

**Play in Finnish kindergartens:
an exploratory study on the pedagogical practices
and opinions of teachers and nurses**

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ABSTRACT

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Play is a key aspect of pedagogical practice in Finnish kindergartens, and ECEC practitioners are advised to appropriately guide or take part in playful activities, supporting children's learning and natural curiosity. This study explores the phenomenon of play from the perspectives of teachers and nurses, as well as from the observations made during the researcher's internship in a Finnish day-care centre.

The participants of this study, six educators, whose working experience in Finnish kindergartens ranged from six months to ten years, filled out a self-reflective open-ended questionnaire in English about their beliefs and experiences on play and playful learning, with children aged three to six. Questionnaire answers and observation notes were examined using inductive Content Analysis.

Results illustrate that pedagogical practice draws on active observation of children's interests and needs and that ECEC practitioners make appropriate use of the environment and of teacher-guided play, to encourage children's autonomy and initiative-taking. Moreover, participation in children's play takes shape both as a voluntary intervention of the educator and as a request from children themselves. Finally, educators report considering play as a vehicle for learning, which encompasses all the areas of development, and arranging elaborate and fun playful learning activities, making the most of music and P.E. time.

Results are consistent with previous literature findings analysing ECEC play-based pedagogies and intend to contribute to the existing theory on play with concrete instances, and to support ECEC practitioners' everyday work.

Keywords: Play; Playful learning; Early Childhood Education and Care; Pedagogical practice; Educators' opinions

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1 INTRODUCTION

Play is considered a central practice in Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, given the diverse and meaningful experiences that children live through it. The Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018 highlights how play can enhance pedagogical practice, for instance by supporting the creation of a positive and creative atmosphere, by enabling the construction of children's ideas of themselves, others and the world they live in, and by enriching learning opportunities. Moreover, playful activities, which are inspired by children's interests and natural curiosity, represent a fertile space for self-expression, active exploration and inventiveness, and ECEC practitioners are advised to support children's play by guiding it as well as by taking part in it (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018).

The role of play in pedagogical practice is influenced not only by the type of curriculum implemented, but also by the teacher's beliefs about play (Pyle, De Luca & Danniels, 2017). The curriculum adopted in Finnish ECEC settings focuses on broad developmental goals, rather than predefined academic learning objectives, and aims to promote the child's holistic well-being and learning, following a tradition of integrated education and care (Bennet, 2005; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Kangas, Harju-Luukkainen, Brotherus, Kuusisto and Gearon, 2019). Educators, through a participatory approach, encourage and provide opportunities for play and playful learning, taking into account children's interests and requests (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019).

Educators' involvement in children's play has been a controversial debate among play theorists, but in light of a cultural-historical conception of play being learned through the interaction with the other (Kuschner, 2015; Roopnarine, 2015; van Oers, 2014), the roles that teachers have in playful activities at the kindergarten are numerous and varied. Educators promote the acquisition of cultural norms and values, bring "sign mediation to children's play" (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2019, p. 463) and support children's make-believe play towards more mature levels, providing a wide range of information and experiences to it

(Bodrova & Leong, 2019; Bodrova, Leong, Germeroth and Day-Hess, 2019). Furthermore, an acknowledging attitude and a close participation from teachers can inspire communication and interactions among children and have a positive effect on the play itself (Løndal & Greve, 2015), and the adult's presence and direction are beneficial to children's creative thinking, especially during the engagement in new activities (Robson, 2015).

The involvement of educators in playful and playful learning activities is also a spontaneous request that originates from children themselves. Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson (2009) categorised children's reasons for reaching out to the teacher as: needing support, wanting to be acknowledged or praised, informing the adult about rule-breakers, asking for information, and inviting the adult as a co-player. Children, therefore, are aware of the value of teacher's potential intervention and ask accordingly.

As acknowledged in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018, learning is holistic, stemming from children's interests and ability levels and encompassing multisensory experiences, socio-emotional, cognitive and motor skills, and play is a vehicle for learning. As put forward by Kangas et al. (2019), ECEC practitioners' knowledge and practice on playful learning should be supported by further research, as the concept is relatively new in Finnish ECEC settings and playful activities are commonly considered child-initiated.

This study aims to explore the phenomenon of play in Finnish kindergartens through the analysis of the reported experiences and opinions of ECEC teachers and nurses, working with children aged three to six, as well as through the analysis of observation notes taken during the researcher's own internship in a Finnish day-care centre. This research intends to benefit the so-called multi-voiced community of ECEC professionals (Kangas & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019) by enriching pedagogical theory on play with valuable experiences and opinions and by supporting the work of ECEC practitioners with an opportunity to reflect on everyday practice.

1.1 Play, learning and teaching

This study, eschewing an exhausting illustration of the numerous definitions and theories that have characterised the classic and contemporary literature on play, focuses on the macro-aspects that denote such a complex and elusive phenomenon. Several authors attempted to describe play in a comprehensive way and provided a general theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon. Burghardt (2005, as cit. in Burghardt & Pellis, 2019, p. 12) identifies five play criteria that are a good exemplification of traditional playful activities in humans as well as in the animal kingdom. According to these criteria, play should be (1) apparently unfunctional to the context where it occurs, (2) intrinsically motivated and rewarding, (3) modified in comparison with its equivalent functional behaviour, (4) recognisable in its form, which can still manifest a degree of variability, and (5) initiated under mild or free-from-stress conditions.

Gray (2019) limits the analysis of the phenomenon to humans and, stressing that playful activities should be defined by their underlying motives, rather than their structural aspects, describes play as being: (a) chosen and directed by the player or in negotiation with the other players, (b) intrinsically motivated, (c) characterised by rules, implicit or explicit, that can be creatively negotiated and challenged, (d) imaginative, in that it transcends the here-and-now, and (e) conducted in alert but relatively stress-free conditions. The above definitions share multiple aspects, such as the state of “relaxed alertness” (Gray, 2019, p. 86), the intrinsic motivation and the fact of going beyond the here-and-now, and they both highlight the multifaceted and fluid nature of play, which presents common elements as well as specific characteristics.

Van Oers’ (2014), in defining the play format, also focuses on the macro-aspects that characterise playful activities: high involvement of the participants, the existence of shared but not necessarily explicit rules, and a variable degree of freedom. He observes that the last element should not be considered as freedom from adults’ interference, but as freedom to challenge the rules, free the imagination and produce original ideas.

Van Oers' (2014) conceptualisation acknowledges the role of educators in children's playful activities and is rooted in the cultural-historical tradition, as well as the belief that play is a leading activity in children's development:

In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour (Vygotsky, 1966/2016, p.18).

