting high-quality ECEC through education and play in all-day settings: Guidelines, methodology and tools for desk & field research*. Polytechnic Institute of Porto.

### Introduction

The EDUPLAY project presents as its first objective to map the needs and challenges of pre- and in-service teachers/headteachers in using play in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In order to complete this objective, desk and field research will be developed directed towards gaining informed knowledge on the state of play in ECEC in the participating countries, at the level of national policies, research outcomes, professional development initiatives, and practices.

Specific goals of this work package (WP2) are: (a) to identify the current challenges and gaps of ECEC systems in regard to the use of play pedagogy and relevant policies; (b) to identify pre- and in-service teachers and headteachers training needs to make effective use of play in promoting children's learning; (c) to identify current play practices in all-day settings of the participating countries.

The current guide serves as a research outline describing the methodology and reporting to be used by partners for the implementation and delivery of WP2, tasks 1 to 7.

The team from ESE | P.Porto, as the leader of WP2, provided guidelines and data collection procedures, reviewed and discussed with partners, to prepare a report for each country, followed by a transnational report.

The indicators for the WP2 are:

- Number of existing documents analysed at the local, national and international level.
- Number of references for current needs and challenges.
- Number of interviews with ECEC in-service headteachers to identify the needs at the school level.
- Number of focus group discussions with ECEC in-service teachers to identify the current challenges and needs at the classroom level.
- Number of observations through study visits by pre-service teachers to identify teacher training needs.

The target values are:

- A minimum of 50 documents and reports reviews (in total).
- A minimum of 50 references of previous studies (in total).

- A minimum of 25 interviews with ECEC in-service headteachers (5 in each country).
- A minimum of 10 focus group discussions with ECEC in-service teachers (2 focus groups with 20 teachers in total per country).
- A minimum of 50 observations through study visits by pre-service teachers (10 in each country).

## PART I. DESK RESEARCH: REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT POLICIES AND RESEARCH LITERATURE

### 1. Review and analysis of current policies

#### DEFINITION AND OBJECTIVE

Review and analysis of current policies involves identifying existing educational policies, regulations/legal documents, governmental reports, recommendations emanated from advisory agencies, and other official documents and data related to the use of play in ECEC, analysing how play is conceptualized, promoted and/or regulated across participating countries.

#### TYPE OF DOCUMENTS

Each partner organization will be responsible to conduct the desk research at the national level using internal available databases (e.g., government websites/platforms).

A minimum of 50 documents and reports reviews (in total) is needed to complete this activity (minimum of 10 per country), among which:

- National, regional, municipal/ local legislation on ECEC;
- Curriculum / curricula frameworks;
- Specific guidelines/brochures supporting curricula implementation;
- Policy papers and strategic plans;
- Official reports from ministries or educational authorities;
- International agreements or recommendations adopted nationally (e.g., UNCRC).

#### DATABASE

A database is organized, contributing to Deliverable D2.1 – Data set. For this purpose, an excel file is provided in attachment (**Database\_Policies**) where each partner can summarize information selected, namely:

- Country, document title, complete reference (APA style), link if available, type of document (\*see above), issuing entity;
- Mentions to play (e.g., “free play”; “structured play”); the focus is to identify the words used);
- Definitions of play (quotes/excerpts of the text);

- Goals/objectives associated with play or importance (quotes/excerpts);
- Recommendations/orientations on pedagogical play practices (quotes/excerpts);
- References to resources or support for play (e.g., professional development initiatives);
- Role of the teacher (quotes/excerpts);
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (brief description explaining how monitoring and evaluation appear);
- Document organization (register if one special section is dedicated to play and/or play is mentioned throughout the document);
- Issues related to translation/national terminology (brief description).

## NATIONAL REPORT “REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT POLICIES”

A 5-7 pages national report (in English) will be produced underlining core aspects of the ECEC national system and policy efforts concerning play in ECEC settings, contributing to Deliverable D2.2 – National needs assessment reports and to Deliverable D2.3 – Transnational needs assessment report. The report will be organized according to the following sections:

### i. Introduction

A brief presentation of the contents and the objectives of the Desk Research (1-2 paragraphs).

### ii. Brief introduction to each partner’s country ECEC system

Text describing the types of ECEC settings / governance / range of children’s age/ state or public sector/ is it compulsory and from what age? / the role of the local authority, if any.

National sources and open access databases like Eurydice (<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia>) and SEEPRO (<https://www.seeepro.eu>) can be used to support this brief characterization.

### iii. Early childhood teachers’ careers and professional development

Text describing the initial professional studies of early childhood teachers / opportunities of professional development / public view of ECEC teachers / work retention / opportunities of career progression / teacher motivation and attractiveness to their profession / any relevant research. Open access databases like Eurydice (<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia>) and SEEPRO (<https://www.seeepro.eu>) can support this brief characterization.

### iv. What efforts have been made regarding the development and implementation of public policies to address play in ECEC settings?

Write a text including the review of relevant national, regional, municipal/local policy guidelines, official documents and reports regarding play in ECEC settings (e.g., national Preschool Education Curriculum). Aspects to consider include (a) the concept of play underlying policies; (b) mentions to its importance or goals/objectives (c) recommendations/orientations on pedagogical (play) practices ; (d) references to resources or support for play (e.g., professional development initiatives) (e) Role of the teacher; (f) monitoring

and/or evaluation practices; (g) the importance of play in the document's organization; (h) issues related to translation/national terminology; (i) other aspects specific to the country.

v. References

## 2. Review and analysis of research literature

### DEFINITION AND OBJECTIVE

Each partner will conduct a literature review focusing on national resources to assess thoroughly the status of play in ECEC contexts and, particularly, the needs and challenges/barriers of pre- and in-service teachers and headteachers in using play in ECEC settings, thus informing the EDUPLAY following activities.

### TYPE OF DOCUMENTS

Each partner organization will be responsible to conduct the desk research at the national level, reviewing all relevant data and resources (include, if possible, research since 2015) such as studies, surveys and previous research (papers, books, book chapters, PhD dissertations, Master dissertations, proceedings, other). Peer-reviewed outputs should be privileged.

A minimum of 50 references of previous studies (in total, all partners) is needed to complete this activity.

### DATABASE

An excel file is provided, contributing to Deliverable D2.1 – Data set (**Database\_ResearchLiterature**). Each partner is asked to summarize information selected using the excel file. Topics can be mandatory, aligned with the application (highlighted in green) or optional, for further analysis (highlighted in orange).

1. Country, short reference, complete reference (APA style);
2. Type of document;
3. Research question / goals;
4. Theoretical framework;
5. Participants/sample;
6. Measures/ instruments;
7. Definition of play (optional);
8. Findings/ results:
  - challenges/barriers faced by professionals (**mandatory**)  
(pre- and in-service education, conditions to implement play practices (e.g., spaces, materials and resources, time), other (e.g., involvement of families and/or communities);
  - needs reported by professionals (**mandatory**);
  - practices/ projects/ initiatives to promote play (optional);
  - impact of play/association with learning outcomes (optional);
  - role of professional (optional);
  - participation of families in play in ECEC (optional);

- Implications for practice and/or policy / future directions (**mandatory**);
- Other information.

## NATIONAL REPORT “REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH LITERATURE”

A 5-7-page national report (in English) on relevant national research and intervention studies regarding play in ECEC settings carried out in each partner country should be completed, contributing to the national needs’ assessment report (Deliverable D2.2) and the transnational needs assessment report (Deliverable D2.3), and following these points:

- Introduction: 1-2 paragraphs a brief presentation of the contents and the objectives of the literature review
- What are the challenges/barriers that in-service teachers / headteachers face in incorporating play into their practices documented in literature? (**mandatory**)

Based on the above research evidence, describe the challenges that teachers and headteachers report in their daily practices in partner countries. Examples can include pre- and in-service education; conditions to implement play practices (e.g., spaces, materials and resources, time) or other relevant challenges/barriers (e.g., involvement of families and/or communities)

- What are the needs that in-service teachers/headteachers state in incorporating play into their practices? (**mandatory**)
- Implications for practice and/or policy / future directions (**mandatory**)
- References

## OPTIONAL SECTION:

For the national teams that will deepen their literature review, a list of optional topics is provided:

- How was play defined/ conceptualized in previous research?
- Identify practices/ projects/ initiatives to promote play opportunities and environments in ECEC settings.

Review of any practices (e.g., practices, pedagogical tools, other projects at national level) developed to promote play, including its effects on professional development and / or children’ outcomes, and/or family engagement.

- What are the documented impact/benefits of play in ECEC for child learning and developmental outcomes?
- What is the role of professionals in creating play opportunities and environments?
- What’s the participation of families in play in ECEC?

(considerer multiple levels of participation related to play, since communication about play to be involved in initiatives to play, etc)

- What are the main research gaps (e.g., research focusing on families?, research with observation methods?)

Additional references

## Part II. Field research: Interviews, focus-group discussions, field observations

### DEFINITION AND OBJECTIVE

Complementing desk research, the field research will map and identify the needs and challenges of pre- and in-service teachers/headteachers in using play in ECEC. Specific goals are: (a) to identify the current challenges and gaps of ECEC systems in regard to the use of play pedagogy; (b) identify pre- and in-service teachers and headteachers training needs to make effective use of play in promoting children learning; (c) to identify current play practices in all-day settings of the participating countries.

Data collection procedures will include interviews, focus groups and observation of ECEC settings.

The field research guidelines outline a structured approach for conducting data collection activities across participating contexts. This includes protocols with the main tools, procedures, and ethical considerations to ensure the transparency, integrity, rigor, and validity of the research process. Instructions for recruiting and communicating with participants will also be included.

### 1) INTERVIEWS WITH ECEC IN-SERVICE HEADTEACHERS

Individual interviews with ECEC in-service headteachers or other key figures with leadership or coordinating roles at the school level will be conducted.

The aim of this activity is to identify the needs and challenges/barriers at the school level regarding the incorporation of play in ECEC settings, as perceived by these professionals.

For this purpose, each country partner is asked to carry out five individual interviews with in-service headteachers, thus collecting qualitative data for needs assessment. The project database will include a total of 25 interviews with ECEC headteachers.

Please find below the instructions for conducting an individual interview. A set of Appendices includes the following elements: the individual interview protocol (Appendix 2, p. 22), participant consent form (Appendix 5, p. 40), and demographic details questionnaire (Appendix 7, p. 44).

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING AN INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

The guide below will be used to facilitate structuring the individual interview by highlighting the procedures and topics that need to be covered. The interviews will be conducted to collect qualitative data from each country to identify in-service headteachers' perspectives on challenges/barriers and needs regarding play in their

school context. Though it is not to be used rigidly, like a questionnaire, the facilitator (interviewer) encourages participants to explore topics in depth, to reflect, to raise their own issues, etc.

**Facilitators:** 1 facilitator (interviewer) and 1 note taker

**Sampling:** The sampling method to be used for data collection will be purposive. This method is chosen because our aim is to capture the challenges/barriers and needs evident in each partner's educational system.

Criteria for selecting participants:

- Select ECEC headteachers who are not expected to participate in other activities of WP 2 (focus groups, observations).
- Whenever possible, try to ensure the participation of professionals working in different sectors (public, private non-profit, private for-profit); rural and urban settings.
- Give preference for participants who are not acquainted with each other.

**Participant Consent:** Participants will sign a consent form to participate in the interview (see Appendix 5). One copy of the informed consent form should be given to participants, and a second copy should be kept by the facilitator. Participants should be informed if any video/audio recording will be used for data collection, and this information must be part of the consent form document. Anonymization is required (see below).

**Demographic data:** It is imperative to collect anonymous demographic data from participants. Questionnaires for this purpose should be handed out via the e-platform in case of electronic implementation of the interviews. In the case of a face-to-face interview the data should be collected at the end of the interview and kept with the recordings of the interview (electronic or paper version can be used).

**Data collection:** The interviews can be video/audio-recorded if agreed by participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The recordings need to be securely stored until transcribed and then destroyed. The transcription shall not contain information that would allow individuals to be linked to specific statements. Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to, except where disclosure is mandated by local policies, laws, and regulations.

**Time and Place for Interviews:** The interview can last about one hour. Participants need to receive clear details of where and when the interview will take place and how long it will last.

