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NETHERLANDS NATIONAL NEEDS

ASSESSMENT REPORT

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

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INTRODUCTION

This National Needs Assessment Report for the Netherlands has been developed within the framework of the EDUPLAY project. The report aims to identify current conditions, challenges, and opportunities for strengthening play-based pedagogy in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Play is widely recognized as a cornerstone of young children's learning and development, yet its implementation in practice is shaped by systemic, organizational, and cultural factors. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective professional development, policy measures, and resources that support educators in embedding play as a core pedagogical approach.

The report combines three complementary components: (1) a review of national policies and guidelines, (2) a synthesis of recent research literature, and (3) findings from field research, including interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. Together, these components provide a comprehensive picture of how play is conceptualized, valued, and enacted in Dutch ECEC settings, as well as the barriers and needs reported by professionals.

The analysis addresses key questions relevant to EDUPLAY: How is play defined and supported in policy? What challenges do educators face in integrating play into daily practice? Which practices and initiatives have proven effective? And what implications arise for professional learning, family engagement, and systemic alignment? The report concludes with recommendations for practice, policy, and future directions, including the design of an online training program tailored to different professional roles.

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

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses current policies in the Netherlands regarding the role of play in early childhood education and care (ECEC). To this end, a thematic analysis was conducted of nine documents and one website, including the legislation governing ECEC (2 documents), recommendations for curricula and approaches in ECEC (4), national guidelines for quality inspection in ECEC (1), recent quality reports (2) and documentation on the ECEC workforce profile (1). The analysis focused on the definition, value and guidelines for integrating play in ECEC within these documents.

This chapter begins with a general overview of the Dutch ECEC system in Section 1.2 and the workforce policy in Section 1.3. Section 1.4 summarizes the findings related to play.

1.2 BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE NATIONAL ECEC SYSTEM

The Netherlands has a split system of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), characterised by separate arrangements for children aged 0–4 and 4–6, each operating under distinct funding structures, public responsibilities, and regulatory bodies (Knijn & Lewis, 2017; Slot, 2018). Centre-based care consists of two main types. Childcare centres provide full-day care for infants and toddlers up to the age of four. Children typically attend between two and five days a week, from 8:00 to 18:00. Childcare centres are privately operated organisations.

If children do not attend full-day care, they can go to playgroups for children between 2½ to 4 years, which are offered two to four times a week for half days. A particular form of these playgroups are the so-called *preschools*, which serve children from underprivileged families and those identified with language delays. Preschool groups typically offer part-day attendance of about four hours, two to four times per week, and focus on education and overall development. Children attending preschool are either integrated into full-day care groups or placed in separate groups specifically designed for them.

Both types of care and education require government accreditation. Participation is nearly universal: approximately 94% of young children attend some form of daycare or playgroup before entering primary school. At age four, children may start publicly funded primary school, where the first two years (kindergarten) are usually combined in mixed-age classrooms for four- to six-year-olds. Although compulsory schooling begins at age five, participation at age four is nearly universal

(OECD, 2016). Responsibility for these two systems is divided between two ministries. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment oversees childcare for children aged 0–4, while the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for the education system from the age of four onwards, including access, equity, and quality (OECD, 2006). Regulations for playgroups serving underprivileged families fall under the jurisdiction of local governments and may vary considerably, particularly with respect to parental subsidies and the number of hours per week children can attend, with a maximum of 16 hours in most municipalities.

Despite the structural divide, both systems (centre-based care for 0–4-year-olds and primary school for 4–6-year-olds) share a common pedagogical orientation: children’s learning and development are viewed holistically and supported primarily through play-based pedagogies, with free play occupying a central role across settings (Singer & Romijn, 2024; Slot et al., 2018).

In primary school, no national curriculum is prescribed, although there is a national framework outlining what children are expected to learn from grade 1 (age 4) to grade 8 (age 12). The government has defined broad educational goals (“kerndoelen”) describing the intended outcomes for primary education. The Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) has translated these national goals into content strands (inhoudslijnen), outlining the instructional goals for teachers. These strands include objectives for the preschool period (ages 2–4) and the early grades (ages 4–7). While the SLO guidelines are not mandatory, most preschools and schools use them to structure their curricula, as this helps ensure alignment with the national learning goals (“kerndoelen”) for grade 8. Schools are free to choose and develop their own pedagogical approaches and teaching materials. Thus, a national framework exists, while still allowing considerable variation in implementation.

There is also a national pedagogical framework for centre-based childcare, written by experts in early childhood education and care, but this framework serves as an optional guideline rather than formal legislation.

1.3 EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS’ CAREERS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The workforce in ECEC, as in many other European countries, is predominantly female and has historically been associated with relatively low professional status. Initial education requirements for professionals in centre-based childcare for 0–4-year-olds are at vocational level, whereas primary school teachers are required to have a bachelor’s degree in primary school education. Preservice teachers can choose to specialize in early childhood education, but this is not a requirement to work

in the youngest age groups. Many ECEC professionals and teachers pursue additional professional development once they are in service. Professionals working in playgroups for children from underprivileged families must complete additional training in programs specifically designed for this target group.

Both centre-based care and primary schools face considerable workforce shortages. In primary education, the average shortage is approximately 9% (Inspectie van het onderwijs 2024), while in schools located in underprivileged neighbourhoods in the five largest cities, shortages can reach up to 25%. Centre-based care also experiences greater shortages in urban areas, although precise figures on the shortage of qualified professionals are less clear.

1.4 DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

As a consequence of the split system, policy documents most often apply either to ECEC-facilities for children under 4 or to primary education (ages 4-12), including the first grades (ECEC for age 4 to 6).

1.4.1 CONCEPT AND DEFINITIONS OF PLAY

Overall, the policy documents make little reference to play, except for three documents that provide curriculum advice for ECEC (Fukkink, 2017; SLO, 2025 [Stichting leerplanontwikkeling - Curriculum Development Foundation]) and evidence-informed recommendations for supporting a good start in primary education at age 4 for all children (Jepma and Vander Heyden, 2022). In the legislation for both ECEC-systems, no reference to play is made. The Education Inspectorate uses a separate framework for the supervision of ECEC in preschools (ages 2½ to 4) and primary schools (4 to 6) serving children from underprivileged families. Only in the former are references to play included in the quality criteria.

The three documents that do mention play regard play as an important way for young children to explore and make sense of the world. Play is described as a spontaneous, voluntary, and meaningful activity that drives children's learning and development, progressing from manipulative play (exploring and handling materials and objects) to symbolic and social play. The documents distinguish between free play, which is child-led open exploration and structured play, which is guided or supported by adults. While free play is essential, adult-guided play helps children reach more complex and cognitively rich forms of play. Learning to play and learning through play together form a necessary balance in ECEC to stimulate development.

1.4.2. IMPORTANCE AND GOALS OF PLAY

In the three documents, play is regarded a central way in which young children explore and understand the world, that strongly shapes their overall development and learning. Through play, children develop simultaneously across cognitive, social-emotional, and psychomotor domains. Play supports growth in key areas such as motor development, early numeracy, emerging mathematical thinking, language, social interaction, and artistic expression.

In addition, play allows children to orient themselves to different systems in the material world, including the living system (e.g., growth, health), the physical system (forces, light, sound), the earth-space system (weather, soil, sun, moon, stars), the technical system (designing, making, testing), and the mathematical system (ordering, measuring, patterns, chance). By engaging with these systems in a playful manner, children acquire foundational knowledge and skills

1.4.3. RECOMMENDATIONS/ORIENTATIONS ON PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

Most policy documents in the review offer recommendations on pedagogical practices in ECEC, often related to the developmental needs of children from underprivileged families, but do not always make explicit reference to play. An important advice for the preschool period from the Educational Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025a) is to expand access and coverage of preschool education for 2–4-year-olds in all municipalities. The research framework of the Educational Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025b) specifies that the preschool environment should actively enable learning through play. Concretely, settings are expected to use play and learning materials tailored to toddlers' developmental stage and to design group rooms and learning/play environments that are attractive and suitably challenging. The pedagogical climate should foster active engagement; staff should structure both free play and guided play with appropriate tasks and clear explanations, and organize activities so that toddlers can truly make them their own.

These expectations align with the pedagogical curriculum, proposed by Fukkink et al. (2017), who advise a balanced pedagogical approach that combines teacher-directed play with opportunities for genuine free play, allowing children to make their own choices while ensuring structured activities that are carefully prepared and guided by staff. Professionals are expected to take an activating role by initiating content-driven activities, providing structure, and stimulating development while respecting autonomy and responding to children's initiative. Play should serve as a vehicle for social and cognitive growth, fostering skills such as sharing, turn-taking, conflict resolution, and language development, which support a smooth transition to primary education. A well-structured daily program with varied activities across emotional, sensory, physical, intellectual, and creative domains is essential, while extremes such as overly passive or dominant teaching styles, fast-paced

activities, and large group sizes should be avoided (Fukkink et al., 2017). Teachers should recognize and expand on teachable moments during play, guiding interactions sensitively and promoting peer engagement to ensure uninterrupted developmental progress.

In the early years of primary education (groups 1 and 2), teaching practices often fail to align sufficiently with the developmental needs of young children, which can hinder progress and motivation (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025a). Improvement requires systematic support tailored to individual pupils, particularly in language development, and regular evaluation of this support. Teachers frequently report that large group sizes make it difficult to supervise play in ways that stimulate development, and many feel inadequately prepared for early childhood education, especially regarding multilingualism (Onderwijsraad, 2024). Since children under six primarily learn through play and hands-on experiences, classrooms should provide rich opportunities for both free and guided play, using meaningful themes and concrete materials such as puzzles, building blocks, and home corners (Singer and Romijn, 2024; SLO, 2024). A coherent programme that integrates structured, teacher-directed activities for academic skills with child-led, play-oriented approaches for social-emotional and self-regulation skills is essential (Jepma and Vander Heyden, 2024). Furthermore, leveraging children’s prior experiences and home-based knowledge can strengthen engagement and reduce gaps between home and school, while embracing multilingual practices fosters belonging and supports learning (Funds of Knowledge). To achieve this, primary schools need teachers with specific expertise in early childhood pedagogy and interaction skills, as well as environments that meet young children’s physical and emotional needs, avoiding an overly “school-like” approach (Jepma and Vander Heyden, 2024).

1.4.4. REFERENCES TO RESOURCES OR SUPPORT FOR PLAY

In the Netherlands, many practice oriented resources for creating qualitative ECEC practices are available. Schools are free to choose their own resources. Policy documents do not offer references for specific resources, only the website of the SLO offers references to or concrete resources to support play and ECEC. This is presented as an overview of different resources.

1.4.5. ROLE OF THE TEACHER

In early childhood education for children aged 2 to 4, the teacher’s role is primarily to create a pedagogical environment that balances care with development-oriented interaction. Teachers must provide space for free exploration while offering guided activities that stimulate cognitive, social, language, motor, and emotional development (Fukkink et al., 2017). This requires a sensitive approach that respects children’s autonomy and interests, while enriching play through adult input and scaffolding. Guided participation—where adults actively involve children in meaningful activities—serves as a key driver of development, enabling children to learn through social

interaction and shared play experiences (Fukkink et al., 2017). ECEC-professionals should observe carefully, respond to teachable moments, and maintain a balance between structure and openness to child initiatives (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2025a). The research framework of the Education inspectorate (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2025b) expects teachers to emphasize interaction and formative assessment: staff should encourage toddlers to interact with adults and peers, enrich learning through play, and actively check whether toddlers understand the assignments and whether pedagogical goals are being achieved. They should provide substantive feedback on children’s play and learning processes and use appropriate educational principles and working methods in their instructions and assignments. In combination, these practices—intentional environment design, balanced free and guided play, tailored guidance and pacing, rich interaction, and ongoing feedback—operationalize a play-rich pedagogy that both protects the integrity of children’s play and advances developmental and learning goals, thereby strengthening continuity into the early years of primary education.

In early years education for children aged 4 to 6, the teacher’s role shifts toward integrating pedagogical and didactic approaches to support uninterrupted development. Teachers must ensure a rich and meaningful language provision, as language delays remain a concern in this age group (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2025a). While academic skills require structured, teacher-directed activities, young children continue to learn primarily through play; therefore, teachers should avoid overly “school-like” approaches and instead supervise and enrich play in classroom corners (Onderwijsraad, 2023; Jepma & Vander Heyden, 2022). When children do not naturally engage in play, teachers should temporarily guide and structure play situations, preparing them with the child and offering support until autonomy is restored (SLO, 2025). This dual role—combining play-based learning with targeted instruction—demands careful observation, interaction skills, and responsiveness to individual developmental needs.

1.4.6. MONITORING AND/OR EVALUATION PRACTICES

The Education Inspectorate (Inspectie van het onderwijs, 2025b) expects preschools to monitor the development of children between 2 and 4 and use this information in a cyclic process for setting goals, providing appropriate education and evaluation. The SLO (2025) offers an overview of available observation instruments, differentiation between observation instrument for all developmental domains (social-emotional, physical, cognitive) or only for specific domains (language, math, self-regulation). These instruments can often be used for an age range between 0 and 6 or 7 years. The development of play is in general not included in these instruments or only described in broad terminology.