According to Vygotsky (1966/2016), make-believe play, creating the so-called Zone of Proximal Development, generates thriving motives to challenge oneself and one's own beliefs about the world and enables the child to be creative, to act on voluntary intentions and to explore imaginative scenarios. In line with Vygotskian beliefs, recent studies highlight how educators can help children to develop imagination, self-regulated behaviour and abstract thinking through mature make-believe play (Bodrova & Leong, 2019; Bodrova et al., 2019).

Moyles (1989) considers play as a process that allows the accretion of children's skills and knowledge through the dynamic interaction of free play and teacher-directed play. She points out that the educator can be called initiator, enabler or assessor of learning, making it possible for the child to meet basic learning needs through play, such as creating, observing, imitating, sensing, cooperating, thinking, questioning, acquiring new knowledge, imagining, gaining competence and confidence, knowing one's own strengths and limitations, learning social values and norms, being part of an open-minded community and being active in a safe environment.

As shown in Table 1, Moyles (1989) exemplifies the relationships between different types of playful activities and the areas of development connected to them (motor, cognitive and socio-emotional skills), highlighting that there are significant overlaps between the areas.

Table 1

Different forms of play in school (Moyles, 1989, pp. 12-13)

	Basic form	Detail	Example
PHYSICAL PLAY	Gross motor	Construction	Building blocks
		Deconstruction	Clay/sand/wood
	Fine motor	Manipulation	Interlocking bricks
		Coordination	Musical instruments
	Psychomotor	Adventurous	Climbing apparatus
		Creative movement	Dance
	Sensory exploration	Junk modelling	
	Object play	Finding out table	
INTELLEC- TUAL PLAY	Linguistic	Communication/function/ ex- planation/acquisition	Hearing/telling sto- ries
	Scientific	Exploration/ investigation/ problem-solving	Water play/ cooking
	Symbolic/ mathematical	Representation/ pretend/ mini worlds	Doll's house/ homes/drama/ num- ber games
	Creative	Aesthetics/ imagination/ fan- tasy/ reality/ innovation	Painting/ drawing/ modelling/ designing
SOCIAL/EMOT IONAL PLAY	Therapeutic	Aggression/ regression/ relaxation/ solitude/ parallel play	Wood/ clay/ music
	Linguistic	Communication/ interaction/ cooperation	Puppets/ telephone
	Repetitious	Mastery/ control	Anything!
	Empathic	Sympathy/ sensitivity	Pets/ other children
	Self-concept	Roles/ emulation/ morality/ ethnicity	Home corner/ service 'shop'/ discussion
	Gaming	Competition/ rules	Word/ number games

A child playing with a doll's house, for instance, would practice symbolic thinking and creativity, and, when interacting with classmates, communication and cooperation. Furthermore, Wood and Attfield (2005) observe that play offers the opportunity to integrate the acquisition of motor, cognitive and socio-emotional skills together with cross-curricular elements, typical of playful learning, that include positive attitudes towards oneself and others, creativity and originality, curiosity and motivation (both extrinsic and intrinsic), resilience and flexibility, and willingness to take risks: all of these aspects will be essential to lifelong learning in adulthood.

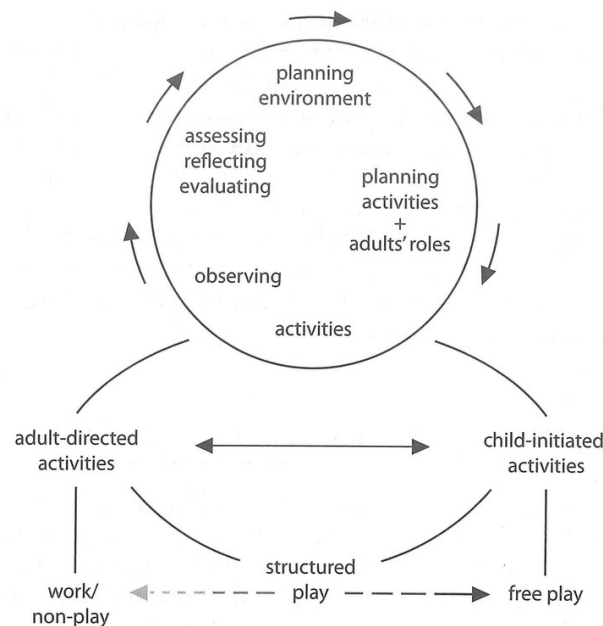
Playful learning at kindergarten represents a methodological shift that has occurred in the last decades in many countries worldwide; Pyle et al. (2017), in their scoping review on the benefits of playful learning in the field of Education,

reveal two different orientations and related pedagogical practices. When the focus is on developmental skills, a more passive role from teachers is advisable, which would allow more child-directed play to occur; instead, when the focus is on the acquisition of academic skills (mathematics, oral and written language), guided play and teacher's intervention are preferred.

Wood (2010) stresses that pedagogical practice should integrate both focuses of playful learning, developmental and academic skills, by combining the information and experiences from adult-directed and child-initiated activities through a recursive use of planning, interaction with children, observation and assessment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

A model of integrated pedagogical approaches (Wood, 2010, p.21)



In her model, Wood (2010) illustrates that play occurring in ECE settings is always influenced, to a degree, by the characteristics of the environment, the curriculum in use, teachers' beliefs and values, the adult/child ratio and the age of the children. She observes that play continuously shifts from being more structured - during guided activities, when children have limited choice or

control and teachers have predefined learning outcomes - or less structured - during child-initiated activities, when children exert choice and imagination with little or no guidance from the adult, who can still participate in the activity.

1.2 Educators' opinions and practices about play and playful learning in early childhood settings

As put forward by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) a more concrete conceptualisation of the role of play from national and school policies is needed to support educators' work and avoid discrepancy between pedagogical beliefs and practices. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) investigated Canadian kindergarten teachers' opinions on playful learning and highlighted two major perspectives: believing that play mainly supported the development of social skills and believing that it also supported academic learning. However, when considering pedagogical practice, it was found that three approaches were followed: two were in alignment with the reported beliefs, whereas the third revealed that learning occurred mainly in formal contexts and that free play represented a moment for children to independently master the new knowledge acquired.

Beliefs about play might prove difficult to put in practice when pressure is put on curricular predefined objectives. Altun (2018) reported that most of Turkish pre-service teachers, attending the last year of an ECE training program, recognised the importance of play as a source of fun, self-expression and development, but believed that the themes and rules should be decided in advance by the adult so that play could be a medium of learning.

