

Original Research Article

Views of Greek Primary Education Professionals on the Utilisation of Play within Preschool and School Environments

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Article History

Received: 29.12.2023

Accepted: 04.02.2024

Published: 07.02.2024

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: Although play comprises a key factor for children's learning and development, it seems not to be connected with learning or utilised for pedagogical purposes, by a large part of the educational community within Greek preschool environments. This study, conducted during the 2019-2020 school year, aims at exploring, with the aid of a questionnaire, the views of kindergarten educators (N:715) and elementary school teachers (N:793) throughout Greece, regarding play and its utilisation as a didactic tool in kindergarten and elementary school. The investigational data showed that within school environments, play is mainly associated with the pupils' recess whereas for preschool environments, it is about reaching learning and teaching goals. Kindergarten educators use play to teach pupils of linguistic and logical-mathematical senses, while elementary school teachers barely utilise it likewise. Finally, this study underlines the re-training of educationalists towards the better utilisation of play within the educational process.

Keywords: Play, Play Didactics, Kindergarten Educators, Elementary School Teachers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Preschool and school pupils develop wholesomely and learn mainly through play, which is considered as a major learning process that allows children to express a plethora of emotions, interact with peers and surroundings, articulate ideas and views, grow their creative thinking, take initiatives, correspond to new conditions and shape their own personality (Brock *et al.*, 2016; Giannini, Jenkis & Saavedra, 2020; Guedes *et al.*, 2020; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

According to international literature, play is defined as a) a basic characteristic of the child's well-tempered development, b) a fundamental means of gathering experiences, c) a key assessing tool for the child's learning and development (Aypay, 2016; Jantan *et al.*, 2015; Johnson & Wu, 2019; O' Keeffeet & McNally, 2021; Pursi, 2019; Wood, 2014; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Namely, it offers the teacher the opportunity to observe their pupils and obtain information regarding their cognitive level and social-emotional development (Jantan *et al.*, 2015; Sivropoulou, 2004), d) a teaching asset and an important learning procedure, offering children the opportunity to learn within a safe, free and joyful environment (Brock *et al.*, 2016; Kieff & Casbergue, 2017; Loizou, 2021;

Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and e) the strongest predictor of children's academic success (Vogt *et al.*, 2018). Play provides experiences that can enhance academic learning by allowing students to build on their prior knowledge, experiences and skills through interactions with their peers and their environment (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Furthermore, play is considered as an important medium for the smooth transition of children from one level of education to another, such as from kindergarten to primary school. It is also important for the transition/return of students to school after critical periods where schools had to remain closed (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic) (Aminova, 2022; Fearn & Howard, 2012; Loizou, 2011; O' Keeffeet & McNally, 2021; Sakellariou *et al.*, 2021; Unicef, 2018). Play, in its various forms offers children the opportunity to wholesomely develop and learn pleasantly, free of pressure, and succeed academically (Loizou & Avgitidou, 2014). More specifically, pupils' involvement into kinetic and music-kinetic activities, socio-dramatic play, role-play games, play with raw materials, educational digital play, rule-play games, traditional play, puppet theatre, outdoor play, symbolic play and imaginary play, contributes into the development and improvement of their skills as well

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as their mutual interaction, helping them develop healthy behaviour patterns, show greater interest in learning, get more efficiently accustomed with the school environment and participate into the educational process more actively (Banou, 2022; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a, 2020b; Sakellariou & Banou, 2021a, 2021b; Sakellariou *et al.*, 2021).

Preschoolers and school pupils benefit not only on their engagement with various organised play activities but also on their involvement into designing, implementing and assessing the educational process of play. It has been proven that children's participation in the designing of the educational process (children suggesting and building toy-objects and play activities, setting the rules of the games) boosts their sense of autonomy and responsibility, teaches them of basic values such as sharing toys and collaborating while it improves their interaction with their peers and educator (Alwaely *et al.*, 2020; Andika *et al.*, 2019; Guedes *et al.*, 2020; Loizou & Charalambous, 2017; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020c; Zaragas, 2011).

In the Greek Kindergarten Educator's Guide 2021, play still holds true as the basic 'highway' for learning and development within kindergarten, constituting, at the same time, the base for organising learning conditions in the context of investigation which promotes the development of post-cognitive skills (Institute of Educational Policy, The Hellenic Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religious Affairs, 2021, 55). On the contrary, in the Greek Primary School Curricula not much mention on play is made, except in some of its categories, such as the language play and the educational digital play. Also, the value of play as a learning and didactical tool in school environments does not seem to be emphasised in the Curricula (Banou, 2022).

Although play is a great means of education, learning and development and it contributes to the achievement of the interdisciplinary approach of knowledge and realisation of learning objectives, its relationship with learning does not seem to be acknowledged and it is not utilised for pedagogical purposes by a large part of the educational community in Kindergarten and Primary School both in Greece and worldwide (Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Freeman, 2015; Lynch, 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009).