**Individual Interview Protocol:** The semi-structured protocol is provided in English. It includes some predetermined questions and topics that you need to cover during the interview. You are asked to customize this in your native language (if preferred) and adjust it to the needs of your target population.

Supplies required:

- A few pieces of paper, pens
- Paper and pen for the note taker
- Video/ Audio recorder
- Individual Interview protocol (informed consent forms, demographic form, questions)

## II) FOCUS GROUPS DISCUSSIONS WITH ECEC IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

The aim of this activity is to identify the current challenges and needs experienced by in-service early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers in incorporating play into their daily practices. The focus group discussions will explore teachers' perceptions of the role of play in early learning, the barriers they face in implementing play-based approaches, and the types of support they consider necessary to enhance the use of play in ECEC settings. These discussions will also provide insight into the broader educational environment, including institutional, pedagogical, and policy-related factors that influence play practices. For this purpose, each country partner is asked to carry out 2 focus group discussions with ECEC in-service teachers (20 teachers per country).

Please find below the instructions for conducting a focus-group interview. Appendix includes the following elements: the focus-group interview protocol (Appendix 3, p. 25), participant Consent Form (Appendix 5, p. 40), and demographic details questionnaire (Appendix 7, p. 46).

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING A FOCUS-GROUP INTERVIEW

The guide below will be used to facilitate structuring the focus-group interview (FG) by highlighting the topics that need to be covered. The FG will be conducted to collect qualitative data from each country to identify in-service ECEC teachers' needs and challenges regarding the integration of play in ECEC settings. Though it is not to be used rigidly, like a questionnaire, at the focus-group discussion, the facilitator encourages participants to explore topics in depth, to reflect, to raise their own issues, etc.

**Facilitators:** 1 facilitator and 1 note taker

**Participants** (sample size): A minimum of 20 **in-service teachers** in total (2 focus groups with 10 participants each).

**Sampling:** The sampling method to be used for data collection will be purposive. We choose a purposive sampling method because our aim is to capture the diversity of experiences and challenges related to play-based practices in each partner's educational system.

Criteria for selecting participants:

- Select ECEC in-service teachers who are not expected to participate in other activities of WP 2 (interviews, observations).
- Whenever possible, try to ensure the participation of professionals working in different sectors (public, private non-profit, private for-profit); rural and urban settings.
- Preference for participants who are not acquainted with each other.

**Participant Consent:** Participants will sign a consent form to participate in the focus-group discussion. One copy of the informed consent form should be given to all participants, and a second copy should be kept by the focus group facilitator. Participants should be informed if any video/audio recording will be used for data collection, and this information must be part of the consent form document.

**Demographic data:** It is imperative to collect anonymous demographic data from focus group participants. Simple questionnaires for this purpose could be handed out as participants arrive (or via the e-platform of the focus group in case of electronic implementation of focus group). In the case of a face-to-face implementation, the data should be collected at the end of the focus-group and kept with the recordings of the focus-group (or via the e-platform, if preferred).

**Data collection:** The discussions can be video/audio-recorded if agreed by participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The recordings need to be securely stored until transcribed and then destroyed. The transcription shall not contain information that would allow individuals to be linked to specific statements. Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to, except where disclosure is mandated by local policies, laws, and regulations.

**Time and Place for Focus Group:** The focus group can last about two hours. Participants need to receive clear details of where and when the focus group will take place and how long it will last. If the focus group takes place online, it should take no more than 1 hour and a half with short in-between breaks.

**Focus Group Interview Protocol:** The semi-structure protocol is provided in English. It includes some predetermined questions and topics that you need to cover during the focus group. You are asked to customize this in your native language (if preferred) and adjust it to the needs of your target population.

Room reorganization and supplies required:

- Reorganize the chairs and tables in a circle.
- Set up a registration table with important documents (informed consent form, demographic information, identification cards (for all the participants)).
- Set up a timer and two audio recorders or cell phones that can be used for recording (make sure they have enough battery and memory for at least two hours of recording).
- Prepare white paper and pens for the participants.
- Paper and pen for the note taker (note taker sits outside the circle, in front of the moderator).
- Set up a table with snacks and coffee maker (optional).

Task Division

- Moderator (to be designated): guides the discussion and keeps the conversation going.
- Note taker (to be designated): check the recorders and take care of logistics. Deal with unexpected interruptions and distractions (e.g., outside noise).
- Take notes (make a seating chart; note nonverbal activity that indicates agreement or interest; write down particularly relevant phrases or expressions).
  - If possible: invite the person who will transcribe the discussion group for note taker.

Moderation strategies in focus-group sessions

- Requests for additional information

Can you explain it a little better?  
Can you give us an example?  
Would you mind explaining more about this?  
Tell us more.  
Can you describe it?

- Other Viewpoints  
Does anyone want to comment on this issue?  
Does anyone think differently?  
Did anyone have a different experience?  
Are there other viewpoints?  
When a participant is less involved:  
\_\_\_\_\_, I don't want to leave you out of the discussion. What do you think?  
\_\_\_\_\_, you haven't had a chance to speak yet. What do you think about this?

### III) OBSERVATIONS OF ECEC SETTINGS

The aim of the field observations in ECEC settings is to identify teacher professional development needs concerning the promotion of play in ECEC. The observations will gather data on the current state of play, including the physical and pedagogical play environment (indoor and outdoor infrastructure and equipment), as well as existing play practices. The purpose is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how play is currently implemented in all-day ECEC settings across the participating countries.

To this end, each partner country is asked to conduct a minimum of 10 study visits to ECEC settings, carried out by pre-service teachers. These observations will be supported by a structured observation tool developed specifically for this purpose. A total of 50 observations will be included in the project database.

Please find below the instructions for carrying out field observation. Appendix includes the following elements: the field observation tool (Appendix 4, p. 29), participant Consent Form (Appendix 5, p. 40) and participant Consent Form – Parents/Children Guardians (Appendix 6, p. 41).

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR CONDUCTING THE FIELD OBSERVATION

The guidelines below will be used to facilitate field observation by highlighting the topics that need to be covered. Field observations will be conducted to collect direct observational data from each country to identify current practices related to play in all-day ECEC settings across participating countries, and needs and challenges identified by preservice teachers. While the observation protocol provides a framework, observers are encouraged to take a reflective approach, noting contextual nuances and specific practices relevant to play promotion in each setting.

**Observer:** Pre-service teacher.

**Participants** (sample size): A minimum of 10 **pre-service teachers** per country (total of 50 pre-service teachers).

**Sampling:** The sampling method to be used for data collection will be purposive. This approach has been chosen to capture the diversity of ECEC environments and the ways in which play-based practices are promoted by their teams.

Criteria for selecting ECEC settings:

- If possible, select ECEC settings whose professionals are not expected to participate in previous WP2 activities (i.e., interviews or focus-group activities).
- Whenever possible, ensure the inclusion of settings from different sectors (public, private non-profit, private for-profit), rural and urban settings.

**Participant Consent:** All participants involved in the observation process (classroom teachers, parents/guardians of children) must sign an informed consent form prior to data collection.

One copy of the informed consent form should be given to all participants, and a second copy should be kept by the observer. Participants should be informed if any video/audio-recording will be used for data collection, and this information must be part of the consent form document.

**Participant Children Assent:** In research involving young children, it is essential to obtain not only the formal consent of parents or legal guardians but also the assent of the children themselves. Assent refers to the child's voluntary and informed agreement to participate, expressed in ways that are developmentally appropriate and meaningful to them.

Children are active participants with the right to express their willingness or unwillingness to take part in research activities. This right must be respected throughout the research encounter. Even in single-session studies, assent should be understood as a responsive and attuned process, where researchers remain sensitive to the child's verbal and non-verbal cues at all times.

To ensure ethical and respectful engagement with children during observational research in ECEC settings the following principles should guide practice:

- Children should be provided with clear, age-appropriate information about the observation, including the project, its purpose, what will happen during the observation, and what aspects of their play will be noticed. This should be communicated using simple language, visuals, or play-based explanations to ensure understanding.
- Children's expressions of assent or dissent (whether verbal, behavioral, or emotional) must be taken seriously. Researchers should be attuned to signs of discomfort, withdrawal, or distress.
- Even in brief, one-time observations, researchers must remain attentive to the child's ongoing comfort and willingness to be observed and be prepared to pause or stop the observation if needed.
- The observation environment should be safe, familiar, and respectful, allowing children to feel secure and free to express themselves.
- Observers should aim to minimize the impact of their presence on participants, seeking to adhere to an ethic of "minimal intrusion" to reduce any sense of pressure, stress, or disruption to the child's natural behavior.

- Particular care must be taken with preverbal or non-verbal children, whose participation should be guided by close observation of affective and behavioral signals, in line with the principles of attunement and sensitivity.

These practices uphold children’s rights and well-being during research and reflect a commitment to ethical integrity. They align with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the child’s right to be heard, and with the ethical standards of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA).

**Demographic data:** This information should be collected by the observer in collaboration with the classroom teacher before the field observation. The aim is to collect basic data regarding the setting (e.g., type of institution, number of children, number of adults, location, classroom grade, etc.). This data helps contextualize the observation and should be recorded using the provided form.

**Data collection:** Observers should take written notes during the visit, following the observation protocol. If photo, audio, or video recordings are used, informed consent must be obtained in advance from all relevant parties (teachers, parents/guardians). The data needs to be securely stored until it is destroyed. Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to, except where disclosure is mandated by local policies, laws, and regulations.

**Timing and Setting:** Each observation should last at least 40 minutes and be scheduled during a regular period of play activity, either indoors, outdoors, or both. Each pre-service teacher should discuss and decide in advance (e.g., in the beginning of the day) with the preschool teacher the best period for observing play. Arrangements should be made in advance with the setting, ensuring the visit fits naturally into the daily routine.

**Observation Tool:** The observation tool structures the data collection across four sections, covering actions before, during, and after the observation. It outlines what information to focus on, such as the learning environment, materials available, types of play observed, and the role of the educator.

Structure of the Tool: The observation tool consists of four sections, all of which must be completed by the pre-service teacher. No item should be left blank:

1. Demographic Characteristics
2. Current Use of Play
3. Play Environment and Teacher Practices During Play
4. Training Needs and Challenges

How to Use the Tool: Parts 1–3 are completed in two phases:

- Phase 1: Begins with the collection of demographic information (Part 1). Then, during the classroom observation (minimum 40 minutes), the pre-service teacher completes Parts 2 and 3 based on what they observe. These responses are recorded in the “PHASE 1” column
- Phase 2: Immediately after the observation, the pre-service teacher discusses and reflects on the observations registered on the tool with the in-service teacher. This collaborative reflection should be mirrored on an agreed response registered in the “PHASE 2” column. The original Phase 1 responses must remain unchanged.

Part 4 is completed after the observation, during the pre-service teacher's own time (not necessarily during the preschool visit).

Materials and Preparation:

- Printed copies of the observation tool.
- Informed consent forms.
- Recording equipment (if applicable and authorized).

Strategies for effective observation:

- Remain as unobtrusive as possible during the visit.
- Note specific moments that reflect play-based learning or pedagogical support for play.
- Pay attention to adult-child interactions, peer dynamics, and use of space and materials.

Helpful prompts for notetaking:

- What types of play are children engaging in (symbolic, physical, social, etc.)?
- How is the environment structured to support play?
- What role do adults play during children's play?
- Are there any interruptions, constraints, or opportunities that shape the play experience?

**Database** (contributing to Deliverable D2.1 – Data set)

An excel file will be provided, contributing to Deliverable D2.1 – Data set is asked to insert the sociodemographic data, anonymized.

### Anonymization

In all databases, for interviews, FG and observations, anonymization is needed, with a code attributed to each individual participant. During observations, an additional code for the “classrooms” will be needed.