Similarly, Tsai (2017), who explored Taiwanese preschool educators' views and practices about play, highlighted that it was generally recognised that play was a source of joy, a basic right and a learning medium that allowed children to free their imagination, but observed that free play occurred mainly during predetermined and short moments of the day, and that games and playful learning activities were often planned by the teachers. According to the latter, children could be inspired to practice what they had learned, if the environment

were purposefully set: for instance, a doll area arranged to look like a shop would encourage children to play the shopkeeper, and therefore to practice about numbers (Tsai, 2017).

Finally, teachers' opinions and practices about play and playful learning were reported to be largely influenced not only by national and school policies, but also by colleagues' daily work. Hesterman and Targowska (2020), who interviewed Western Australian preschool teachers on the topic of play-based learning, highlighted that the factors that enabled the implementation of playful learning included a shared philosophy on the significance of play for children's development and learning between co-workers and the school administration, and the opportunity to constructively reflect on professional practice.

1.3 Research context and research questions

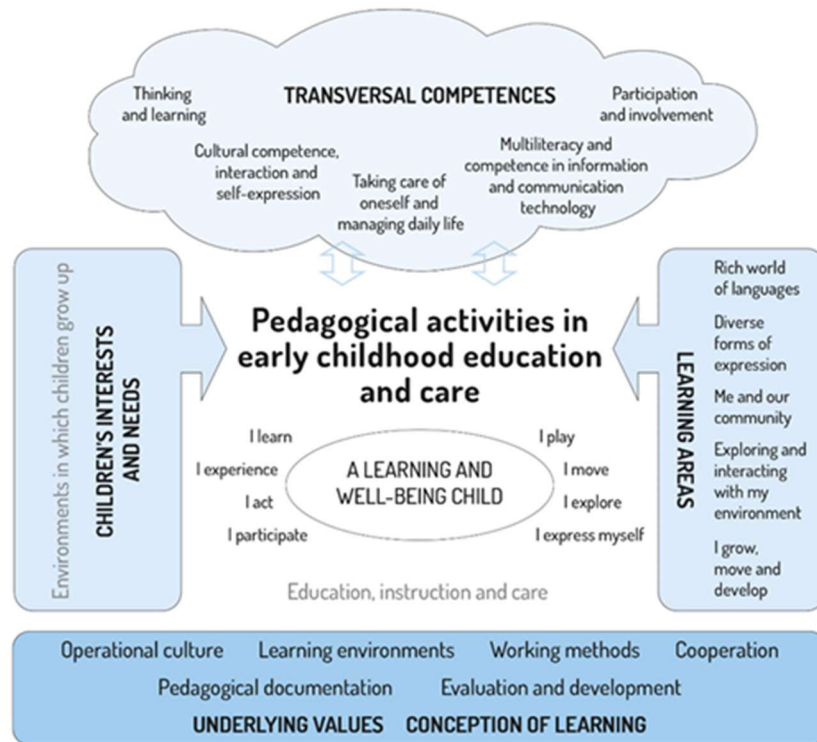
The Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018 describes the goals and principles that providers should draw on to prepare both the local curriculum and the child's individual plan. In the latter, children's interests, skills and needs, documented in collaboration with the guardians, lay the foundation for the implementation and evaluation of integrative pedagogical activities:

Children's interests and questions serve as a key premise for the activities. For example, the themes may emerge from play and games, fairy tales, excursions or spontaneous interactive situations between the children and personnel or in the interaction among children (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p.43).

In the Finnish ECEC context the interactions between educators, children and the environment are a key aspect of pedagogical activity, which promotes children's holistic growth and learning, with an emphasis on broad developmental goals (learning areas and transversal competencies) and children's interests and needs (see Figure 2) (Bennet, 2005; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018).

Figure 2

The framework for pedagogical activity in early childhood education and care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p.38)



Within this framework, the operational culture values the importance of play in the holistic development and learning of the child: play has a central role in pedagogical practice, promoting exploration, creativity, agency and self-expression, and consolidating meanings based on personal experiences and social relations (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019).

The aim of this study was to explore the phenomenon of play in Finnish ECEC settings from the perspectives of teachers and nurses working with children aged three to six. Moreover, the observations of the researcher's personal experience as a trainee in a Finnish kindergarten allowed for triangulation of research data and for a richer understanding of the phenomenon. A qualitative approach, concerned with the intentions and meanings of experiences, seemed the most appropriate option to explore ECEC educators' pedagogical practices and opinions (Tracy, 2013). The paradigm chosen was social constructivism, which

explores a given phenomenon through the eyes of social actors, who actively shape and interact with reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

The research questions were:

1. How do ECEC practitioners make provision of play opportunities in Finnish ECEC settings?
2. How do ECEC practitioners take part in children's play in Finnish ECEC settings?
3. What do ECEC practitioners think about play and learning?

The research questions allowed the analysis of the phenomenon from the points of view of ECEC practitioners and aimed to understand how educators participated in children's playful activities and how the phenomena of play and play-based learning took shape in a context where the emphasis of the curriculum is on broad developmental learning goals, rather than academic ones (Bennet, 2005; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Kangas et al., 2019).

2 RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research participants

Participants in this study were ECEC practitioners, teachers and nurses, selected according to these criteria: implementing a local curriculum that followed the guidelines of the 2018 Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care, working with children aged three to six and using English language in everyday practice. These inclusion criteria allowed for the definition of the target population (Robinson, 2014). Potential participants were asked by their manager or by the researcher if they were interested in filling a printed questionnaire in English about their pedagogical practices and opinions on play. The educators who agreed to participate in the study were emailed the questionnaire, as well as the related documentation about the aim of the research and about the processing of personal information and research data. The search for participants started in November 2020 and ended in January 2021. In total, six educators, four teachers and two nurses, participated in the study and their working experience in Finnish ECEC settings ranged from six months to ten years.

2.2 Questionnaire for ECEC practitioners

Due to the busy schedule that ECEC practitioners have, I decided that an online questionnaire was the ideal method to collect their opinions and experiences. Moreover, I preferred that participants could choose the most suitable time to answer the survey, which required concentration and reflection.

One critique to using written questionnaires in qualitative research is that individual answers might lack depth; however, Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey and McEvoy (2020) observe that, when the design of a qualitative survey properly frames the research topic and the sample is relevant, the entire dataset

can be considered complex and rich. In addition, to get richer answers, Braun et al. (2020) advise correlating the questions with a request of explaining in detail some essential aspects, as in question 5: “Could you report two or three episodes where you actively intervened in children’s play. (Please explain in detail: age of the child/children; the activity; your intentions and role)” (see Appendix).

In the survey there were nine questions in total: the first inquired about the participants’ years of working experience in kindergartens and their current role; the following seven were open-ended topic-based questions that promoted critical thinking and reflection, addressing central concepts of pedagogical practice in Finnish kindergartens such as teacher-guided play, playful learning and children’s agency. In the last question it was asked if there were any extra considerations that participants had about play or playful learning to collect unexpected but still applicable information (Braun et al. 2020).