Play in many school classrooms is considered as unimportant and it is not satisfactorily used for the achievement of learning and teaching objectives (Wu, 2013; Wu, 2021). On the one hand, play is more associated with leisure, recreation and school break, while on the other hand learning it is mainly connected with the activities that are organised and guided by the teacher (Bulunuz, 2012; Peterson, Portier & Murray, 2017; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

The main purpose of primary school is the acquisition of academic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic) through the traditional form of teaching, while play comes second (Rao & Li, 2009). In other words, play is scantily to hardly used towards the achievement of learning and teaching goals (Wu, 2013; Wu, 2021). The present situation may be due to: a) teachers' perception that teaching subjects (e.g. Physics) through play is challenging (Cheng, 2001; Miller & Almon, 2009), b) teachers' perception that play is a waste of time and it cannot contribute to the achievement of academic goals (Jantan *et al.*, 2015; Veiga *et al.*, 2016; Yusof & Alas, 2021), c) parents' negative perceptions of play, which affect teachers' decisions (Parmar *et al.*, 2004; Wu, 2021) and d) in the passing reference of the Curricula regarding the importance of play and its contribution to child's learning and development (Cheng, 2012; Cheng, 2001).

Play comprises the subject matter for numerous researchers. Over the recent years, research has been conducted under the main object of studying the social and emotional interactions of preschool children during the educational process of play (Bjork-Willen, 2007; Karrebak, 2011; Weyns *et al.*, 2017). The same goes for research that examines the contribution of different play categories towards the strengthening of the children's social and emotional interaction in preschool and school centres (Bierman & Motamedi, 2015; Ursache, Blair & Raver, 2012; Zaragas, 2016). Few studies, however, seem to have been carried out that investigate teachers' views on play and the use of a play-based learning approach in primary school (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002; Tsiaras, 2004).

Within Greece, studies have been conducted, in which various play categories within preschool and school environments are examined (Athanasaki, 2019; Banou, Strati & Mitsi, 2021; Roumelioti, 2021), as well as studies exploring the views of current and future kindergarten educators about play and its role into the educational process (Banou, 2017; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a, 2020b). No studies seem, nonetheless, to have been carried out that examine and compare the views of elementary school teachers to those of kindergarten educators on play and its employment as a didactical tool in the context of the elementary school and kindergarten educational process. The present work contributes towards this direction. It comes to deposit exploratory data onto the scientific community, on the purpose of promoting issues concerning the utilisation of play as a tool for learning, bringing on findings to lead to suggestions about the implementation of play-based approach into the kindergarten and elementary school, no less further employment and utilisation of play categories into the daily school practice.

More specifically, the objective of this study is to investigate on the views of Primary Education professionals regarding play and its utilisation as a

didactical tool within the context of the educational process in the Kindergarten and Elementary School. Our study is based upon the following investigational hypothesis and questions:

Investigational Hypothesis:

- Kindergarten educators to a greater extent utilise play for teaching and learning purposes within school environments than Elementary School teachers do.

Investigational Questions:

- What is the role of play into the educational process?
- What is the role of play into the Curricula?
- What is the contribution of play into the child's emotional development?
- What is the contribution of play into the child's language development?
- What is the contribution of play into the child's logical-mathematical development?
- What is the contribution of freestyle and organised play into the child's learning and development?
- Do the educationalists assess children's learning through play?
- Do preschool and school pupils participate into the designing and organising of the play environment?
- Do the educationalists participate into child play?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Objective

Through the study, it is sought the views of kindergarten educators and elementary school teachers from all Greece to be investigated, with regards to play and its utilisation as a didactical tool in the context of the kindergarten and elementary school educational process.

2.2. Research Sample

The hereunto exploratory work was conducted during the 2019-2020 academic year, on Primary Education professionals (N: 1508). To specify with, for the comparative study, 715 kindergarten educators (N: 715), to a percentage of 45.55% and 793 elementary school teachers (N: 793), to a 52.6% were selected by random stratified sampling throughout Greece and they were all asked to answer questions, via questionnaire, in relevance to play and its utilisation as a didactical tool within the context of the educational process for kindergarten and elementary school. Our purpose was to select of a large amount of the Greek educationalists' population. Ultimately, the objective was to illuminate the poor Greek literature and articles that account for play, based on the opinions of Primary Education professionals.

Of the participants, 324 were of male gender, while 1184 of female. Their ages spanned from 22 to 61

years. In particular, 186 educationalists (12.3%) were of ages between 22 and 31 years, 393 (26.1%) from 32 to 41 years, 452 (30.0%) from 42 to 51 years and 477 (31.6%) from 52 to 61 years. The highest percentage of the educationalists (41.6%) were between 11 to 20 years of teaching service, 24.3% between 21 and 30 years, 14.1% of over 30 years, 11.7% up to 5 years, while only 8.4% were between 6 and 10 years of service.

620 educationalists (41.1%) reported they had never been trained on cognitive domains about play during their undergraduate studies, while 888 (58.9%) reported that they had. 634 educationalists (42.0%) claimed they had not received any retraining with play being its basic course, while the remaining 874 (58.0%) reported that they had.

2.3. Research Tool

Survey research via questionnaire was considered as the most suitable data gathering method towards screening the views of a representative sample among the Primary Education Professionals, regarding play and its utilisation as a learning tool within the context of the educational process. After a profound studying of the Greek and international literature and articles, a questionnaire was formed, which consists of two parts: a) Personal information of the participants and b) open and closed-ended questions about play and its utilisation in the preschool and school learning environments, some of which were correspondent to the Likert scale; according to it, the participants would report the level of frequency, under a statement with the use of an 1 to 5 scale. Furthermore, there are statements concerning the 'Yes' or 'No' types of questions. Finally, the responders had the opportunity to select more than one answers to various questions (see Appendix for details).