1.4.7. IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN THE DOCUMENT'S ORGANIZATION

Only in the three documents mentioned in Section 1.4 reference to play is found throughout the document or website. All other documents have limited or no reference to play.

1.4.8. NATIONAL TERMINOLOGY AND TRANSLATION ISSUES

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. COUNTRY-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS OR UNIQUE INITIATIVES

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).

1.5. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF CURRENT POLICIES

In the Netherlands, laws on ECEC prescribe which developmental areas must be included in the curriculum and what end goals should be achieved by the age of 12. However, (pre)schools are free to choose their own pedagogical approach. The Educational Inspectorate applies clear criteria that describe a play-oriented approach for preschools (ECEC for 2-4-year olds from underprivileged families), but such an approach is not part of the inspection framework for ECEC in primary

education (ages 4 to 6). The Netherlands Curriculum Development Foundation (SLO) does encourage a play-oriented approach for ECEC (ages 2 to 6 or 7) by providing background information on play, it does not offer clear guidelines or criteria for implementing play-oriented education. The most detailed description of a play-oriented approach in ECEC is found in the proposed pedagogical curriculum by Fukkink et al. (2017), which focused on child day care (0-4) and out-of-school care (4-6).

To put it bluntly, adopting a play-oriented approach is a choice in the Netherlands, and head teachers vary considerably in how and to what extent they support or implement this in the first two or three grades. ECEC-teachers in the Netherlands, particularly those working with 4-6 year-olds, often struggle to create learning environments where play is the central activity for children's learning and development. This may be due to the absence of a national play-oriented framework. The next chapter goes deeper into the needs of ECEC-teachers in practice.

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

2.1. INTRODUCTION

This literature review, as the second component of the national desk research, explores the status of play and play-guidance in the ECEC of the Netherlands. It aims to shed light on the needs of educators and pedagogical professionals as well as the challenges they face while implementing play-based practices. In doing so, it supports the EDUPLAY project by identifying key themes, challenges and needs of the professionals, and implications for professional development and policy.

The review followed a structured methodology based on the SPIDER framework. The systematic search was conducted across three academic databases: Psychinfo (results 5, 2 selected), ERIC (results 8, 0 selected), and Web of Science (results 391, 8 selected). The inclusion criteria for the review included peer reviewed studies, conducted in Dutch ECEC contexts, published since 2015, focused on play and play guidance, with relevance to teachers' practices, conceptions, and systemic conditions. The systematic search yielded ten relevant peer reviewed journal articles.

To answer the questions relevant to the EDUPLAY project, the data was extracted and organized thematically across the following dimensions: APA reference, type of publication, country, research questions or goals, the theoretical framework, participant characteristics, measures or instruments used, definitions of play, the challenges or barriers professionals face, the needs reported by professionals, successful practices, projects, or initiatives used to promote play, the documented impact of play or its associations with learning outcomes, the role of the professional and the implications for practice and future directions.

2.2. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC PRACTICES

Out of the ten journal articles, eight explicitly addressed the challenges and barriers faced incorporating play into ECEC practices. A range of challenges that hinder the meaningful integration of play into ECEC practices are reported by teachers and other ECEC professionals. These barriers emerge at multiple levels: individual practitioner skills and beliefs, organizational and curricular conditions, and broader structural or sociocultural expectations.

First, many teachers and pedagogical professionals 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).

Teachers found it difficult to remain seated with children because they were used to moving around and regulating behavior. When sitting in the activity corner, they questioned whether they should simply observe, intervene, join in, or lead the play. Competing tasks such as administration, preparing fruit, or cleaning further limited their ability to stay present in play, and some felt that sitting with children did not count as “real work.” Another study by Van Rossum et al (2025) reported that pedagogical professionals hesitated to intervene in spontaneous play out of fear of disrupting it, and their overall engaged support for learning was rated just below average, suggesting limitations in providing the high-quality interactions needed to enrich play. Observational findings supported this, in the study conducted by Leseman et al. (2001) a large share of teachers’ verbal (63%) and nonverbal (82%) behavior during play was classified as distracted or procedural rather than play-oriented. The study by Prins et al. (2025) also reported that teachers described the difficulty of allowing children full freedom in natural or outdoor play. They needed to suppress their own urge to protect children from weather conditions or risky play and instead attend to what emerged in children’s interactions with nature.

The study by Thieme et al. (2025) reported language diversity as a perceived barrier amongst teachers. Many teachers believed that emergent multilingual children experienced more difficulty connecting with peers and had fewer opportunities for high-quality play. Teachers reported that limited proficiency in the ECEC language could lead to frustration or externalizing behaviors, which made other children reluctant to engage in play with them. Over one-third of teachers noted that children who did not speak the ECEC language well, tended to engage in simpler forms of play. Language policies added to this challenge: 44% of teachers were expected to encourage children to use only the official ECEC language(s), and only 17% were allowed to let children use any language during play.

Certain elements of professional learning also emerged as a barrier (Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Implementing a play-based curriculum was described as a long-term and demanding process that required intensive guidance from teacher educators, colleagues, and examples of good practice. Teacher educators reported limited time to teach students how to recognize play characteristics, choose developmentally appropriate activities, and practice offering pedagogical hints while still allowing room for exploration. Time and resource constraints, together with pressure from school boards to focus on testing and narrow learning outcomes, pushed some teachers back toward more traditional, basic-skills-focused instruction (Aalsvoort et al., 2015). Finally, some broader contextual barriers, including parental attitudes toward play and variation in teachers’ own play-related skills, were mentioned (Aalsvoort, et al., 2015).

2.3. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

Across the included studies, five address the needs reported by ECEC professionals that would help them integrate play more effectively into their daily practice.

Teachers emphasized the value of targeted training and reflection (Aalsvoort et al., 2010; Tajik & Singer, 2021). A brief training session on “play engagement” was reported to be highly motivating, helping teachers quickly grasp the concept and apply it in their classrooms. Similarly, watching video episodes of classroom interactions stimulated discussions among staff and students. Participants described the experience as “holding a mirror” to their practice, which helped them recognize aspects of their own behavior and identify areas for improvement. These findings point to a need for structured opportunities for guided professional reflection, using concrete examples from practice.

Concerns were raised about the overall quality of teacher training in three studies (Prins et al., 2025; Thieme, et al., 2025; Van Schaik et al., 2018). These concerns point to a broader need for improved, modernized training that would equip future teachers with the competencies required to meet children’s developmental needs through play-based approaches. A couple of competencies that were addressed amongst these studies were: (1) knowledge on how children build concepts through embodied interaction with the physical worlds; (2) training to use interactional language skills; (3) better preparation for the linguistic diversity that can exist within the ECEC group or classroom coupled with more flexible language practices in ECEC settings. Lastly, the study by Prins et al. (2025) noted that a shift in mindset was necessary, for example, regarding risky play, which required professionals to relate differently to play situations they had previously considered unsafe or undesirable.

2.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Overall, the findings of the included studies point to the need for policies that protect time and space for play, recognize the value of sustained teacher presence and programs that explicitly address play (Aalsvoort et al., 2015; Leseman, et al., 2001; Singer et al., 2014; Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum et al., 2025). One study also highlighted the value of early and continuous practicum experience, as seen in Dutch teacher training, where students begin classroom practice immediately (Aalsvoort et al., 2010). Such policies should also promote multilingual and culturally responsive practices, given the positive effects of acknowledging children’s home languages on their sense of belonging and peer interactions (Thieme et al., 2025). Moreover, video-based reflection tools, using recorded episodes and structured questionnaires, helped professionals step

back from habitual practice, reconsider their beliefs, and adjust their interactions (Aalsvoort, et al., 2010). Future work should examine how teacher proximity, interaction quality, and culturally sensitive approaches shape children's engagement in play, and how tools like Impulse or video-based reflection can be sustainably embedded in professional development.

2.5. IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF PLAY IN ECEC

2.5.1. CONCEPT AND DEFINITIONS OF PLAY

Although many studies did not provide a formal definition of play, the seven that did, highlighted several key characteristics. Play is generally child-directed and voluntary, allowing children to choose playmates, materials, and activities (Aalsvoort, et al., 2015; Leseman et al., 2001; Thieme et al., 2025). It can take various forms, including symbolic, construction, pretend, and rule-based play, with pretend play particularly supporting imaginative role-taking and narrative construction (Leseman et al., 2001; Van Rossum, et al., 2025). Theoretical perspectives describe play as a sociocultural activity with shared rules, degrees of freedom, and high personal involvement (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Van Rossum et al., 2025). Play is intrinsically motivating, engages children's social, cognitive, and sensory capacities, and promotes collaborative learning, self- and other-regulation, and exploration in meaningful contexts (Singer et al., 2014; Van Schaik et al., 2018). Across studies, play is marked by enjoyment, flexible rules, freedom of choice, and absence of externally imposed goals.

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

Five articles mentioned the impact or benefits of play on learning outcomes and development. However, only one of the studies actually researched this impact and therefore can conclusively report on the benefits of play on learning and development. The study by Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) compared two different classrooms; one followed a teacher-driven approach, and the other was based on the play-based approach of Developmental Education. Children in the play-based classroom learned significantly more words that were also semantically richer and embedded in a more extensive semantic network during the 3-week period than the children in the teacher-driven classrooms. This indicated that play-based approaches may benefit language learning.

2.5.3. PRACTICES, PROJECTS, OR INITIATIVES PROMOTING PLAY

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).

2.5.4. ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS IN CREATING PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

Seven out of the ten journal articles addressed the role of the professional as such: The professional plays a crucial role in children’s play by providing a secure, responsive presence that supports engagement, emotional security, and learning (Leseman et al., 2001; Singer et al., 2014; Tajik & Singer, 2021). Excessive movement or fragmented interactions can disrupt play, while sensitive, sustained involvement, especially as a play partner, enhances pretend play, social interaction, and language development (Tajik & Singer, 2021; Van Rossum, 2025). In play-based curricula, teachers co-construct learning experiences with children, balancing children’s interests with developmental and cultural goals, rather than following a rigid plan (Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Their role includes managing environments, facilitating interactions, and selectively joining play, adapting to children’s needs and context (Aalsvoort, et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). In nature-based or outdoor play, teachers often shift from pre-planned instruction to becoming active co-participants, responding to emergent opportunities (Prins et al., 2025). Overall, the professional must navigate when to step back and when to intervene, ensuring play remains a meaningful context for learning.

2.6. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review shows that, although play is widely valued within the Dutch ECEC context, professionals experience substantial and recurring challenges in integrating it meaningfully into their daily practice. Many professionals struggle with their pedagogical role during play and feel uncertain about how to balance observing, supporting, and intervening. Their presence is frequently fragmented due to organizational demands, leaving limited sustained time with children. Additional obstacles arise from discomfort with risky play, the complexities of supporting multilingual children, pressures from school boards to emphasize academic outcomes, and parental expectations that undervalue the role of play. Taken together, these personal, organizational, and systemic challenges restrict the depth and quality of children's play experiences.

Across studies, professionals express a clear need for targeted professional learning to strengthen their ability to support play. They point to a desire for concrete tools to recognize play characteristics, scaffold concept development, and use language in interactionally rich ways with diverse groups of children. Teachers particularly value guided reflection, often through video-based feedback, as a way to better understand their actions and refine their approach. At the same time, the review identifies significant limitations in the national research landscape, including a lack of longitudinal evidence and limited studies that directly link pedagogical approaches to child outcomes. The literature also highlights the need for teacher education programs to provide stronger preparation in supporting children's spontaneous exploration and physical engagement with the world, as current training often leaves new practitioners underprepared for the realities of play-based pedagogy.

The findings further underscore the importance of aligning policy and organizational conditions with pedagogical intentions. Studies emphasize that uninterrupted time and well-organized spaces are essential for deep play engagement, and that professionals need structural recognition of their presence in play as legitimate pedagogical work. Multilingual and culturally responsive approaches require dedicated time, resources, and collaborative expertise, which can only be sustained when system-level policies support them. Likewise, early and continuous practicum experiences, combined with structured reflection tools and play guidance tools such as the Impulse framework, emerge as promising pathways for strengthening professional competence.

Finally, although only one study directly examined developmental outcomes, the available evidence suggests meaningful benefits of high-quality play-based practice, such as richer vocabulary development in children attending play-oriented classrooms. Across the broader literature, effective practice consistently centres on teacher presence, relational engagement, and responsiveness to children's cues, needs, and cultural backgrounds. Professionals are expected to shift fluidly between observing, joining, and guiding play. This is a complex expertise that requires time, support, and

ongoing professional development to cultivate. Overall, strengthening these conditions at all levels is vital to ensuring that educators can fulfil their pedagogical role and that all children have access to rich, developmentally meaningful play experiences.

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

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The EDUPLAY project aims to map and assess the needs and challenges faced by pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as headteachers, in effectively integrating play into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). To achieve this objective, field research was conducted in participating countries, including the Netherlands, with the purpose of developing an informed understanding of the current state of play in ECEC. This chapter summarizes the Dutch field research.