For anonymization purposes, use the following code for each participant:

Country number, Role (letter), number of individual participants

Cyprus 1; Greece 2; Lithuania 3; Netherlands 4; Portugal 5

Pre-service/Student = S; In-service Teacher = T; Headteacher/Coordinator/Leader = H

Individual participant from 01 to 99

Examples:

- the 5<sup>th</sup> headteacher interviewed in Portugal: **5H05**
- the 11<sup>th</sup> teacher interviewed in Greece: **2T11**

## National report “Field research: Interviews, focus-group discussions, field observations”

A 5-7-page national report (in English) on the field research regarding play in ECEC settings carried out in each partner country should be completed, contributing to the national needs’ assessment report (Deliverable D2.2) and the transnational needs assessment report (Deliverable D2.3), and following these points:

- i. Introduction: 1-2 paragraphs a brief presentation of the contents and the objectives.
- ii. Procedures of the field research: participants, data collection procedures (with special focus on each country particularities) (1-2 pages)
- iii. Main findings

- a) What are the challenges/barriers that ECEC in-service teachers / headteachers face in incorporating play into their practices documented in literature? **(mandatory) (1 page)**

Based on the above research evidence, describe the challenges that teachers and headteachers report in their daily practices in partner countries. Examples can include pre- and in-service education; conditions to implement play practices (e.g., spaces, materials and resources, time) or other relevant challenges/barriers (e.g., involvement of families and/or communities)

- b) What are the needs that in-service teachers/headteachers state in incorporating play into their practices? A special focus is required concerning training. **(mandatory) (1 page)**

- c) Current play status and practices in all-day settings (identify practices/ projects/ initiatives to promote play opportunities and environments in ECEC settings), and needs and challenges identified by preservice teachers. **(mandatory) (2 pages)**

e.g., practices, pedagogical tools, projects developed to promote play, including its effects on professional development and / or children’ outcomes, and/or family engagement.

- iv. Implications for the other WP of the project, and for practice and/or policy / future directions **(mandatory) (1 page)**

- v. References

### Optional section:

For the national teams that will include the optional questions, a list of additional topics is provided:

- How was play defined/ conceptualized by participants?
- What is the perceived impact/benefits of play in ECEC for child learning and developmental outcomes?
- What is the role of professionals in creating play opportunities and environments?

- What's the participation of families in play in ECEC?

(Consider multiple levels of participation related to play, since communication about play to be involved in initiatives to play, etc)

## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Part A - Welcome and Instructions

**1. Welcome:** *Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. You have been asked to participate because your point of view is important to us. Your perspective is highly valued, and we appreciate your time and willingness to contribute to this study.*

*My name is (XXX) and my colleague is (XXX in XXX). XXX is here today to assist me by taking notes and supporting the interview process.*

**2. Brief Introduction:** *This interview is part of the EDUPLAY project, which aims to identify the needs and challenges faced by pre- and in-service ECEC professionals in incorporating play into early childhood education settings. The interview will last approximately one hour. I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences, perceptions, and practices related to play in your preschool context. Please feel free to ask me to repeat or clarify any question if needed. Apart from that, I will intervene as little as possible to allow you to share your views freely.*

**3. Anonymity/ Confidentiality:** *As part of our aim to collect high quality data, we have found it helpful to keep recordings of the interview. Review of recordings usually provides us with more information that might be helpful for identifying key challenges and difficulties that you are facing. Although the interview will be audio recorded, I would like to assure you that the interview will be anonymized. The recordings will be kept safely in a locked facility/safe data storage until they are transcribed verbatim, then they will be destroyed. The transcribed notes of the interview will contain no information that would allow individual subjects to be linked to specific statements. May I record the interview to support accurate data collection? If you agree, please sign the consent form or, in the case of an online interview, click the "accept recording" button.*

### 4. Ground rules:

- *You may skip any question you do not wish to answer.*
- *You are encouraged to speak freely and honestly.*
- *Everything you share will remain confidential and used only for research purposes.*
- *If at any point you wish to stop the interview, you are free to do so.*

**5. The facilitator hands in the Consent form:** *According to research ethics guidelines the participants must give their consent before participating in the interview. Please read the consent form carefully. By signing it, you confirm that you understand the purpose of the interview and agree to participate.*

*"Do you have any questions?" (the facilitator answers questions that may arise).*

**6. The facilitator hands in the demographics form:** *Now please take a few minutes to fill out this demographic questionnaire. Please do not write your name on it.*

In the option of an e-interview the consent form and demographics form should be sent about 1 week before the interview takes places for completion by the participants, followed by a reminder 2-3 days before the e-interview.

**7. Then the facilitator switches on the recorder:** *OK, let's begin.*

### Part B - Individual Interview

**Warm up:** *Could you please introduce yourself and describe your role in your institution/preschool?*

*Please share a good memory you have related to play when you were a child.*

#### Introductory question:

*This interview focuses on your experiences and views regarding the use of play in early childhood education. We are particularly interested in understanding how play is integrated into your preschool's practices, what challenges you face, and what support you believe is needed to enhance play-based learning.*

#### Guiding questions:

1. *How is play currently integrated into your school's educational practices? (mandatory)*
2. *Can you share any successful practices, projects, or initiatives related to play that have been implemented in your school? (mandatory)*
3. *Please describe, how you, as a headteacher/coordinator, promote play. (Please, share specific examples). (mandatory)*
4. *What resources does your institution, or specific settings within your institution, have to promote play? (mandatory)*
5. *What challenges or barriers do you and your team face when trying to implement play-based practices? (mandatory)*
6. *What kind of support or resources would help you and your team better integrate play into your school's practices? (mandatory)*
7. *What professional development opportunities were available to you and your staff related to play-based learning? How effective were they? What other professional development opportunities would you and your team need in this topic? (mandatory)*
8. *What (other) pressing needs can you identify in your school to ensure that play is effectively used to support children's learning and development? (mandatory)*
9. *To what extent do national, regional or local policies support or hinder the use of play in ECEC settings? (mandatory)*
10. *What do you see as the main benefits of integrating play in early childhood education?*
11. *How do you perceive the role of the headteacher in facilitating play?*
12. *What kind of facilitators have you encountered when trying to develop or encourage play-based practices in your school?*

13. *How do families and the wider community engage with or influence play practices in your school?*
14. *Concluding questions: Of all the topics we've discussed, what do you think are the most important issues for improving play-based learning in early childhood education? Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered? (mandatory)*

**Conclusion:** *Thank you for participating. This has been a very productive discussion. Your opinions will be a valuable asset to the project. We hope you have found this interview interesting and also an add value. If there is anything you are unhappy with or wish to complain about, please contact the (XXXXX). I would like to remind you that any comments featuring in this report will be anonymous. [Confirm that the completed demographic form and the signed consent form were handed]*

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Part A - Welcome and Instructions

**1. Welcome:** *Welcome and thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion. You have been asked to participate because your point of view is important to us. Your perspective is highly valued, and we appreciate your time and willingness to contribute to this study.*

*My name is (XXX) and I my colleague is (XXX in XXX). XXX is here today to assist and help me throughout this focus-group.*

**2. Brief Introduction:** *This focus group discussion is part of the EDUPLAY project, which aims to identify the needs and challenges faced by pre- and in-service ECEC professionals in incorporating play into early childhood education settings. This focus group will last approximately two hours. I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences, perceptions, and practices related to play in your classroom. I hope these questions will stimulate discussion amongst you. I will not be contributing to the discussion, but I'm here to moderate the session by keeping track of time, encouraging the participation of all teachers and making sure that all of the issues in which we are interested are discussed. You can ask me to repeat a question if you need to, but apart from that, I will contribute as little as possible.*

*Each of you has your name in front of you to help us remember everyone's name. Don't feel obligated to respond every time. If you want to build on something another colleague said, if you want to agree or disagree, if you want to give an example, feel free to do so. You can also talk among yourselves about these issues. I am here to ask questions, to listen, and to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak. We are very interested in hearing from each other. So, given the expected length of this discussion, if someone is taking too long, I may ask to give the opportunity to other colleague, and if someone is saying too little, I may ask for their opinion. We really want everyone to have a chance to share their ideas. The XXXX \_\_\_\_\_ (notes taker) is here to support me in these tasks, while also taking care of some logistical aspects and taking notes.*

*If you have a cell phone, please turn it off, and if you need to answer, go outside please. Feel free to get up to eat or drink whenever you want (if this is available).*

[Adapt these instructions in case of an e-focus group]

**3. Anonymity/ Confidentiality:** *As part of our aim to collect high quality data, we have found it helpful to keep recordings of the session. Review of recordings usually furnishes us with more information that might be helpful for identifying key challenges and difficulties that you are facing. Although the session will be taped, I would like to assure you that the discussion will be anonymized. The recordings will be kept safely in a locked facility/safe data storage until they are transcribed verbatim, then they will be destroyed. The transcribed notes of the focus group will contain no information that would allow individual subjects to be linked to specific statements. May I tape the discussion to facilitate its recollection? If you are in agreement, you will need to sign where indicated in the consent form/ press the button that says “accept recording” in order to proceed.*

#### 4. Ground rules:

- *The most important rule is that only one person speaks at a time. There may be a temptation to jump in when someone is talking, but please wait until they have finished. However, you do not have to speak in any particular order/way.*
- *Please answer and comment as accurately as possible. I and the other focus group participants would appreciate it if you would refrain from discussing the comments of other group members outside the focus group. If there are any questions or discussions that you do not wish to answer or participate in, you do not have to do so; however please try to answer and be as involved as possible.*
- *There is no right or wrong answer. When you do have something to say, please do so. You do not have to agree with the views of other people in the group. There are many of you in the group and it is important that I obtain the views of each of you.*
- *You are encouraged to speak freely and honestly.*
- *Everything you share will remain confidential and used only for research purposes.*
- *If at any point you wish to stop the interview, you are free to do so.*

**5. The facilitator hands in the Consent form (skip in case of an e-focus group):** *According to research ethics guidelines all focus group participants must give their consent before participating in the discussion. Please read the details of the procedure to make sure you understand the essence of the focus group and what participation is required. By signing the consent form, you certify that you have read, understood, and accepted all the information regarding the consent form document.*

*“Does anyone have any questions?” (the facilitator answers questions that may arise).*

**6. The facilitator hands in the demographics form:** *Now please take a few minutes to fill out this demographic questionnaire. Please do not write your name on it.*

In the option of an e-focus group the consent form and demographic should be sent about 1 week before the focus-group implementation for completion by the participants, followed by a reminder 2-3 days before the e-focus group.

**7. Then the facilitator switches on the recorder:** *OK, let’s begin.*

## Part B - Focus Group Interview

**Warm up:** *Could you please introduce yourself and describe your role in your institution?*

*Please share a good memory you have related to play when you were a child.*

**Introductory question:**

*This focus group will be focused on your experiences and perceptions regarding the use of play in early childhood education. We are particularly interested in understanding how play is integrated into your classroom practices, what challenges you face, and what support you believe is needed to enhance play-based learning.*

**Guiding questions:**

1. *How is play currently integrated into your classroom's pedagogical practices? (mandatory)*
2. *Can you share any successful practices, projects, or initiatives related to play that have been implemented in your classroom? (mandatory)*
3. *Please describe how you, as a teacher, promote play. (Please share specific examples). (mandatory)*
4. *What resources does your classroom have to promote play? (mandatory)*
5. *What challenges or barriers do you or your team face when trying to implement play-based practices? (mandatory)*
6. *What kind of support or resources would help you and your team better integrate play into your practices? (mandatory)*
7. *What were the contributions of your preservice training in the implementation of play opportunities for children? (mandatory)*
8. *What professional development opportunities were available to you related to play-based learning? (Which was the most recent one? On which topic?) How effective were they? What other professional development opportunities would you and your team need on this topic? (mandatory)*
9. *What (other) pressing needs can you identify in your school to ensure that play is effectively used to support children's learning and development? (mandatory)*
10. *To what extent do national, regional or local policies (e.g. national curriculum) support or hinder the use of play in ECEC settings? How do you as a teacher mobilize the regulations on your pedagogical practices related to play? (mandatory)*
11. *What do you see as the main benefits of integrating play in early childhood education/ in your classroom?*
12. *How do you perceive the role of the teacher in facilitating play in your setting?*
13. *What kind of facilitators have you encountered when trying to develop or encourage play-based practices in your classroom or school?*
14. *How do families and the wider community engage with or influence play practices in your classroom?*
14. *How do you monitor and evaluate the implementation of play practices in your daily activities?*
15. *Concluding questions: Of all the topics we've discussed, what do you think are the most important issues for improving play-based learning in early childhood education? Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?*

**Conclusion:** *Thank you for participating. This has been a very productive discussion. Your opinions will be a valuable asset to the project. We hope you have found this group discussion interesting and also an add value. If there is anything you are unhappy with or wish to complain about, please contact the (XXXXX). I would like*

*to remind you that any comments featuring in this report will be anonymous.* [Confirm that the completed demographic form and the signed consent form were handed]

