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A Cross-Cultural Study on Factors Affecting Children's Agentic Action in Their Play

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Abstract

Play, and especially free play, offers a unique opportunity for children to act with agency. Yet the regulated and routinized structure of early childhood education and care settings, impedes children's agentic action which is limited by adult-imposed rules. The present cross-cultural study aims to explore the extent to which Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems in seven countries are enabling children to be agentic and provide opportunities for children's agency development during play. Specifically, founded on the rationale that in the context of an ECEC setting the notion of agency is interconnected with the notion of freedom, the present study aims at exploring through the responses of 187 early childhood educators' from seven countries, children's prerogative to choose how, where and with whom to play, which resources to use in their play, how much time to spend on play and the extent to which adults' rules limit children's opportunities to exercise agency and control. In addition, the study aims at exploring if and how educators' and children's characteristics affect the opportunities for agentic action. Results highlight that although children's autonomy and their right to participate in shaping their experiences in the ECEC setting are valued and acknowledged across countries, their agentic action is not equally supported in all seven countries. Specifically, although ECEC systems in some of the countries are characterized by an ethos of agency, in the majority of them children are not viewed as real co-constructors of their play experiences.

Keywords: Free play, Free choice, Agency, Early childhood education and care, Cross-cultural study

Introduction

In recent years, children's agency has received increased attention in early childhood research, policy, and pedagogical practice (Degotardi, 2013; Scott, 2019). The importance of promoting and fostering children's right is grounded in theories such as the new sociology of childhood, on child rights-based approaches, as well as on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989) which all acknowledge that children are "capable, active, agentic beings with human rights" (Scott, 2019, p. 23) and have the right to be active participants and to influence all matters affecting their lives, including lived experiences, routines and learning. Children's active participation includes their right to be listened to, to express opinions, to make decisions, and to share power (Shier, 2001 as cited in Degotardi, 2013). Such theories and approaches presuppose that children's voices are at the center of the educational practice and that "children [are] relatively free from adult intrusion and direction, enabling them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership, and control, and to direct their own learning" (Wood, 2014, p. 4).

One of the fundamental rights of preschool-aged¹ children is play (UNCRC, Article 31); an activity which among other features, enables children to be active participants and exert their agency. Yet, even though the UNCRC was ratified more than 30 years ago, neither children's right to be active agents in their lives nor their right to play are ensured across countries (Sirkko et al., 2019). Specifically, although "early childhood education settings can provide ideal arenas for the realization of children's agentic rights [...], pedagogical and institutional practices can either enable or constrain children's agency" (Sirkko et al., 2019, p. 284). For example, the increased emphasis on academics and the decreased emphasis on play, jeopardizes opportunities, time, and space for free play, which is more and more silenced in ECEC (Rentzou et al., 2019) and shifts attention from child-initiated activities and free play to adult-led and structured activities (Fisher et al., 2008). In addition, existing research (e.g., Scott, 2019; Sirkko et al., 2019; Wood, 2014) highlights that even in the context of child-centered practices, that value children's agency as their right, children's free choice, participation in decision-making and play is always constrained, to a smaller or larger extent, by educators' beliefs and values, institutional practices, curricula, policies, and regulations.

The present study aims to explore the extent to which ECEC settings in seven countries are enabling children to be agentic and provide opportunities for children's agency development during play. Specifically, founded on the rationale that in the context of an ECEC setting the notion of agency is interconnected with the notion of freedom, the present study aims at exploring children's prerogative to choose when to play, with what to play and for how long they can play without interruptions. In addition, the study aimed at exploring educators' stated purpose of play and stated role during children's play and how these limit children's opportunities to exercise

¹ In the context of the present study, as preschool-aged children are defined the children from birth to their enrollment in the primary school.

agency and control. Finally, the study explored whether and how educators' characteristics (e.g., years of experience and participation in professional development) and children's age affect the opportunities for agentic action.

The Concept of Children's Agency

Fostering independence and providing children opportunities to make choices and decisions, to assume responsibilities and to influence their world is important for children's well-being and overall development, and simultaneously conveys the message that they are valued as competent members of the society. These notions are central to the concept of agency which, according to Wood (2014), has a transformative potential as it allows someone to change his/her own circumstances.