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

A multi-informant research strategy was adopted to ensure a comprehensive mapping of needs, challenges, and current practices surrounding play pedagogy in ECEC. The use of triangulation was intended to generate complementary insights into how play is currently conceptualized and enacted by different professional groups.

3.2. PROCEDURES OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

The field research consisted of three parts: individual interviews with headteachers of schools, focusgroup interviews with inservice teachers and observations in practice by preservice teachers.

The field research focused mostly on stakeholders in ECEC for 4-6 year olds, although some participants were working in ECEC for 2-4 year olds or in an integrated child centre, in which there is more cooperation between both ECEC facilities.

3.2.1 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS WITH HEADTEACHERS

The analysis drew on five valid interviews with headteachers. All participants were women. Two participants were aged 56 years or older (40%), two were aged 46–55 years (40%), and one was aged 25-35 years (20%). Regarding educational attainment, two participants held a bachelor's degree (40%), two held a master's degree (40%), and one held a doctorate (20%). Regarding

location, three participants worked in cities (60%), one worked in a small town (20%), and the remaining participant worked in a village (20%). Two participants were 56 years or older, two were between 46 and 55 and one participant was between 25 and 35 years. In terms of professional experience, headteachers had been in their current role for an average of 10.8 years ($SD = 8.8$) and had an average of 25 years of work experience in education ($SD = 9.3$). The institutions they coordinated served children in settings with considerable variability, ranging from 172 to 900, corresponding to an average of 400 children ($SD = 293.4$).

3.2.2 FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

A total of 19 early childhood in-service teachers, who participated in focus group interviews were included in the analysis. All participants were women. Participants were distributed across age groups as follows: six teachers (31.6%) were aged 36–45, followed by five teachers (26.2%) aged 25–35 and four teachers (21.1%) aged 46–55. The ≥ 56 age group comprised three teachers (15.8%), while the < 25 age group was the least represented, with one teacher (5.3%).

Regarding educational background, nine teachers (47.4%) held a master's degree, while eight (42.1%) held a bachelor's degree. Only one participant (5.3%) reported having completed Secondary education, and another participant (5.3%) indicated an Other type of qualification, specifically training in art and outdoor play within ECEC settings.

In terms of work location, nine teachers (50.0%) worked in towns, four teachers (22.2%) in cities, three teachers (16.7%) in small towns, and two teachers (11.1%) in villages. Concerning professional experience, in-service teachers reported an average of 11.3 years in their current positions ($SD = 8.45$) and 15.6 years of experience in education overall ($SD = 10.1$). Regarding classroom structure, teachers reported that the institutions in which they worked had, on average, 278 children ($SD = 166.4$). The number of adults per classroom ranged from 1 to 2, with an average of 1.6 adults ($SD = 0.5$). The number of children per classroom ranged from 11 to 25, with an average of 18 children ($SD = 5.2$). Note that the number of children per classroom increases during the year, when new 4-year-olds enter the school, rising to 25 – 30 children.

Concerning children's age groups, nine teachers (52.9%) taught 4–6-year-olds. Three teachers (17.6%) worked mainly with 5-year-olds, while two teachers (11.8%) taught children under 3 years old and another two teachers (11.8%) worked with 3-year-olds. Only one teacher (5.9%) taught 4-year-olds.

3.2.3 DIRECT OBSERVATIONS BY PRESERVICE TEACHERS

The practice of an inservice teacher was observed in three classrooms by three different preservice teachers, using the same observational instrument. In addition to the observations, the three

preservice teachers and another three completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions concerning their own play-oriented practices, the challenges and needs they encounter, and the extent to which their education prepared them to use play in ECEC settings. (Field 4 in the instrument). The preservice teachers were recruited in the IPABO University of applied sciences, among bachelor students in their fourth year, within the ECEC-programme.

All observations took place in public kindergarten settings. Each of classrooms were in rural ($n=1$), suburban ($n=1$) and urban areas ($n=1$). The number of children per classroom ranged from 17 to 18, with a mean of 17.7 children ($SD = 0.6$). This number will increase during the year, as explained before. The number of children with special needs varied more widely, ranging from 0 to 9 per classroom. In all classrooms, the number of adults was consistently two, including the preservice teacher.

Concerning children's age groups, one classroom served 4–5-year-olds, while two classrooms worked with children aged 4–6 years. Regarding the three questionnaires completed only for Part 4, two of them referred to children aged 4–6 years, and one was completed by a trainee working in a 3–6-year-old classroom.

A total of 3 play episodes were observed ($M = 1$ episode per classroom; $SD = 0$). Most activities were teacher-initiated (75%), while child-initiated activities accounted for 25% (only one moment).

In Phase 1, a total of 15 play-type selections were reported across the three questionnaires. Imaginative, Creative, and Construction play were the most frequently selected types, each representing 20.0% of all reported play instances. Object play, rule-based play, and social play each accounted for 13.3% of the responses.

In Phase 2, a total of 17 play-type selections were reported across the three questionnaires. Object play, imaginative play, creative play, and construction play were among the most frequently selected types, each representing 17.6% of all responses. Rule-based play and social play were each mentioned in 11.8% of the selections. Outdoor play was the least reported type, accounting for 5.9% of all instances.

During Phase 1, a total of seven teacher-involvement selections were reported across the three questionnaires. Indirect teacher involvement was the most frequently selected form (42.9%). Involvement in children's play accounted for 28.6%, while direct involvement and outside involvement were each mentioned in 14.3% of the selections.

During Phase 2, a total of nine teacher-involvement selections were reported. Again, indirect teacher involvement was the most frequently selected form (33.3%). Direct involvement, involvement in children's play, and outside involvement were each selected two times, representing 22.2% of the responses.

During both Phase 1 and Phase 2, the teacher-role data were identical, with a total of eleven role selections reported in each phase. In both phases, the observer role was the most frequently selected (27.3%). All other roles — co-player, director, helper, and facilitator — were selected equally often, each representing 18.2% of the responses.

Finally, the six preservice teachers felt in general confident about their own competencies in organizing and integrating play in their classrooms. Most of them reported lacking confidence on items relating to teacher–parent collaboration in the context of play, such as supporting parents to stimulate play at home (Q12) or encouraging parents to participate in the evaluation of play (Q14).

3.3. MAIN FINDINGS

3.3.1. CHALLENGES/BARRIERS IN INCORPORATING PLAY INTO ECEC

From the interviews, focusgroups and open questions in the questionnaire for the preservice students, it appeared that head teachers, inservice and preservice teachers all identified the following challenges and barriers for incorporating play into ECEC:

- Pressure for cognitive outcomes: a strong emphasis on measurable academic goals (language, math) and preparation for grade 3 reduces time and value for play.
- Insufficient knowledge and skills: Across all groups, there is difficulty in linking play to learning goals, observing developmental progress, and guiding play effectively. Head teachers state that teachers often have difficulty translating goals into play-based approaches.
- Organizational constraints: Lack of time, staff shortages, and rigid schedules hinder uninterrupted play and teacher involvement. Head teachers refer to organizational inefficiencies and inservice teachers to a heavy administrative load.
- Limited play environment: Materials and spaces are often inadequate or poorly designed for rich, challenging play.
- Children’s background factors: Poverty, limited play experience, screen time, and parental attitudes (focus on performance, fear of dirt) negatively affect play quality.
- Policy and systemic issues: National and local policies prioritize testable outcomes over play; inspection frameworks rarely value play.

Both head teachers and inservice teachers notice a lack of a clear school vision and understanding of play within the team.

Head teachers in particular identified external pressure from curriculum and accountability systems as a barrier to implementation of play. Some inservice teachers mentioned that mixed-age groups complicate play facilitation. They also stated that training programs often provide limited support for play-based pedagogy.

The six preservice teachers mention that their limited practice time (e.g., 2 days/week) restricts implementation. They often struggle to enrich play corners and integrate language and have difficulty managing diverse play levels among children. They meet a lack of teacher modeling and support for their own learning process in their schools.

In sum, all groups experience pressure from performance-driven systems, lack of time and resources, and need for richer play environments. They identify insufficient competence in guiding play as a major barrier.

Head teachers emphasize systemic and policy-level pressures and organizational vision. Inservice teachers focus on team alignment, practical constraints, and inadequate training. Preservice teachers struggle mainly with limited practice opportunities and lack of modeling/support.

3.3.2. NEEDS OF PROFESSIONALS IN INCORPORATING PLAY

Across all groups—head teachers, inservice teachers, and preservice teachers—there is a strong consensus that play is essential for young children’s learning, yet its integration in practice requires more than good intentions. Professionals need deeper knowledge of child and play development, practical strategies for guiding play, and a shared vision that positions play as a core educational approach rather than an optional extra.

Head teachers emphasize structural support and cultural change within schools. They call for systematic coaching in classrooms, opportunities for peer learning, and clear frameworks from school leadership. For example, they stress that teachers should not only observe play but actively join in to enrich it, using approaches like the “three Es” (Explore, Engage, Enrich). They also highlight the need for extra time and staff so teachers can prepare rich play environments and interact meaningfully with children, rather than being consumed by administrative tasks. Investment in high-quality materials and thematic play corners is seen as crucial, alongside efforts to involve parents and tackle “play poverty” at home.

Inservice teachers focus on practical implementation. They want concrete tools and inspiring examples for setting up play corners, translating themes into play opportunities, and using observation frameworks effectively. Professional development should go beyond incidental workshops; teachers value on-the-job coaching and team-based learning. They also stress the importance of flexible schedules so play is not interrupted, and additional classroom support to allow

for sustained, guided play. Strengthening collaboration with parents—through communication, participation in themes, and guidance on play at home—is another priority.

Preservice teachers, meanwhile, seek clarity and confidence. They need clear learning goals and guidance on integrating these into play rather than relying on teacher-directed activities. One preservice teacher advocates internships with younger children (ages 2–4) to better understand developmental trajectories and play dynamics. They also want support in choosing appropriate materials and literature, and strategies for differentiation, as children’s needs vary widely.

In short, all groups agree that play must be central to early education, but their needs differ. Head teachers focus on policy, vision, and resources; inservice teachers on practical tools and team development; and preservice teachers on foundational skills and targeted guidance. A comprehensive approach—combining knowledge, coaching, time, materials, and a shared vision—appears essential to embed play effectively and sustainably.

3.3.3. PRACTICES, PROJECTS, OR INITIATIVES PROMOTING PLAY

Across head teachers, inservice teachers, and preservice teachers, play is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early childhood education. All three groups stress the importance of thematic play as a driver of engagement and learning. Themes such as “restaurant,” “knights and castles,” or “Sinterklaas” are used to structure play corners and activities. These themes often involve role-play supported by props, visual scripts, and real-life experiences (e.g., visiting a bakery or assembling a toy kitchen). Across settings, teachers enrich play by adding materials gradually, modeling roles, and asking open-ended questions to deepen interaction.

Another common thread is the creation of a rich play environment. Both head and inservice teachers describe fixed corners—such as home, building, and thematic corners—supplemented by dress-up clothes, boxes with specific thematic play objects, and open-ended materials like blocks and natural items. Outdoor play is consistently valued, with spaces equipped for movement games, sand play, and construction. Preservice teachers echo this need, emphasizing the role of materials tailored to developmental stages.

Professional development is also a shared priority. All groups recognize that guiding play requires skill and intentionality. Initiatives such as Startblokken (a play-based approach for children between 0 and 6 of underprivileged families), Video Interaction Guidance (VIG), and professional learning communities (PLCs) are mentioned as tools to improve play guidance. Preservice teachers highlight the impact of university courses and internships, noting that theory on play levels and phases informs their practice.

Finally, family engagement emerges as a common goal. Examples include ‘language bags’ for home use, parent participation in thematic activities, and communication about the value of play. While implementation varies, all groups see parental involvement as key to continuity between home and school.

In addition to shared ambitions and initiatives, the three respondent groups articulate distinct approaches to fostering play opportunities and designing engaging environments in ECEC settings.

Head teachers focus on embedding play within school culture and policy. They describe e.g. systematic planning for playing along, structural collaboration with libraries, and investment in materials and thematic development. Leadership plays a central role in facilitating resources, organizing training, and maintaining a shared vision. Projects such as storytelling tables and building play worlds with children illustrate efforts to combine language development with creativity. Head teachers also emphasize long-term strategies, such as periodic vision renewal and partnerships with external experts.

Inservice teachers concentrate on practical challenges and solutions. They report dilemmas in balancing free play with structured activities and maintaining quality when staffing is limited. Their initiatives include thematic cycles, observation tools, and play guidance based on the “three Es” (Explore–Connect–Enrich). They value hands-on strategies, such as starting themes with real-life triggers (e.g., a trip or a hidden object) and integrating picture books into play. Outdoor play and flexible scheduling are recurring themes, as is the need for richer materials and more staff to sustain play quality.

Preservice teachers highlight practices that foster child agency and creativity. They advocate for themes chosen with children rather than fixed year-long plans and describe successful examples of co-constructed play environments, such as creating a letterbox for a postal theme. Role cards, visual scripts, and playful problem-solving (e.g., pretending a letterbox is a rubbish bin) are used to stimulate imagination. Preservice teachers also stress the importance of observing play to identify developmental needs and enrich interactions. Their initiatives often reflect current academic insights, bridging theory and practice.