2.3 Internship and observation notes

To achieve a deeper understanding of the researched phenomenon, questionnaire answers from ECEC teachers and nurses, together with observation notes taken during the researcher’s internship in a Finnish kindergarten, constituted the research data and allowed for triangulation. Multiple types of data, in fact, can ensure credibility to the study (Tracy, 2013).

As part of my university studies, I did an internship of one month, in January 2021, in an English-speaking kindergarten in Finland, which allowed me to observe as well as to participate in children’s play. I had an oral agreement with the manager of the day-care centre that I could use the observation notes in my thesis in accordance with the research ethical principles.

I spent most of the time with the group of older children, whose age ranged from three to six, and shadowed the personnel in charge. My role of researcher shifted from “complete participant” to “participant as observer” (Tracy, 2013, p.108): as a trainee, I supported educators when needed or played with children,

and at the same time observed life at the kindergarten. I did not take notes in the fieldwork, but instead, once at home, I would write recall notes about my daily interactions with the children, with a focus on how I had approached them in their free play or how I had been involved in their games. I am aware that I might have failed to report some granular details in the observation notes, but I felt it was important to engage with the community and to be present for the children.

2.4 Data analysis

The qualitative method used to analyse the questionnaire answers and the observation notes was inductive Content Analysis, which allowed to examine the researched phenomenon in a subjective but still systematic and scientific way (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The aim of the analysis was to describe the reality of play in Finnish ECEC settings, highlighting the relevant categories emerged from the identification of similarities and differences within the research data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017; Schreier, 2014).

Prior to the analysis, anonymised data was merged into a Word document so that each question of the survey would list the related answers obtained from each educator. Grouping all the answers derived from the same inquiry facilitated a visual comparison of the data. Moreover, applicable observation notes were copied from the researcher's thesis journal to the Word document and each transcript was put under the relevant topic-based question (question 5, 6 or 8; see Appendix). Data was therefore read and re-read to make sense of it as a whole (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Primary-cycle coding started with the identification of the units of analysis, which were represented by an individual theme, a word or a paragraph, expressing an idea (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Data was therefore examined and fragmented to develop descriptive open codes that would capture the essence of each unit of meaning, using the same words of the participants.

Multiple readings allowed for a constant comparison of the text units to refine the coding scheme developed and better fit the data (Tracy, 2013).

Secondary-cycle coding aimed to organise the data into more comprehensive and interpretative categories. Firstly, when the same concept emerged from the answers of more educators, those were grouped together under a comprehensive subcategory. For example, the first-level code “Toys reachable” was reflected in the answers of four educators and constituted itself a subcategory. Secondly, hierarchical interpretative codes were created to summarise similar conceptual ideas, with a view to understanding how the data could meaningfully address the research questions (Tracy, 2013). Finally, consistency of the second-level codes was rechecked until saturation of concepts was achieved, that is when the coding process has extracted all the possible and meaningful information out of the data, and a definition of the categories completed the abstraction process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017, Newby, 2014). The twelve categories that emerged from the secondary-cycle coding are presented in Table 2 in relation to the research question that they address.

Table 2

Categories and related research questions

Research Question	Category
1. How do ECEC practitioners make provision of play opportunities in Finnish ECEC settings?	Children can make choices about toys and classrooms
	Educators provide a safe and engaging playing environment
	The interests and needs of the individual child and of the group identified through observation inspire planning of activities
	Use of teacher-guided play as predefined time
2. How do ECEC practitioners take part in children’s play in Finnish ECEC settings?	Use of teacher-guided play as required from the specific situation
	Educator intervenes to support and expand the play
	Educator intervenes to support reflection on children’s own behaviour and problem-solving skills

Table 2 (continued)*Categories and related research questions*

Research Question	Category
2. How do ECEC practitioners take part in children's play in Finnish ECEC settings?	Educator is asked to be informer or acknowledger
	Educator is asked to be co-player
3. What do ECEC practitioners think about play and learning?	Play is young children's way of learning
	Play to learn socio-emotional, cognitive and motor skills
	Music and movement offer numerous playful learning opportunities

2.5 Ethical solutions

The implementation of this study followed the principles of ethical research practice - procedural, situational and relational ethics - in accordance with the research guidelines of the University of Jyväskylä (Tracy, 2013; University of Jyväskylä, 2021). Firstly, the choice of a written questionnaire stemmed from knowing that ECEC practitioners have a tight schedule and I wanted to offer them the possibility to choose when to take the survey. Secondly, to ensure that educators were comfortable with answering the questionnaire, which was in English, one criterion to select the participants was that they used English in their everyday practice. Furthermore, at the beginning of the questionnaire, it was mentioned not to worry about possible grammar or spelling mistakes (Braun et al., 2020). Participants were also emailed two copies of the questionnaire: the Word version and the PDF version, the latter in case they preferred filling it manually and scanning it afterwards.

Consent to use the questionnaire answers as research data was asked at the beginning of the questionnaire itself. Two additional documents were attached to the survey. The first document illustrated the aim of the study, highlighting the voluntariness of participation and the researcher contact information. It also

described how participants would have been informed about the results of the study. The second document explained that the personal information and questionnaire answers collected would have been anonymised and stored on the researcher's password-protected university account and that research data would have been anonymously published in the thesis.

Permission to use the observation notes in the thesis was asked to the manager of the kindergarten, prior to the beginning of my internship. The choice of writing recall notes originated from the awareness of my role as a trainee and from the desire to engage with the community. In the recall notes and in the research data, the names of the children were pseudonymous to guarantee anonymity.

3 RESULTS

The following subsections illustrate the results of this study, grouping findings according to the relevant research question. Extracts from questionnaire answers and from observation notes correlate the analysis with vivid examples of practices and opinions about play and playful learning in Finnish ECEC settings.

3.1 ECEC practitioners' provision of play opportunities

All educators illustrate a flexible and purposeful use of the environment, where toys and play materials are organised and put at a reachable level for children, who can independently choose what to play with and put back accordingly, as the following quote shows:

We make sure that all equipment (toys, games, arts and crafts materials etc.) are at the child's reach easily. Only smaller toys or parts are put higher so that all rooms are safe for all age groups. Some toys are grouped according to their type into learning spaces (role play, logical thinking, art, building etc). Boxes and areas are labelled to make it easier for the child to put things in their place. Educator 5, question 2 (see Appendix).

To ensure that the environment is safe and engaging, educators adopt several measures, such as keeping toys that need the adult's supervision in a separate cupboard, rotating the classrooms so that children can vary their games, and dividing the group into smaller groups. Children are also encouraged to choose which classroom they would like to play in.