The concept of children's agency has been defined and conceptualized in varying ways. Touhill (2013) maintains that agency "is linked to the control someone has on what is happening around them and the potential to influence those occurrences" (p. 1). On the other hand, Wood (2014) urges that "agency involves the ability to learn, to teach oneself and to develop reflexivity and metacognitive capacities" as well as "to manage the social dynamics of institutional and interpersonal power" (p. 7). Scott (2019) has provided the following extended definition of the concept of agency, which emphasizes the role of educators on children's agency development and enactment:

"Children's agency is when children act with initiative to pursue their valued outcomes, with consideration of others. Children's ability to enact their agency is dependent on educator practice. Educators can facilitate children's agency in early childhood education and care settings through prioritizing children's decision-making, and agency by engaging in practices which enable children to experience freedom and opportunities to exercise their power, appropriate to their abilities" (p. 174).

The concept of agency is centrally linked to and interconnected with the concept of freedom. Sen (1985 as cited in Scott, 2019) has used the notion of 'agency freedom' which "refers to the way in which an individual is free to pursue whatever goal or outcome it is that they deem to be valuable or meaningful" (p. 59).

As it becomes evident from these definitions, children's agency is promoted and developed by allowing children to make choices at many different levels and not from a limited range of options. For example, to promote children's agency, educators need to provide responsive and flexible learning environments, experiences and resources that are freely available, and children do not need adults' assistance to reach and use them. Apparently, the concept of children's agency goes beyond children's ability to make choices, to incorporate educators' practices and their active role in recognizing, supporting, and facilitating children's agency through support, encouragement, choice, and opportunities (Degotardi, 2013; Scott, 2019; Scott et al., 2020). It is postulated therefore, that children's agency does not happen in a vacuum, nor does it occur naturally, but rather it is advanced when efforts are taken to support children's autonomy, participation, and choice (Degotardi, 2013).

Yet such efforts seem to be limited. Specifically, although the concept of children's agency should underpin the ECEC discourse (Scott et al., 2020), educators frequently avoid offering children the opportunity to make choices as they might "not be compatible with an efficient daily routine and might complicate [the] day" (Touhill, 2013, p. 2). Free choice, free play and any other effort that can support children's autonomy, participation, and choice is constrained, according to the literature, by multiple factors, such as policy frameworks, space, time, resources, adult's role, rules, parents' expectations, gender, ethnicity, social class, ability, and disability and the schoolification of ECEC (Wood, 2014). In fact, even when children's agency is valued and promoted, children still have limited opportunities to enact their agency. For example, Sairanen and Kumpulainen (2014) found that in an ECEC setting where recognizing and enabling children's agency was valued, children still had very few opportunities to truly act with agency and "take the initiative to transform their positions and to change the course of activities" (p. 168). Wood (2014) also postulates that even if choices are offered to children, these are not unconditionally free, but rather aligned to "curriculum goals, the demands of 'outcomes-led' policy drivers privilege adults' rather than children's choices, with the outcomes being interpreted developmentally in relation to curriculum goals" (p. 5).

Children's Agency in Play

The concepts of agency and participation underpin most of the theoretical and pedagogical approaches to children's play, as agency is inherent to free play. Although there is not an unanimously accepted definition of play but rather an abundance of definitions and taxonomies of play (Rentzou et al., 2019), in their majority these definitions highlight that play is characterized by freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation, is concerned with the process rather than the product, and the players are the ones who control it and define the purpose.

Play experiences offer a unique opportunity for children to develop and practice their independence, identity, and agency. When children engage in free play they enact their agency, through being actively involved in their learning and through influencing and shaping their lives within the classroom, where they act and achieve goals (Markström & Halldén, 2009). Specifically, during their unstructured and free play² children can focus on the process rather than on the product and they have ample opportunities to use their imagination, curiosity, creativity, and intuition. Building on their prior experiences and interests, children can, during their freeplay, make choices and decisions on the way they will use and form their physical and social environment to meet the needs of their self-directed play. It would seem, therefore, that free play provides an ideal context for both the realization of agency in young children as well as the encouragement of agency by their caregivers (Degotardi, 2013). In addition, Wood (2014) maintains that "play is

² As discussed in detail in Rentzou et al. (2019), play is an elusive concept and there is an abundance of definitions. In the present study, free play is defined as: 1) intrinsically motivated; 2) controlled by the players; 3) concerned with process rather than product; 4) non literal; 5) free of externally imposed rules; and 6) characterized by the active engagement of the players (Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg, 1983).

a distinctive form of activity, in which children’s motivation to play reflects their need to develop mastery of play, and to enact forms of agency that are often denied to them in other contexts” (p. 7).