## ANNEX B – POLICY DOCUMENTS IDENTIFIED IN THE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PLAY POLICIES

### Panel A. Cyprus

Document Title	Complete Reference	Link, if available	Type of Document	Issuing body/entity
“Pre-primary education: General information, goals, registration”	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, Department of Primary Education. (n.d.). Pre-primary education: General information, goals, registrations. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth.	<a href="https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/en/infoserv_preprimary_general_information.html?utm_source">https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/en/infoserv_preprimary_general_information.html?utm_source</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Cyprus Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
«Ωρολόγιο πρόγραμμα νηπιαγωγείου»	Υπουργείο Παιδείας, Αθλητισμού και Νεολαίας. (χ.χ.). Ωρολόγιο πρόγραμμα νηπιαγωγείου. Διεύθυνση Δημοτικής Εκπαίδευσης.	<a href="https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/orologio_nipiagogeio.u.html">https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/orologio_nipiagogeio.u.html</a>	Curriculum/ Curriculum guidelines	Cyprus Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
«Αναλυτικό Πρόγραμμα Προσχολικής Εκπαίδευσης (3 Χρόνων – Προδημοτική)»	Υπουργείο Παιδείας, Αθλητισμού και Νεολαίας Κύπρου. (2024). Αναλυτικό Πρόγραμμα Προσχολικής Εκπαίδευσης (3 χρόνων – Προδημοτική).	<a href="https://sch.cy/ed/316/ap_niproscholiki_ekpaidefsi.pdf">https://sch.cy/ed/316/ap_niproscholiki_ekpaidefsi.pdf</a>	Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines	Cyprus Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth
«Οδηγός νηπιαγωγού για την ολόπλευρη ανάπτυξη και αγωγή των παιδιών»	Υπουργείο Παιδείας και Πολιτισμού, Παιδαγωγικό Ινστιτούτο, Υπηρεσία Ανάπτυξης Προγραμμάτων. (2015). Οδηγός νηπιαγωγού για την ολόπλευρη ανάπτυξη και αγωγή των παιδιών (Α΄ έκδοση).	<a href="https://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/603/odigos_proscholiki.pdf?utm_source">https://archeia.moec.gov.cy/mc/603/odigos_proscholiki.pdf?utm_source</a>	Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines	Cyprus Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth - Pedagogical Institute, Curriculum Development Unit
«Σύμβαση των Ηνωμένων Εθνών για τα Δικαιώματα του Παιδιού» Cyprus – Key contextual data	Επίτροπος Προστασίας των Δικαιωμάτων του Παιδιού. (2018). Σύμβαση των Ηνωμένων Εθνών για τα Δικαιώματα του Παιδιού. Schreyer, I., & Oberhuemer, P. (2024). Cyprus – Key contextual data. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), <i>Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe: 33 country reports</i>	<a href="https://www.childcom.org.cy/ccr/ccr.nsf/All/2046A2379F8FBFE5C22582FE00432588?OpenDocument">https://www.childcom.org.cy/ccr/ccr.nsf/All/2046A2379F8FBFE5C22582FE00432588?OpenDocument</a>  <a href="https://www.seeipro.eu/Seiten/Englisch/Texte/Englisch/Cyprus_Key_data.pdf?utm_source">https://www.seeipro.eu/Seiten/Englisch/Texte/Englisch/Cyprus_Key_data.pdf?utm_source</a>	International agreements or recommendations adopted nationally  Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	Office of the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (Cyprus)  Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.

with key contextual data.  
State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.

Cyprus – ECEC Workforce Profile	Loizou, E. (2024). Cyprus – ECEC workforce profile. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), <i>Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe: 33 country reports with key contextual data</i> . Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.	<a href="https://www.seeepro.eu/Seiten/Englisch/Texte/Englisch/Cyprus_Workforce.pdf">https://www.seeepro.eu/Seiten/Englisch/Texte/Englisch/Cyprus_Workforce.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy, in collaboration with national expert (Eleni Loizou, University of Cyprus)
Cyprus – Key contextual data	Schreyer, I., & Oberhuemer, P. (2018). Cyprus – Key Contextual Data. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), <i>Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data</i> (pp. 193–205). Munich: SEEPRO.	<a href="file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/EDUPLAY/Tasks%20Week%207/Desktop%20Research/Research%20article/Loizou%20Policy%20review/ISBN-publication.pdf">file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/EDUPLAY/Tasks%20Week%207/Desktop%20Research/Research%20article/Loizou%20Policy%20review/ISBN-publication.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	SEEPRO (Study of Early Education and Professionalisation)
Cyprus – ECEC Workforce Profile	Loizou, E. (2018). Cyprus – ECEC Workforce Profile. In P. Oberhuemer & I. Schreyer (Eds.), <i>Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data</i> (pp. 172–192). Munich: SEEPRO.	<a href="file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/EDUPLAY/Tasks%20Week%207/Desktop%20Research/Research%20article/Loizou%20Policy%20review/ISBN-publication.pdf">file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/EDUPLAY/Tasks%20Week%207/Desktop%20Research/Research%20article/Loizou%20Policy%20review/ISBN-publication.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	SEEPRO (Study of Early Education and Professionalisation)
Report On European Good Practices To Inform The Development Of A National Ecec Quality Framework For Cyprus	Hatzinikolaou, K. (2023). Report on European good practices to inform the development of a national ECEC Quality Framework for Cyprus. UNICEF ECARO. Produced with the financial assistance of the European Union via the Recovery and Resilience Fund.	<a href="http://www.dmsw.gov.cy/dmsw/sws.nsf/All/D8E8591B26DD8681C2258BDC004702E7/\$file/1_CY%20TSI%20ECEC%20Project%20Report%20on%20Good%20Practices.pdf?OpenElement">http://www.dmsw.gov.cy/dmsw/sws.nsf/All/D8E8591B26DD8681C2258BDC004702E7/\$file/1_CY%20TSI%20ECEC%20Project%20Report%20on%20Good%20Practices.pdf?OpenElement</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	UNICEF, with the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth of the Republic of Cyprus

Supporting the Expansion and Strategic Development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus: A brief on the EU TSI Project in Cyprus

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare & Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. (2021). Supporting the expansion and strategic development of early childhood education and care in Cyprus: A brief on the EU TSI Project in Cyprus. Nicosia: Government of Cyprus, in cooperation with UNICEF and the European Commission.

Official reports from ministries or educational authorities

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Government of Cyprus. Implemented with UNICEF and the European Commission.

Supporting the Expansion and Strategic Development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus: A brief on the EU TSI Project in Cyprus

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare & Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. (2022). Supporting the expansion and strategic development of early childhood education and care in Cyprus: A brief on the EU TSI Project in Cyprus (2022–2024). Nicosia: Government of Cyprus, in cooperation with UNICEF and the European Commission.

Official reports from ministries or educational authorities

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Government of Cyprus. Implemented with UNICEF and the European Commission, with additional support from CARDET.

National Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Framework (Cyprus)

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare & Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth. (2024). National Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Framework: Supporting the expansion and strategic development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus. UNICEF & European Commission (Technical Support Instrument), funded by the European Union through the Recovery and Resilience Fund.

Policy papers and strategic plans

Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, in cooperation with UNICEF and the European Commission (TSI project).

Early childhood education and care	Eurydice. (2025). Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe (3rd ed.). Publications Office of the European Union	<a href="file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Early%20childhood%20education%20and%20care%20%20%20%20.pdf">file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Early%20childhood%20education%20and%20care%20%20%20%20.pdf</a>	Policy papers and strategic plans	Eurydice - Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Supply Mapping Report- Cyprus	UNICEF, Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare & Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (2023). The provision of early childhood education and care in Cyprus: Supply mapping report for the project "Supporting the expansion and strategic development of early childhood education and care in Cyprus" UNICEF.	<a href="file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/ECEC_Supply%20mapping%20report_EN.pdf">file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/ECEC_Supply%20mapping%20report_EN.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

## Panel B. Greece

Document Title	Complete Reference	Link, if available	Type of Document	Issuing body/entity
DEPPS (2003)	Pedagogical Institute (2003). <i>Cross-thematic Curriculum Framework for Nursery School</i> (DEPPS). Pedagogical Institute [in Greek].		Legal document (30 pages)	Pedagogical Institute (now The Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (now the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports)
[Kindergarten] Educator's guide (2006)	Dafermou, Ch., Koulouri, P., & Bassagianni, E. (2006). <i>Educator's guide: Educational planning – Creative learning environment</i> . O.E.D.B. [in		It is referred to as "school manual" (available in print and as	Pedagogical Institute (now The Institute of Educational Policy

	greek] ISBN: 960-06-1886-0		an e-book) (432 pages)	(IEP), Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs (now the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs and Sports)  *(now The Institute of Education al Policy (IEP)
Program of studies for preschool education (2022) (expanded version)	Penteri, E., Chlapana, E., Meliou, K., Filippidi, A., & Marinatos, Th. (2022). <i>Program of studies for preschool education</i> (Expanded Version, 2nd ed.) Institute of Educational Policy.		e-book (109 pages)	IEP (Institute of Education al Policy)
Kindergarten Educator's Guide (2022) (2nd ed.)	Penteri, E., Chlapana, E., Meliou, K., Filippidis, A., & Marinatos, Th. (2022). <i>Kindergarten Educator's Guide - Supporting Material. Compass: Theoretical and Methodological Framework-Practical Applications and Instructional design Plans.</i> Institute of Educational Policy.		e-book (395 pages)	IEP (Institute of Education al Policy)
National action plan for the rights of children (2021)	Ministry of Justice (2021). <i>National action plan for the rights of children.</i>	<a href="https://www.ministryofjustice.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/National_Action_Plan_for_the_Rights_of_the_Child.pdf">https://www.ministryofjustice.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/National Action Plan for the Rights of the Child.pdf</a>	Governmental report	Ministry of Justice

Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres (2017)	Government Gazette Issue (FEK) (2017). <i>Protipos kanonismos litourgias dimotikon ke kinotikon nomikon prosopon dimosiou dikeou pedikon ke vrefikon stathmon</i> (Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres) (pp. 55989-55995). Ministry of Public Administration.	<a href="https://www.elinyae.gr/sites/default/files/2019-07/4249B_2017.1512561916419.pdf">https://www.elinyae.gr/sites/default/files/2019-07/4249B_2017.1512561916419.pdf</a>	Government Gazette	Ministry of Public Administration.
1st biennial progress report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee (2024)	Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs (2024). <i>1st biennial progress report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee</i> .	<a href="https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee/national-action-plans-and-progress-reports_en">https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/social-protection-social-inclusion/addressing-poverty-and-supporting-social-inclusion/investing-children/european-child-guarantee/national-action-plans-and-progress-reports_en</a>	Governmental report	Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs
<a href="https://paidi.gov.gr/">https://paidi.gov.gr/</a>	The open platform of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security for access and information of all citizens on issues related to children	<a href="https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/KYPSELI-teliko.pdf">https://www.dianeosis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/KYPSELI-teliko.pdf</a> <a href="https://paidi.gov.gr/">https://paidi.gov.gr/</a>	Website	Ministry of Labor and Social Security

## Panel C. Lithuania

Document Title	Complete Reference	Link, if available	Type of Document	Issuing body/entity
Order. August 24, 2022. No. V-1269, Vilnius: On the Approval of General Programs for Pre-Primary, Primary, Basic, and Secondary Education.	Dėl priešmokyklinio, pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio ugdymo bendrųjų programų patvirtinimo. Įsakymas. 2022 m. rugpjūčio 24 d. Nr. V-1269, Vilnius	<a href="https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/45f3b02523e311edb36fa1cf41a91fd9?positionInSearchResults=0&amp;searchModelUUID=0930658b-09d3-4617-9b69-3e37720373e6">https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/45f3b02523e311edb36fa1cf41a91fd9?positionInSearchResults=0&amp;searchModelUUID=0930658b-09d3-4617-9b69-3e37720373e6</a>	Policy papers and strategic plans	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.

