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GREECE NATIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

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

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eduPLAY



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INTRODUCTION

To understand the current state of play within Greece's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system, a multi-layered research approach is essential. Play, serving both as a pedagogical tool and a children's right, is shaped by a complex interplay of policy frameworks, educational and pedagogical theories, professionals' beliefs, and everyday classroom practices. To capture this complexity, three types of investigation were conducted and combined: desk research, a literature review and field research. Each of these components offers a vital perspective: desk research reveals how play is positioned and supported within official policy documents and guidelines; the literature review uncovers the academic and professional discourse surrounding play; and field research provides direct evidence of how play is enacted and experienced in practice. Together, these complementary methodologies enable a nuanced understanding of the status of play in Greek ECEC, linking macro-level policy intentions with the micro-level realities of teaching and learning.

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

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The following review and analysis provide an overview of policies related to play within Greek early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The discussion begins with a brief introduction to the national ECEC system and the careers and professional development of early childhood educators in Greece. It then proceeds with a detailed analysis of public documents addressing play, aiming to investigate whether and how play is endorsed and facilitated at the national level. Relevant official documents and websites were subjected to content analysis to identify patterns and draw inferences regarding intentions and effects (Herring, 2010). A total of five documents, categorized as ‘public, official documents’ were identified to offer insights into the policy-level perspective on play, covering a span of approximately 20 years. Additionally, three official websites (see Ministries) were examined to identify references related to a stance on children’s right to play or recommended play practices.

1.2 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE NATIONAL ECEC SYSTEM

In Greece, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) comprises two distinct types of settings based on child age. These institutions reflect the split management approach where funding, regulation and governance are distributed between authorities.

For children under four (4), ECEC services include municipal infant care centers (vrefiki stathmi), infant/childcare centers (vrefonipiaki stathmi/nurseries) for children from 2 months, and child care centers (2 ½ to 4years old - pediki stathmi), supervised by the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs. These settings follow the ‘Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres’ (Government Gazette Issue (FEK) B’ 4249/05.12.2017, amended by Ministerial Decision D11/26396/920/2020). Despite efforts over the years (see Pedagogical Framework “Kypseli” by Meghir et al., 2021), no national curriculum or framework exists for childcare settings serving children under four. Each center develops its program (Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs, 2024) based on the guidelines outlined in the ‘Standard Regulation of Operation’, which includes free play, group activities, and quiet times. The primary objectives of these settings are to foster children’s social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development within a secure environment, following scientific evidence (Article 2).

Additionally, there exist private childcare settings and facilities, which may be either profit or non-profit, as well as part-time childcare options for infants and/or children, and integrated care centers for infants and children, managed by the Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family Affairs.

For children aged 4-6, ECE includes pre-schools / kindergartens (nipiagogia), both public and private, under the Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, and Sports (MoE). Pre-school education in nipiagogio

is classified under primary education, governed by the same legislation (Government Gazette Issue 167/A/30-9-1985), with its organization detailed in Article 3. Recently (2020-2021), compulsory pre-school education in Greece has been extended to two years, starting at age 4 (Law 4521/2018; Law 4704/2020). Public nipiagogia provide free pre-school education and must follow a national curriculum framework (or 'Program of Studies') supervised by the Institute of Educational Policy, an advisory body to the MoE (Hellenic Eurydice Unit, 2025).

As Bennett (2011, p. 1) argues, a nation's approach to early childhood education governance "says much about how early childhood is understood in a country and the relative value given by governments to policymaking, funding and regulation in this field". Greek ECEC provision shows characteristics that Bennett (2011, p. 2) describes as "the consequences of split system governance": weak state investment and regulation for childcare, limited funding, an undervalued workforce, discontinuity in provision for children and their families, and lack of cooperation between services (Birbili & Christodoulou, 2018; Grammatikopoulos et al., 2017). At the same time, there is a significant 'cultural commitment' to young children's education that not only overshadows childcare provision (OECD, 2011) but also encourages the so-called 'schoolification' of early childhood education (Bennett, 2011, p. 3), resulting in, among other things, children spending less time in play (Rentzou, 2015).

1.3 EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' CAREERS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kindergarten educators

To qualify as a kindergarten educator in public and private kindergartens, individuals must possess a degree from one of the nine Greek University Departments (or Schools) of ECE. Admission requires a high school diploma and satisfactory score in the competitive state-controlled Panhellenic Exams, held annually in June. Students must complete eight semesters (four years) and earn 240 ECTS credits. Each university department designs its curriculum, including mandatory courses, optional compulsory courses, field experience (or practicum), and electives (Birbili & Tsitouridou, 2019; Sakellariou, 2024).

Early Childhood Education degree holders can work in various institutions and services beyond public and private kindergartens. Career advancement opportunities include administrative roles at school and regional levels (e.g. as Education Advisors), subject to meeting formal qualifications. Current legislation (Law 4354 / 2015, Law 4823 / 2021) sets kindergarten educators' remuneration equal to primary school teachers. Salary depends on factors like service years, marital status, additional qualifications, employment in border areas, positions of responsibility (e.g. Director, Head of school unit), and the nature of employment contract (Government Gazette Issue 2524/2016). Teaching hours total 25 per week.

Continuing professional development (CPD) includes mandatory and voluntary components. Providers of CPD programs, both required and optional, include: (a) school units (see in-school training), (b) the Regional Directorate of Primary and Secondary Education, (c) Higher Education Institutions and Ministry bodies like the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP), (d) teachers' unions. The Institute of Educational Policy serves as the primary entity supporting MoE in teacher CPD matters.

Nursery and Childcare educators (pedagogues)

For nursery and childcare educators in public and private ECEC settings, a degree from one of the three University Departments of Early Years Learning and Care is required. Entry prerequisites include a secondary education (Lyceum) certificate and Panhellenic Exams grade. The program spans eight semesters. Graduates can work in municipal or private day nurseries and childcare centers, operate as self-employed caregivers for children from infancy until they commence primary school, establish and manage nursery or childcare centers and take administrative roles (Sakellariou, 2024). Salaries, bonuses, and benefits match other civil servants. Nursery and Childcare educators and Assistants work five days weekly for thirty (30) hours.

For nursery and childcare educators, there is no specific professional development provision. They are civil servants within the social welfare sector, governed by relevant legislation. The legal framework (Law 3528/2007) asserts that on-the-job training is an employee's right, to be conducted through introductory training at the start of their career, ongoing professional development activities, postgraduate programs, or postgraduate education cycles.