All educators consider observation as a key aspect of the pedagogical planning, in light of the numerous information that can be inferred from children's play as well as from all the other activities carried out at the kindergarten (mealtimes, transitional phases such as getting dressed for outdoor time, etc.). The observed interests and needs of both the individual child and of the group are reported to be taken into account to implement pedagogical activities in order to engage children and stimulate their natural curiosity:

Observation is the basis (pillar) of our job. A deep insight and experience with observing the children is crucial for a ECEC teacher. It is by observing their interactions, play,

interests, behaviour, that a teacher is able to plan according to the children's needs, keep them motivated and curious. Educator 6, question 3 (see Appendix).

Observation is described as an active skill that develops with practice and allows educators to know and understand children's interests and group dynamics, and to identify areas of strength and areas in need of development. Moreover, attentive observation is said to help educators to deal with conflict situations, preventing these or leading children towards conflict resolution, as the following quote shows:

I usually observe how children are behaving. Is sharing hard? Then I need to be closer to the child who has a problem with sharing. I can immediately seize the opportunity to prevent a fight. Sometimes I lead the play to a good direction if I know something might happen. The main point is to know the children. Educator 1, question 3 (see Appendix).

Teacher-guided play, as a planned activity, is reported to take place in the morning during circle time - when children are presented with new activities and games, which will inspire future play - or just after circle time - when they are encouraged to work on concepts previously introduced, such as letters, colours or action songs. Depending on the topic, guided play can also occur outdoors, which offers many learning opportunities:

We usually use the mornings for guided play when the child is more receptive. We might introduce a concept during the morning circle (for our group 3 and 4-year-old it is around 9:15) and continue with guided play from there. This can take place also outdoors, depending on the subject introduced. Educator 5, question 4 (see Appendix).

A reason for choosing the mornings as predetermined time for guided play is that children have been observed to be more responsive and open to workgroup and playful learning activities at that time of the day.

When it does not happen at a predefined time, teacher-guided play is reported to be used on the spot for numerous and different reasons. Educators' suggestions can help children to engage in a particular activity, especially when a child is new and is still familiarising with the environment and the toys in it, or to start a game in case there is little choice about toys:

I usually do this [teacher-guided play] if the toy amount is limited, for example there are five shovels but seven children or only one awesome pink castle bucket... Usually I do this in small rooms or outside. I might help to start the game if children have different opinions about play. It also helps those who have weak social skills. When I see everything is ok, I step back and let the children play. Educator 1, question 4 (see Appendix).

This educator highlights that, during free play, children who have weak socio-emotional skills might struggle to be heard and that the adult's guidance can lead the group to find a fairer solution about activities or roles to do.

Furthermore, teacher-guided play is said to be an opportunity for educators to address the rules of a game or to redirect play when children seem restless or bored and might benefit from guidance or suggestions that would make the game more engaging or varied, for example when children limit themselves to using the same toys or playing with the same friends:

I usually guide children to play when they tend to stick with some certain friends and never want to play with others/ or some certain toys; when they get too loud (guided-play can help them calm), when they want teacher help or when teacher sees it is needed to have teacher-guided play. Educator 3, question 4 (see Appendix).

This educator also mentions that teacher-guided play can be a request originating from children themselves when they need support in their activities.

On the topic of teacher-guided play, one educator reports as follows:

Mostly I try to keep the amount of teacher-guided play as small as possible. I think that the ideas and impulses for play come from the kids and the more I (as teacher) try to guide the game the less "play" it becomes. I really like to join the kids' game, but they decide what to play. Educator 2, question 4 (see Appendix).

Highlighting the importance of play being child-centred, this educator feels that guiding activities excessively would make them less "play", and prefers to mainly go along with children's choices, when approaching their games.

Finally, other reasons to use guided play are to include a child that has been left aside or to assess children's development:

I use it at least once or twice a week to assess children or if a child is feeling isolated or if they tend to play with only some children. I usually let them choose a number and match them according to the learning goal I have planned. Educator 6, question 4 (see Appendix).

This educator reports asking children to pick a number, previously assigned to a learning objective, and evaluating them, while they are engaged in playful activities that promote certain skills.

3.2 ECEC practitioners' participation in children's play

One major reason for educators' voluntary participation in children's play that emerged from the data was supporting and expanding the play. Giving explanation about game rules, promoting cooperative play, following and supporting children's imagination, and correcting information, were the reported as well as observed ways for educators to actively take part in children's play.

Depending on the requests and characteristics of the situation, the teacher's intervention was momentary:

Age: 4 years old. Three children wanted to play with a memory card game but were a bit confused about the rules and turns. I decided to intervene, explaining them the rules and playing one round as an example. After that, they preferred to play by themselves (without adult). Educator 4, question 5 (see Appendix).

This educator intervened to show children how to play the memory card game and, once ensured that they understood how to continue, withdrew from the play, respecting children's willingness to be autonomous.

Other times, the teacher's presence was continuous and led to a more elaborate game:

Age: 3-4 years old. Children were having free play; some children chose to play with wooden blocks. However, they were spreading the blocks without intending to play with them properly and there was no connection between children, while playing with the same thing. Therefore, I sat down and started building "Jenga", then they all asked me what I was doing, and they wanted to help me to build. So, they were taking turns in building the blocks. Educator 3, question 5 (see Appendix).

This educator decided to promote cooperation within a group of children who were separately playing with the same toys and, by joining the game, created an opportunity to work on turn-taking and having a shared goal.

Going along with children's pretence was an opportunity for the educator to expand the game:

Two 5-year-old girls are pretending to be kittens, crawling on the floor and meowing. I greet them as cats and ask them if they have eaten. One kitten-girl says no. I pretend to give milk to them, and they pretend to drink. Then they hop on a toy car that another child is "driving". I ask the driver if she is bringing the kittens to school. She nods. One kitten-girl says that they are going to the school for cats; she seems proud of the "school for cats" idea she has just had. The driver adds that she should go to the shop to buy food and says that they have arrived at school. The two kitten-girls hop off and go play elsewhere.

Another day, one of the kitten-girls will approach me playfully as a cat, remembering when I went along with her play. (Extract from observation notes).

Acknowledging the girls' signals of pretending to be cats (crawling and meowing) and following the game (giving milk; asking about the destination of the car trip) created space for new pretence (driver-girl playing the role of the mother who drops the kids to school and does the shopping; kitten-girl coming up with the amusing idea of a school for cats). Moreover, participating in the game led to new instances of play.