While all groups share a commitment to play as a vehicle for learning, their priorities differ: head teachers emphasize vision, resources, and structural partnerships; inservice teachers focus on practical implementation and team-based professionalization; preservice teachers seek flexibility, creativity, and theoretical grounding. Together, these perspectives suggest that promoting play in ECEC requires a multi-layered approach—combining rich environments, thematic integration, skilled guidance, and strong collaboration among educators, families, and external partners.

3.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

3.4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings highlight the need for a shift from viewing play as an optional activity to recognizing it as a core pedagogical approach. For practice, this means creating rich, thematic play environments that integrate learning goals without compromising children’s autonomy. Teachers should be supported to actively guide play through strategies such as co-playing, modeling roles, and using open-ended questions. Practical tools—like observation frameworks and thematic planning guides—can help educators link play to developmental objectives. Schools should allocate time and staffing to allow uninterrupted play and teacher involvement, reducing the tendency for play to be the first activity dropped under time pressure. Collaboration with parents is essential; initiatives such as language bags, parent workshops, and participation in thematic activities can strengthen continuity between home and school.

3.4.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

At the policy level, the findings call for systemic recognition of play as a legitimate learning approach. Current accountability frameworks prioritize measurable cognitive outcomes, which marginalizes play. Policies should embed play in curriculum guidelines and inspection criteria, ensuring that schools are not penalized for dedicating time to play-based learning. Funding mechanisms must support investment in high-quality materials, outdoor spaces, and professional development. Furthermore, policies should encourage partnerships between schools, libraries, and community organizations to enrich play opportunities. Addressing play poverty through broader social measures—such as providing resources for families and promoting awareness of play’s developmental benefits—should also be a priority.

3.4.3 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future efforts should focus on building a shared vision of play across all levels of the education system. This includes sustained professional learning communities, periodic vision renewal, and leadership training to maintain play as a cultural norm within schools. Research should continue to explore the impact of play-based approaches on child outcomes, particularly in language, socio-emotional development, and executive functioning. There is also a need to develop scalable models for thematic play integration that balance flexibility with curricular coherence. For preservice teachers, internships should include exposure to diverse play practices and younger age groups (2–4 years) to deepen understanding of developmental trajectories.

3.4.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKPACKAGE 3 – AN ONLINE TRAINING PROGRAM

The findings suggest that an online training program on integrating play should address the knowledge and skill gaps identified across all groups. Modules could include:

- Foundations of play-based learning: developmental theory, benefits of play, and links to learning goals.
- Practical strategies for play guidance: co-playing techniques, observation tools, and the “three Es” (Explore, Engage, Enrich).
- Designing rich play environments: thematic planning, material selection, and outdoor play integration.
- Family engagement strategies: tools for involving parents and promoting play at home. Interactive elements—such as video demonstrations, case studies, and peer discussion forums—can enhance engagement. Incorporating reflective tasks and virtual coaching will help translate theory into practice. Finally, the training should be adaptable for different roles (head teachers, inservice teachers, preservice teachers) to address their distinct needs.

3.5. IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF FIELD RESEARCH

3.5.1. CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF PLAY BY PARTICIPANTS

Across head teachers and inservice teachers, play is conceptualized as both a development-oriented learning process and a source of well-being and autonomy for children. Head teachers describe play as the foundation of all activities, emphasizing its “serious learning value” alongside free play. They reject entertainment-oriented activities, favoring child-initiated play enriched by teacher guidance. Inservice teachers similarly view play as a pedagogical pillar, integrated into thematic work and daily routines. However, they note that practice often becomes “activity-driven,” with professionals focusing on tasks rather than authentic play. Preservice teachers (mentioned indirectly) see play as a context for observing development and fostering creativity, but struggle to balance guidance with child-led exploration. Overall, play is understood as essential for learning, yet its implementation is constrained by performance pressures and organizational routines.

3.5.2. PERCEIVED IMPACT AND BENEFITS OF PLAY

Participants consistently highlight the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits of play. Head teachers stress its role in language development, imagination, manipulation, and (emotionally) processing experiences. They argue that play supports autonomy and well-being while enabling deep learning through exploration and repetition. Inservice teachers observe that thematic play encourages cooperation, problem-solving, and communication, noting improvements in children's engagement and happiness when free play is prioritized. Examples include role-play scenarios (e.g., “restaurant” themes) that foster vocabulary and socio-cultural understanding. Both groups believe that play enhances motivation and creates meaningful learning contexts, though they caution that without guidance, play can remain superficial.

3.5.3. ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS IN CREATING PLAY OPPORTUNITIES

Professionals are seen as active facilitators rather than passive observers. Head teachers emphasize systematic planning for playing along, using strategies like the “three Es” (Explore, Engage, Enrich) and modeling roles. They advocate for structural coaching, professional learning communities, and thematic planning to ensure continuity and depth. Inservice teachers describe their role as observing, joining play when appropriate, and asking open-ended questions to enrich interaction. They also stress the importance of co-playing without dominating, applying techniques such as creating play scripts or introducing socio-cultural practices. Both groups identify significant barriers—lack of time, staff shortages, and insufficient training—that limit their ability to guide play effectively. Preservice teachers, while less experienced, aim to integrate theory into practice by designing thematic corners and co-constructing play environments with children.

3.5.4. FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN PLAY

Family engagement is recognized as crucial but remains inconsistent. Head teachers report initiatives such as “language bags” (a bag containing a picture book and associated play materials for home use), parent involvement in thematic activities (e.g., preparing food for a “restaurant” theme), and informational sessions on the importance of play. Inservice teachers note challenges: many parents undervalue play, viewing school primarily as a place for formal learning. Cultural attitudes, fear of mess or injury, and limited time contribute to low involvement. Some municipalities offer programs to teach parents how to play with their children, but these efforts are sporadic. Overall, while schools strive to restore parental involvement, barriers such as poverty, screen time, and performance-oriented expectations persist.

3.6. MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF FIELD RESEARCH

The field research confirms that play is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early childhood education, yet its integration into practice faces significant systemic and practical challenges. Across all respondent groups—head teachers, inservice teachers, and preservice teachers—pressure to meet cognitive benchmarks and prepare children for formal schooling often overshadows play-based approaches. Organizational constraints such as limited time, staff shortages, and rigid schedules further restrict opportunities for uninterrupted play. Additionally, inadequate materials, poorly designed environments, and socio-economic factors like poverty and screen dependency reduce the quality of play experiences. These barriers are compounded by policy frameworks that prioritize measurable outcomes over holistic development, leaving play undervalued in inspection and accountability systems.

Despite these obstacles, there is strong consensus on the developmental benefits of play. Participants emphasize its role in fostering language acquisition, imagination, problem-solving, and socio-emotional growth. Play is seen not only as a vehicle for cognitive learning but also as essential for autonomy and well-being. Thematic education, enriched through role-play and real-life experiences, is highlighted as particularly effective in engaging children and creating meaningful learning contexts. However, without skilled guidance, play risks remaining superficial, underscoring the need for professional competence in observation, co-playing, and scaffolding interactions.

The research also reveals distinct priorities among the three groups. Head teachers focus on embedding play within school culture and policy, advocating for structural coaching, leadership support, and investment in rich environments. Inservice teachers emphasize practical tools, flexible scheduling, and team-based professional development to sustain play quality. Preservice teachers seek clarity and confidence, calling for internships that expose them to diverse play practices and strategies for integrating learning goals into play. Across all groups, collaboration with families emerges as a shared ambition, though parental involvement remains inconsistent due to cultural attitudes, time constraints, and limited awareness of play's educational value.

In conclusion, promoting play in ECEC requires a multi-layered approach that combines policy reform, professional development, and family engagement. Schools need resources, time, and a shared vision to prioritize play as a core pedagogical strategy rather than an optional activity. Future directions should include scalable models for thematic play integration, research on its impact on child outcomes, and online training programs tailored to different professional roles. These steps are essential to ensure that play is not only preserved but strengthened as a foundation for early learning and development.

CONCLUSION

1. Play is central to learning—but structurally under-supported

Across policies, research, and practice, the Netherlands consistently regards play as fundamental to young children's holistic development—supporting language, socio-emotional growth, executive functions, and embodied concept-building. In classrooms and childcare settings, thematic roleplay is widely used and associated with high engagement and deeper learning when adults are present as sensitive co-players and facilitators. Yet, the systems that should scaffold this practice do not uniformly recognize or protect play. Legislation and inspection frameworks for the early primary years (4–6) do not embed play as a criterion, and accountability pressures to demonstrate cognitive outcomes often crowd out uninterrupted play time and adult proximity in corners where play unfolds. In short, play is pedagogically central, while systemically peripheral: its status in guidance and oversight is inconsistent and leaves school leaders and teachers to shoulder the burden of interpretation and implementation.

This mismatch translates into predictable barriers observed in the field: limited time and staffing, rigid schedules, uneven materials and environments, and systemic socio-economic challenges (including 'play poverty,' screen exposure, and reduced parental capacity to support play at home). Professionals report uncertainty about their role in play, variation in teacher training and confidence, and a lack of sustained coaching to turn good intentions into skillful, routine practice. While head teachers emphasize vision, policy pressures, and resourcing, inservice teachers highlight practical tools, flexible timetabling, and team-based learning; preservice teachers ask for clearer guidance, targeted supervision, and earlier, broader practicum experiences, also with younger age groups. These strands converge on the same conclusion: to realize the promise of play, ECEC needs coordinated system-level support alongside grounded, day-to-day pedagogical skill.

2. Presence, partnership, and purposeful design

Evidence from the literature and field points to three high-leverage conditions for quality play. First, adult presence matters: when teachers are close, observant, and responsive co-players, children's engagement and pretend play deepen, vocabulary grows richer, and peer interactions become more inclusive. Second, partnership across the ecosystem—from PLCs and video-based reflection to library collaborations and educational partnership with caretakers—extends play beyond the classroom and normalizes it as a community practice. Third, purposeful design of environments and themes—rich corners, sequenced materials, visual scripts, and invitations to role-play—creates continuity across free and guided play and helps teachers connect emergent activity to developmental goals without collapsing into mechanical, task-focused work. Together, these conditions elevate play from fragmented activities to a sustained pedagogical approach.

The field research underscores that these gains are contingent on leadership and culture: periodic renewal of the school's vision, clear daily coordination of roles (who supervises play, who manages care tasks), and protected time for teachers to prepare themes and pay attention to play in corners. When such routines are in place, play is less likely to be deprioritized during periods of high workload. In their absence, teachers often revert to goal-directed activities that appear more easily measurable, even though they may not align with developmental needs. High-quality play depends on deliberate organizational structures rather than ad hoc efforts.

3. From ideology to operational standard

The policy review reveals a fragmented landscape: preschools serving underprivileged families are inspected against play-oriented criteria, while early primary years (4–6) lack comparable expectations. The Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) provides background and resources but not binding guidance; adopting play-oriented approaches is effectively optional, subject to leadership preference and local culture. The outcome is uneven provision and teacher uncertainty. To remedy this, play must shift from an ‘optional ideology’ to an operational standard—articulated across curriculum advice and inspection criteria. This does not mean mandating uniform methods; rather, it means specifying minimum conditions (time, environment, teacher proximity, formative observation) and recognizing play-rich pedagogy in supervision and improvement cycles. Such alignment would legitimize teacher presence in play corners as real work, safeguard time for uninterrupted play, and enable leaders to allocate resources without fear of accountability penalties.

Crucially, system alignment should account for linguistic diversity and cultural inclusion. Teachers report constraints when language rules restrict children's use of home languages during play; more flexible, inclusive language practices, combined with training in interactional language skills, help children belong and collaborate. Policies that acknowledge multilingual play, coupled with practical coaching, can reduce barriers and improve peer engagement.

4. Professional learning: build capability, not compliance

The report points to a need for practice-proximate professional learning. One-off workshops are insufficient. Instead, teams benefit from cyclic observation, peer modeling, video reflection that ‘holds a mirror’ to interactions, and structured frameworks (e.g., Startblokken, a play-oriented ECEC-approach) that connect adult moves to children's emergent activity. Leadership should allocate time for these processes and recognize them in workload planning. Preservice education needs continuous practicum across 2–4 and 4–6 settings, explicit preparation in play guidance (co-playing, scaffolding, role-scripts), and mentoring that normalizes teacher proximity in play as a legitimate professional stance. Across roles, the target is the same: to cultivate nuanced judgment about when

to step in, when to step back, and how to transform moments of play into learning without hijacking children's agency.

Initiatives involving parents and other caretakers, such as collaborative workshops, co-created thematic activities, and take-home play materials, should be designed to build educational partnerships that value families' knowledge and experiences. These approaches aim to create continuity between home and school, fostering shared responsibility for play-based learning and encouraging exploration, repetition, and hands-on engagement.