Current challenges facing the ECE workforce in Greece

Kindergarten educators face job reductions due to demographic challenges: birth rates have declined, yet the unfavorable staff-to-child ratios (1 educator to 25 children) persist (Sakellariou, 2024). Another issue is the aging teaching workforce, exacerbated by increasing retirement age limits (currently 67 years). An additional challenge is the rise in bureaucracy driven by efficiency demands and a culture of accountability. Furthermore, the fixation of salaries and pensions at low levels (Law 3833/2010) compared to Europe (OECD, 2023), remains an ongoing difficulty, with little improvement expected as the Greek economy is described as still recovering (Sakellariou, 2024).

1.4 DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

According to the international literature, an effective play policy should include a vision statement where play is a key component of healthy development, a list of objectives and goals, a working definition of play, features of quality play environments, and roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders (Armstrong & Gau, 2023; Canadian Public Health Association, 2019). Free, unstructured play should also be ensured across settings (Children's Alliance, 2024).

In Greece, there is a notable absence of a national policy supporting young children's play. The only official documents addressing the role of play in children's education and its benefits are the national curricula for kindergarten and the accompanying Educator Guides. However, the country does recognize children's rights (Law 2121/1992), as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, including their right to play in Article 31.

The absence of a national play policy indicates a lack of coordination among various stakeholders, including local authorities, educational institutions, families, child-focused professionals, out-of-school

care providers, health boards, and Ministries. Additionally, existing policies, such as those concerning school yards and play spaces, child-related issues, and the National Action Plan for the Rights of Children, are not aligned under a unified vision and guidelines that define their roles and responsibilities in prioritizing, facilitating, and supporting children's play. Furthermore, stakeholders are not encouraged to develop play policies at the local level, nor are they allocated fundings to develop and maintain play spaces that are accessible to all children and conducive to different types of play. For example, kindergartens and child centers are not required to articulate, even at the school unit level, their vision of play and the principles guiding each setting's approach. Similarly, families, as stakeholders, appear to be insufficiently acknowledged as a significant context for young children's play, evidenced by the absence of pertinent references in public and policy documents regarding their role in this capacity.

The sole 'play provision' subject to state regulation pertains to public/municipal playgrounds and private play spaces, where legislation prioritizes children's safety and equipment quality. Interestingly, the National Action Plan for the Rights of Children (Ministry of Justice, 2021) categorizes public playgrounds as "services in the sector of the entertainment of minors" (p. 30), indicating a perception of play 'as recreation'. In the same document, play is mentioned only twice in the section addressing summer camps for Roma children, where play is presented as a tool for empowering Roma children and facilitating the learning of "rules of co-existence and play" for all camp attendees (pp. 156-157).

Play in Greek kindergartens

The definition and discussion of play within Greek curriculum documents are shaped by decisions made by state-appointed authors who develop the national curriculum based on government educational priorities. In this context, references to play, the presence or absence of a clear definition, the existence (or not) of a theoretical framework, the emphasis on certain types of play over others, and other related issues are inconsistently addressed across Greek curricula and the accompanying Educator Guides. This diversity of perspectives is also documented in studies analyzing different Greek curricula's approach to play in early childhood education and care (see Vellopoulou & Georgopoulou, 2022). However, a common feature among Greek curricula (or else 'Program of Studies') over the past two decades, appears to be the acknowledgment that play should be a critical feature of the "whole curriculum" (Pedagogical Institute, 2003, p. 587), that "knowledge in kindergarten is viewed as an entity that is approached through play" (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. 14), that "children learn through play" (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. 21) and that play is "the dominant teaching means" in kindergarten/early childhood education (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. 26). In the recent national curriculum, its authors synthesize these ideas as follows: "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., 2022b, p. 51).

A significant contribution to the official discourse on play in Greek early childhood education has been made by the recent "Program of Studies" for the kindergarten (Penderi et al., 2022a). This program employs the concepts of 'playful learning' and 'playfulness,' along with related terms such as 'playful features,' 'playful activity,' and 'playful mood,' throughout both the curriculum document and the educator guide. As the authors (2022b) argue,

playful learning in the school environment has two dimensions. According to the first, children's play is the objective in a learning situation, with learning goals being achieved indirectly through children's active engagement in playful situations. According to the second, play becomes the means for designing a learning situation that leads directly and methodically to the attainment of learning goals. (p. 124)

The authors' efforts to give play a more pronounced position in the new curriculum are evidenced both in the frequency of references to play and playful learning, as well as in the more detailed discussions on what playful learning is (see for example section A4.1.2 Playful Learning, 2022b, pp. 123 - 141), what play means for young children (e.g. p. 123), how educators can promote playful learning (e.g. p. 125), what the "capacity to play" means (p. 124), what a 'play scenario' is (e.g. p. 128) and how "dolls as a toy/object favored by young children can be used by the educator as a 'methodological tool'" to organize learning activities and experiences (e.g. p. 132) (Penderi et al., 2022b). 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" (p. 202). The new curriculum also aligns with previous curriculum documents (Dafermou et al., 2006; Pedagogical Institute, 2003) in, for example, conceptualizing play (free and structured) as one of the "learning contexts" in Kindergarten and as an assessment context offering "invaluable information regarding children's development of their thinking" (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. 35, p. 42), as well as "the way [children] communicate with each other, the way they use the available objects and the way they develop their ideas" (Dafermou et al., 2006, p. 42; Penderi et al. 2022b, p. 300).

Regarding theoretical frameworks informing play in Greek kindergartens, since 2003, references to Vygotsky and socio-cultural theories, as well constructivist theories, draw early childhood educators' attention to how play fits with constructivist learning and involves social learning, relations, imitation and other concepts crucial for development and learning. These references range from brief mentions (e.g. Pedagogical Institute, 2003) to comprehensive discussions (see Dafermou et al., 2006 and Penderi et al., 2022b).

Concerning the educator's role, again, curricula vary in the depth of discussion and orientation on this topic. For example, 2003 curriculum's Educator Guide (Dafermou et al., 2006) emphasizes educator "interventions" (p. 60) that enhance the development of children's play and support various types of play (e.g. creative play). Practices like "planning flexible play spaces", "encouraging children to take ownership of their play areas" and "ensuring enough time for children's play" (p. 71) promote play primarily from the children's perspective and secondarily as a learning tool. The new curriculum (Penderi et al., 2022b), while also addressing play as an "autonomous activity" (p. 200), extensively employs the term "playful learning" to show educators that "play and educational 'work' do not constitute conflicting processes but coexist harmoniously and provide feedback to each other" (p. 125). Within this context, "[t]he role of the early childhood educator in a learning condition with playful character" follows Hanghøj's (2013) game-based teaching model as "instructor, playmaker, guide, and evaluator" (as cited in Penderi et al., 2022b, p. 132), where, for instance, the educator, in the role of the 'playmaker', can 'intrude' in the play process to enrich the scenario or participate as co-player to enhance children's practices" (Penderi et al., 2022b, p. 131).