The questionnaire was distributed into facilities- kindergartens and elementary schools- of all Greece, through the 'Google Forms' app, during the 2019-2020 school year and the educationalists were briefed of the purposes of the research. The gathering of the forms took place during the same school year. In total, 1508 forms were filled out and delivered back. It should be mentioned that the confidentiality and secrecy of the responses was assured and it was stressed out that the releasing of the results would take place after the completion of the study, to all interested parts. The researchers provided explanatory answers to all educationalists who expressed any query on the questions, via e-mail, without, however, the answers of the responders to be in any way affected or any personal view or opinion to be expressed.

The thematic axes and questions within the survey were formed after a scrutiny of not only the Greek and worldwide literature and resources, but also of the Kindergarten and Elementary School Curricula. The topics of the questionnaire have been internationally

proposed and examined and previous studies have been conducted, this is why the questionnaire is truly valid in terms of content. The qualitative criterion was taken on account. We followed the already existing theoretical framing and selected questions/axes that cover basic thematic sections. The scales are of qualitative not quantitative nature while the indicators are not applicable. Finally, this study is a part of a broader research work.

2.4. Limitations of the Study

The educationalists who filled out the questionnaire were working at State kindergarten and elementary school facilities throughout Greece. Only educationalists working at State facilities participated in our study, since the majority of Private kindergartens and elementary schools were unwilling to contribute into the research.

2.5. Data Analysis

The answers were collected, codified and processed with the help of SPSS v23.0 statistical package while their analysis was carried out where appropriate. For the description of the five-scale outcomes, mean values and standard deviations were used. Regarding the multiple choice questions, description tables were created with percentiles not only in total of the entries, but in total of the participants, as well. T- Tests were conducted for two independent samples on the outcomes deviation, respectively to job title, after taking tests of normality according to the Shapiro-Wilk criterion. For the examination of the relations among categorical variables, the Pearson Chi Square Independence Test was employed. For the codification of open-ended questions, the method of Sampling Categorisation was implemented. The responses to open-ended questions were gathered and screened, while they were categorised per content, under the caution of no information leakage

would take place, while, at the same time, the responses of the same content would be incorporated within the same category.

2.6. Research ethics

The first step was to be granted a licence by the bodies in charge and the Research Ethics Committee (REC/EDHE) of the University of Ioannina, so that the research on the subjects would be carried out. On a second phase, an e-mail was sent to the school facilities throughout Greece, the purpose of the study was explained to the Heads and Principals, and they were asked to voluntarily fill out the questionnaire, not only themselves but the educationalists of each school, as well. The conductors guaranteed of the educationalists’ absolute confidentiality and personal data protection, accentuating at the same time that the forms would be collected for exclusively explorative purposes.

3. PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY RESULTS

3.1 The Role of Play in the Curricula

Primary Education professionals were asked about the importance of play within the Interdisciplinary Unified Framework of Study Programmes (D.E.P.P.S.). From the elements on Chart 1, a statistically significant deviation is observed between the views of the responders, regarding the importance of play, concerning learning in the D.E.P.P.S. (p -value<0.001, Pearson Chi-Square). The majority of kindergarten educators (73.7%) deems the position of play in the D.E.P.P.S. as very important, a view shared by the majority of elementary school teachers to a percentage of 40.6%. A poor 2.3% of elementary school teachers sees play as unimportant, a view that was not adopted by any of the kindergarten educators.

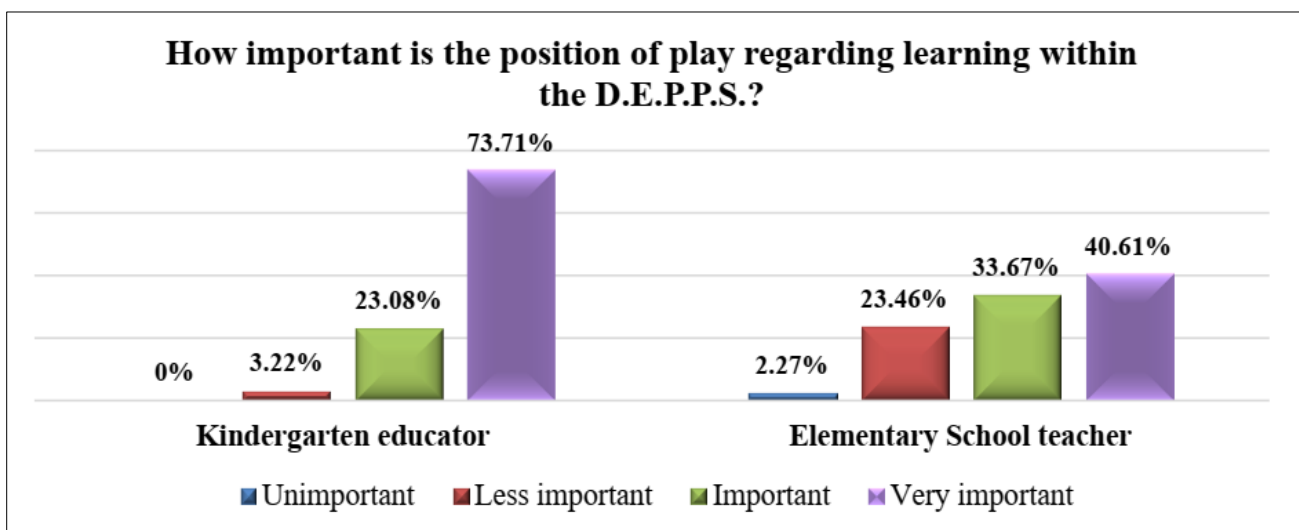


Chart 1: Views of educationalists on the importance of play in the D.E.P.P.S.