Other times, the educator approached children's role-play with a more specific intention:

Age: 5-6 years old; activity: role play, teacher – students. Children were playing very well but I intervened to correct some information that the "little teacher" taught to students and gave them some compliments as well. Educator 3, question 5 (see Appendix).

This educator decided to intervene to support the game with appropriate information about what was being taught and to show appreciation of how children were playing.

The educators' second major reason for voluntarily taking part in playful activities was fostering children's reflection on behaviour and helping them to develop and practice social problem-solving skills. Promoting inclusion, supporting children to find a solution about their play or about a disagreement between the players, and creating a space to discuss inappropriate behaviour or violent games, were the situations observed as well as reported from educators. Adult's intervention aimed to help children to find activities to do or be included in their friends' game, or to support a discussion towards mature levels. As the following quote shows, educators reported acting as mediators and promoting reflection:

5-year-old children were arguing when a friend was making annoying sounds and they asked him to stop. I acted as an "enabler": both sides had a say and I asked only open-ended questions in order to promote "thinking". The children achieved the conclusion themselves. Educator 6, question 5 (see Appendix).

This educator did not impose a solution but listened to both parties and supported critical thinking until the children reached a solution by themselves.

Sometimes, because of the children's temperamental characteristics, the adult's presence was needed even after a solution was reached:

Two 5-year-old girls: Sarah suggests playing "the teacher and the student". Rose agrees enthusiastically and Sarah starts assigning the roles. Another child, Paul, a 4-year-old boy, says he will join and insists to be the teacher. Paul and Sarah start arguing. I intervene and suggest that they could take turns, saying that Sarah could be the teacher first as the game has been her idea. The children agree. I stay nearby, observing but also playing the role of the student. The children are playing well, re-enacting the circle time routine: the teacher would ask "What day is today? Who wants to update the calendar? Who wants to count the children?" and students would raise their hands accordingly and, if called, reply to the question. However, the boy is impulsive and finds it difficult to respect the turns. When necessary, I remind him about the turn-taking. (Extract from observation notes).

I decided not to leave the scene because I was aware, from personal observations and reported experiences, that Paul had difficulties in respecting turns while playing with other children, and that, during previous discussions with peers, his behaviour had escalated into physical aggression. When I noticed that Paul was getting impatient to be the teacher or frustrated about not having been chosen to answer the teacher's questions, I would reassure him that he would do those things when it was his turn and reminded him about the importance of respecting the turns.

The educator's involvement in children's play was also a spontaneous request that originated from children themselves. A major category included experiences where educators were asked to acknowledge children's activities, when the latter wanted to be praised or their activities to be checked, or to enrich the game with information, as noted:

Activity: role play; a girl, T (3 ½ years), plays with the "doctor's kit". She has a doll and uses all the different doctor's tool on the doll, while speaking with herself. T brings the doll to me, I'm supposed to hold it now. T shows me the tools, she looks expectantly at me; when I say something about the tool (what it is, what to use for, how to use...) she acts accordingly to my explanations, then puts the tool away, takes a different one and repeats the same actions. My role here is to give things a name and a course of action (for that specific thing). Educator 2, question 6 (see Appendix).

The 3-year-old girl decided to involve the educator in her role play because she was eager to learn new things and she knew that an adult would have taught her the information she needed or missed.

The other major category included experiences where the educator was asked to join the game as co-player in numerous and different types of play:

constructive play, tag, hide-and-peek, pretend play, role play, board games. Sometimes the reason for involving the adult in a game was that the child was feeling lonely, but other times it was that children wished to have fun together with the educator:

Age: 3- 4 years old. During outdoor play, often children (around 8-10 of them) ask the adult to play hide-and-peek with them. Sometimes me/the adult counts other times one child wants to count and the adult hides. Educator 4, question 6 (see Appendix).

The request to be co-player was reported to be common, and enjoyable for educators too, as the following quote shows:

4 years old. It happens often. They ask to play a board game, Uno, African tähti, Kimble, or role play (Can you be an animal?); 3 years old. Can we play with ears? 3 years old. Can you come and sleep in our house? (Role play). I usually join them and enjoy very much 😊. Educator 6, question 6 (see Appendix).

Being involved in children's role play was an opportunity for educators to expand the child's patterns of interaction in social situations, such as short dialogues between mother and child, shopkeeper and client, teacher and student, and doctor and patient. Children were also reported to be knowledgeable about familiar social situations:

Rose, a 5-year-old girl, approaches me with a Lego house and two Lego dolls, asking me to play with her. I take one doll; Rose tells me to knock at the door and lets me inside. Pointing to the Lego beds, she says that it is bedtime. After pretending to be sleeping, Rose says that it is snack time. She announces that there is pizza to eat and starts looking in the Lego box for the Lego pizza, but cannot find it. I then suggest that we eat something else and, taking a yellow round Lego, ask if she would like to have a cake. She nods and announces that it is her birthday. We sing "Happy Birthday", then we eat the cake. After that, Rose tells me to leave and to knock again. I come in and announce that it is my birthday. I put my doll at the table. She observes that first we should sleep and then eat the cake. We do so. (Extract from observation).

Rose was clear on what she expected from each situation (we should knock at the door before coming in, we should first sleep then eat the snack, we should sing "Happy Birthday" before eating the cake) showing to be aware of the social conventions that characterise her everyday life and, drawing on those, be able to construct a logical storyline. The game with Rose continued:

After I leave, Rose says that it is morning, and she comes out of the Lego house, and we greet each other. I suggest that we have a walk in the park. She agrees, then puts her doll on top of a real chair and makes her fall down. I ask, "What happened?", but she corrects me, addressing her doll, "Are you ok?". I repeat "Are you ok?". She answers "Yes". Then Rose takes a square Lego and, saying that it was a TV, puts her doll in front of it. After putting my doll next to hers, Rose makes the TV fall on my doll and asks, "Are you ok?". I answer "Yes". (Extract from observation).

Similarly, Rose knew how to behave in social circumstances (we should immediately ask “Are you ok?” if someone is hurt). In addition, Rose re-addressed feelings previously experienced: earlier that day, in fact, she had tripped over a chair, and, during the game, she re-enacted the same scene with her doll. On the topic of role-play, one educator stated:

[...] In role games kids can experience options and patterns for actions in diverse social situations. Role play also enables the child to deal with fears in a safe, self-determined intensity, to confront them and to try out coping patterns [...] Educator 2, question 7 (see Appendix).

Finally, it was reported how educators could indirectly prompt children’s free play by sharing cultural and artistic traditions:

Age: 5-6 years old. During free play children chose to organise a performance by themselves after the teacher introduced them to the “Lunar New Year”. They came up with a dance performance on Lunar New Year music. Children were so into practicing that some of them got their muscles tired. The little choreographer asked teachers to replace those children so they could rest 😊. Educator 3, question 6 (see Appendix).