Based on the preceding analysis, it can be argued that while common messages are conveyed to early childhood educators regarding the significance of play in ECE, 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. The variable 'authorship of Greek preschool curricula' is crucial when examining how Greek curricula address various issues. Children's play exemplifies that, 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? Compounding the issue, regardless of the emphasis a Greek curriculum document places on play, its ideas and arguments can be effectively nullified by Ministry directives, like the operational timetable in kindergartens prescribing strict playtime, or requirements for activities in English and 'Skills Labs,' taking three hours per week (Eurydice Unit Greece, 2022). Another illustration of how the broader policy context affects the position of play in kindergarten is the fragmented approach to supporting children with special needs, which fails to provide educators with the necessary context for inclusive play opportunities and spaces (Lenakakis et al., 2018). As the Greek education system remains one of the most centralized among OECD countries, educators' curriculum decisions often cannot prioritize children's needs and interests (OECD, 2018).

Play in infant and child care centers

As previously noted, currently there is no established curriculum document for children attending nursery settings (ages 1-4). However, the Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres (Government Gazette Issue, 4249/2017) applies to all infant and child nursery settings. This regulation outlines the objectives of day care centers, which include fostering holistic development in children, facilitating transition from family to educational settings, providing daily nutrition and care, and increasing parental awareness of pedagogical and psychological issues (Article 2). It is also recommended that centers and educators deliver early childhood care and education based on the latest scientific data, which may, implicitly, include references to play. The document mentions 'play/toys' twice: instructing the "Pedagogical personnel," to "suggest the classroom needs for supplies to implement the program (toys, cleaning items, etc.)" (p. 55993), and suggesting that "free play hours outside or inside, rest, and relaxation are defined according to the age of children as well as their individual and biological needs" (p. 55992).

Previous efforts to develop a national Pedagogical Framework for children aged "0-4" have resulted in two documents available online (refer to '[Pedagogical Program for Child Care Centers](#)', 2009, and '[Kypseli Program](#)', 2021). Neither framework has been officially implemented (even "Kypseli", published in the Government Gazette Issue -178-A'-01.10.2021-, remained in pilot phase). Notably, the "Kypseli" program (Meghir et al., 2021) contains an extensive section on play, consistently emphasizing that "play is a central concept in early childhood education" (p. 38). In contrast, the "Program for the cultivation, education, and care of preschool-aged children" (Ministry of the Interior, 2009), adapted from a German program, contains a concise section on play. However, in the context of this review and in comparison to the current national curriculum's perspective on play, it is noteworthy that this latest program explicitly states that "when pedagogues play with children, they participate in

their play without dominating it or using it for supposedly educational purposes. Play, from children’s perspective, is free from expediency. It should not be used by adults as an instrument to achieve their goals” (p. 34).

1.5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF CURRENT POLICIES

The importance of play for young children’s learning and development is articulated by the Greek academic community (see the next section of this report) and non-profit organisations advocating children’s rights, including their right to play. This endorsement is also evident in courses at various educational levels (e.g. undergraduate studies, postgraduate studies) and initiatives for teacher professional development (e.g. seminars, workshops, manuals, conferences – see for example the 2023 OMEP conference on children’s play).

While these activities create a supportive environment for play in Greek early childhood education, they do not constitute a national approach guided by shared vision and objectives tailored to young children within the Greek context. Although Greece has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizing children’s right to play, this principle has not been translated into integrated national strategies or funding commitments. Existing regulations concerning children—such as those addressing playground safety, school infrastructure, or the National Action Plan for the Rights of Children—approach play from a limited, recreational perspective rather than as a developmental or educational priority. Consequently, play remains marginalized across policy areas, with no provisions encouraging local-level play strategies, inclusive play spaces, or family involvement in promoting play.

Within the education system, the main policy references to play are found in national kindergarten curricula and Educator Guides. These documents consistently position play as central to learning and development. The 2022 national curriculum has expanded this perspective by introducing the concepts of “playful learning” and “playfulness”. However, the emphasis and theoretical framing of play vary by curriculum authors, reflecting individual perspectives rather than a unified national stance. The absence of a policy vision means that curricular references to play, while conceptually rich, are vulnerable to being undermined by ministry directives, rigid timetables, and other centralized policy constraints that limit teachers’ autonomy to prioritize play in daily practice.

A similar lack of policy coherence is observed in infant and childcare centers for ages 1–4. While national regulations acknowledge play marginally—referring briefly to playtime and the provision of toys—there is no official pedagogical framework positioning play as a developmental right or pedagogical method. Although two older curriculum frameworks proposed play-centered approaches, neither has been implemented nationwide. As a result, play in early childhood care and education remains governed by isolated curricular guidelines rather than an overarching policy vision. Overall, Greek policy discourse recognizes play rhetorically but fails to institutionalize it as a priority, leaving its implementation dependent on curriculum authors’ interpretations, institutional practices, and educators’ commitment.

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

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Play's role in young children's learning within Greek ECEC is prominent in academic literature, as evidenced by a considerable volume of journal articles, conference presentations and graduate research. While research emphasizes the perceptions of experienced educators and undergraduate students, indicating a strong interest in individual beliefs as a critical determinant of pedagogical practices, there is also a growing body of research examining the topic from children's perspective (see Papadopoulou, 2019; Rentzou et al., 2025), thereby acknowledging the importance of participatory pedagogy (de Sousa et al., 2019). Research topics range from traditional interests – like the role of play in national curricula, educators' definitions of play, or their perceptions of their role in facilitating play – to contemporary aspects like digital play, risky play, and outdoor play. This review focuses on studies examining challenges and barriers Greek educators and prospective teachers face in promoting and supporting children's play in everyday pedagogy.

The literature review involved extracting full text, peer reviewed empirical articles and doctoral theses in Greek from the National Documentation Centre and Google Scholar, as well as peer -reviewed articles in English from Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, ProQuest and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). To be included in the data, articles had to focus on 'perceptions', 'beliefs' (and related terms) of "pre-service teachers"/ "prospective teachers" and or "in-service teachers" or "early childhood teachers/educators/professionals/practitioners" in combination with 'challenges', 'barriers', 'obstacles', 'needs' and 'practices.' Other search terms included 'play/children's play', 'playful learning', and 'play-based learning/pedagogy'. Articles exploring solely the perceived benefits of a type of play or the value of play, in general, were excluded. The search yielded 15 articles, 8 in Greek and 7 written in English. Data collection and analysis were conducted by Maria Birbili and Maria Stamatoglou.