3.2. Contribution of Play into the Children’s Emotional Development

Following, a comparison is made between the educationalists’ views regarding the utilisation of play categories, on the purpose of children’s expressing and management of emotions. From the elements of Table 1, it is obvious that kindergarten educators give more positive answers about play than the elementary school

teachers, since throughout the questions, the percentage regarding a positive view on the kindergarten educators’ side, exceeds that of the elementary school teachers, who mostly employ educational digital play (64.5%), then socio-dramatic play (50.6%), rule play games (49.4%), kinetic play (49.2%), traditional play (45.6%), music-kinetic play (44.5%) as well as puppet theatre (30.9%) on the purpose of children’s emotional development.

Table 1: Views of educationalists on the utilisation of play, on the purpose of children’s expressing and managing emotions, under the criterion of job title

| Utilisation of play categories regarding children’s expression and emotion managing, per job title of educationalists | | | |
|---|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| | Job title | | Total |
| | Kindergarten Educator | Elementary School Teacher | |
| Do you utilise kinetic play, in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 193 50,8% | 187 49,2% | 380 |
| Do you utilise socio-dramatic play in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 663 49,4% | 679 50,6% | 1342 |
| Do you utilise rule play in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 213 50,6% | 208 49,4% | 421 |
| Do you utilise traditional play in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 153 54,4% | 128 45,6% | 281 |
| Do you utilise puppet theatre in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 478 69,1% | 214 30,9% | 692 |
| Do you utilise music-kinetic play in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 338 55,5% | 271 44,5% | 609 |
| Do you utilise educational digital play in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions? | 65 35,5% | 118 64,5% | 183 |
| Total | 2103 | 1805 | 3908 |

3.3. Contribution of Play in Child Language Development

Table 2 presents the views of the educationalists about the utilisation of verbal play, on the purpose of their pupils’ language development. A statistically significant deviation is observed among the subjects,

under the criterion of job title ($p < 0.001$). Those among the participants who are kindergarten educators seem to promote children’s on-hand involvement into a range of verbal communication forms (Mean=4, 33), towards the strengthening of their speech, unlike the elementary school teachers (Mean= 3, 59).

Table 2: Views of educationalists regarding the promotion of experiential engagement of pupils with various forms of verbal communication, on the purpose of enhancing their speech, under the criterion of job title

| | | For the enhancement of speech of pupils, do you promote their experiential engagement with various forms of verbal communication? | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|--------------------|---------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Valid N |
| Job title | Kindergarten Educator | 4,33 | ,64 | 715,00 |
| | Elementary School Teacher | 3,59 | ,76 | 793,00 |

3.4. Contribution of Play in Child Logical-Mathematical Development

The educationalists were asked whether they encourage their pupils to engage themselves with games that promote their logical-mathematical development. Based on Table 3, there is a statistically significant deviation among the subjects under the criterion of job

title ($p < 0.001$), where, in fact, kindergarten educators encourage children to play games of quick geometrical shapes recognition or search for hidden shapes and present them before their peers, to a greater degree (Mean= 4, 37) than those who bear the job title of elementary school teachers (Mean=3, 53).

Table 3: Views of educationalists regarding children’s engagement with games of quick shapes’ recognition or finding hidden shapes, in order for them to learn how to recognise and arrange the basic plane and solid geometrical shapes based on their general characteristics as well as in a variety of positions, sizes and directions

| | | Do you encourage your pupils to engage themselves with games of quick shapes’ recognition or finding hidden shapes, in order for them to learn how to recognise and arrange the basic plane and solid geometrical shapes based on their general characteristics as well as in a variety of positions, sizes and directions? | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|--------------------|---------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Valid N |
| Job title | Kindergarten Educator | 4,37 | ,63 | 715,00 |
| | Elementary School Teacher | 3,53 | ,75 | 793,00 |

3.5. Contribution of Freestyle and Organised Play in Child Learning and Development

On Chart 2 the views of the educationalists regarding the utilisation of free and organised play within the educational process which aims at the child’s learning and development, are monitored. According to

the elements presented, the majority of kindergarten educators (96, 36%) favours for free and organised play, in contradiction to the elementary school teachers whose majority only shares the same view to a percentage of 84, 62%.