5. Future directions

The findings suggest future directions at three levels: (a) Within the ECEC-classroom: protect uninterrupted play, assign adult roles per corner, use thematic planning with graduated materials, integrate visual role scripts and book-based storytelling tables, and use a cycle of observe (explor) → join (engage) → enrich → and explore again cycle; (b) With the ECEC-team & community: renew a shared play vision, run PLCs with video reflection, partner with libraries and other organisations, make parent engagement a structured and intentional approach, and ensure that staffing patterns allow teacher presence in play; (c) System: embed play criteria in inspection for 4–6, fund materials and outdoor spaces, recognize multilingual and culturally responsive play, and promote integrated child centres and cross-age continuity.

For Work Package 3, an online training should provide foundational theory, practice modules on co-playing and observation, environment design, multilingual inclusion, and family engagement, using for example case videos, peer forums, and micro-coaching, with differentiated paths for head teachers, inservice, and preservice teachers.

6. Limitations and future work

The literature base has limited longitudinal evidence directly linking play guidance to child outcomes, beyond suggestive findings such as vocabulary gains in play-rich classrooms. Field insights reflect specific contexts and some self-report. Scaling will require practice-embedded research cycles that trace how teacher proximity, interaction quality, and inclusive language policies shape engagement and outcomes over time.

Final reflection

The Dutch ECEC system offers strong foundations for play-based pedagogy, including committed professionals, thematic approaches, and, sometimes, established local collaborations. The key challenge is achieving coherence: aligning policy frameworks, inspection criteria, leadership practices, and professional development so that play is recognized as a core principle of early

education rather than an optional activity. When educators act as responsive partners, environments are intentionally designed, and families are engaged as collaborators, play can be integrated as legitimate pedagogical work. The EDUPLAY initiative has the potential to translate this shared commitment into consistent, system-wide practice.

ANNEX 1: NETHERLANDS – RESEARCH SAMPLE AND DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

Individual Interviews with Headteachers

The analysis drew on five valid interviews with headteachers. All participants were women. Two participants were aged 56 years or older (40%), two were aged 46–55 years (40%), and one was aged 25–35 years (20%). Regarding educational attainment, two participants held a bachelor's degree (40%), two held a master's degree (40%), and one held a doctorate (20%). Regarding location, three participants worked in cities (60%), one worked in a small town (20%), and the remaining participant worked in a village (20%). Two participants were 56 or older, two were between 46 and 55 and one participant was between 25 and 35. In terms of professional experience, headteachers had been in their current role for an average of 10.8 years ($SD = 8.8$) and had an average of 25 years of work experience in education ($SD = 9.3$). The institutions they coordinated served children in settings with considerable variability, ranging from 172 to 900, corresponding to an average of 400.6 children ($SD = 293.4$).

HEADTEACHERS AND IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Netherlands	Participants, n	Age groups n	Current Position (in years), $M (SD)$	Professional Experience (in years), $M (SD)$	Children per institution, $M (SD)$
Headteachers	5	25-35 yrs: 1 46-55 yrs: 2 > 56 yrs: 2	10.8 (8.8)	25.0 (9.3)	400.6 (293.4)
In-service teachers	19	< 25 yrs: 1 26-35 yrs: 5 36-45 yrs: 6 46-55 yrs: 4 > 56 yrs: 3	11.3 (8.45)	15.6 (10.1)	17.9 (5.3)

Focus-Group Interviews

A total of 19 early childhood in-service teachers, who participated in focus group interviews were included in the analysis. All participants were women. Participants were distributed across age groups as follows: six teachers (31.6%) were aged 36–45, followed by five teachers (26.2%) aged 25–35 and four teachers (21.1%) aged 46–55. The ≥ 56 age group comprised three teachers (15.8%), while the < 25 age group was the least represented, with one teacher (5.3%).

Regarding educational background, nine teachers (47.4%) held a master's degree, while eight (42.1%) held a bachelor's degree. Only one participant (5.3%) reported having completed secondary education, and another participant (5.3%) indicated an Other type of qualification, specifically training in art and outdoor play within ECEC settings.

In terms of work location, nine teachers (50.0%) worked in towns, four teachers (22.2%) in cities, three teachers (16.7%) in small towns, and two teachers (11.1%) in villages. Concerning professional experience, in-service teachers reported an average of 11.3 years in their current positions ($SD = 8.45$) and 15.6 years of experience in education overall ($SD = 10.1$). Regarding classroom structure, teachers reported that the institutions in which they worked had, on average, 278 children ($SD = 166.4$). The number of adults per classroom ranged from 1 to 2, with an average of 1.6 adults ($SD = 0.5$). The number of children per classroom ranged from 11 to 25, with an average of 18 children ($SD = 5.2$). Note that the number of children per classroom increases during the year, when new 4-year-olds enter the school, rising to 25 – 30 children.

Concerning children's age groups, nine teachers (52.9%) taught 4–6-year-olds. Three teachers (17.6%) worked mainly with 5-year-olds, while two teachers (11.8%) taught children under 3 years old and another two teachers (11.8%) worked with 3-year-olds. One teacher (5.9%) taught only 4-year-olds.

Direct Observations by preservice teachers

The practice of an inservice teacher was observed in three classrooms by three different preservice teachers, using the same observational instrument. Besides the observations, the three preservice teachers and three of their peers completed a questionnaire (Field 4 in the instrument), which focuses on the competencies and beliefs of the preservice teachers themselves.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS (CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS)

Netherlands	Participants, <i>n</i>	Observed classrooms, <i>n</i>	Children per classroom, <i>M (SD)</i>	Adults per classroom, <i>M (SD)</i>	1 play episode per classroom, Duration in Minutes <i>M</i>
Observants + questionnaires	3	3	17.7 (0.6)	2.0 (0.0)	57 minutes
Only questionnaires	3				

All observations took place in public kindergarten settings. They were located in a village ($n=1$), a small town ($n=1$) and a city ($n=1$). The number of children per classroom ranged from 17 to 18, with a mean of 17.7 children ($SD = 0.6$). This number will increase during the year, as explained before. The number of children with special needs varied more widely, ranging from 0 to 9 per classroom. In all classrooms, the number of adults was consistently two, including the preservice teacher.

Concerning children's age groups, one classroom served 4–5-year-olds, while two classrooms worked with children aged 4–6 years. Regarding the three questionnaires completed only for Part 4, two of them referred to children aged 4–6 years, and one was completed by a trainee working in a 3–6-year-old classroom.

A total of 3 play episodes were observed ($M = 1$ episode per classroom; $SD = 0$), lasting between 40–80 minutes. Most activities were teacher-initiated, while only one preservice teacher also observed child-initiated activities. After initiation by the teacher, the teachers were in various ways involved in children's play, either indirect or direct, sometimes only observing.

ANNEX 2: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS WITH HEADTEACHERS / LEADERS

Challenges and barriers to shaping play	
Themes	Contributions from interviews
External pressure to achieve cognitive goals	<p>Strong emphasis on cognitive outcomes and 'preparing for Year 3'. This puts pressure on teachers to opt for lessons rather than play-based learning.</p> <p>National trend: knowledge-based curriculum valued more than development-oriented work → hinders play.</p> <p>The headteacher feels that there is a lot of pressure on performance (such as mastering letters), while this can be at the expense of play.</p> <p>Testability and social pressure: the urge for measurability at a young age makes it difficult to appreciate play as a fully-fledged learning method.</p> <p>Tension between 'offering reasoned activities' / VVE [=early childhood education for children at risk] /SLO [= governmental support for curriculum] goals and scope for play; tendency to use checklists as the 'quickest fix'. Need for better translation of goals into play, thereby reducing the pressure of tests and checklists.</p> <p>There is tension between results-oriented working/performance benchmarks and learning through play. The pressure of language and arithmetic goals can sometimes limit play.</p>
Insufficient competence	<p>There is insufficient knowledge about preschool development, play development and didactics in play. Teachers find it difficult to articulate what children learn through play.</p> <p>There is a lack of skill in observing and playing in the zone of proximal development, and there are difficulties with effective classroom management, which is necessary to supervise play.</p> <p>Theory alone does not work; teachers need on-the-job coaching, but professional guidance is currently lacking.</p> <p>Staff that comes from an 'entertainment-oriented' approach need to shift their mindset towards learning through play. Staff who have been in the profession for a long time or have been trained differently sometimes find it difficult to work towards more in-depth play.</p> <p>Observation and child-centred working (non-interaction skills) are difficult when one is used to a programme-oriented approach.</p>

	<p>Not everyone has sufficient knowledge of young children's development, the differences between children and what that means for play.</p> <p>Reluctance to engage in goal-oriented play; playing along is sometimes seen as 'having fun' rather than a didactic intervention in early childhood education. Recognising goals in play and formulating follow-up steps is difficult.</p> <p>Persistent divisions between 'youngest' and 'oldest' preschoolers can hinder differentiation in play; there is a need to focus more on development rather than calendar age.</p>
<p>Preconditions of time and organisation</p>	<p>When something needs to be prepared quickly, teachers fall back on (old) routines.</p> <p>There is too little time to properly develop themes and prepare play guidance.</p> <p>Time and task pressures hinder opportunities for in-depth play (many peripheral tasks, little child-free time).</p> <p>Staff shortages: permanent staff often have to take on organisational tasks, which means that unfamiliar substitute teachers supervise the play, which is counterproductive.</p> <p>Daily coordination (who takes care of the children? who supervises play?) is not always efficient.</p> <p>The classrooms in the new school building are small, which limits the space available for organising play activities. The groups become larger as the year progresses, whereas smaller groups are preferable for intensive play supervision.</p>
<p>Play guidance is a greater challenge for teachers than other approaches</p> <p>Teachers opt for structured activities</p>	<p>Colleagues are more likely to choose structured activities because: It feels more organised, It is controllable, They are certain that 'something has been learned'.</p> <p>There is a culture in which everything must be verifiable. As a result, too much work is still done at desks and too little in corners, on the floor or in play situations.</p> <p>Some teachers fall back on control or safety, which means that play is used less naturally.</p> <p>Encouraging language during play requires active guidance; without guidance, play often doesn't run smoothly or remains superficial.</p> <p>According to the headteacher, the biggest challenge lies in supervising play in the various corners. There is a need to build on what children already know, but this requires a lot of time and the presence of the teacher in several play corners at the same time.</p>

	<p>Children are not always able to organise play independently; teachers need to guide them in this. The team is still exploring how best to do this.</p>
<p>The play-based learning environment is not rich</p>	<p>Insufficiently challenging play and learning environment, materials not yet at the desired level.</p> <p>Although there are many materials available, the play corners and materials are not always sufficiently richly equipped.</p> <p>Safety and health rules (e.g. risks in natural outdoor spaces, no toilet rolls) can restrict play.</p> <p>Inspection requirements demand a lot of documentation and planning, especially for greener outdoor gardens.</p> <p>The standard advice to 'choose a theme close to the child' does not always work; sometimes 'magical' or interest-driven themes (e.g. dinosaurs, Sinterklaas) work better for engagement and play quality.</p>
<p>(Background) characteristics of children (poverty, low level of education of parents, level of development) make the work more difficult.</p>	<p>Parents in the neighbourhood often do not know how to play with their children. There is less play at home.</p> <p>Many children start with limited skills: routines (such as putting on a coat, getting their fruit) take a long time to learn, leaving less time for play guidance.</p> <p>Some children have difficulty communicating or do not yet have sufficient language skills to play with others.</p> <p>Children with behavioural or developmental delays require a lot of supervisory attention, which hinders play supervision for the rest of the group. The current system of special needs education creates obstacles, such as lengthy procedures before children can be supported in a more suitable place.</p> <p>Parents sometimes have an attitude that hinders play (e.g. fear of getting dirty or falling).</p> <p>More and more children are arriving with a lack of play experience: Due to excessive screen time ("screen fade syndrome") ; Due to poverty and limited play experience at home ; Due to socially isolated families.</p> <p>Children with limited play skills need more guidance and encouragement.</p> <p>After the pandemic, parental involvement has decreased. Parents sometimes feel that children should not get dirty, which limits their play opportunities.</p>
<p>The school's vision and policy are not clear or supportive</p>	<p>Not all school leaders have a vision for learning through play, which means that the culture of a school can 'flatten' the knowledge of early childhood specialists. There</p>

	<p>are therefore major differences between schools in terms of how much space is given to play.</p> <p>The board encourages a vision for young children and a reasoned approach, but also emphasises 'requirements/accountability'. There is a need for a shared narrative in which play and goals go hand in hand ('it is not free play without goals, but goals do not have to restrict play').</p>
Play-oriented pedagogy is not sufficiently implemented	<p>Teachers still do not play actively enough. This hinders the development of rich play interaction. Play guidance requires patience, a lot of repetition and conscious action. The team still needs to maintain this rhythm consistently.</p> <p>Staff changes lead to a relapse into old patterns; a shared language and culture around play are still under development. Alertness is needed to avoid 'old-fashioned' routines (always at the table, deferred attention without play value).</p> <p>There is an organisational problem that leaves too little time to work together on developments, evaluations and coordination. This hinders the implementation of play-based working.</p>