2.2. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC PRACTICES

Data analysis suggests that both professional and aspiring educators encounter multifaceted challenges related to play, which arise from both conceptual issues and structural limitations within the Greek environment and policy.

A dichotomy of play and learning

A significant conceptual challenge shared by both in-service and pre-service teachers is the prevailing perception that play and learning are distinct entities (Kambeza et al., 2020; Vellopoulou, &

Georgopoulou, 2022). This perception appears more pronounced among pre-service teachers, indicating a need for targeted interventions at the university level. In-service teachers, on the other hand, tend to view play as an educational tool primarily linked to cognitive and physical benefits, emphasizing structured play with these objectives (Lenakakis et al., 2016). Conversely, they associate play as a means of free expression with mainly emotional and social benefits (Lenakakis et al., 2016).

Limited understanding of free play

The literature highlights the challenge of developing a comprehensive understanding of free play for educators and, more importantly, their role within it (Vellopoulou et al., 2024). Pre-service teachers tend to associate play with learning predominantly in the context of organized play and struggle to grasp what free play entails (Vellopoulou et al., 2024). In-service teachers also show a preference for structured play, often prioritizing organized play activities over children's free play.

Play: a concept for all children?

Regarding the inclusivity of play, in-service teachers appear to struggle with conceiving play as a concept that encompasses all children, including those with disabilities. The reviewed studies suggest that only a small fraction of participants considered children with disabilities when defining play, with this number decreasing further when discussing the benefits of free play and its potential benefits for children (Lenakakis et al., 2018). Educators tend to describe children with disabilities in play as taking on a subordinate or passive role, often requiring constant assistance. An inclusive perspective is also lacking among pre-service teachers, who generally appear to adopt limited and confused views on inclusion and disability (Vellopoulou et al., 2024). The literature further reveals that practitioners face challenges in confronting stereotypes related to gender and toys (see, for example, negative attitudes towards certain dolls), which has an impact on what children are permitted to play with in kindergarten (Gonitsioti & Magos, 2016).

Encouraging different types of play and toys

The literature indicates that both in-service and pre-service teachers encounter conceptual and structural barriers to integrating diverse types of plays into their practice. For example, there is a prevalent perception that the outdoor environment serves merely as 'recess space' rather than an important setting for playful learning (Kalpogianni, 2019). Educators also prioritize a "not to get hurt," approach, which seems to restrict play opportunities as teachers do not trust young children to manage outdoor play or risky situations during play (Birbili & Kyriakidou, 2024; Kalpogianni, 2019). Coupled with poor outdoor facilities and equipment and the negative perceptions of parents about this kind of play, children's participation in outdoor play remains very low (Gessiou, 2019; Zafeiroudi, 2021; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020c). Additionally, there is a hesitancy regarding the use of digital games in kindergartens, both due to infrastructure issues and teachers' feeling of being untrained using ICT for educational purposes (Kolovou et al., 2021).

A hesitation to evaluate play

Both in service and pre-service teachers exhibit reluctance in evaluating play and its connection to children's learning. Only a few experienced educators assess children's learning during play, with some teachers reporting that 'sometimes' encourage children to evaluate their achievements during play activities (Sakellariou & Banou 2020b, 2021). Researchers identify a lack of confidence as a critical factor influencing the practice of evaluating play and its educational value.

Parental collaboration

Kindergarten teachers appear hesitant to collaborate with parents on play-related issues possible because some of them do not perceive this kind of collaboration as making a difference to their practice or children's learning (Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a).

2.3. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

The studies reviewed highlight a pressing need for targeted professional development to address the identified gaps and challenges. Specifically:

- Both pre-service and in-service teachers need to revisit the complexity of play, better understand free play and structured play, and move beyond perceiving play merely as a learning tool (Papadopoulou et al., 2024). Narrow conceptualizations of play reinforce false or strict dichotomies, like between play and learning or free and structured play, making it difficult to integrate play meaningfully into everyday educational practices. Especially, free play, which is driven by children's agency and intrinsic motivation, appears to remain poorly understood and underutilized.
- Studies suggest that play is not consistently conceptualized as accessible to all children, particularly those with disabilities. Both groups of educators tend to perceive children with disabilities as passive or peripheral participants in play, rather than as active, capable contributors, revealing a need for training that integrates inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, and equity considerations.
- There is a general reluctance among educators to evaluate children's learning during play, stemming from a lack of appropriate training, assessment tools, or professional confidence. This hesitation may contribute to the marginalization of play within assessment practices, despite its rich potential as a site of meaningful observation and pedagogical insight.
- Professionals need to reconsider collaborating with parents on play issues, as they currently show reluctance to engage with them on such matters. This disconnect hinders the development of a shared understanding between families and educators regarding the role of play in young children's learning and development and limits opportunities for promoting the value of play within the home environment.

2.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To address the challenges and needs identified, we provide both practical suggestions and future research directions that can offer a better understanding of how play and playful learning can be supported effectively.

Teacher education, as the starting point of the teacher education continuum plays a crucial role in fostering a reflective stance towards the concept of play and its role in children's learning and development. In this context, preservice teachers require not only references on the various types of play but, perhaps more importantly, an examination of their assumptions and beliefs about play and playful learning, as well as discussions on play as a cultural value. Moreover, as both Greek and international literature indicate, conceptualizing play in all its complexity poses a challenge for both preservice and in-service educators. Integrating playful learning effectively into classrooms should be systematically addressed and practiced from the onset of teachers' careers, with examples from different subject areas and diverse groups of children. Practicing 'play activities' in a fragmented manner, during their practicum seems to leave significant gaps in pre-service knowledge and beliefs about play. Pre-service teachers should also be supported in observing and evaluating play to grasp its complexity and its value as a means to better understand children. Encouraging a cycle of modelling, guidance/coaching, feedback and reflection, supported by experienced mentors, is proposed as a professional development strategy to help in-service teachers explore unfamiliar areas such as playful learning and challenging concepts like inclusive play and assessment through, of, and for play (Lee et al., 2024). Co-creation and collaboration between researchers and professionals have the potential to serve as opportunities for problem solving and the construction of theoretical knowledge in action (Lee et al., 2024).

The review also highlights a significant need for educators to understand play as a universal concept for all children and for teacher educators to integrate the pedagogy of inclusion and disability with courses on play in university programs. Similarly, teacher professional development should emphasize how gender stereotypes and toy preferences may exclude some children and limit play in early childhood settings.