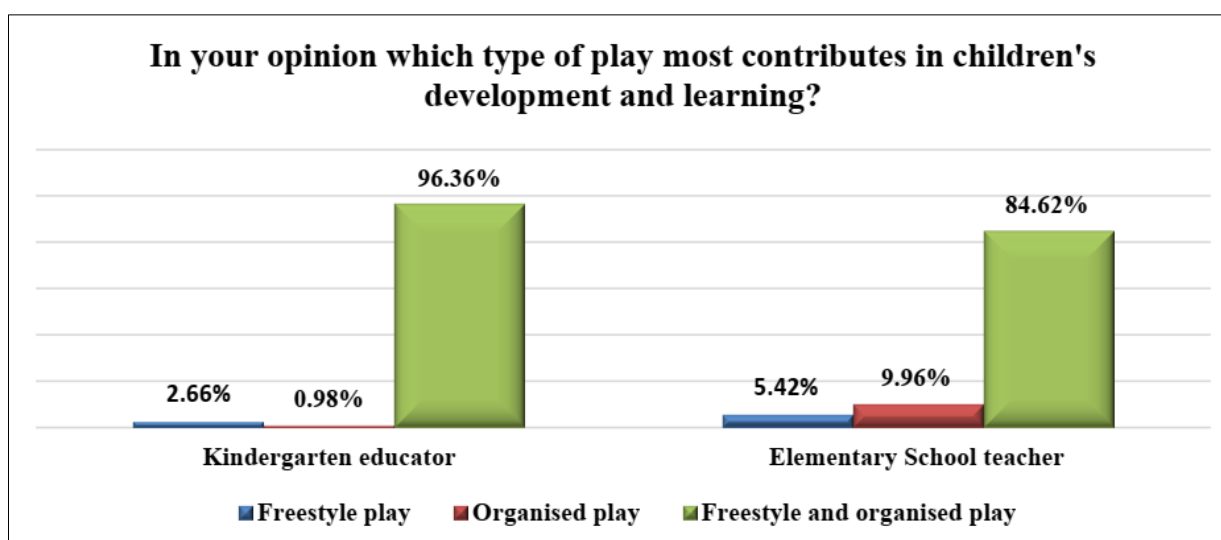


Chart 2: Contribution of freestyle and organised play in child learning and development

3.6. Assessment of Children’s learning Through Play

The educators were asked to give their answers regarding whether they assess children’s learning with the assistance of play or not. According to Table 4, a statistically significant deviation is observed among the

participants, respectively to their job title ($p < 0.001$). Kindergarten educators seem to assess children’s learning through play, to a much higher degree (Mean= 4, 18) than their elementary school colleagues (Mean= 3, 31).

Table 4: Views of educationalists on the assessment of children’s learning through play under the criterion of job title

| | | Do you assess children’s learning through play? | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|--------------------|---------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Valid N |
| Job title | Kindergarten Educator | 4,18 | ,70 | 715,00 |
| | Elementary School Teacher | 3,31 | ,99 | 793,00 |

According to Chart 3, a statistically significant variation exists among the responders under the criterion of attending re-educating seminaries about play ($p < 0.001$). More on this, those among the educationalists

who have indeed taken up such retraining seem to assess children’s learning to a higher degree than their colleagues who have not.

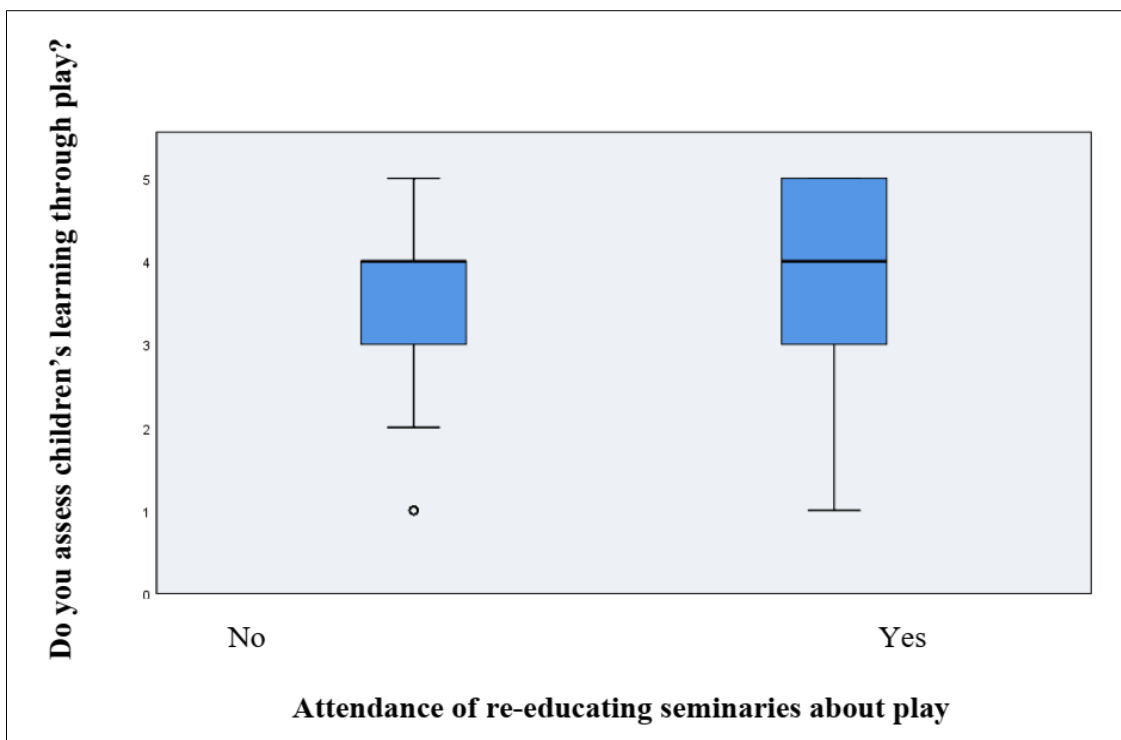


Chart 3: Views of educationalists about the assessment of children's learning through play, under the criterion of the attendance of re-educating seminars

3.7. Participation of Pupils into the Educational Process of Play

According to Table 5, kindergarten educators (Mean= 3, 61), to a greater extent than the elementary

school teachers (Mean= 3, 03), claim that children take part into the designing and organising of the play environment (p<0.001).