Needs for integrating play into practice	
Themes	Contributions from interviews
More knowledge, insight, skills	<p>More insight into: Preschool development, Play development, Play guidance (including the 3 Vs [Verkennen, verbinden, verrijken = Explore, Engage, Enrich])</p> <p>Awareness of the reasons for learning through play. Teachers must learn to articulate what children learn through play.</p> <p>Knowledge about play development, developmental psychology, the importance of manipulation/imagination and variation in development.</p> <p>More training is needed on: Play guidance for children with additional support needs (appropriate childcare), Giftedness (IQ training), After-school care play development (project-based, exploratory play for 4–6 year olds).</p> <p>More attention to observation, in-depth play, and the 9 guidance roles of OGO/Startblokken [=play-oriented approach].</p> <p>Teachers need confirmation that play really contributes to learning, which encourages them to continue using it.</p>
Ways of professionalisation	<p>Structural coaching in the classroom and support with implementation are essential; not just a manual or training course. Peer consultation, intervision and professional learning communities.</p>

	<p>There is a need for more in-depth guidance on play, especially in combination with target groups for second language learners: how do you guide children who have little language knowledge [of Dutch] and less experience with certain forms of play?</p> <p>More training in stimulating play: how do you keep play going when children do not naturally engage in role-play?</p> <p>More targeted coaching of the internal counsellor and possibly external trainers for play interaction.</p> <p>Training or guidance to support teachers in playing along, asking questions, observing and contributing to play.</p> <p>Space to collaborate, reflect, meet and practise play-based working.</p> <p>Need to be inspired by other schools, experts or examples.</p> <p>Coaching and assurance 'on the work floor': periodic observations, follow-up discussions and video coaching; peer observation/lesson study; repeated 'refresher sessions' (e.g. every two years) to keep the vision alive. Managers facilitate and monitor agreements.</p> <p>Startblokken training courses [= "starting blocks" is a play-based approach] and recertification remain necessary</p>
<p>Need for supporting resources</p>	<p>Practical guidelines for playing along: concrete formats with observation points, sample questions, language for interventions, goals in play ('what do you pay attention to?'), and follow-up steps in the ZNO. For both teachers and teaching assistants.</p> <p>Tools to link SLO/VVE goals [national goals / goals for children at risk] to theme corners/activities and to form groups that encourage and deepen play; examples of documentation that offer an alternative to checklists.</p>
<p>Extra time and support</p>	<p>Extra time to: Design and develop themes, Prepare materials, Carefully and richly decorate play corners.</p> <p>An important need is for additional staff who can assist with play, so that teachers can play along for longer and in a more focused way and stimulate language development.</p> <p>Extra support with routines (such as a supervisor for the intake of four-year-olds) helps to free up time for play.</p> <p>Teachers need more time in their working week to properly prepare lessons and play activities. Currently, a lot of time is spent on parent contacts and organisational tasks.</p>

	<p>Sufficient available staff who know the group well.</p> <p>Time and space to change and deepen the play environment.</p>
Change of vision	<p>Space in annual targets and timetables to prioritise play.</p> <p>School leaders must support and maintain this vision, provide clear instructions and frameworks from management, and collaborate with teacher training colleges, boards and schools to change the culture.</p>
Enriching the play-based learning environment	<p>Investment in challenging materials and corners, spaces that invite, support and deepen play.</p> <p>Larger, better-equipped play areas would help to facilitate play optimally. Materials are considered sufficient, but there is a need for a permanent budget to be able to design rich themes.</p> <p>Addition of materials (such as building sets, dolls, play materials) and an attractive, rich play-based learning environment. Funds have been made available for materials and books; further investment could help to make corners even richer.</p> <p>Budget and access to current thematic attributes, open-ended materials and role-play/construction game enhancers; continue external partnership with library and theme boxes.</p> <p>The triennial toy scan supports the quality of materials.</p> <p>Materials that encourage autonomous play (according to Pikler, among others): No toys with buttons, Less “entertainment” material, More open-ended materials and motor skills-enhancing toys.</p>
Support for parents	<p>Parents must be supported and guided in play at home, so that a connection is created between home and school play.</p> <p>Restoring parental involvement. Communicating the importance of getting dirty, free play and experimentation.</p> <p>Tackling play poverty through broader social policy.</p>
Shared vision and approach	<p>Shared vision and culture: ongoing dialogue, 'stimulating questions' in memos/team meetings, joint agreements that are visibly implemented in the classroom; use of a common language about play and professionalism.</p>
Clear agreements and sustainable implementation	<p>Maintain rhythm in play supervision, do not 'slack off', and keep involving new children.</p> <p>Explicit scheduling of play as a core didactic activity (status of 'small circle'), so that it is not the first thing to be cancelled when things get busy.</p>

	Clearly determine on a daily basis: Who is responsible for play supervision? Who is responsible for care tasks? Who is responsible for organisational tasks?
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Current situation in terms of play/games in practice	
Themes	Contributions from interviews
Comments on the general approach to play	<p>During playtime, there is room for free play.</p> <p>Within the organisation, play is the basis of all activities, with both: Serious learning value (development-oriented) & Free play (well-being, autonomy)</p> <p>Use of a digital selection tool (digital whiteboard tool) to organise free choice; pupils often choose freely, sometimes at the invitation of the teacher.</p> <p>Entertainment is explicitly avoided: activities are not 'devised' by adults to be carried out, but arise from the children themselves.</p> <p>Circle games are played in circles, and outdoor play also plays a major role.</p> <p>The team is very experienced and enthusiastic. They inspire each other, but still need more time to develop together.</p> <p>Teachers actively supervise play and try to deepen it. Attention is paid to play levels and play expectations per age group.</p> <p>Playing along is planned systematically (instead of 'always doing crafts at the table'), based on the principle: 'I'm playing now and I won't be disturbed'.</p> <p>Educational staff learn to provide input as more knowledgeable partners.</p> <p>Atelier pedagogical activities (understanding with your hands [=Art – Reggio approach]) are used for expressive play.</p>
Thematic work and play	<p>Thematic work is leading and is developed on an annual basis. Thematic cores (e.g. 'the body') are translated into corners such as a GP's surgery.</p> <p>Play is integrated into daily practice. The role of play is considered for each theme. Play is actively used in almost all corners (building corner, constructions, home corner, thematic corners).</p> <p>An example is the theme 'restaurant', in which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A play is used as a starting point to demonstrate roles and actions. • Roles (such as waitress, cook, customer) are extensively supervised.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups visit each other's restaurants and make reservations. • Parents are sometimes involved, for example in preparing food. • The game is deepened by increasingly rich materials and role-play scenarios. <p>The school works thematically; play is integrated into this, but is still under development. There is still a relatively large amount of work done at tables, although there is a desire to learn more through play and to work more in corners.</p> <p>Continuous themes in group 1-2 [=4-5 yers] (and continuing into 3-4 [=6-7yrs]): current and rich themes (e.g. 'castles') are used school-wide. In 1-2, corners are set up for specific purposes (building a throne in the building corner; house/role play as a 'knight's hall'). Circle activities tie in with the theme. In 3, there is still a lot of conscious play, while involving 4 is more difficult due to age/dynamics.</p> <p>Thematic work has been going well since last year; the longer a theme runs, the richer the play. Teacher guidance is essential here.</p>
<p>Playful learning environment</p>	<p>There are fixed corners (doctor's corner, building corner, etc.). Outside, there is plenty of space for free play. The gym is used for playful activities, free play and movement games.</p> <p>The school environment is still under development; it is not yet fully rich or challenging.</p> <p>Steps have been taken in terms of materials (e.g. building materials, The Hague set). The space is large and offers opportunities for rich design.</p> <p>Infrastructure in the neighbourhood (public school playgrounds, playgrounds) also determines the opportunities for play.</p>
<p>Professionalisation and team development</p>	<p>Professional literature is used, including HJK articles [=The young child, journal for ECEC-teachers] and other sources. There are team meetings about themes and play.</p> <p>Ongoing process with Sardes [=educational support service], but this is proving difficult.</p> <p>The headteacher has experience with Startblokken [=starting blocks, a play-oriented curriculum] at a previous school and sees more opportunities here. She encourages, provides direction, supplies resources and creates time. Theme structures have been refined under her leadership. Attention is paid to professionalisation and awareness.</p> <p>There is an internal programme for early childhood specialists, with a strong focus on play and playing along.</p>

	<p>PLCs [professional learning communities] and training courses support teachers in play guidance. The ECEC-teachers show great willingness to professionalise and often acquire new knowledge.</p> <p>An external expert is involved. Interventions have taken place, but could have been implemented in a more rigorous and concrete manner.</p> <p>Previous intensive programmes with the educational support service led to progress; there is a 'menu' for training (including early childhood specialists; collaborations with teacher training colleges). After team changes, the assurance partly disappeared; the vision is on paper, but is not always a 'living document'. Periodic reactivation is necessary (e.g. every two years).</p> <p>The staff educator participates in the group, models play and interactions, and conducts educational audits. Coaches guide teams in play development.</p> <p>Starting blocks programmes run across the entire organisation. Study days focus primarily on pedagogical content (e.g. lectures, peer review).</p> <p>Coaches are given extra hours for pedagogical development.</p>
<p>Facilitation for teachers</p>	<p>The headteacher facilitates play by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making budget available for materials, books and theme development. • Providing early childhood education support, such as transition classes that combine language and play. • Giving teachers space to shape their play practice, especially when there are changes in the team. <p>The headteacher emphasises the benefits of play, such as imagination, manipulation, processing experiences, language development and well-being. And having confidence in the children and teachers.</p> <p>The headteacher encourages ideas from the team, organises materials, invites expertise and provides support through literature and resources.</p> <p>The manager facilitates up-to-date, rich materials for thematic corners, avoids outdated/superfluous offerings, and purchases what is necessary for deepening play.</p>
<p>Cooperation with parents</p>	<p>Parents are involved through photographs, information about themes and invitations to presentations or closing ceremonies.</p> <p>Sometimes parents participate actively, such as in preparing food in the restaurant theme.</p>

	<p>Parents are involved, for example in the parents' room. They are shown how they can support play and language at home. Language bags [=decorated bags with a picture book inside and games or small puppets to play with your child at home] are used for this purpose.</p> <p>Parents are gradually becoming more involved again.</p>
Collaboration	<p>Structural collaboration with the library (6 visits/year, book exchange, theme boxes).</p> <p>Close cooperation group 1-2-3 strengthens play in group 3 [=age 6-7] ; group 4 [=age 7-8] is 'work in progress'. Differences in style within the team (younger teachers find it easier to immerse themselves in corners; older teachers find free choice more difficult) are overcome through peer learning and dialogue.</p>
Good practices	<p>The storytelling table is a successful play practice. Children act out stories from picture books with figures and puppets and can then take on roles themselves. This stimulates language development.</p> <p>More and more locations are building play worlds together with children, such as a homemade caravan for the 'Camping' theme. This strengthens child participation: 'A little from the teacher, a lot from the children'.</p>

ANNEX 3: THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUPS WITH IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Challenges and barriers to shaping the game	
Themes	Contributions from focusgroups
Pressure to perform	If targets (VVE/SLO) are set too rigidly and are mandatory, this can stifle play; teams with room for their own interpretation experience fewer obstacles
The approach of professionals is not of sufficient quality	<p>Insufficient goals are linked to the corners.</p> <p>Focus on activities instead of play: Professionals feel that practice quickly becomes 'activity-driven' (what fits within the theme?), which puts pressure on designing and supervising play in the play corners.</p> <p>Many people start enriching and forget to observe first and connect with the children's play.</p>
Vision and approach are insufficiently aligned within the team	<p>There is no shared approach.</p> <p>There is no shared vision.</p> <p>Even if you have a vision of learning through play on paper, this is not the case for all colleagues in practice.</p> <p>There are significant differences in the degree of guidance provided by the teacher and in the children's speech.</p>
Organisation is an obstacle	<p>Strict schedules (e.g. shared school playground, fixed outdoor play times) interrupt playtime.</p> <p>Heterogeneous age groups (0–4 years): In 'mixed-age groups' with babies and toddlers, needs vary; children get in each other's way. Serving different developmental levels at the same time makes facilitating rich play complex.</p>
Lack of time and manpower	<p>Scheduling play (e.g. 'small circle', playing along as a small circle) works, but is often the first thing to be sacrificed when things get busy, resulting in play being given less priority.</p> <p>Supervising play corners requires presence; if you let go too much, the corner 'changes' and the play goes in a different direction. There are too few hands to consistently enrich and guide.</p> <p>Observations and administrative obligations take time and limit playtime.</p> <p>There is too little time to allow play to continue uninterrupted.</p> <p>Teachers are often alone in front of the group, making it more difficult to play along and observe. There is a lack of extra hands, which is particularly noticeable in nursery groups.</p>
Training programs do not offer enough support	<p>Training programs (Pabo, PM/SPW) have limited coverage of play; the focus is more on subject areas and learning pathways than on playing along, enriching and connecting. Much of the learning takes place during internships or through additional programs (Startblokken, specialist early childhood).</p> <p>What you learn about play depends heavily on your internship location/workplace; the experience of play differs per team and per person.</p>