Regarding collaboration with families in supporting play, engaging in dialogue, workshops or shared observations can help bridge the existing gap and foster a more consistent and supportive approach to play-based learning across home and school settings. However, while discussions about involving families in play-related issues may occur in teacher education or professional development, effective implementation also requires support from the policy context. Even if teachers inform parents about the significance of play for young children's well-being, development and learning, as long as play is not promoted as part of the nation's vision for its young children, educators' arguments in favor of play will always be perceived as 'theoretical statements'.

Finally, in Greece, where educational borrowing is common at several levels (Birbili & Christodoulou, 2018), it is essential for both research and teacher professional development to support educators and all stakeholders in filtering curriculum directions and guidance through what is meaningful to them and the children they serve. Educators need to recognize play as a social and cultural issue (Rentzou,

2013). From this perspective, it will be easier to understand both its complexity and the many social actors involved and required to support it as a fundamental right for young children.

2.5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The reviewed literature, though limited, indicates that both pre-service and in-service teachers in Greece face conceptual and structural challenges in understanding and integrating play ECE. A key finding is the persistent dichotomy between play and learning. Many educators, especially pre-service teachers, tend to perceive play and learning as separate, with play often reduced to an instructional tool aimed at cognitive or physical outcomes rather than being valued as a holistic, child-led process. Another recurring conclusion concerns educators' insufficient understanding of free play. Both pre-service and in-service teachers show a preference for structured play, struggling to define or facilitate free play effectively. This gap extends to issues of inclusivity: play is not consistently conceptualized as accessible to all children, particularly those with disabilities. Structural barriers further constrain the implementation of diverse forms of play. Outdoor and digital play opportunities are particularly limited due to safety concerns, insufficient facilities, lack of training, and parental resistance.

The literature concludes that a systematic, reflective approach to teacher preparation and professional development is essential for addressing these challenges. Teacher education programs should enable future educators to critically assess their beliefs about play, explore its cultural dimensions, and learn to observe and evaluate it as a pedagogical practice. For in-service teachers, sustained professional learning that includes mentoring, feedback, and collaborative inquiry is recommended. Finally, stronger policy support and school–family collaboration are vital for integrating play into the broader culture of Greece. Without policy alignment and cultural recognition of play's importance, teachers' advocacy for play risks remaining theoretical rather than transformative.

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

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The field research discussed here forms part of a broader transnational initiative aimed at examining the current state of play in ECEC across diverse educational contexts. The study was designed to gather in-depth, context-specific insights through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This approach allowed for a multifaceted exploration of how play is currently understood, implemented, and supported within various Greek early years settings, as well as how institutional and policy factors influence these practices.

By foregrounding the voices and experiences of professionals in the field, the research aims to inform policy, teacher education and curriculum development that better support play as a central component of early learning. The findings also contribute to the larger international effort to assess and compare play-related practices and attitudes, highlighting both shared and context-specific issues that impact the implementation of play in ECEC settings.

3.2. PROCEDURES OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

The study involved 35 participants, representing a variety of roles within ECEC in Greece. The group included 5 headteachers, 20 experienced early childhood educators and pedagogues, and 10 pre-service teachers from a university-level teacher education program. This sample aimed to provide a balanced view of the diverse stakeholders involved in the planning and implementing play-based learning in early childhood settings. Specifically, the inclusion of both in-service and preservice educators allowed the research to capture not only current practices and challenges but also the perspectives of those entering the profession.

In-service teachers were primarily selected based on their willingness to participate following a call for participation directed at educators and pedagogues with varying teaching experiences and positions and from diverse types of ECEC settings and geographical locations (e.g. large cities, islands). Preservice teachers were also recruited through an open invitation at a higher education institution. With approval from Aristotle University's Research Ethics Committee (No. 225925/2025), all participants were informed in advance about the project's objectives and the study processes, ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent in accordance with ethical guidelines.

Data collection & analysis procedures

Data were gathered through interviews with headteachers, focus groups with practicing early childhood educators and pedagogues, and classroom observations conducted by preservice teachers. Both individual and focus groups interviews were recorded with participants' permission and transcribed by the two researchers,

Interviews with headteachers were conducted to explore their institutional perspectives on play, including their views on structural or systemic constraints, and support mechanisms for play-based learning. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes and was conducted online, as this was most convenient for all participants due to their time availability.

Focus groups with early childhood educators and pedagogues were held to enable shared discussion around everyday experiences, challenges, and strategies related to implementing play in their classrooms. These sessions encouraged collaborative reflection and peer insight, each lasting around 50 to 70 minutes depending on the number of participants per group. Focus groups were also conducted online.

Observations were conducted by pre-service teachers in selected ECEC settings, after they have been briefed about the project and its goals. Using a guided observation protocol developed by Dr E. Loizou and Dr Victoria Michaelidou (University of Cyprus) and structured in three parts, they recorded children's play behaviors, educator responses, and the learning environment's affordances and constraints. The protocol also encouraged prospective teachers to discuss their observations with the classroom teacher, aiming to help them grasp both the complexity of the teacher's role in children's play and the limitations of singular observations of children's play practices. Combined with a number of closed- and open-ended questions (4th part) that students had to answer post-observation regarding their own views and role in designing and implementing play practices, the data collected provided insight both into how play is enacted in practice and how future educators perceive their role and agency in play pedagogy. Observations in ECEC settings lasted between 30 to 45 minutes, primarily occurring during what is referred to as 'free play time' (typically at the start of the daily program).

Data collection was conducted by Maria Birbili and Maria Stamatoglou and data analysis by Maria Birbili. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2021) which involves searching for meaningful patterns within the data (more on the themes generated from data at Annex 2.).

3.3. MAIN FINDINGS

3.3.1. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC

Regarding resources and infrastructure, there appear to be stark contrasts: some kindergartens feature large yards and additional rooms that can serve as playrooms, while others have small yards or share them with primary schools, where the latter often have the upper hand. Private schools and public daycare centers seem to fare better regarding indoor and outdoor space. This disparity may be attributed to the Greek state's approach to establishing new kindergartens (e.g. any vacant space, even

those previously functioning as shops or stores, may be converted into kindergartens) compared to municipalities' efforts to create spaces for infants and toddlers, where safety is a more significant concern and children's needs are more pronounced (e.g. babies require space to move safely). Overall, study participants perceive the Ministry of Education's response to the needs of public kindergartens as very slow: repairs are not conducted regularly, and changes only occur after considerable effort and pressure from educators and headteachers. The delay in repairing yards, which would offer Greek pre-schoolers ample playtime throughout the year due to favourable weather, led some participants to suggest that this reflects the Greek state's interest in children's play. The persistent issue of bureaucracy, repeatedly criticized in OECD reports, exacerbates the situation (Nasios, 2024). Nevertheless, even in such challenging circumstances educators strive to find solutions to maximize children's play opportunities. For instance, they may rearrange tables and chairs daily in small classrooms to create more space or resort to dismantling fixed furniture to open up areas for play.