This educator described how the children felt inspired by the Lunar New Year music and decided to arrange a dance show; the dancers were so engaged in the activity that they had to take a break, and teachers were asked to dance, so that the show could continue.

3.3 ECEC practitioners’ opinions and practices about playful learning

All educators assert that play is a vehicle for young children to learn and report numerous experiences of playful learning activities that reflect a holistic conception of learning. Acquisition of language, logical and abstract thinking, mathematical skills and spatial awareness; reflection on time, scientific phenomena and emotions; development of creativity, active listening, socialisation and turn-taking; all these skills are reported to be practiced and mastered during playful learning activities.

Learning through play is described as encompassing all the areas of development (socio-emotional, cognitive and motor skills) and allowing children

to work on more skills at once in a positive and relaxed atmosphere. The child-centred and engaging nature of play is highlighted, which enables children to be focused and learn in accordance with their ability levels and natural curiosity. Moreover, play is recognised to be a space where children explore novelty and can be creative.

Playful learning is reported to be teacher-guided, when the educator guides children through the different steps of an activity, or child-led, as the following quote shows:

Age: 5-6 years old. In our group children love to play the “ten game”: children sit in a circle, one by one taking turns to say from 1 to 10 in order (each one say one number) who says 10 will stand up and we’ll continue the game with the rest. Repeating the game until only one child left. My role was one of the players or an observer. Educator 3, question 8 (see Appendix).

This game allows children to practice self-regulation, turn-taking and mathematical skills in a joyful atmosphere. The latter is contagious, as reported:

I think learning by playing is also fun for the teachers. We also learn how to take an easy and playful attitude towards life. I wish that adults would also remain playful. Educator 6, question 9 (see Appendix).

Furthermore, short learning opportunities can be introduced on the spot and take a playful form, such as asking to make connections between the colours of Lego blocks and children’s clothes, so that they can show their knowledge. Similarly, the repetition of an activity, such as re-reading the same book, allows educators to develop children’s knowledge and make them the expert:

Often, before nap time, a 5-year-old boy would ask me to read him a particular book. At the beginning I would tell the story pointing at the pictures, but gradually I would encourage the boy to tell the story by asking questions about the pictures. (Extract from observation notes).

The request to read the book had always come from the child and it became the basis for a playful learning activity, where the boy could practice language skills, abstract thinking and be original (once he intentionally swapped the names of two characters to be humorous). Prompting children to read their favourite book from the pictures could also be organised in the form of a small group activity.

Music and movement are reported to be present in numerous playful learning experiences:

Songs. I can sing how to put the shoes on. I don't need to repeat but sing a playful song about dressing up. They [children] will listen if you sing. Educator 1, question 8 (see Appendix).

Singing again: some "movement-songs" bring the great opportunity to link words with the corresponding movements while having a lot of fun. "Heads, shoulders, knees and toes" for example, or songs that connect words/verb: "shake hands, then clap them, lay them in your lap, ..." and DO the named actions at the same time... as group activity (age around 3 to 5 years) the younger kids can observe and copy me but also the older kids. Educator 2, question 8 (see Appendix).

Both educators express how songs can engage children's attention and channel learning, and it is highlighted that doing the action while singing helps to memorise vocabulary or to learn new words or verbs. In addition, it is observed that activities can benefit from the presence of multi-age groups of children.

Finally, physical education (P.E.) time was a great occasion for educators to arrange fun and elaborate games:

Age 3-4 years old; animal gym: children have to move like animals (a horse, a crab, a snake...); they learn to follow instructions, animal names and gross motor skills. Educator 4, question 8 (see Appendix).

Age: 3-4 years old. Using "We are going on a bear hunt" book as the base for some P.E. play time. We get to introduce the concepts of over, under and through. In addition to language, there is physical (gross motor skills) and musical thinking. It is built as an obstacle course. Educator 5, question 8 (see Appendix).

In both teacher-guided activities, children could practice and develop brain-body coordination and spatial and rhythmic awareness together with other skills (active listening and creativity, or language and musical thinking).

4 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the phenomenon of play in Finnish kindergartens, with a view to understanding how ECEC practitioners make provision of play opportunities, how they participate in children's playful activities and what they think about play and learning. In the following subsections, the results of the study are summarised and discussed in relation to previous literature findings, and a final evaluation of the study, together with a reflection on further research directions, conclude the discourse.

4.1 Discussion of results

Results illustrated that, in Finnish ECEC settings, pedagogical activities are implemented by taking into account children's interests and needs, identified through active observation, and that the environment is organised to encourage free play and promote children's autonomy and initiative-taking, in line with national curricular guidelines and previous literature findings (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Kangas et al., 2019; Koivula, Gregoriadis, Rautamies & Grammatikopoulos, 2019; Vuorisalo, Raittila & Rutanen, 2018).

Teacher-guided play was described as a planned activity - when children were presented with new games or concepts at a specific time of the day - as well as a spontaneous activity - when educators considered it useful or necessary to guide children's play. When not engaged in teacher-guided play, children were free to choose the activities and the classrooms to play in. Moreover, teacher-guided activities represented an opportunity to evaluate the child in a playful way. In this regard, Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels and Wickstrom (2020) outlined several strategies for educators to assess children during guided play as well as during free play, highlighting a range of play types concerned with developmental or academic goals.

Participation in children's play was both the educator's voluntary choice, when the latter intended to expand and enrich children's game or intervene during conflict situations, and a spontaneous request of children themselves. In addition, active observation and deep knowledge of the children allowed for appropriate teacher's intervention, which is at the core of participatory pedagogy (Hedges & Cooper, 2018).

Teacher's intervention has been a controversial topic among play theorists, and teacher-directedness and child-centredness are sometimes considered opposite concepts. However, as put forward by Pyle and Danniels (2017), considering children's interests and ability levels is a way for educators to ensure that guided games are still child-centred and engaging, without fearing that the activity becomes "less play".

Reported as well as observed experiences revealed that educators purposefully and appropriately took part in child-initiated activities, providing useful information during make-believe play and supporting children's imagination, consistent with existing literature findings (Bodrova & Leong, 2019; Bodrova et al., 2019). Moreover, educators' presence and intervention inspired children's play with authentic and original knowledge, infecting them with enthusiasm, as Wood and Attfield (2005) suggested, and were beneficial to the play itself, promoting cooperation and communication, as put forward by Løndal and Greve (2015). Finally, children were found to involve the adult in numerous and different games, when they wished to be acknowledged, or when they wanted a co-player or needed support from a knowledgeable figure, as previous research outlined (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Tsai, 2015).