<p>No sustainable approach to play</p>	<p>Not all teams already evaluate their approach to play in a structured way; some are still getting started with new observation/monitoring apps and need extra training. Methods such as VIB provide valuable insights, but require a lot of time and effort.</p>
<p>Uncertainty to act</p>	<p>Working entirely thematically led to a lot of play, but some (quieter) children were not given much attention; finding the right mix remains difficult. The question is: how do you do that? Playing with materials from nature. In a green childcare centre, children spend a lot of time outdoors, which makes organising group play more difficult. Children have imagination, but their play often does not connect with each other. Some children are better at playing together outside, others inside. This makes it more difficult to create joint play situations. Schools do not know how to enrich play areas.</p> <p>Many people who work with preschoolers have insufficient knowledge about the developmental stages of young children in each area of development. Many professionals think that they are not doing enough if they play along.</p>
<p>Play learning environment</p>	<p>Need for more and richer materials (dress-up clothes per corner, thematic attributes such as construction helmets/vests/gloves) to deepen play; collecting is partially successful. The classroom is too small: six corners in the corridor that are shared with the after-school care centre, but they have different goals. "The environment is your third pedagogue. But that's not the case here, and I think that's a real shame."</p>
<p>(Background) characteristics of children and cooperation with parents can sometimes be difficult</p>	<p>With children who are only present part of the time (toddlers, after-school care), it is difficult to continue the play and learning program at home; getting parents on board is not always easy. Some parents attach little value to play and do not see it as a form of learning. They expect children to 'learn' at school and not 'play', which leads to limited support for learning through play. Low parental involvement and limited knowledge about play also influence the interaction between children. Groups with many multilingual pupils interact less with each other, which makes play less fluid. Today's children play differently, more often influenced by screens and less experienced with everyday situations. A pupil who needs intensive support can take up a lot of teaching time. Special needs education often causes programs to stall; children sometimes remain too long in a place that is not suitable for them. Authorities sometimes only start investigating when a child is almost four years old. The group includes many children who come from other schools with developmental or behavioural problems. This requires a lot of attention and energy, leaving less room for focused play guidance. Much of the time is spent creating calm, setting boundaries, teaching routines and preventing conflicts. Many children have little experience with board games, cooperation, fair play and following rules. Basic skills such as using a dice still had to be taught. Some of the children are less able to play together indoors and resort to running around or acting out, which disrupts the game.</p>

	<p>Parents are still mainly concerned with basic matters (such as providing fruit and bread). They are not yet involved in play activities or learning through play. Because the group and school have only just started in this configuration, routines, play materials and approaches are still being developed. There is little accumulated experience or established practice.</p> <p>Parents are focused on performance, a good job and a good income later on, and it is also a bit more materialistic.</p> <p>It is commonplace that children are no longer able to play as well because parents give them little space to play at home.</p> <p>I also notice that children used to be more skilled in terms of motor skills, and that they are now more afraid of getting dirty. But they simply play less, and they also live in smaller flats.</p>
<p>Government policy is not helping</p>	<p>Municipal subsidies determine hours, commitment and opportunities within VVE (early childhood education and care for at risk children between 2,5 – 6). Local and national politicians do not understand how important play is for young children: they focus on maths results, language deficits, targets and tests.</p> <p>There is a significant shortage of teachers and high levels of absenteeism due to illness. In many classes, unqualified staff, teaching assistants instead of teachers, or students who are still in training are in charge of the group. This does not help to promote learning through play.</p> <p>Many headteachers of primary schools are not particularly interested in young children (4-6) , and the subject is not addressed during study days.</p> <p>There is still a sharp divide between preschoolers in group 1-2 and year 3 pupils: from playing to sitting on a chair.</p> <p>Several municipalities have new policies and subsidies for young children, but these are not really focused on play. They are more about getting children ready for Year 1. How are we going to ensure that children can sit in a circle and stand in a line?</p> <p>In the inspection framework, play does not play a role for young children.</p>

<h2>2. Needs to integrate play into practice</h2>	
<h3>Themes</h3>	<h3>Contributions from focusgroups</h3>
<p>Needs to expand concrete knowledge and skills</p>	<p>Theoretical knowledge of working principles. What can you do and how?</p> <p>Let adults in training play at an adult level so that they experience what it does to you as an adult and what it means for children. This is mainly about awareness.</p> <p>Increasing knowledge about early childhood development and learning pathways.</p> <p>A clear learning pathway for early childhood development helps with observation and guidance.</p> <p>Training in observing, connecting, playing along, enriching and documenting (video coaching, study days with practical examples, Startblokken-type approach). Also increase attention in training courses.</p>

	<p>Additional training in the use of observation and monitoring tools (such as HOREB and thematic frameworks) and targeted refresher training on play materials, play dynamics and interventions. On-the-job coaching (e.g. with VIB) helps to deepen interactions and play guidance.</p> <p>Awareness and skill in playing along: There is a need for pedagogical skills to not only observe, but to consciously join in the play (co-playing). By being close by and participating, the play can be enriched and stimulated.</p> <p>Promoting expertise: Training courses on play, language in play, motor skills, challenging corners, playing along. Professional development helps teachers to better guide and deepen play.</p>
Supporting materials and agreements to strengthen play	<p>The team indicates a need for inspiration and development around play and learning through play. Think of tools for guiding play and stimulating role-play.</p> <p>A 'blueprint' in the theme corner as a starting point (what do you see, what can happen here?) and step-by-step motivation/enrichment; tools for annual planning and thematisation.</p> <p>Support in translating themes into 'playable' corners and routines for different ages.</p> <p>There is a demand for examples of how play can be better designed, how corners can be set up and how you can work in a play-oriented way within different themes.</p>
Organisation that supports play	<p>Fixed planning and prioritisation of play (playing along as a 'small circle'), so that it is not the first thing to be scrapped.</p> <p>Clear observation frameworks, evaluation cycles and annual plans that focus on play help teams to embed play consistently and purposefully.</p> <p>More flexible timetable so that play does not have to be interrupted.</p>
More time and manpower	<p>More staff capacity to actively supervise play areas, observe and intervene at the right moment.</p> <p>More hands in the classroom to play, observe and supervise children.</p> <p>More time to let play continue without interruptions.</p>
Strengthening cooperation with parents	<p>Parental involvement: strategies and tools to involve parents so that play continues at home (communication, examples, accessible materials).</p> <p>Increase parental involvement by letting them participate in themes and outings.</p> <p>Informing parents about the importance of play for learning.</p> <p>In Year 3, you often have a parents' evening to inform parents about how children learn to read and how you can encourage them at home. It would be great if this also happened in Years 1 and 2, but in the area of play. How you can play with children, how we play with children at school and how you can touch on all areas of development.</p>
Enriching the play learning environment	<p>Space to set up challenging play corners.</p> <p>More budget available for materials</p> <p>Sometimes there are far too many materials. Everything must be appropriate to the theme.</p>

	<p>The home corner and theme corner should be in the classroom itself and not shared with other groups in the corridor. Budget for thematic activities and dress-up materials per corner; use of free materials to stimulate variety and depth. Sufficient and challenging materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real materials (spoons, kitchen utensils, rice, pasta) • Loose parts (sticks, pine cones, chestnuts) • Seasonal materials (autumn box) • Homemade materials and theme boxes • Role-play cards <p>Materials should encourage discovery and open play</p> <p>Outdoors as a fully-fledged place to play and learn: sources of inspiration and practical ideas (e.g. books with outdoor arithmetic) and setting up outdoor corners (construction, house/role play) to facilitate role play outdoors as well.</p> <p>A rich learning environment with sufficient concrete materials is essential to keep children engaged. Materials should encourage play so that children do not run off or lose interest.</p>
<p>Strengthening training and professionalisation</p>	<p>Do not hire too many external coaches, but position teachers who have specific expertise so that they can coach other colleagues on the job or inspire or model how they do it. No incidental forms of refresher training, but rather professional development as a joint team, utilising the strengths within your own team. Provide more training on this subject. Further professionalisation after training could be approached in a more systematic manner.</p> <p>Learning from good examples of how other teachers do this</p>
<p>Shared, supported vision within the team and developing that vision</p>	<p>It is very important to put play first. I think that if play is at the top of the agenda in the training programme for management and the team, then you can build everything else around play. The rest will follow, but it starts with play. Shared vision and awareness: spreading the word in schools and childcare centres; broad understanding that preschoolers learn primarily through play and why (development, brain connections). I see the school searching for where learning actually takes place. Also seeing the richness of that play in order to work on the development of young children. Seizing that opportunity and not focusing too much on the fact that you have to teach young children and that you have to work with them in large groups towards a goal, but that you can also link those goals very closely to play and the corners and add rich materials to them.</p>

	<p>There is a need to brainstorm together, coordinate and develop joint approaches. The team is already working on this, but identifies it as an ongoing need.</p> <p>Involvement of colleagues for continuity and a shared vision.</p>
Improving play guidance	<p>Before playing, my role is to introduce children to socio-cultural practices and connect that to the game. Knowing what we are doing and why we are doing it. When they are playing, in a flow, do you join in or not? Do not take a central role if you join in, so that you can enter and exit the game. Apply different forms of guidance: the 3 Vs, modelling play, providing input on socio-cultural practices, how are things going there, creating a play script together, creating a problem in the game that you can solve together, bringing the world into the classroom and taking the classroom into the world. It is important that children are allowed to repeat their play often. If they play with involvement, the play will continue to develop. You can link the play to reading picture books aloud.</p> <p>Children need examples and visual support for role-playing, such as clarity about roles (e.g. who gets to be Sinterklaas) to prevent conflicts.</p>
A continuous line in the school	A continuous line of play/discovery towards Year 3 is considered desirable
Policy that supports play	The government should set out a policy to strengthen the continuity from toddlers to preschoolers, because the transition is so big and there are many rules that make it difficult.

3. Current situation in terms of play/games in practice	
Themes	Contributions from focusgroups
Starting points	<p>Free play has a fixed place in the daily routine (visually supported with pictograms). 'Playful development' is seen as a pedagogical pillar in the policy. Free play is combined with a limited number of tasks (Dalton education). Observations are recorded (e.g. using HOREB), linked to theme objectives, including the HOREB circles. In addition, teams use child monitoring systems that also monitor play development.</p>
Dilemmas in play guidance	<p>Scheduling play (e.g. 'small circle', playing along as a small circle) works, but is often the first thing to fall by the wayside when things get busy, resulting in play being given less priority. Guiding play corners requires presence; if you let go too much, the corner 'changes' and the play goes in a different direction. There are too few hands to consistently enrich and guide. Balance between thematic free play and focused small circle: working entirely thematically led to a lot of play, but some (quieter) children were not given much attention; finding the right mix remains difficult.</p>

	Bringing the outdoors indoors: the question is, how do you do that? Playing with materials from nature.
Training and professionalisation	<p>For specific interventions, Video Interaction Guidance (VIB) is used with baseline and follow-up measurements (film recordings before and after), after which the images are discussed with staff. This provides insight into interaction quality and play development, but is labour-intensive.</p> <p>Staff in early childhood education groups receive training. Teams work with observation and evaluation tools and draw up annual plans. If evaluations show that play requires attention, an action plan is drawn up with refresher courses/workshops (e.g. on play materials and play dynamics).</p> <p>In training programmes (Pabo, PM/SPW), play has been given limited attention; the focus is more on subject areas and learning pathways than on playing, enriching and connecting. Much of the learning takes place during internships or through additional programmes (Startblokken, specialist early childhood).</p> <p>Quality depends on context: what you learn about play depends heavily on your internship location/workplace; the experience of play differs per team and per person.</p> <p>If goals (VVE/SLO) are set too rigidly and are mandatory, this can restrict play; teams with room for their own interpretation experience fewer obstacles.</p> <p>school teams for group 1 and 2 and childcare work with themes (Startblokken 5–6 years; connecting with the child's experience and zone of proximal development). Younger children have more play, older children more inquiry-based learning.</p> <p>Use of free materials and stimulating materials; indoor and outdoor corners are created (building corner, house/role play) to support diverse play.</p>
Thematic work	<p>Many schools work thematically from holiday to holiday. Corners are set up around the theme: building corner, bakery, maths corner, clay corner, etc.</p> <p>Starting activities for new themes: introducing a problem, something under a cloth, a trip to the bakery or a bus ride.</p> <p>The Sinterklaas theme currently offers many starting points: writing wish lists, stamp sheets, practising words, a bakery with clay, a Sinterklaas board game, building a steamboat, dressing up, role-playing in the house corner. Themes are deliberately used as a framework for play.</p> <p>Some groups work with Startblokken/VVE in cycles of approximately six weeks. Each theme must be 'playable' in the group; theme plans are developed so that children can experience the theme through play.</p> <p>Children set up their own 'yoga school' with a punch card; autumn theme 'creepy crawlies' with outdoor searches; sports themes that are continued by children in role-play.</p>
Ways of guiding play	<p>Professionals play along to deepen the play. Role-play is sometimes practised in a circle, after which the children take over independently.</p> <p>Children with rich imaginative play are paired with others to stimulate play.</p> <p>Observations are used to guide play.</p>