Resources such as toys and small-scale equipment for play also pose challenges for the educators in the sample. Many report a lack of variety and reliance on standardized toys and play objects, which may impact children's creativity. However, educators often address this issue at their own expenses or with generous support from parents. More experienced educators and pedagogues and those in mid-career often overcome this challenge by using their knowledge to handcraft toys and games from reused or recycled materials. Others encourage children to create their own games or toys, enriching not only the classroom resources but also children's learning and skills, as 'constructing', for instance, a board game, has many learning benefits.

The teacher-child ratio in Greek kindergartens and its negative impact on children play also emerged in interviews. Having twenty-three or twenty-five children in small classrooms was reported as a challenge, particularly for free play, where children should ideally have the freedom to move around the classroom as their play dictates. Coupled with the fact that standardized tables of a certain type and size seem to dominate Greek classrooms, children also lack space for music or drama games, which some educators highly value not only for 'academic' purposes but also because they recognise the importance of allowing children to involve their whole body in what they do. The number of children in classrooms, combined with teachers' observations that children's 'profiles' have 'nowadays' changed to include children with highly diverse needs and maturity levels, also leads educators to argue that even if providing play opportunities was easy, supporting children's play once it has developed is what has become the real challenge.

Finally, regarding the time that Greek preschoolers have for play, although it is officially guaranteed in the daily program (Law 4957/2022), all kindergarten educators in the sample discussed how the current situation, shaped by the new national curriculum and ministerial guidelines for accountability in ECE, has placed such pressure on educators that they feel play –especially free play - has suffered. Educators argue, that despite the national curriculum's references to play-based learning, a series of mandatory academic requirements (see e.g. a two-hour mandatory "structured activities") have rendered the curriculum "heavily cognitive", making "structured learning" the most valued form of learning in Greek kindergartens, and for some, even "expelling" play from kindergarten.

3.3.2. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

Study participants describe training and professional development on play within the Greek context as unsystematic and fragmented. Although their experiences vary, most share memories from their teacher education that include perhaps one course that touched on play at some point (e.g. courses on technology discussing digital games). Some educators mention courses on theatre arts and movement, which included games they continue to use systematically. Overall, most participants remember courses that discussed play among other topics, but not ones dedicated entirely to play.

Kindergarten educators report that professional development on play is uncommon, even as the new curriculum emphasizes play-based learning as a crucial component of Greek early childhood pedagogy. This situation is described as ‘strange’ by most of interviewees, with some suggesting it will soon negatively affect the implementation of play-based learning, as misconceptions will prevail. Educators comment that while they understand the State’s focus on health issues or bullying (examples of current national professional development initiatives), its apparent lack of interest in addressing or promoting young children’s play “says a lot about how play is valued in theory but not in practice”.

What they lack from central provision, some educators find among their colleagues and collaborations with other early childhood settings, both in Greece and abroad, through European programs. This includes exchanges of ideas and co-organizing events focused on play. Headteachers, also appear to play a role, though this is limited to inspiring colleagues to try new things due to the nature of their position in the Greek context. Two participants also highlighted the importance of school culture in relation to play: if embraced by the entire school then, as they say, play opportunities expand in numerous directions.

The professional development needs of experienced educators and pedagogues, as revealed in the study, are understandably shaped by their own definitions of play. Within this context, pedagogues in day care centres who perceive play as essential for preventing boredom in young children, expressed a need for practical advice on creating new toys/games or new ideas for play opportunities in the classroom. Meanwhile, some kindergarten educators who perceive play as central to early childhood pedagogy expressed a desire to deepen their understanding of the concept of play-based learning. One interviewee also mentioned the need to discuss play for children from different cultural backgrounds, citing Roma children as an example.

3.3.3. PRACTICES, PROJECTS, OR INITIATIVES PROMOTING PLAY

Participants’ accounts suggest that despite challenges related to resources and infrastructure, they strive to incorporate play into their pedagogy, although to varying degrees and for different purposes/objectives. A common practice for promoting play opportunities for young children involves organizing events with parents, where families typically engage in play with their children. During these events, certain types of play, such as physical play/games and group games, tend to dominate. Educators believe this practice also helps demonstrate the value of play to families. However, based on other comments about societal perceptions of play, it seems that this approach does not necessarily or automatically lead to profound changes in beliefs about children’s play. Other practices aimed at involving families include ‘lending’ games for home use.

For some educators, regularly renewing toys and play materials is a priority, and they share various ideas, some of which involve children in the decision-making and construction processes. Additional practices include educators collaborating to enrich play in the yard (e.g. organizing “an invitation for play” with loose parts) or organizing joint play activities with older children from nearby elementary schools. Another common practice among participants is the use of ‘dolls’ or ‘figures’ (e.g. communication dolls, empathy dolls, and persona dolls) to capture children’s attention and engage them in structured activities “in a playful way”.

The play practices discussed during data collection also offered valuable insights into how individuals perceive and define play. For example, some activities organized by educators were labelled as ‘play’ (e.g., creating a collage or constructing a maquette) as long as they were presented to children as such. Other interviewees, particularly those working with infants and toddlers, primarily discussed games involving movement, dramatization, and theatrical expression, emphasizing the importance of developing young children’s mobility. They also described play as ‘fun’ and ‘joy’, ‘a fun way to learn’ and a means for children to release energy. In contrast, educators at the kindergarten level documented a broader range of terms and types of play. These variations in definitions may stem from various factors, including initial training, professional qualifications and knowledge, past experiences, and current priorities. They are also related to the age of the children educators serve and the perceived needs of these children. Interestingly, with few exceptions, participants expressed reservations about digital play for young children, a view that seemed to originate either from a personal stance towards technology or from witnessing the concerning effects of children’s overexposure to digital games on mobile phones and tablets at home. As educators working in day care centres attest, this exposure begins at a very early age.

A sample of pre-service teachers who observed and discussed play with experienced teachers offers insight into how initial teacher education might shape perceptions of young children’s play and future practices. Although some student teachers, like their in-service counterparts, have not taken courses exclusively focused on play, they do not view this as a disadvantage. Instead, they find that ‘hearing about play’ in various subject contexts was helpful for understanding its importance for children’s development and learning. The challenges identified by pre-service teachers include uncertainty about how to support different types of play in practice, particularly within various subject areas, how to differentiate play activities for children from diverse cultural backgrounds and with varying needs, and how to honour children’s preferences regarding their participation in play. They also grapple with defining the boundaries of their own involvement in children’s play and express a desire to learn more about creating their own pedagogical games. Practicum appears to serve as a helpful platform for understanding how play is implemented in practice, but it also reveals how play is sometimes marginalized in classrooms due to a ‘lack of time’ and the emphasis on ‘academic knowledge’ that in-service teachers mentioned in their interviews. For the pre-service teachers in the sample, observing experienced educators’ play practices also emerges as an important need.