Table 5: Views of educationalists on the pupils' participation into the educational process of play under the criterion of job title

| | | Do the children participate into the designing and organising of the play environment? | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|--------------------|---------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Valid N |
| Job title | Kindergarten educator | 3,61 | ,78 | 715,00 |
| | Elementary School teacher | 3,03 | ,90 | 793,00 |

3.8. Participation of the Educationalists into Children's Play

The educationalists taking part in the research were to respond whether they participate into their pupils' play or not. According to Table 6, a statistically

significant deviation is observed among the responders under the criterion of job title. Kindergarten educators participate more (Mean= 3, 77) than teachers (Mean= 3,46) in children's play (p<0.001).

Table 6: Views of educationalists on their own participation into children's play under the criterion of job title

| | | Do you participate into children's play? | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|--|--------------------|---------|
| | | Mean | Standard Deviation | Valid N |
| Job title | Kindergarten educator | 3,77 | ,70 | 715,00 |
| | Elementary School teacher | 3,46 | ,82 | 793,00 |

3.9. Qualitative Aspects of the Primary Education Professionals' Views with Regards to the Utilisation of Play within Early Childhood School Environments Question: In Your Opinion, Why Should Play Be Utilised During the Educational Process?

The Primary Education professionals were asked why should play be utilised into the educational

process. From the data there seems to be a statistically significant deviation among their views on the issue under discourse (p-value<0.001, Pearson Chi-Square). To specify with, kindergarten educators see play mainly as a tool for learning, to a percentage of 32, 9% ('Play assists on experiential learning while the educational process is actualised in a pleasant manner for the kids'),

whereas elementary school teachers consider play as mostly a means of entertainment and discharge of children’s vigour to a percentage reaching 24, 5% (‘Play is a way for outlet and leisure. Through it, children take a rest from the burdens of lessons’). Finally, though with a different frequency, both groups agree that play comprises a means for a wholesome development of the children (here is an ostensive response by a kindergarten

educator: ‘Play ought to be utilised within the educational process, because it helps kids socialise, learn, as well as explore their environment effortlessly and in pace with their personal rate’, an ostensive response by an elementary school teacher ‘Utilisation of play into the educational process is necessary since it contributes on the child’s social-emotional, mental and physical development’).

Table 7: Views of educationalists on the utilisation of play into the educational process

| | | Job title | | |
|--|---|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| | | Kindergarten educator | Elementary School teacher | |
| In your opinion, why should play be utilised into the educational process? | Tool for learning | Count | 235 | 154 |
| | | Column N % | 32,9% | 19,4% |
| | Educational means | Count | 87 | 87 |
| | | Column N % | 12,2% | 11,0% |
| | Means for children’s wholesome development | Count | 174 | 200 |
| | | Column N % | 24,3% | 25,2% |
| | Means of entertainment and discharge of children’s vigour | Count | 95 | 194 |
| | | Column N % | 13,3% | 24,5% |
| | Motivations for learning and greater involvement of children into the educational process | Count | 70 | 114 |
| | | Column N % | 9,8% | 14,4% |
| | Means for assessing children’s learning | Count | 54 | 44 |
| | | Column N % | 7,6% | 5,5% |

4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Kindergarten educators and elementary school teachers from all Greece were requested to answer questions about play and its utilisation into the educational process within early childhood environments. The exploratory findings have shown that kindergarten educators give more positive responses regarding play, considering that it mainly works as an educational tool. This aspect has been supported not only by the Kindergarten Curricula but also by the international literature and articles (Brock *et al.*, 2016; Loizou & Loizou, 2019; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a, 2020c; Wood, 2014). On the contrary, the majority of elementary school teachers takes play mostly as an entertaining activity and means of recreation, a view that has been attested to by other researchers (Peterson, Portier & Murray, 2017).

Kindergarten educators claim that play should be utilised in the context of the educational process because it comprises a learning tool and gives children the opportunity to learn in a pleasant and creative manner, while elementary school teachers think that play should indeed be utilised, since it helps children discharge their vigour, take a rest from the lessons and have fun (Banou, 2017; O’ Keeffeet & MacNally, 2021; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a). This view among the elementary school teachers might be due to the fact that inside the Schools of Primary Education at the majority of Greek Universities, courses with play as their basic teaching subject fail to be offered.

Kindergarten educators deem the position of play in early childhood Curricula as highly significant, a view which has been supported by other studies (Banou, 2017; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a, 2020b), while elementary school teachers consider it as not so significant to even insignificant (Cheng, 2012). The weight preschool educationalists lend on play, in contrast to elementary school teachers is due to the fact that play is the core element for preschool curricula, whereas in those of elementary school but a minor reference is made on play (e.g. educational digital play) and its role as a tool for learning and development (Banou, 2022). There should, however be a change on the philosophy of the very Curricula which account for the Elementary School regarding play so that not only play itself but play-based learning approach gains a more significant role within the Curricula.