Pre-primary School Curriculum (2022)	Priešmokyklinio ugdymo programa [Pre-primary School Education Program]. (2022). Priešmokyklinio, pradinio, pagrindinio ir vidurinio ugdymo bendrųjų programų 2 priedas	<a href="https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-s-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimas-priesmokyklinis-ugdymas/priesmokyklinio-ugdymo-programa/">https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-s-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimas-priesmokyklinis-ugdymas/priesmokyklinio-ugdymo-programa/</a>	Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Order. September 4, 2023 No. V-1142, Vilnius: On the Approval of Guidelines for the Pre-School Curriculum (2023) Early Childhood Curriculum	Įsakymas dėl ikimokyklinio ugdymo gairių patvirtinimo. 2023 m. rugsėjo 4 d. Nr. V-1142	<a href="https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/76bb8f404b5911ee8185e4f3ad07094a?fwid=f5arm3g7r">https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/76bb8f404b5911ee8185e4f3ad07094a?fwid=f5arm3g7r</a>	Policy papers and strategic plans	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Order on the Amendment of Order No. V-1142 of the Minister of Education, Science and Sports of September 4, 2023, "On the Approval of the Guidelines for the Pre-School Curriculum."	Early Childhood Curriculum. The webpage of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania. Įsakymas dėl ikimokyklinio ugdymo programos gairių patvirtinimo. February 5, 2024, No. V-131, Vilnius	<a href="https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-s-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimo-sistema-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/ikimokyklinio-ugdymo-programa/">https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-s-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimo-sistema-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/ikimokyklinio-ugdymo-programa/</a>	Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Methodology for the Internal Evaluation of the Quality of Schools Implementing the Pre-School and/or Pre-Primary Curriculum (2020)	Įsakymas dėl ikimokyklinio ugdymo programos gairių patvirtinimo. February 5, 2024, No. V-131, Vilnius	<a href="https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/pjektai/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ikimokyklinio-amziaus-vaiku-ugdymosi-pasiekimu-aprasas.pdf">https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/pjektai/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ikimokyklinio-amziaus-vaiku-ugdymosi-pasiekimu-aprasas.pdf</a>	Policy papers and strategic plans	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Methodology for the Internal Evaluation of the Quality of Schools Implementing the Pre-School and/or Pre-Primary Curriculum (2020)	Sabaliauskienė, R., Brandišauskienė, A., Brėdikytė, M., Rugevičiūtė, R. (2021). Ikimokyklinio ir (ar) priešmokyklinio ugdymo programas diegiančių mokyklų veiklos kokybės įsivertinimo metodika. ŠMSM.	<a href="https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/pjektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PUmokyklu-veiklos-kokybes-isivertinimo-metodika.pdf">https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/pjektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PUmokyklu-veiklos-kokybes-isivertinimo-metodika.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.

Methodology for the External Evaluation of the Quality of Schools Implementing Pre-school and/or Pre-primary Curriculum.	Sabaliauskiene, R., Brandišauskiene, A., Brėdikytė, M., Rugevičiūtė, R. (2020). Ikimokyklinio ir (ar) priešmokyklinio ugdymo programas diegiančių mokyklų veiklos kokybės įsivertinimo metodika. ŠMSM.	<a href="https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/p/rojektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PUmokyklų-veiklos-kokybes-isivertinimo-metodika.pdf">https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/p/rojektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PUmokyklų-veiklos-kokybes-isivertinimo-metodika.pdf</a>	National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Guidelines for the External Evaluation of the Quality of Schools Implementing Preschool and/or Pre-primary Curriculum.	Sabaliauskiene, R., Brandišauskiene, A., Brėdikytė, M., Rugevičiūtė, R. (2021). Ikimokyklinio ir (ar) priešmokyklinio ugdymo programas diegiančių mokyklų veiklos kokybės išorinio vertinimo gairės. ŠMSM.	<a href="https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/p/rojektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/isorinio-vertinimo-metodikos-gaires.pdf">https://www.nsa.smsm.lt/p/rojektai/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/isorinio-vertinimo-metodikos-gaires.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania.
Decree on the approval of the state policy conception on child welfare. May 20, 2003. No. IX-1569, Vilnius	Nutarimas dėl vaiko gerovės valtybės politikos koncepcijos patvirtinimo. 2003 m. gegužės 20 d. Nr. IX-1569, Vilnius	<a href="https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.1882ABF8B6AB">https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.1882ABF8B6AB</a>	National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation	The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania
Decision on approving the description of the model to improve living and educational conditions for children from birth to the start of compulsory education. November 11, 2009, No. 1509. Vilnius	Nutarimas dėl vaikų nuo gimimo iki privalomo mokymo pradžios gyvenimo ir ugdymo sąlygų gerinimo modelio aprašymo tvirtinimo. 2009 m. lapkričio 11 d. Nr. 1509. Vilnius	<a href="https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.68989E298734">https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/TAR.68989E298734</a>	National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation	Government of the Republic of Lithuania

## Panel D. Netherlands

Document Title	Complete Reference	Link, if available	Type of Document	Issuing body/ entity
De staat van het onderwijs 2025 [State of education 2025]	Inspectie van het Onderwijs. (2025) <i>De staat van het onderwijs 2025</i> . Ministerie van onderwijs, cultuur en wetenschap.		Report	Ministry of Education, culture and research. Inspection of education.

Het Jonge Kind - SLO	SLO. (2025). Het jonge kind. <a href="https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/jonge-kind/">https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/jonge-kind/</a>	<a href="https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/jonge-kind/">https://www.slo.nl/thema/meer/jonge-kind/</a>	Website	Stichting leerplanontwikkeling - National centre of expertise for curricula
Pedagogisch Curriculum	Fukkink, R. (ed.) (2017). Pedagogisch curriculum voor het jonge kind in de kinderopvang.		Booklet	Bureau kwaliteit kinderopvang [Institute for quality of child care]
Onderzoekskader Inspectie van het onderwijs [Research framework Education inspectorate]	Inspectie van het onderwijs (2025). Onderzoekskader 2021 voor het toezicht op de voorschoolse educatie en het primair onderwijs. Versie per 1 augustus 2025. Ministerie van onderwijs, cultuur en wetenschap.  [Education Inspectorate (2025). Research framework 2021 for the supervision of pre-school education and primary education. Version as of 1 August 2025. Ministry of Education, Culture and Science]		Research framework	Ministry of Education, culture and research. Inspection of education.
ECEC Workforce profile 2024	Singer, E., and B. Romijn. 2024. "The Netherlands – ECEC Workforce Profile." In Early childhood workforce profiles across Europe. 33 country reports with key contextual data, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer. Munich: State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy.	<a href="http://www.seeepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm">www.seeepro.eu/English/Country-Reports.htm</a>	Country report	State Institute for Early Childhood Research and Media Literacy, Munich
Letter of Advice by Education council [onderwijsraad]	Onderwijsraad. (2023). Adviesbrief over voorzieningen voor het jonge kind. 21 september 2023. [Education Council. Letter of advice about facilities for young children]		letter of Advice to "house of commons" by Education Council	Onderwijsraad. [education council]

Quality monitoring Child care 2017-2024	Romijn, B., Slot, P., Jepma, IJ., Muller, P., Breedevelde, M., Tiliopoulou, V., Leseman, P. (2025). Kwaliteit van de Nederlandse kinderopvang. De kinderdagopvang, peuteropvang, buitenschoolse opvang en gastouderopvang in beeld. Gecombineerde metingen 2017-2024. LKK.		Landelijke kwaliteitsmonitor Kinderopvang.	Landelijke kwaliteitsmonitor Kinderopvang.
A better start for all children	Jepma, IJ., Vander Heyden, K. (2022.) Verbeteren start in het basisonderwijs. Een wetenschappelijk kader. Sardes.		Scientific advice report	Nationaal Regieorgaan Onderwijsonderzoek [national coordinating body for educational research]
Wet Kinderopvang	Wet kinderopvang	<a href="https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0017017/2024-12-11/#Hoofdstuk1_Afdeling1_Artikel1.1">https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0017017/2024-12-11/#Hoofdstuk1_Afdeling1_Artikel1.1</a>	Law Childcare	Ministry of social affairs and Employment
Wet Primair onderwijs	Wet op het primair onderwijs	<a href="https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0003420/2025-08-01/#Hoofdstuk1_TiteldeelII_Afdeling1_Paragraaf1_Artikel9">https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0003420/2025-08-01/#Hoofdstuk1_TiteldeelII_Afdeling1_Paragraaf1_Artikel9</a>	Law primary education	Ministry of Education, culture and research.

## Panel E. Portugal

Document Title	Complete Reference	Link, if available	Type of Document	Issuing body/ entity
Gender and citizenship guide for pre-school education	Cardona, M. J., Nogueira, C., Vieira, C., Uva, M., & Tavares, C. (2015). Gender and citizenship guide for pre-school education [Guião Género Cidadania Pré-escolar]. Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG). <a href="https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/398_15_Guiao_Pre_escolar.pdf">https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/398_15_Guiao_Pre_escolar.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/398_15_Guiao_Pre_escolar.pdf">https://www.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/398_15_Guiao_Pre_escolar.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG)

<p>A Maior Lição do Mundo: Ação Climática - projetos selecionados. Edição 2021-22 [The World's Largest Lesson Selected Projects – Climate Action   2021/2022 Edition]</p>	<p>UNICEF Portugal (2022). Selected projects within the AMLM – selected projects 2021–2022. UNICEF Portugal. Accessed June 26, 2025 from <a href="https://www.unicef.pt/media/3704/projetos-selecionados-amlm-2021-2022.pdf">https://www.unicef.pt/media/3704/projetos-selecionados-amlm-2021-2022.pdf</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.unicef.pt/media/3704/projetos-selecionados-amlm-2021-2022.pdf">https://www.unicef.pt/media/3704/projetos-selecionados-amlm-2021-2022.pdf</a></p>	<p>Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation</p>	<p>UNICEF Portugal</p>
<p>Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-school Education</p>	<p>Directorate-General for Education (2016). Curricular guidelines for pre-school education [Orientações curriculares para a educação pré-escolar]. Ministry of Education of Portugal. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/Orientacoes_Curriculares.pdf</a></p>	<p>Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines</p>	<p>Directorate-General for Education (DGE)</p>
<p>Decree-Law No. 240/2001 [Law no. 46/86 of 14 October (Basic Law of the Education System), published in the Official Gazette, I Series, no. 237, as amended by Decree-Law no. 117/97 of 19 September] and upheld by Decree-Law No. 241/2001 and Decree-Law No. 43/2007</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (2001). Decree-Law No. 240/2001. Retrieved July 26, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/240-2001-631837">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/240-2001-631837</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/240-2001-631837">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/240-2001-631837</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>
<p>Decree-Law No. 241/2001 [Basic Law of the Education System Law no. 46/86 of 14 October, published in the Official Gazette, I Series, no. 237]</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (2025). Decree-Law No. 241/2001. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/241-2001-631843">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/241-2001-631843</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/241-2001-631843">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/241-2001-631843</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>