3.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the study's small size, its findings highlight significant challenges and complexities in integrating play into the Greek ECEC system. These insights have direct implications for educational practice, policy development and future research or interventions.

Implications for practice

The report highlights the persistence and creativity of educators who, despite systemic constraints, endeavor to integrate play into the pedagogical strategies. Teachers' efforts – ranging from rearranging classroom furniture daily to crafting toys from recycled materials – reflect a commitment to play and an understanding of its value for young children's learning and development. However, these practices frequently depend heavily on personal initiative, parental support, or informal peer networks.

To build on these efforts, structured and sustained professional development on play is crucial. Data reveal that many educators lack formal training focused exclusively on play or play-based learning. Therefore, educators would benefit from targeted workshops, continuous in-service training, and communities of practice that explore various forms of play, their pedagogical value and culturally responsive approaches to play. The importance of collaborative school cultures also becomes evident; practices develop better when play is embraced school-wide.

Moreover, differentiated training based on practitioners' role, the age groups they work with, and their professional qualifications is needed. For example, teaching assistants in daycare centers, may require foundational knowledge of child development and play theory, while more experienced kindergarten and day care center educators may seek deeper theoretical insights or strategies for inclusive play.

Implications for policy

At the policy-level, the findings reflect a troubling disconnect between the official rhetoric around play-based learning and its actual implementation, particularly in kindergartens. Although the national curriculum extensively references to play, the growing emphasis on cognitive 'academic' outcomes and academic accountability seems to have sidelined unstructured, child-led play. Policies need to shift from viewing play as an optional or secondary activity to recognizing it as a fundamental right and pedagogical tool in early learning.

Revising curriculum guidelines to better balance different types of play and reducing the academic pressures placed on kindergartens could restore play's place in early childhood settings. Furthermore, regulating teacher-child ratios is essential and a long-held demand of early childhood professionals. Large class sizes – sometimes as high as 25 children – make meaningful play engagement and support extremely difficult, especially when classrooms are physically constrained because of these numbers.

There is also a need for national investment in infrastructure. Disparities in the physical environment of kindergartens – such as limited outdoor space – mirror broader inequalities between private and public institutions and between kindergartens and daycare centers. Addressing these disparities requires a

national infrastructure strategy for early childhood facilities, which includes regular maintenance, upgrades to play environments, and equitable distribution of resources. Outdoor spaces are particularly important for Greek young children in urban areas, many of whom spend most of their time indoors and are encouraged by their families to engage in ‘quiet’ digital play, as several participants have noted.

Additionally, the state must systematize and prioritize professional development focused on play. While there will always be current issues or needs to address, these should not overshadow the foundational importance of play in early childhood development.

Future directions

Future efforts should focus on creating a more coherent and supportive ecosystem for play in ECEC. Research could further explore how educators’ differing definitions of play influence their practices and how school cultures that value play can be nurtured.

Further, engaging families and communities remains a promising yet underutilized strategy. Although events involving families in play are common, their long-term impact on shifting societal attitudes towards play seems limited. Future initiatives might concentrate on forming deeper partnerships with families, including workshops that unpack the developmental importance of play and collaborative projects that involve parents in designing play opportunities for young children in various contexts.

Finally, greater attention must be paid to inclusivity in play. Given educators’ concerns about supporting the play of children with diverse needs and cultural backgrounds, training and resources should be developed to promote inclusive play practices that honor and reflect children’s varied experiences, needs, and interests.

In conclusion, strengthening the role of play in Greek ECEC requires a multifaceted approach, involving systemic policy reform, sustained educator support, and a reorientation of pedagogical priorities to truly align with the principles of play-based learning. Without such changes, play risks remaining more of a theoretical ideal than a lived reality in children’s educational experiences.

3.5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF FIELD RESEARCH

Field research findings reveal that incorporating play into Greece’s ECEC system encounters various challenges. Key barriers include inadequate infrastructure, limited play resources, high teacher-child ratios, insufficient maintenance of school facilities, and a predominantly academic national curriculum that tends to marginalize free play. Educators often address these shortcomings through creativity and personal initiative, such as crafting toys, renewing play materials, and collaborating with colleagues and parents.

Professional development related to play is described as fragmented and insufficient. Most educators had minimal formal training in play-based learning, and ongoing opportunities for professional growth in this area are rare. Many rely on informal networks, peer exchanges, or international collaborations to enhance their practices.

Variations in training, qualifications, and perceptions of play influence how educators integrate play into their pedagogy. Additionally, pre-service teachers express uncertainty about applying play pedagogy, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms or with children with special needs.

3.6. REFERENCES

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CONCLUSION

Across the three strands of analysis – current policies, national literature review, and field research – a consistent picture emerges: while play is widely acknowledged in Greece as essential to children's learning and development, it remains underprioritized in practice, policy and teacher education. In other words, there is a clear rhetorical and academic recognition of play's value, evident in research, advocacy, and curriculum discourse, but this acknowledgment lacks a cohesive national framework to ensure systematic implementation. The absence of an integrated, long-term strategy that positions play as both a pedagogical method and a developmental right means that educators' efforts to promote play depend largely on individual initiative and institutional context rather than coordinated state support.

Ultimately, strengthening play in Greek early childhood education requires a paradigm shift that unites policy, practice and professional development. Only through sustained collaboration among policymakers at different levels, educators, teacher education and families can Greece transform its current rhetoric about play into a systemic reality – ensuring that play will not be displaced from its central pedagogical role and will be supported by all stakeholders as the foundation of early childhood learning and well-being.

ANNEX 1.

Greece - A Descriptive Overview of Field Research Data

Individual Interviews with Headteachers

The analysis was based on five interviews with headteachers. All participants were women. The mean age was 50 years ($SD = 11.2$). One participant was aged 25–35 years (20%), two were aged 46–55 years (40%), and two were 56 years or older (40%).

Regarding educational attainment, all five participants held a Master's degree. In terms of geographical location, one headteacher worked in a small town (20%), two in towns (40%), one in a city (20%), and one in a large city (20%).