On the basis of exploratory data, kindergarten educators utilise play throughout its various aspects, on the purpose of the children’s learning and development (emotional, linguistic, logical-mathematical) (Pyle, DeLuca, & Danniels, 2017; Walsh & Fallon, 2021), while elementary school teachers mostly implement educational-digital play (Amorim *et al.*, 2022; McTigue *et al.*, 2020), which does comprise an effective pedagogical asset when it comes to the broader learning procedure (Amorim *et al.*, 2022). The situation under discourse stems from the fact that within preschool curricula play comes forward through its various forms (kinetic, music-kinetic, educational-digital, socio-dramatic, role play games, traditional play, play with raw materials, rule play games, puppet theatre) while in the

elementary school ones, only a minimal reference is made on play, with just a certain number of play categories being highlighted such as educational-digital play and language play. Our exploratory hypothesis (Kindergarten educators utilise it to a higher degree than their elementary school colleagues for teaching and learning purposes within school environments) seems therefore to be verified.

Free as well as organised play activities are more highly promoted within preschool environments than school ones, a fact which proves that kindergarten educators, more than elementary school teachers acknowledge the importance of the forementioned play categories for children's learning and development (Brock *et al.*, 2016; Sousa & Oxley, 2021; Wood, 2014). On the contrary, elementary school teachers believe that organised play activities can contribute mainly on children's learning. This aspect could possibly be attributed to the fact that within the elementary school play is mostly related with recess and leisure of the pupils, while organised play aims at the achievement of learning goals (Peterson, Portier, & Murray, 2017). It should be mentioned that this non-positive attitude of the elementary school teachers towards play may be due to either their lacking re-training on play issues or to the complete absence of play-related cognitive domains within the majority of University Early Childhood Education Faculties throughout the country.

Teaching courses on pedagogical merits of play by the Universities' Early Education Faculties is, therefore, taken as necessary, the same goes for conducting retraining seminars on play, with play as their basic subject, so that the Educators are taught of appropriately utilising play and play didactics inside preschool and school learning environments (Harris & Bilton, 2018). Play (either organised or freestyle) ought to be given a more important place within the Elementary School Curricula as well, while teachers should more substantially associate it with learning, since it, according to literature, facilitates children's learning and wholesome development, contributes to their academic achievement and comprises a basic tool for assessing their learning and development (Brock *et al.*, 2016; Fisher *et al.*, 2013; Gardner-Neblett *et al.*, 2016; Weisberg *et al.*, 2015).

Both, kindergarten educators and elementary school teachers who have undertaken a retraining on play-related issues assess children's learning through play to a higher level than their colleagues who have not been respectively retrained (O' Keefe & MacNally, 2021). It is worth mentioning that within the elementary school the learning level of pupils is mainly assessed through tests and evaluation papers, not through play (Constantinou & Constantinou, 2017). Play should, nonetheless, be more extensively employed towards assessment purposes within school environments (Wood, 2014). At this point, necessary is deemed the

substantial retraining of educationalists on play issues, in order for themselves to comprehend the importance of play as a learning and assessing tool and familiarise with ways to incorporate play into their own teaching (Sakellariou & Banou, 2020a).

Finally, kindergarten educators are keener on urging their pupils take part into the designing and organising their school play environments than elementary school teachers, while they seem to be more participative in the children's play. This specific case could be attributed to the fact that preschool curricula are based on play and play-related learning approach so kindergarten educators are better informed than elementary school teachers, not only over the significance of play as a learning and development tool but also the participative approach of learning (designing and assessment of the educational process of play).

In any case, the encouragement of pupils, on the educationalists' side, to engage themselves with the very designing of the environment is considered to be of uttermost significance, taking on account the fact that approach via participation holds a key role for the quality of the education provided while it does leave its mark onto a more substantial and integral familiarisation of children with the educational procedure (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020c).

Furthermore, the educationalists themselves ought to be eager to participate into children's play; this sort of involvement truly boosts children's positive relationship with their peers, uplifts their engagement with the overall educational process and builds up their academic skills (Kilday & Ryan, 2019; Sakellariou & Banou, 2020c).

The present exploratory work proposes a) the implementation of play-based learning approach within preschool and school environments along with the backing of teaching in play, b) the reconsideration of Primary Education professionals' views regarding play and the role it holds in the context of the educational process, c) the exhaustive study of the Curricula by the educationalists, d) the tuition of cognitive objects which revolve around play as their basic axis, on the side of University Early Education Faculties, e) the promotion of participative learning approach (participatory designing and assessing the overall educational procedure by the educationalists in collaboration with the children as well as with their parents), f) the utilisation of play a tool for children's learning assessment and g) the substantial re-educating of the educationalists on play issues.

Future research could investigate upon and compare the views of practising along with prospective kindergarten educators and elementary school teachers of all academic years, on the issue of play and its utilisation within the context of the educational process.

In a broader aspect, further studies would be possible to be conducted on the purpose of examining the beliefs and intentions of Primary Education professionals over the utilisation of play as a teaching and learning tool in the context of preschool and school education. Ultimately, it would be utterly useful that studies would be carried out in which the views of toddlers and elementary school pupils themselves regarding play within preschool and school environments would be explored.