<p>Decree-Law No. 79/2014 [Decree-Law No. 79/2014 of 14 May: Approving the legal regime of professional qualification for teaching in preschool, basic and secondary education (expressly repealing Decree-Law No. 43/2007 of 22 February, Decree-Law No. 220/2009 of 8 September, and Ordinance No. 1189/2010 of 17 November)]</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (2014). Decree-Law No. 79/2014. Retrieved July 26, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/79-2014-25344769">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/79-2014-25344769</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/79-2014-25344769">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/79-2014-25344769</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>
<p>Decree-Law No. 9-A/2025 [The Decree-Law No. 79/2014 of 14 May had already been amended by Decree-Laws No. 176/2014, 16/2018, 112/2023, and 23/2024. The new Decree-Law No. 9-A/2025 of 14 February constitutes the fifth amendment to the diploma and proceeds with its republication.]</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (2025). Decree-Law No. 9-A/2025. Retrieved June 25, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/9-a-2025-907406911">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/9-a-2025-907406911</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/9-a-2025-907406911">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/9-a-2025-907406911</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>
<p>Environmental Education Framework for Sustainability for Early Childhood, Basic and Secondary Education</p>	<p>Ministry of Education. (2018). Environmental Education Framework for Sustainability for Early Childhood, Basic and Secondary Education [Referencial de Educação Ambiental para a Sustentabilidade para a Educação Pré-Escolar, o Ensino Básico e o Ensino Secundário]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/f">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/f</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidania/Educacao_Ambiental/documentos/referencial_ambiente.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidania/Educacao_Ambiental/documentos/referencial_ambiente.pdf</a></p>	<p>Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, Portugal</p>

iles/ECidadania/Educacao\_Ambienta  
l/documentos/referencial\_ambiente.p  
df

<p>Framework for risk education</p>	<p>Ministry of Education. (2015). Framework for risk education [Referencial para a Educação para o Risco]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidadania/educacao_Risco/documentos/referencial_risco.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidadania/educacao_Risco/documentos/referencial_risco.pdf</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidadania/educacao_Risco/documentos/referencial_risco.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/ECidadania/educacao_Risco/documentos/referencial_risco.pdf</a></p>	<p>Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation</p>	<p>Directorate-General for Education (Ministry of Education, Portugal)</p>
<p>Inclusive education: A support manual for inclusive practice</p>	<p>Ministry of Education. (2018). Inclusive education: A support manual for inclusive practice [Educação inclusiva: Manual de apoio à prática inclusiva]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/manual_de_apoio_a_pratica.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/manual_de_apoio_a_pratica.pdf</a></p>	<p><a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/manual_de_apoio_a_pratica.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/manual_de_apoio_a_pratica.pdf</a></p>	<p>Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, Portugal</p>
<p>Law No. 46/1986 [Law no. 46/1986, of October 14: Basic Law of the Education System (as amended by Laws nos. 115/1997, of September 19; 49/2005, of August 30; 85/2009, of August 27; and 16/2023, of April 10].</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (1986). Law No. 46/1986. Retrieved July 26, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/46-1986-222418">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/46-1986-222418</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/46-1986-222418">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/46-1986-222418</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>
<p>Decree Law No. 5/1997 [Preceded by Law No. 46/86 of October 14 and Decree-Law No. 147/97 of June 11].</p>	<p>Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic] (1997). Law No. 5/1997. Retrieved July 28, 2025, from <a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/5-1997-561219">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/5-1997-561219</a></p>	<p><a href="https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/5-1997-561219">https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/lei/5-1997-561219</a></p>	<p>National, regional or municipal/local law/regulation</p>	<p>Portuguese Republic</p>

Learning with the school library: Framework	Ministry of Education. (2017). Learning with the school library: Framework [Aprender com a Biblioteca Escolar: Referencial]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B\$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&amp;fileName=referencial_2017_impres.pdf">https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B\$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&amp;fileName=referencial_2017_impres.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B\$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&amp;fileName=referencial_2017_impres.pdf">https://www.rbe.mec.pt/np4/%7B\$clientServletPath%7D/?newsId=99&amp;fileName=referencial_2017_impres.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Portugal
Measures for Local Action. Promoting Safe Environments in the Post-Confinement Period	UNICEF Portugal (2020). Measures for Local Action. Promoting Safe Environments in the Post-Confinement Period. UNICEF: Lisboa	<a href="https://www.unicef.pt/media/2976/unicef_medidas-para-a-acao-local.pdf">https://www.unicef.pt/media/2976/unicef_medidas-para-a-acao-local.pdf</a>	International agreements or recommendations adopted nationally	UNICEF Portugal
Media education framework (updated version)	Ministry of Education. (2023). Media education framework (updated version) [Referencial de Educação para os Media]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Noticias_documentos/referencial-epm-versaoatualizada-dez2023_11dez.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Noticias_documentos/referencial-epm-versaoatualizada-dez2023_11dez.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Noticias_documentos/referencial-epm-versaoatualizada-dez2023_11dez.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Noticias_documentos/referencial-epm-versaoatualizada-dez2023_11dez.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Portugal
Pedagogical guide for the inclusion and promotion of Roma communities in pre-school education	Ministry of Education. (2021). Pedagogical guide for the inclusion and promotion of Roma communities in pre-school education [Guião Pedagógico para a Inclusão e Promoção das Comunidades Ciganas na Educação Pré-Escolar]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao_pedagogico_comunidades_ciganas_pre-escolar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao_pedagogico_comunidades_ciganas_pre-escolar.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao_pedagogico_comunidades_ciganas_pre-escolar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/RecursosEducativos/guiao_pedagogico_comunidades_ciganas_pre-escolar.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Portugal
Pedagogical Guidelines for Centre-based Infant-Toddler Education	Ministry of Education. (2024). Pedagogical Guidelines for Centre-based Infant-Toddler Education [Orientações Pedagógicas para Creche]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes_pedagogicas_para_creche_para_consulta_online.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes_pedagogicas_para_creche_para_consulta_online.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes_pedagogicas_para_creche_para_consulta_online.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Curriculo/EInfancia/orientacoes_pedagogicas_para_creche_para_consulta_online.pdf</a>	Curriculum/Curriculum guidelines	Ministry of Education, Portugal

Physical education in pre-school education: Guidelines and practices	Ministry of Education. (2023). Physical education in pre-school education: Guidelines and practices [Educação Física na Educação Pré-Escolar: Diretrizes e práticas]. Directorate-General for Education. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a_educacao_fisica_na_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a_educacao_fisica_na_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a_educacao_fisica_na_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/a_educacao_fisica_na_educacao_pre-escolar.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Portugal
Planning and assessment in pre-school education	Ministry of Education / Directorate-General for Education. (2021). Planning and assessment in pre-school education [Planear e avaliar na educação pré-escolar]. <a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/planearavaliar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/planearavaliar.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/planearavaliar.pdf">https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/planearavaliar.pdf</a>	Specific guidelines/brochures or orientations supporting curriculum implementation	Ministry of Education, Portugal
State of Education 2023	National Education Council (2023). State of Education 2023 [Estado da Educação 2023]. <a href="https://www.cnedu.pt/content/EE2023/Versao_Integral/EE2023.pdf">https://www.cnedu.pt/content/EE2023/Versao_Integral/EE2023.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.cnedu.pt/content/EE2023/Versao_Integral/EE2023.pdf">https://www.cnedu.pt/content/EE2023/Versao_Integral/EE2023.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	National Education Council, Portugal
The education of children from 0 to 12 years	National Council of Education (2009). The education of children from 0 to 12 years: Study report, proceedings of the seminar held on May 20, 2008, and opinion. National Council of Education. <a href="https://www.cnedu.pt/content/antigo/files/1_A_Educacao.pdf">https://www.cnedu.pt/content/antigo/files/1_A_Educacao.pdf</a>	<a href="https://www.cnedu.pt/content/antigo/files/1_A_Educacao.pdf">https://www.cnedu.pt/content/antigo/files/1_A_Educacao.pdf</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	National Education Council, Portugal
Ordinance 644-A/2015 [regulates the organization and functioning of extracurricular enrichment activities (AEC), family support component (CAF), and preschool animation and family support activities (AAAF) in public preschool education, revoking Order No. 9265-B/2013 of July 15 (Diário da República, 2nd series, No. 164)].	Ministry of Education and Science. (2015). Portaria n.º 644-A/2015, de 24 de agosto. Diário da República [Official Gazette of the Portuguese Republic], 2ª série, No. 164. Retrieved from <a href="https://dre.pt/">https://dre.pt/</a>	<a href="https://dre.pt/dre/detail/portaria/644-a-2015-70095687">https://dre.pt/dre/detail/portaria/644-a-2015-70095687</a>	Official reports from ministries or educational authorities	Ministry of Education, Portugal

Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling ( Order n.º 6478/2017, 26 de julho)

Directorate-General for Education. (2017). Profile of students at the end of compulsory schooling (Order No. 6478/2017, July 26). Ministry of Education. <https://dge.mec.pt>

<https://www.dge.mec.pt/perfil-dos-alunos>

Official reports from ministries or educational authorities

Ministry of Education, Portugal

## ANNEX C – EMPIRICAL STUDIES INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS (FIVE COUNTRIES)

### Panel A. Cyprus

Authors (year)	Document type	Title (abridged – English)	Focus
Loizou (2017a)	Journal article	<i>Towards play pedagogy</i>	Teacher play practices
Loizou (2017b)	Book chapter	<i>Socio-dramatic play typologies</i>	Socio-dramatic play
Loizou et al. (2017)	Journal article	<i>Teacher involvement in socio-dramatic play</i>	Teacher scaffolding
Loizou & Michaelides (2020)	Book chapter	<i>Socio-dramatic play facilitated through drama</i>	Drama-based practices
Loizou & Loizou (2022)	Journal article	<i>Creative play and the role of the teacher</i>	Teacher involvement
Loizou & Olymbiou (2023)	Journal article	<i>Constructive play and pre-service teachers' involvement</i>	Pedagogical practices
Michaelides & Loizou (2024)	Journal article	<i>Drama-based professional development programme</i>	Teacher training
Michaelidou (2025)	Journal article	<i>Teacher practices during play</i>	Classroom practices
Rentzou et al. (2019)	Journal article	<i>Teachers' conceptualisations and uses of play</i>	Cross-national empirical
Shiakou & Belsky (2013)	Journal article	<i>Parent attitudes toward children's play and learning</i>	Family perspectives
Georgiou (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	<i>Educational drama programme to foster play skills</i>	Intervention program
Kyriakou (2018)	Doctoral dissertation	<i>Action research supporting play pedagogy</i>	Action research
Michaelidou (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	<i>Educational drama for developing teachers' play skills</i>	Professional development

### Panel B. Greece

Authors (year)	Document type	Title (abridged – English)	Focus
Kalpogianni (2019)	Journal article	<i>Why are children not outdoors?</i>	Outdoor play
Kolovou et al. (2021)	Journal article	<i>Digital games in early childhood education</i>	Digital play
Lenakakis et al. (2018)	Journal article	<i>Play and inclusive education</i>	Inclusion
Rentzou (2013)	Journal article	<i>Greek preschool children's playful behaviour</i>	Play behaviour
Rentzou et al. (2025)	Journal article	<i>Children's views and perceptions about play</i>	Children's perspectives
Sakellariou & Banou (2020a)	Journal article	<i>Play within the kindergarten curriculum of Greece</i>	Curriculum & play

Sakellariou & Banou (2020b)	Journal article	<i>Planning and evaluating play</i>	Pedagogical planning
Sakellariou & Banou (2020c)	Journal article	<i>Play within outdoor preschool learning environments</i>	Outdoor play
Sousa et al. (2019)	Journal article	<i>Participatory pedagogies</i>	Participation
Vellopoulou & Georgopoulou (2022)	Journal article	<i>Perspectives on play</i>	Teachers' definitions
Zafeiroudi (2021)	Journal article	<i>Exploring outdoor play in kindergartens</i>	Outdoor play practices
Birbili & Kyriakidou (2024)	Journal article	<i>Risky play in Greek kindergarten</i>	Risky play
Gonitsioti & Magos (2016)	Journal article	<i>"Car for boys, doll for girls?"</i>	Gender & toys
Papadopoulou (2019)	Journal article	<i>Children talk about play and lessons</i>	Children's perspectives
Papadopoulou et al. (2024)	Journal article	<i>Effects of training preservice educators in children's play</i>	Teacher education

### Panel C. Lithuania

Authors (year)	Document type	Title (abridged – English)	Focus
Brandisauskiene et al. (2025)	Journal article	<i>Self-regulation in pretend play in the digital age</i>	Pretend play
Brėdikytė et al. (2015)	Journal article	<i>Dynamics of pretend play development</i>	Pretend play
Juodaitytė et al. (2015)	Journal article	<i>Play as a philosophy of the child's life</i>	Play theory
Bredikyte & Brandisauskiene (2022)	Journal article	<i>Adult actions supporting narrative playworlds</i>	Adult mediation
Bredikyte & Brandisauskiene (2023)	Journal article	<i>Pretend play and self-regulation</i>	Self-regulation
Hakkarainen et al. (2015)	Monograph	<i>Play and self-regulation</i>	Play & development
Sujetaitė-Volungevičienė (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	<i>Emotional regulation in play</i>	Emotional regulation

### Panel D. Netherlands

Authors (year)	Document type	Title (abridged – English)	Focus
König & van der Aalsvoort (2009)	Journal article	<i>Attitudes of Dutch and German preschool teachers</i>	Teacher attitudes
Leseman et al. (2001)	Journal article	<i>Playing and working in kindergarten</i>	Cognitive co-construction
Singer et al. (2014)	Journal article	<i>Teacher's role in supporting play engagement</i>	Teacher involvement