With respect to professional experience, participants had held their current position for an average of 19.6 years ($SD = 13.5$) and had an average of 26.8 years of experience in the education sector ($SD = 10.8$). The institutions they coordinated enrolled, on average, 58.8 children ($SD = 16.5$).

Focus-Group Interviews with In-service teachers

A total of 20 early childhood in-service educators and pedagogues, who participated in focus group interviews, were included in the analysis. All participants were women, with 1 teacher (5%) aged 25–35, 9 teachers (45%) aged 36–45, 8 teachers (40%) aged 46–55, and 2 teachers (10%) aged 56 or older. Regarding educational background, 10 teachers (50%) held a Bachelor's degree, 9 teachers (45%) held a Master's degree, and 1 teacher (5%) held a Doctorate.

In terms of work location, 6 teachers (30%) worked in large cities, 5 teachers (25%) in villages, 5 teachers (25%) in small towns, 2 teachers (10%) in towns, and 2 teachers (10%) in cities. Concerning professional experience, teachers reported an average of 9.9 years in their current positions ($SD = 8.4$) and 19 years of experience in education overall ($SD = 8.4$).

Regarding classroom structure, teachers reported working with an average of 18 children per classroom ($SD = 3.4$). The institutions in which they worked had, on average, 46 children ($SD = 22.5$). The number of adults per classroom ranged

from 1 to 3, with an average of 2 adults ($SD = 0.6$). Concerning children's age groups, 10 teachers (50%) taught mixed-age groups (3–6 years), 7 teachers (35%) taught 3-year-olds, 2 teachers (10%) taught 4-year-olds, and 1 teacher (5%) worked with children under 3 years old.

Classroom Observations by pre-service teachers

A total of 10 classrooms were observed. Most classrooms were located in suburban areas (6/10; 60%), followed by rural areas (3/10; 30%) and urban areas (1/10; 10%). All observations were conducted in public schools. Regarding educational level, 7 classrooms (70%) were nursery settings, and 3 classrooms (30%) were kindergarten settings.

The number of children per classroom ranged from 19 to 22, with an average of 21 children ($SD = 1.1$). The number of children with special needs per classroom ranged from 0 to 1. The number of adults per classroom ranged from 1 to 3, with an average of 1.8 adults per classroom ($SD = 0.6$). Teachers reported an average of 22 children per classroom ($SD = 1.7$). Concerning children's age groups, 7 observations (70%) involved children aged 3–4 years, while 3 observations (30%) involved children aged 4–5 years.

A total of 86 play episodes were observed across the classrooms, averaging 8.6 episodes per classroom ($SD = 3.3$). Most activities were child-initiated (65/86; 75%), while teacher-initiated activities accounted for 21 episodes (25%). In Phase 1, object play and social play were the most frequently observed types, each representing 23.1% of episodes. These were followed by imaginative play (17.9%) and creative play (12.8%). Outdoor play accounted for 10.3% of episodes, while rule-based play (7.7%) and construction play (5.1%) were the least frequent. In Phase 2, object play and social play remained the most frequent (23.1% each), followed by rule-based, imaginative, and creative play (12.8% each). Outdoor play occurred in 10.3% of episodes, while construction play remained the least frequent (5.1%). These patterns indicate a high degree of consistency in the types of play across the two phases.

Teacher involvement was then examined. In Phase 1, indirect teacher involvement was most frequent (40%), followed by direct involvement (32%), teacher intervention in children's play (24%), and no involvement (4%). In Phase 2, the reported distribution of involvement remained broadly consistent. Regarding teacher roles in Phase 1, observation was the most common role (30%), followed by co-participation (20%) and direct guidance (20%), with helping in 16.7% and facilitation in 13.3% of episodes. In Phase 2, observation remained dominant (28.6%), helping occurred in 20% of cases, and co-

participation, direct guidance, and facilitation were each reported in 17.1% of cases. These results suggest a consistent pattern of teacher involvement and roles between the two phases.

Finally, most student teachers reported feeling confident across most assessed items. Out of the 14 items, four items (Q2, Q9, Q12, and Q14) had the highest proportion of “not confident” responses, each with 20% of students indicating uncertainty. This suggests that, while overall confidence was high, these items represent areas where additional support or guidance may be beneficial.

ANNEX 2.

Greece – Overview of thematic analysis

Themes emerging from the Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Structural and systemic constraints on play

Examples from data: Participants described small or shared school yards that restricted free movement and outdoor play, while others reported converting former shops into kindergartens, spaces not originally designed with young children's needs in mind. One participant described the daily task of rearranging classroom furniture or dismantling fixed units to create temporary play spaces.

Theme 2: Resource scarcity and educator-led initiatives

Examples from data: Educators noted a lack of diverse play materials and a reliance on standardized toys, conditions which prompt them to compensate through personal spending, handmade resources and parental contributions. Some participants described crafting toys from recycled materials or encouraging children to create their own games, such as designing board games, which were seen as enriching both play and learning.

Theme 3: Time pressure and the marginalization of free play

Examples from data: Some kindergarten teachers described the current national curriculum “as heavily cognitive” and argued that teacher-structured learning and mandatory activities have become the most valued form of learning. This trend is either “expelling” play from some classrooms or reducing opportunities for free play. The tension between policy rhetoric and classroom reality was a concern mainly expressed by kindergarten teachers.

Theme 4: Overcrowding, changing child profiles and the complexity of supporting play

Examples from data: Participants described classrooms with over twenty children, where free movement was very difficult, especially when combined with fixed, standardized furniture. They also noted that children's needs have become increasingly diverse making the support of play a challenge.

Theme 5: Fragmented professional preparation and ongoing development

Examples from data: Most educators/pedagogues perceived their initial training related to play as fragmented and unsystematic. They recalled only brief or indirect engagement with play during their studies, rather than dedicated coursework on the subject. Professional development opportunities focused on play were described as rare, despite curricular emphasis on play-based learning. Two participants emphasized that when play is collectively embraced within a school, opportunities for play expand significantly.

Theme 6: Diverse conceptions of play shaping practice

Examples from data: Some participants labelled structured creative tasks, such as collage-making, as play if presented as such to children. Others, particularly those working with infants and toddlers, emphasized movement, dramatization, joy, and energy release. Kindergarten teachers tended to articulate broader understandings of play, which most participants expressed reservations about digital play citing concerns about today's children's exposure to screens at home.

Theme 7. Emerging professional needs of pre-service teachers

Examples from data: Pre-service teachers expressed concerns about differentiating play, respecting children's agency, and defining appropriate levels of teacher involvement. They also expressed uncertainty about implementing and supporting play particularly across subject areas and within diverse classrooms. They confirmed that play, in the classrooms they visited, is often marginalized due to time constraints and academic pressures.



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