Educators also showed to be aware of the power relations that exist in children's free play and that may lead to conflict situations, as Wood (2014) highlighted. Conflict in kindergartens, defined as "a situation in which two or more children have a misunderstanding caused by the incompatibility of their interests in a given activity", could be a consequence of wanting to play with the same toy or to be the first to do something, or be a negative reaction to other children's presence in the game (Wiegerová & Navrátilová, 2019, p. 778). In such

situations educators reported acting as mediators, without imposing a solution, and prompting children's problem-solving and social skills. Church, Mashford-Scott and Cohrssen (2018) observed that enabling children to come up with their own solution, if needed by modelling the desired behaviour, can concretely improve problem-solving skills and lead to a stronger agreement with the negotiated solution and a greater likelihood that children would re-enact the same strategies in future conflicts.

All educators stated that play is a vehicle for young children to learn and described playful learning activities as encompassing all the areas of development (socio-emotional, cognitive and motor skills), in accordance with the guidelines of the Finnish National Core Curriculum for ECEC 2018, which focuses on broad developmental outcomes, rather than academic ones (Bennet, 2005; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Kangas et al., 2019). Equally important for learning and exploration was the outdoor environment and the relationship with nature from the early childhood stage (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Nitecki & Chung; 2016).

Educators' beliefs about playful learning reflected the operational culture that characterises Finnish ECEC settings: play was a key method to implement pedagogical activities and to enhance learning opportunities, establishing a positive and relaxed atmosphere and strengthening the relationships between children as well as between children and educators (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). Moreover, it was found that the fun and enjoyment experienced during playful learning activities were shared among children and educators, and that the latter employed different approaches to learning and allowed for varied and rich educational experiences, consistent with previous findings in Finnish kindergartens and primary schools (Hyvönen, 2011).

Playful learning activities were both teacher-directed - when the adult guided children through the different steps of a new or difficult activity - and child-led - when the educator introduced learning opportunities on the spot or when children independently performed a game they had mastered. Furthermore, music and movement were found to be present in numerous

playful learning activities: songs were reported to capture children's attention and facilitate learning, and P.E. time was said to be an occasion for educators to plan several fun and creative games, which focused on different developmental skills. As put forward by Niland (2009) music engages young children on multiple levels, physically, vocally, cognitively, socially, emotionally and creatively and a playful child-centred approach to music would benefit children, for example, by allowing them to creatively expand their favourite songs with new lyrics or melody, to freely explore sounds or to design personalised musical materials. Similarly, an appropriate planning of physical activity experiences contributes to the holistic development of the child, and early childhood educators are advised to implement varied and elaborate P.E. programmes and not to relegate physical activity just to outdoor time or free play (Lu & Montague, 2016).

4.2 Evaluation of the current study and suggestions for further research

The present study has fulfilled its stated goal to explore the phenomenon of play in Finnish ECEC settings, highlighting how ECEC practitioners make provision of and participate in playful activities, and what they think about playful learning. The results of the study intend to contribute to the existing literature on play and to the multi-voiced community of ECEC professionals (Kangas & Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2019) by offering a vivid and contemporary description of play among children aged three to six, from the perspectives of teachers and nurses, and from the researcher's personal observations during her internship in a Finnish kindergarten.

The questionnaire for ECEC practitioners was designed to properly frame the research topic and to collect a rich and elaborate dataset (Braun et al., 2020). In addition, triangulation of research data allowed for a deeper understanding of play in Finnish kindergartens, and inductive Content Analysis offered a systematic and scientific description of the phenomenon studied, which was still

subject to the researcher's interpretations (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Having a background in Psychology and coming from another culture, I approached the reality of Finnish ECEC system with receptiveness and wonder, given the passion I have always had for Early Childhood Education and Developmental Psychology, and attempted to give an account of opinions and practices on play as objectively as possible (Sword, 1999). In Table 3 the main steps of the research process are summarised (Twycross & Shields, 2005).

Table 3

Audit trail of the data collection and data analysis phases

Steps	Actions
1	Transcribing observations made during internship in a Finnish kindergarten
2	Collecting questionnaire answers via email
3	Merging anonymised research data (applicable observation notes and questionnaire answers) on a Word document, organising it under relevant topic-based question
4	Reading and re-reading the whole dataset
5	Primary-cycle coding: identifying units of analysis and developing a descriptive coding scheme
6	Secondary-cycle coding: identifying subcategories and creating hierarchical interpretative codes that answered the research questions
7	Checking consistency of second-level codes until saturation of concepts
8	Defining the categories

Research data was reflected in the hierarchical interpretative codes that emerged from the analysis and a definition of the categories completed the abstraction process (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017, Newby, 2014).

Given the small size of the sample and the autonomy that Finnish kindergartens have in preparing the local curriculum, a limitation of this study is that results do not represent all the nuances of educators' practices and beliefs about play in the Finnish ECEC context, but are instead a testimonial of the points of view and work of particular Finnish ECEC communities (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). However, results might still be reflected in those ECEC settings

where the focus of the curriculum is on broad developmental goals, and learning is considered holistic, occurring through play and appropriate educator's intervention (Bennet, 2005). Another limitation of the study is that children's perspectives were not included in the analysis, but, if taken into account, could provide precious information on the perceived involvement of children in educators' planning (Hedges & Cooper, 2018).

The Finnish ECEC context is a fertile ground for the refinement of play-based pedagogy, thanks to the centrality of play in pedagogical practice and the recommended participation of educators in children's play (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Fonsén, 2018). Moreover, a flexible use of the local curriculum allows to prioritise children's interests and needs, and to plan in accordance to those, putting the actual child at the centre of pedagogical planning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). Further research could deepen the analysis of play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings, by combining educators' experiences and opinions with children's perspectives, to enrich theoretical knowledge on play with concrete instances and to support ECEC practitioners' work and professional development.

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APPENDIX

Questions for ECEC practitioners

1. How long have you been working in a kindergarten and which is your current role?
2. How do you make use of the environment to facilitate children's own play?
3. How does observation influence your pedagogical choices?
4. In your everyday practice, when do you make use of teacher-guided play? Is there a particular time of the day or reason for this choice?
5. Could you report two or three episodes where you actively intervened in children's play. (Please explain in detail: age of the child/children; the activity; your intentions and role)
6. Could you report two or three episodes where a child/children spontaneously asked you to join their play. (Please explain in detail: age of the child/children; the activity; your role)
7. In your opinion, how does play support learning at the kindergarten?
8. Could you give one or two examples of playful learning activities that occur in your practice. (Please explain in detail: age of the child/children; the activity, your role)
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about the implementation of playful/playful learning activities (observations, considerations, challenges)?