Tajik & Singer (2021)	Journal article	<i>Enhancing play engagement through collaboration</i>	Play engagement
van der Aalsvoort et al. (2010)	Journal article	<i>Attitudes towards playful preschool activities</i>	Play attitudes
van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015)	Journal article	<i>Trainee teachers' perspectives on play</i>	Pre-service teachers
van Oers & Duijkers (2013)	Journal article	<i>Teaching in a play-based curriculum</i>	Play-based curriculum
van Schaik et al. (2018)	Journal article	<i>Observing interactions in ECEC</i>	Play observation
Prins et al. (2025)	Journal article	<i>Nature as a co-teacher</i>	Outdoor & nature play
Thieme et al. (2025)	Journal article	<i>Multilingual peer interactions</i>	Peer play
van Rossum et al. (2025)	Journal article	<i>Supporting language and play development</i>	Language & play

### Panel E. Portugal

Authors (year)	Document type	Title (abridged – English)	Focus
Afonso & Mamede (2018)	Journal article	<i>Playing with patterns in preschool education</i>	Pedagogical strategies
Antunes & Luís (2018)	Journal article	<i>Play in early childhood education</i>	Play conceptions
Coelho et al. (2018)	Journal article	<i>Profiles of play behaviour and emotional knowledge</i>	Play behavior
Coelho et al. (2023)	Journal article	<i>Playing-2-Gether</i>	Teacher training & play
Oliveira & Mendes (2017)	Journal article	<i>Playing at gender</i>	Gender & play
da Silva Pinto (2025)	Journal article	<i>Outdoor play in early childhood education</i>	Outdoor play
Pinto (2022)	Doctoral dissertation	<i>The child participates through play</i>	Participation & outdoor play
Mira et al. (2019)	Book chapter	<i>Play behaviours in children with hearing loss</i>	Inclusive play
Barros et al. (2024)	Journal article	<i>Participatory practices in ECEC</i>	Participation
Gomes et al. (2024)	Journal article	<i>Enhancing autonomy in preschoolers</i>	Motor play
Monteiro et al. (2022)	Journal article	<i>Screen-time exposure and children's development</i>	Play (contextual)
Veiga et al. (2017)	Journal article	<i>Social competence at the playground</i>	Playground play

**Note.** Countries are presented in alphabetical order. Panels A–E present the empirical studies included in the national systematic reviews. Titles are presented in English and abridged for readability. Full references are provided in the reference list.

## ANNEX D – SPIDER TOOL | DEFINITION OF SEARCH TERMS

	EN
<b>Sample</b>	<p>preschool teachers</p> <p>early years teachers</p> <p>ECEC teachers</p> <p>ECEC educators</p> <p>ECE teachers</p> <p>ECE educators</p> <p>Pre-service ECEC teachers</p> <p>Student teachers</p> <p>ECEC headteachers</p>
<b>Phenomenon of Interest</b>	<p>Play</p> <p>play-based</p> <p>playful</p> <p>playfulness</p> <p>play pedagogy</p>
<b>Design</b>	<p>Any type of design (randomized control trial, single or multiple case study, action research studies...)</p> <p>“questionnaire*” OR “survey*” OR</p> <p>“interview*” OR “focus group*” OR “case study*” OR</p> <p>“observation*”</p>
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>process and outcomes (views, perspectives, perceptions; learning; development)</p> <p>“view*” OR “experience*” OR “perception*” OR “belief*” OR</p> <p>“feel*”</p>
<b>Research type</b>	<p>qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods</p>

Databases: SCOPUS; PSYCINFO; EBSCO; ERIC; WEB OF SCIENCE; PSYCARICLES; National databases (e.g., for Portugal, RECAAP)

Time frame: 2015-2025

## ANNEX E – DATA EXTRACTION TEMPLATE FOR LITERATURE REVIEW

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
PROJECT: EDUPLAY												
Country	Short reference [e.g.: Carter et al. (2011)]	Complete reference (APA style)	Type of publication	Research question/goals	Theoretical framework	Participants/sample	Measures/instruments	Definition of play [optional]	Challenges/barriers faced by professionals: Pre- and in-service education	Challenges/barriers faced by professionals: conditions to implement play practices	Challenges/barriers faced by professionals: other	Needs reported by professionals
K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T			
PROJECT: EDUPLAY												
Challenges/barriers faced by professionals: conditions to implement play practices	Challenges/barriers faced by professionals: other	Needs reported by professionals	Practices/projects/initiatives to promote play	Impact of play/association with learning outcomes [optional]	Role of professionals [optional]	Participation of families in play in ECEC [optional]	Implications for practice/policies and future directions	OTHER information [optional]				

## ANNEX F - RESEARCH SAMPLE AND FIELDWORK PARTICIPANTS

### PANEL A. HEADTEACHERS

Country	Participants, <i>n</i>	Age, <i>M (SD)</i>	Current Position (in years), <i>M (SD)</i>	Professional Experience (in years), <i>M (SD)</i>	Children per institution, <i>M (SD)</i>
Cyprus	5	47.0 (9.3)	3.8 (3.6)	25.6 (9.4)	71.0 (28.2)
Greece	5	50.0 (11.2)	19.6 (13.5)	26.8 (10.8)	58.8 (16.5)
Lithuania	5	50.0 (10.4)	8.2 (7.0)	—	274.0 (246.7)
Netherlands	5	—	10.8 (8.8)	25.0 (9.3)	400.6 (293.4)
Portugal	5	54.4 (8.1)	13.0 (5.5)	32.4 (7.9)	155.0 (134.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>50.4 (0.71)</b>	<b>11.1 (9.4)</b>	<b>25.1 (9.2)</b>	<b>191.9 (212.5)</b>

### PANEL B. IN-SERVICE TEACHERS (FOCUS GROUPS)

Country	Participants, <i>n</i>	Age, <i>M (SD)</i>	Current Position (in years), <i>M (SD)</i>	Professional Experience (in years), <i>M (SD)</i>	Children per class, <i>M (SD)</i>
Cyprus	21	33.0 (7.6)	8.2 (7.5)	8.6 (6.9)	18.9 (6.2)
Greece	20	—	9.9 (8.4)	19.0 (8.4)	18.1 (3.4)
Lithuania	24	48.0 (9.9)	—	19.4 (13.4)	16.5 (3.4)
Netherlands	19	—	11.3 (8.45)	15.6 (10.1)	17.9 (5.3)
Portugal	22	47.0 (9.6)	22.0 (12.1)	23.0 (13.8)	19.1 (4.9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>42.9 (12.0)</b>	<b>12.9 (10.6)</b>	<b>16.9 (11.4)</b>	<b>18.1 (4.7)</b>

### PANEL C. PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS (CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS)

Country	Observed classrooms, <i>n</i>	Children per classroom, <i>M (SD)</i>	Adults per classroom, <i>M (SD)</i>	Play episodes per classroom, <i>M (SD)</i>
Cyprus	19	23.0 (2.12)	2.0 (0.8)	9.9 (3.8)
Greece	10	21.0 (1.1)	1.8 (0.6)	8.6 (3.3)
Lithuania	10	14.0 (1.7)	2.5 (0.7)	5.6 (7.1)
Netherlands	3	17.7 (0.6)	2.0 (0.0)	—
Portugal	10	17.0 (3.6)	4.5 (0.7)	10.6 (11.0)
<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>19.2 (3.9)</b>	<b>2.5 (1.2)</b>	<b>8.7 (2.2)</b>

**Note.** Values are reported as mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*). Dashes (—) indicate information not reported in the national datasets. Total means are weighted by sample size.

## ANNEX G - DATA COLLECTION DATABASES AND CODING FRAMEWORKS

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
ID	Country	Age	Age category (0 = <25; 1 = 25-35; 2 = 36-45; 3 = 46-55; 4 = ≥56)	Gender (0 = M; 1 = F; 2 = Other)	Professional_Background (0 = Pre; 1 = Lead; 2 = Insp; 3 = Pol; 4 = O)	Other_Background	Current_Position_Years	Edu_Experience_Years	Highest_Education (0 = Sec; 1 = B; 2 = M; 3 = D; 4 = O)	Other_Education	Location_Type (0 = V; 1 = S; 2 = T; 3 = C; 4 = L)	Institution_Size	Observations

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
ID	Country	Age	Age category (0 = <25; 1 = 25-35; 2 = 36-45; 3 = 46-55; 4 = ≥56)	Gender (0 = M; 1 = F; 2 = Other)	Professional_Background (0 = Pre; 1 = Lead; 2 = Insp; 3 = Pol; 4 = O)	Other_Background	Current_Position_Years	Edu_Experience_Years	Highest_Education (0 = Sec; 1 = B; 2 = M; 3 = D; 4 = O)	Other_Education	Location_Type (0 = V; 1 = S; 2 = T; 3 = C; 4 = L)	Institution_Size	Class_Adults	Class_Children	Classroom_Age_Group (0 = <3yo; 1 = 3yo; 2 = 4yo; 3 = 5yo; 4 = 6yo; 5 = 3-6yo; 6 = 4-6yo)	Observations

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
GENERAL INFORMATION											
ID	Country	ECEC_Setting_Code	Observation_Date	Time_Start	Time_End	Observation_Context	Observation_Moment	Duration_min	N_Children	N_Children_SpecialNeeds	N_Adults

X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD
PART 2: CURRENT USE OF PLAY						
P2_Q3_Ph2_PlayType (0=Obj; 1=Rules; 2=Sol; 3=Ima; 4=Cra; 5=Cons; 6=Out) Multiple answers allowed – list all using semicolons (e.g., 0;2;4)	P2_Q4_TeacherInv (0=Dir; 1=Ind; 2=In; 3=Out)	P2_Q4_Ph1_TeacherInv (0=Dir; 1=Ind; 2=In; 3=Out)	P2_Q4_Ph2_TeacherInv (0=Dir; 1=Ind; 2=In; 3=Out)	P2_Q5_TeacherRole (0=Co; 1=Dir; 2=Hel; 3=Fac; 4=Obs)	P2_Q5_Ph1_TeacherRole (0=Co; 1=Dir; 2=Hel; 3=Fac; 4=Obs)	P2_Q5_Ph2_TeacherRole (0=Co; 1=Dir; 2=Hel; 3=Fac; 4=Obs)

AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR	AS
P3_Q1_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q1_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q2_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q2_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q3_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q3_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q4_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q4_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q5_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q5_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q6_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q6_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q7_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q7_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q8_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)

BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY
P3_Q16_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q17_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q17_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q18_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q18_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q19_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q19_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q20_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q20_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q21_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q21_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q22_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q22_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q23_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q23_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q24_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)

BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO
P3_Q24_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q25_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q25_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q26_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q26_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q27_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q27_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q28_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q28_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q29_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q29_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q30_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q30_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q31_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q31_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q32_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)

DF	DG	DH	DI	DJ	DK	DL	DM	DN	DO	DP	DQ	DR	DS	DT	DU
PART 3: PLAY ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHER PRACTICES DURING PLAY															
P3_Q40_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q41_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q41_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q42_Ph1 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P3_Q42_Ph2 (0=not; 1=some; 2=very)	P4_Q1_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q1_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q2_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q2_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q3_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q3_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q4_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q4_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q5_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q5_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q6_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)

DU	DV	DW	DX	DY	DZ	EA	EB	EC	ED	EE	EF	EG	EH	EI	EJ	EK	EL	EM
PART 4: TRAINING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES																		
P4_Q6_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q6_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q7_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q7_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q8_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q8_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q9_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q9_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q10_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q10_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q11_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q11_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q12_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q12_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q13_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q13_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q14_Conf (0=Conf; 1=Not)	P4_Q14_Expl (0=Conf; 1=Not)	Observation

## ANNEX H - OBSERVATION TOOL FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Authors: Eleni Loizou & Victoria Michaelidou

**Aim of the observation tool:** The aim of the present tool is to collect pre-service teachers' perceived use of play in the current ECEC settings while observing the in-service teachers' practice during play observation. The observational data collected by the pre-service teachers are concerned with three areas: a) the current play status, b) the current play environment and role of teachers in play and c) the training needs of the pre-service teachers about the use of play in ECEC.

**What is included in the tool:** The tool consists of four parts, which are listed below. The pre-service teacher must complete all parts, and no item should remain empty or unanswered.

- PART 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
- PART 2: CURRENT USE OF PLAY
- PART 3: PLAY ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHER PRACTICES DURING PLAY
- PART 4: TRAINING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

### How to use the tool:

For PARTS 1-3, the observation tool should be completed across two phases.