	<p>Open questions are asked to deepen play. I try to join in with these children's play, and that's what I do most of the time. At the moment, I am mainly observing. What are they playing? What are the children playing, what are they doing? What can they already do? If you look at exploring, connecting and enriching, then it is mainly exploring and connecting at the moment. One school has started with free play instead of starting every day in a circle, and parents report that their children are happier going to school.</p> <p>Teachers first observe the children's play and sometimes join in to deepen or guide it. They ask questions and help initiate role-play.</p> <p>In recent weeks, they have seen more and more role-play emerging, especially in the home corner. Children are starting to talk to each other more during play, which was not common before.</p> <p>One hour a day is spent playing board games.</p> <p>We like to work with picture books. Examples include themes such as Kikker is Kikker (Frog is Frog) or seasonal activities such as autumn leaves. These stories and materials are integrated into corners, outdoor activities and routines.</p> <p>Coaching approach: first observe, join in where necessary, keep quiet, give small input and then step back; add where necessary. Use the three Es: Explore-Engage-Enrich Playing along is explicitly seen as a 'small circle'; by putting it on the agenda, play gains more weight and quality.</p>
<p>Teamwork around play</p>	<p>Some schools have consultation moments with toddlers → continuity. Study days and training courses are used to improve play. The team jointly determines which themes and activities.</p>
<p>Play learning environment</p>	<p>Seasonal boxes, theme boxes, dress-up clothes, kitchen utensils, books, open-ended materials such as blocks and rugs are used to enrich play. There is a lot of outdoor play, with extensive materials such as a sandpit, play kitchen, bicycles and ropes. Large learning areas are shared, which offers space but sometimes also imposes limitations. A play table in the classroom with Playmobil toys, which works well for language development. Corners and materials present: always a house corner and a theme corner. Also a painting board, chalkboard, a building corner with a complete set of Lego, magnetic building blocks, Kapla, and other construction materials (). A house corner with a washing machine, ironing board, sink, large bench, two chairs, and a kind of puppet theatre. The doll's house has been brought into the classroom. All the craft and folding paper, the creative cupboard, lots of puzzles, bead boards, lots of</p>

	<p>developmental materials. Very large Duplo blocks, also in the hallway. And a sand table.</p> <p>There are schools where there are many differences between the materials available in each classroom.</p> <p>At one school, there are lots of books in every corner.</p> <p>One school has a very large box containing musical instruments and dance materials, such as scarves and musical instruments, shakers, sticks and a drum. And sometimes string instruments or wind instruments or percussion instruments. Board games to teach basic skills (counting, fair play, following rules). This ties in with the group's great need for play.</p> <p>The group has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Board games • Challenging building materials (including a Hague block set, large foam blocks, rainbow materials, felt mats) • Extensive play corner with kitchenette, dress-up clothes, vegetables, shop and soon a playhouse • Drawing materials and sensory materials (clay, chestnuts, sand and water table) <p>The school provides ample opportunity to purchase materials, which means that the play corners are still expanding.</p> <p>Need for more and richer materials (dress-up clothes per corner, thematic attributes such as construction helmets/vests/gloves) to deepen play; collection is partially successful.</p>
<p>Collaboration with parents</p>	<p>For children who are only present on a limited basis (toddlers, after-school care), it is difficult to continue the play and learning programme at home; getting parents on board is not always easy.</p> <p>In a few municipalities, young parents are taught how to play with their children at home.</p>

ANNEX 4: OPEN QUESTIONS TO PRESERVICE TEACHERS

Questions	Contributions written on the questionnaire
<p>1. How (in what ways) can you, as a prospective teacher, promote play [for example, in the context of your workplace]? Please give specific examples.</p>	<p>I often try to highlight different areas of development within play corners. An example of this is, within the theme of knights and princesses, repeating an activity previously given in the large/small circle in the theme corner and seeing how the material is used and how I can further stimulate this. I had given a circle activity with gold coins, repeated it in the theme corner and, together with the pupils, realised that we were missing bags to divide the coins.</p> <p><i>- Creating a rich learning environment. Setting up a play corner with suitable materials that are appropriate for the children's development.</i></p> <p><i>- I observe the children's play at my internship location a lot to learn more about the pupils' level of play. Non-participatory or participatory. I then join in and try to enrich the play by emphasising certain roles or teaching the correct use of materials.</i></p> <p>I would like to have more time to play with the children. Because I am currently the only teacher for the group, I find that I don't always have time for this, as the small group activities also need to be done. If they finish on time, I always try to play with them for a while, mainly in the play corners. I have also noticed that if you really create and build the theme with the children, it becomes much more alive and you can achieve more. I would actually like you to be able to see which theme is appropriate at the moment, instead of having to decide this a year in advance.</p> <p>I encourage play by letting children come up with their own play within the theme and not guiding them too much. I observe which children are able to join in or deepen the game and enrich the game by adding appropriate materials or ideas.</p> <p>I can offer more open-ended materials such as boxes, so that they are challenged creatively and linguistically. Their imagination has room to grow, and we can work on fantasy play, for example. Connect with the children's interests and use them as themes. For example, "dinosaurs": materials, books, music, etc. This increases engagement.</p> <p>Showing examples, examples with a small group, participating</p>
<p>2. What successful practice, project or initiative related to play</p>	<p>Setting up a theme plan myself has been successful. In this way, together with another colleague, I have gained insight into the theme corner and we can come up with activities and materials that fit in well with it.</p>

<p>have you introduced/implemented?</p>	<p>- I notice that, compared to my internship supervisor, I play with the children in the corners much more. I try to find a better balance between the small circles I conduct during playtime and how often I play with the pupils. Because there is a lot to be gained from both.</p> <p>I act out the last two themes together with the story, among other things. During our “play”, the children are allowed to add things, ask questions and tell stories. We also sometimes pretend that we don't know or understand, and the children fill in our play and tell us what to do. We have role cards that the children have to wear around their necks so that other children and we know which role they are taking on and playing in the corner.</p> <p>We also have a play script on display, in which the play is depicted and laid out with photos of children. Children can always look at this as a reminder. We create the theme corner together with the children, which makes it more meaningful and requires the children to make things themselves, such as a letterbox for the post theme. We first went to a real letterbox and then discussed it and recreated it. Our theme corner is deliberately separate from the home corner, so that the home corner can also visit the theme project, such as the airport before and now the post office.</p> <p>I have introduced playing-2-gether, where the children themselves decide what game we play and what we need for it. They think about what is still missing and how we can enrich the game. In this way, I do not lead, but follow their ideas and involvement.</p> <p>I am currently working on themes. I am going to create a discovery corner within the theme of “autumn”, but this corner will take shape based on the children's interests within the theme.</p> <p>Participating in play helps give pupils insight</p>
<p>3. What challenges or obstacles do you face (or have you faced) when implementing a play-based approach?</p>	<p>Adding language to a theme corner is something I still find very difficult. I am practising this a lot at the moment, but I have not yet found a good way that works for me.</p> <p>- Because I am still a student, it is much more difficult to implement a particular approach, as you are only there two days a week. The teacher has already implemented her own style and approach in the group. So you can't change much. I certainly experience this as an obstacle sometimes. But the nice thing is that I look for a challenge in what I can do to give it my own twist.</p> <p>That it is not customary in every school to create and expand a theme corner together with the children. Many schools do not participate in play</p>

	<p>either, and I notice that as a result, the children's play does not progress beyond “playing house with a dog”.</p> <p>Some of the older children's play ideas were too difficult for the younger children. For example, a child from group 2 [5-year-old] had come up with something in the aeroplane play corner, but some children from group 1 [4-year-olds] did not know how to deal with it, which meant that the play did not run as smoothly.</p> <p>Enriching play and discovering what kind of play is taking place and how I can take it to the next level.</p> <p>That it wasn't meaningful enough and they didn't want to play</p>
<p>4. What support or resources would help you to better integrate play into your practice?</p>	<p>finding more rich materials with which I can stimulate the theme corner, but which still focus on learning through play. I want to achieve this in such a way that the pupils play and, at the same time, learn a lot.</p> <p>- I would like more support in how to apply the goals you want the children to achieve in the play in the corners. How do I achieve the goals while playing along? Often you tend to offer this in your circles, as it is easier to monitor. I would like to become more skilled in how I can offer the goals through play in the corners, and how I can monitor whether they are mastering the goals.</p> <p>It would be great if there were clear and concrete SLO goals, which also state what you need to work on and what you can do. Even if it were just to introduce the child to... As a teacher, you would then be more compelled to participate.</p> <p>To better integrate play, it would help to have materials that fit the theme or play corner, such as building materials or playing cards.</p> <p>I can delve into observation lists and play models to see clear examples of the types of play. Once I have a better picture, I can also reflect and record what I have seen in order to actively process the information.</p> <p>Theme-oriented material</p>
<p>5. How has your training contributed to creating play opportunities for children?</p>	<p>I am currently following the play-based learning specialisation, where I am taught about various possibilities within play-based learning and how I can apply this in practice. I find this a great way to learn.</p> <p>- I have learned a lot about the theories relating to the levels/phases of play. I use this every day in my internship and gain a lot of knowledge from it. I know where the children are in their development and what I can do to enrich their play or play opportunities.</p>

	<p>I have started to use play more consciously in my themes and to involve the children more in this. I have found that children learn more from doing things themselves and experiencing reality for themselves, and from imitating or creating, than from being presented with something and being teacher-led. My training contributed by offering books, articles and examples that provide insight into the different ways of playing and how to encourage this in children.</p> <p>We often talked about types of bacon and used reports to show that we could connect, deepen and enrich [=explore, connect and enrich]. We analysed things from different angles, but had to figure out a lot ourselves to promote angles and play.</p> <p>The lessons in the Speleon (ECEC teaching lab) and the input from the teachers</p>
<p>6. Which topics/methodologies do you think could have been covered during your training to better support play in the group? And at what moments/in which phases of your training?</p>	<p>How I can add material in the theme corner (or other corners) in the areas of development (such as language, arithmetic, social-emotional), thereby unconsciously stimulating play.</p> <p>- I would have liked to learn more about selecting play materials for your group. What kind of materials promote the development of your group? Do you perhaps make too many materials available, causing the children to lose sight of the bigger picture? Or is your selection not varied enough, causing the children to become bored? I would have liked to learn this in Year 3, young children.</p> <p>I benefited greatly from my toddler minor, in which I also saw the progress made by preschoolers (2-4 yrs) and what kind of games toddlers play. It is now much easier and clearer what you can expect from children, where they come from and how you build on this. Especially for primary school ECEC teachers, I think that a quarter or six-month toddler internship should perhaps be mandatory. Because only then do you realise how much children grow and how quickly. I am now much better at assessing how to use play and how to make it meaningful, because toddlers really show you a mirror and everything is still play at that stage.</p> <p>This varies per student, because every class is different. However, during the training, the teacher can contribute ideas about situations in the internship group and advise which books or articles can help to support play.</p> <p>There could have been more focus on how to tell when children are ready for the next stage of play.</p> <p>There could also have been more attention paid to “learning to play”. Both of these would have been useful during the Young Child minor in my third year of study.</p> <p>NA</p>

7. What other needs do you see in your practice to ensure that play is used effectively to support children's learning and development?

I find adding materials that I first offered in an activity and then applying them in a corner to be a nice way of working. I notice that the pupils also find this a nice way of working, because they have already been able to familiarise themselves with the materials within the activity.

I notice that many children in my group drift a little while playing. Not all of them really get into the game, but some certainly do. Many children make the same crafts every week and don't really play. They often choose the same thing from the selection board. I feel that they could use a bit more challenge and that more expectations could be set for productivity during play-based learning. If the children themselves are more engaged in actual play, it is easier to guide the level of play.

My co-teacher and I do a lot with play. We sometimes pretend to be crazy and then let the children come up with a solution. This allows us to see how incredibly engaged the children are and you can just see that they love what we do.

For example, we took a walk around the neighbourhood and saw a letterbox. At first, the children didn't see it and didn't do anything with it, but when they saw it, we briefly pretended it was a rubbish bin as a joke. The children got really into it and came up with whole stories about what it was: "a letterbox", "cards to grandma go in it" and "the postman collects it". A lot of information was shared with each other as a result of a short "role play". We also used the magic of children. We had to set up a new classroom and on Thursday we decided to assemble the toy kitchen with the whole group. Everyone was given their own task and their own materials. The children had to work together and read the instructions. The fact that it wasn't finished wasn't our problem; it was about the process. We hoped to finish it by the end of the day, but we didn't manage to. My colleague and I finished the kitchen set after school that afternoon and put it in place. The next morning, the children came into the classroom full of amazement, and when we told them that "Bob the Builder" had done it, a new game immediately started in the building corner, because they wanted to show Bob their constructions, so they really did their best. The magic that children bring to play remains beautiful and magical to work with every day.

In my internship class, differentiation is particularly important because the children are at many different levels and have varying needs, for example in terms of materials, language and arithmetic.

I particularly need examples in which I can incorporate many areas of development at the same time in order to work on holistic development. I would also like more information on how I can use play phases more effectively in small groups.

The maths corner with scales, language corner with letters. Workshop for fine motor skills.



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