5. CONCLUSION

Play comprises a basic pedagogical tool as well as an inextricable part of the educational process, while it bears the very meaning of freedom, gives prominence to behavioural models but, at the same time, it is an evolutionary operation. More to this, it helps towards a tractable approach to knowledge in a joyful and fun way. For all these reasons, play-based learning approach has drawn the lights of many researchers as well as educational systems throughout all these years.

The goal of our study was to explore the views of kindergarten educators and elementary school teachers about play and its utilisation within the context of the educational process for the kindergarten and the elementary school. From the data it became clear that kindergarten educators are the ones to favour for teaching and learning through play, to a greater degree than their elementary school colleagues. Play comprises a fundamental teaching and learning tool mainly in the Kindergarten, holds a prominent place in the preschool Curricula while, through its variety of forms, it contributes to the child's socio-emotional, linguistic and logical-mathematical development. Kindergarten educators, unlike elementary school teachers, assess children's learning through play, encourage to a greater level, their pupils to be a part of the designing and organising of the school play settings and they involve themselves into their pupils' play.

The views of the educationalists who agreed to take part in this study were explored in terms of other types of variables, such as years of teaching service, age, gender and previous attendance of courses over the pedagogical values of play during undergraduate studies. The conductors recorded no statistical differences, whatsoever. More extensive research is, nonetheless of dire necessity to be carried out in order for a more comprehensive generalisation of data to be achieved.

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APPENDIX
Research Questionnaire

Dear Educators,

This questionnaire addresses primary education professionals (Kindergarten Educators and Elementary School Teachers). Its purpose is to investigate upon the educationalists' views on the utilisation of play as a didactical means within preschool and proto-school education. It is structured in two parts, for which you are kindly requested to answer in multiple choice as well as essay questions. The forms are completely confidential and anonymous. It shall be used exclusively for the purposes of the study.

Your opinion is extremely important for exploring the issues of play didactics, but also for the utilisation of play within the educational process of the Kindergarten and the Elementary School. Your participation is absolutely voluntary and we please, after you have carefully read the questions that follow, to respond in an individual and sincere manner.

Thank you in advance for your participation and valuable help.

PART 1
DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Job Title

| | | | |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|
| Elementary School teacher | 1 | Kindergarten educator | 2 |
|---------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|

2. Gender

| | | | |
|------|---|--------|---|
| Male | 1 | Female | 2 |
|------|---|--------|---|

3. Age

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|---|
| 22 to 31 years | 1 | 52 to 61 years | 4 |
| 32 to 41 years | 2 | | |
| 42 to 51 years | 3 | | |

4. Years of Teaching Service

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|---|
| Up to 5 years | 1 | 21 to 30 years | 4 |
| 6 to 10 years | 2 | Over 30 years | 5 |
| 11 to 20 years | 3 | | |

5. Courses on Play as a Didactical Means During Undergraduate Studies

| | | | |
|-----|---|----|---|
| Yes | 1 | No | 2 |
|-----|---|----|---|

6. Retraining with Regards to Play

| | | | |
|-----|---|----|---|
| Yes | 1 | No | 2 |
|-----|---|----|---|

PART 2
QUESTIONS REGARDING PLAY WITHIN
PRESCHOOL AND SCHOOL LEARNING

Play and its role into the educational process

7. In your opinion why should play be utilised into the educational process?

.....

Play and the Curriculum

8. How important is the position play holds regarding learning within the D.E.P.P.S.?

| | | | |
|----------------|-----------|----------------|-------------|
| Very important | Important | Less important | Unimportant |
|----------------|-----------|----------------|-------------|

Play, Social and Personal Development

9. Which of the following types do you most utilise in order for the children to learn how to express and manage their emotions (e.g. envy, fear, anger)? You are free to select more than one options.

1. Kinetic play
2. Socio-dramatic play
3. Rule games (e.g. board games)
4. Traditional play
5. Puppet theatre
6. Music-kinetic play
7. Educational digital play
8. Other

Play and Language

10. For the empowerment of the pupils' verbal skills do you favour for their experiential engagement with various forms of verbal communication (dramatisation, theater, role play games, play with the use of puppet-characters/caricature, tongue-twisters, traditional play)?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Frequently | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|

Play and Mathematics

11. Do you encourage children play games of quick shapes recognition or search for hidden shapes and present those they know in front of their peers, in order to learn recognise and arrange the basic plane and solid geometrical shapes based on their general characteristics as well as on a variety of positions, sizes and directions?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Frequently | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|

Categories-types of play

12. In your opinion, which type of play most contributes onto the children's learning and development?

1. Freestyle play
2. Organised play
3. Freestyle and Organised play

Assessment of the Play Educational Process

13. Do you assess children's learning through play?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Frequently | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|

Play and School Learning Environments

14. Do children participate into the designing and organising the play environment?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Frequently | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|

The Educationalist's Role into Child Play

15. Do you participate into children's play?

| | | | | |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|
| Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Frequently | Always |
|-------|--------|-----------|------------|--------|

Cite This Article: Maria Sakellariou, Maria Banou, Eleni Loizou, Charilaos Zaragas (2024). Views of Greek Primary Education Professionals on the Utilisation of Play within Preschool and School Environments. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 7(2), 27-40.