- In phase 1, the pre-service teacher should use the tool while observing play implemented by an in-service teacher in an ECEC classroom (*during 1 visit that will last at least 40 minutes*) and complete the following parts by indicating his/her understanding of the use of play. The pre-service teacher is expected to complete the tool by providing reliable data based on what he/she observed during the observation. The pre-service teacher's responses during phase 1 should be completed in column "PHASE 1".
- In phase 2, the pre-service teacher should complete the same tool again (*right after the end of the observation*), while this time discussing and reflecting in collaboration with the in-service teacher about the items of the tool. The pre-service teacher should incorporate the in-service teacher's input from the discussion and may decide to change some of his/her responses. The pre-service teacher's responses during phase 2 should be completed in column "PHASE 2", and no changes should be made in the initial responses collected during the previous phase.

For PART 4, the observation tool should be completed after the end of the observation (*during pre-service teachers' personal time and not necessarily during the school visit*).

## GENERAL INFORMATION

To begin, please complete the following points:

Observer (Pre-service teacher) (Add your code here):		ECEC setting (Add the ECEC setting's code here):	
Date of observation:		Time of observation/ time in the daily schedule that observation takes place	--:-- to --:--  During _____ (e.g. "During free play time" or "during break time in the yard")
Duration of observation:			
Number of children in the classroom during the observation:		Number of children with special needs:	
Number of adults in the classroom during the observation:			

## PART 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Put a  according to the profile of the ECEC setting you have visited.

- ECEC setting area:**  
 Rural  Suburban  Urban
- Type of ECEC setting: (multiple selection)**  
 Public  Private  Communal
- Type of ECEC setting: (multiple selection)**  
 Nursery  Kindergarten/Preschool
- Classroom Grade (multiple selection):**
- < 3 years  3-4 years  4-5 years  5-6 years  3-6 years
- Total number of children registered/enrolled in the classroom: .....**

## PART 2: CURRENT USE OF PLAY

For this part, the pre-service teacher's responses during phase 1 should be completed in column "PHASE 1" and the pre-service teacher's responses during phase 2 should be completed in column "PHASE 2". No changes should be made in the initial responses collected during Phase 1.

Respond to each of the following statements by noting a <input type="checkbox"/> . (Multiple selection)	Indicate the number	<b>PHASE 1 (To be completed by the pre-service teacher)</b>	<b>PHASE 2 (To be completed by the pre-service teacher after the discussion with the in-service teacher)</b>
1. How many play activities/episodes (for one or a group of children) have you observed?		NA	NA
2. How many forms of play have you observed?		<input type="checkbox"/> <b>child-initiated</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>teacher-initiated</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>child-initiated</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>teacher-initiated</b>
3. How many types of play have you observed?		<input type="checkbox"/> <b>object-oriented</b> (i.e., exploration and/or manipulation of objects and materials, discovering or using their properties and functions for their own sake) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>games with rules</b> (i.e., interacting with peers/adults and/or toys, or is alone, in responding to the goals of the game) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>pretend-sociodramatic</b> /(i.e., role play with themes of day-to-day activities) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>pretend-imaginative</b> (i.e., role play with imaginative themes and roles) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>creative</b> (i.e., process of creating and/or being creative and possibly ends with a realistic or imaginative product) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>constructive-block play</b> (i.e., involved in construction, interacting with peers/adults and/or toys, or is alone, in creating and/or recreating a realistic or imaginative experience) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>outdoor</b> (i.e., physically active outdoors and in nature, exploring, discovering or challenging themselves.	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>object-oriented</b> (i.e., exploration and/or manipulation of objects and materials, discovering or using their properties and functions for their own sake) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>games with rules</b> (i.e., interacting with peers/adults and/or toys, or is alone, in responding to the goals of the game) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>pretend-sociodramatic</b> /(i.e., role play with themes of day-to-day activities) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>pretend-imaginative</b> (i.e., role play with imaginative themes and roles) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>creative</b> (i.e., process of creating and/or being creative and possibly ends with a realistic or imaginative product) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>constructive-block play</b> (i.e., involved in construction, interacting with peers/adults and/or toys, or is alone, in creating and/or recreating a realistic or imaginative experience) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>outdoor</b> (i.e., physically active outdoors and in

			nature, exploring, discovering or challenging themselves.
4. How many types of teacher involvement in play were observed?		<input type="checkbox"/> <b>direct</b> (i.e., teacher observes and provides specific/guiding information) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>indirect</b> (i.e., teacher observes and follows children’s lead, by providing suggestions). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>in role</b> (i.e., teacher is having a role and actively participating) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>out of role</b> (i.e., teacher is involved in play for managing the classroom, without actively participating)	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>direct</b> (i.e., teacher observes and provides specific/guiding information) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>indirect</b> (i.e., teacher observes and follows children’s lead, by providing suggestions). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>in role</b> (i.e., teacher is having a role and actively participating) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>out of role</b> (i.e., teacher is involved in play for managing the classroom, without actively participating)
5. How many roles did the teacher employ during play?		<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Co-player</b> (i.e., having a role and actively participating) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Director</b> (i.e., actively provides suggestions in relation to everyone’s role and actions, the scenario, use of space and materials). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Helper</b> (i.e., provides help, in using or manipulating materials and tools). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Facilitator /mediator</b> (i.e., facilitates play by providing materials, toys, reminding play rules, making suggestions, resolving disputes). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Observer</b> (i.e., observes children’s actions, behaviors, interactions, use of materials/toys and noting needs/challenges, or evaluating children’s learning and his/her practices).	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Co-player</b> (i.e., having a role and actively participating) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Director</b> (i.e., actively provides suggestions in relation to everyone’s role and actions, the scenario, use of space and materials). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Helper</b> (i.e., provides help, in using or manipulating materials and tools). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Facilitator /mediator</b> (i.e., facilitates play by providing materials, toys, reminding play rules, making suggestions, resolving disputes). <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Observer</b> (i.e., observes children’s actions, behaviors, interactions, use of materials/toys and noting needs/challenges, or evaluating children’s learning and his/her practices).

### PART 3: PLAY ENVIRONMENT AND TEACHER PRACTICES DURING PLAY

For this part, the pre-service teacher's responses during phase 1 should be completed in column "PHASE 1" and the pre-service teacher's responses during phase 2 should be completed in column "PHASE 2". No changes should be made in the initial responses collected during Phase 1.

\*\*

Indicate with a <input type="checkbox"/> , whether you observed (or not) the following teacher practices during play while visiting the ECEC classroom?		PHASE 1 (To be completed by the pre-service teacher)		PHASE 2 (To be completed by the pre-service teacher after the discussion with the in-service teacher)	
		Observed	Not observed	Observed	Not observed
TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTION		Observed	Not observed	Observed	Not observed
1.	Encourage children to be involved in play activity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Encourage children to communicate about play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Interaction with children during play considering their individual characteristics (development, interests and learning capabilities).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Respond to children in a manner that supports their participation and agency in play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Respect for different ways in which the children express themselves during play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PEER & GROUP INTERACTION		Observed	Not observed	Observed	Not observed
6.	Support for children in establishing friendships and interacting with other children during play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	Promotion of a sense of belonging for all children during play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	Promotion of an environment that appreciates individual differences and diversity (i.e., different cultures, religions, and developmental).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9.	Use of appropriate practices for promoting peer interaction and group play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>TEACHER ROLE-PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES &amp; LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>
10.	Participation of teachers in children's play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11.	Provision of opportunities for children to participate in meaningful play activities that encourage learning and development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12.	Use of play in a way that supports and promotes children's holistic development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13.	Promotion of experiential learning through play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14.	Provision of suggestions/ideas during children's play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15.	Respond to children's play needs (materials/objects)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16.	Observation of children's play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17.	Lead the play activity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18.	Formulation of questions about children's play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19.	Provision of questions to make children think and enhance their play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20.	Provision of comments and constructive feedback on children's play that supports maintaining or developing their play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21.	Involvement with other duties/tasks during playtime.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22.	Provision of efficient time for children to play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23.	Support children in developing their play through both direct and indirect teacher involvement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

24.	Use of differentiation during play (i.e., whether teacher differentiated the play's material/objects/plot/process to address the children's individual needs, profile, interests or readiness level).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>PLAY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>
25.	Use of routines and rules during play for effectively managing children's behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26.	Existence of well-established rules in the classroom about sharing play materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27.	Regular modification of the play learning environment based on children's needs and interests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28.	Organisation of space based on types of play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29.	Provision of open play areas offering opportunities for active play and movement.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30.	Provision of play spaces for quiet and individual play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31.	Provision of play spaces for group play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32.	Provision of play spaces for distinct play areas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33.	Encouragement for a combination of play areas during play.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34.	Provision of appropriate (based on children's level) and good-quality play materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35.	Provision of diverse and multi-functional play materials/objects that support different types of play (i.e., open-ended materials/loose parts that promote creativity, etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
36.	Provision of sufficient play materials/objects (i.e., the quantity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	of materials corresponds to the number and/or the age of children).				
37.	Easy access to play materials/objects for all children.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
38.	Use of play materials with opportunities to be transferred between different play areas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>PLANNING, DOCUMENTATION &amp; EVALUATION</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>	<b>Observed</b>	<b>Not observed</b>
39.	Use of informal observation for collecting data about children's skills/competencies/knowledge during play	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
40.	Use of formal evaluation for collecting data about children's skills/competencies/knowledge during play (i.e., observation tools, rubrics, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
41.	Documentation of children's development during play (i.e., diary, narrative report, play episodes, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
42.	Self-evaluation of teachers' role during play (i.e., practices, learning environment, teacher-child relationship, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Answer the following open-ended questions concerning your role as observer.

1. Was it difficult or easy to observe children's play and the teacher's role in it? Please explain briefly.

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Was your discussion with the teacher helpful in identifying observations that were accurate and points that you may have missed? Was this a helpful experience for you? Please explain why briefly. (To be completed during Phase 2)

.....

.....

.....

## PART 4: TRAINING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

*This part should be completed after the end of the observation (during pre-service teachers' personal time and not necessarily during the school visit). The student is expected to answer the following questions concerning his/her level of confidence about the following statements:*

<b>PLANNING, DOCUMENTATION &amp; EVALUATION</b>  <b>Do you feel confident to...</b>		<b>Confident</b>	<b>Not-confident yet</b>	<b>If not confident was selected, please specify briefly.</b>
1.	Use of a pedagogical framework/curriculum/guidelines to daily plan play practice/pedagogy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2.	Use of a pedagogical framework/curriculum/guidelines to systematically evaluate play practice/pedagogy.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3.	Offer dedicated time for play daily (at least an hour).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4.	Attempt to connect play activities with other learning activities (i.e., subjects, projects, visits, field research, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5.	Plan and implement child-initiated play activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6.	Plan and implement teacher-initiated play activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7.	Plan and implement different types of play activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8.	Participate in children's play by undertaking various roles.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9.	Adequately support children's play to enhance their holistic development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10.	Differentiate play's environment (space, materials), content or process for addressing different children's levels and provide opportunities for all children (i.e., disabled, low SES, bilingual, refugees, etc).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>TEACHER &amp; PARENTS/GUARDIANS COLLABORATION</b>  <b>Do you feel confident to</b>		<b>Confident</b>	<b>Not-confident yet</b>	<b>If not confident was selected, please specify briefly.</b>

11.	Establish an open and trusting relationship with parents/guardians, helping them understand the importance of play in children’s lives and development.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
12.	Support parents to appropriately make use of play at home.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
13.	Encourage parents/guardians’ involvement in planning and implementation of play activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
14.	Encourage parents/guardians’ participation in the evaluation of play activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Please respond to the following open-ended questions by reflecting on the current status and use of play in ECEC settings:

1. How (in what ways) can you, as a pre-service teacher, promote play [e.g., in the context of your practicum] ? Please kindly share specific examples.

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Can you share any successful practices, projects, or initiatives related to play that you have implemented?

.....

.....

.....

.....

3. What challenges or barriers do you face (or have faced) when trying to implement play-based practices?

.....

.....

.....

.....

4. What kind of support or resources would help you better integrate play into your practices?

.....

5. What were the contributions of your pre-service training in the implementation of play opportunities for children?

.....

6. What topics/methodologies do you think could have been covered during your training that could better support the promotion of play in ECEC? And at what moments/stages during your training?

.....

7. What other needs can you identify regarding your practice to ensure that play is effectively used to support children’s learning and development?

.....

Thank you for your time!



Co-funded by  
the European Union