However, for play to promote children’s agency it needs to be open-ended, self-directed and inquiry based. On the contrary, when adults are the ones who choose children’s activities or assign children to play areas, children understand this as work and not as play (Degotardi, 2013). Existing research highlights that “children value freedom from structure, making choices, and having time to themselves” (Kapasi & Gleave, 2009 as cited in Wood, 2014, p. 4) and that they learn most from play only if it belongs to them (Degotardi, 2013).

Eccles and Templeton (2002 as cited in Nilsen, 2021) have found that when children can freely choose what to play and what materials to use, they play for longer periods, whereas Wolf (2014 as cited in Nilsen, 2021) maintains that if play materials are defined for use within limited physical spaces and set times, the organization may limit the play’s scope. In addition, Mwatha et al. (2017) found that there is a strong positive correlation between availability of play materials and children’s social and emotional development, and they postulate that “an environment that encourages children to make their own choices helps them feel safe, valued, adventurous, competent and confident to take initiative” (p. 279).

Children’s Agency in the Frameworks of the Participating Countries.³

Cyprus

The aim of the National Curriculum implemented in Cypriot kindergartens is “to strengthen the image of a capable, dynamic, determined and optimistic child, who develops through the relationships he forms in various socio-cultural contexts. A child who is actively and critically involved in negotiating his relationships and shaping his future and society” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020, p. 4). The Curriculum also acknowledges that children have their own voice and rights in the processes of learning and development.

Turning to play, the Curriculum emphasizes that the environment should be organized in such a way that provides children with opportunities to make decisions based on their pace of development. Although children have the freedom to choose space, playmates, activity, material and time limits, the Curriculum acknowledges that freedom is limited by the “rules and learning culture built by the social group under the guidance of the kindergarten teacher and the framework set by the kindergarten teacher, based on the assessment she/he makes and the respective goals she/he sets for each child individually but also for children as a whole” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020, p. 7).

³ For an overview of the ECEC system in each of the participating countries see Rentzou et al. (2019)

Denmark

In Denmark, the Day Care Act (Velfærdsministeriet, Ministry of Welfare, 2020) is founded on and influenced by the UNCRC. According to the Act, ECEC must promote children's well-being, learning, development, and character formation (Bildung) based on play and children's perspectives on their everyday life. Thus, the program must allow children to influence their experiences and are considered co-responsible for designing and introducing the experiences and activities offered to them. This way children can understand the mechanisms of democracy and they live in democratic settings. As part of this, childcare must contribute to children's agency, ability to participate in binding communities and integration in the Danish community. As part of the Act children in ECEC settings must be interviewed about their opinion on issues related to their everyday life in ECEC and children's opinion should be heard, taking into consideration their age and development. The interview, which results should be publicized, centers on issues such as children's view about childcare in general, about their relationships with other children and friendships, and about the teachers (e.g., whether the child likes the teachers and feels that the teachers like him/her, whether the teachers listen to the child, scold him/her, etc.), about indoor and outdoor equipment for play, etc.

Estonia

Although one of the main goals of ECEC in Estonia is the implementation of child-centered education (Tuul, 2017) and even though the renewal of the National Curriculum is based on the principles of child-initiated education, relatively little attention has been paid to child's agency. According to the National Curriculum (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava, 2008) children are active participants in learning and educational activities and they should be involved in the planning of activities, encouraged to make choices, and analyze what has been done. In terms of play, it is acknowledged as the main activity of preschool children, as according to the Curriculum play skills are the basis for development of children's general skills and skills and knowledge in all subject areas. To emphasize the importance of play, eight play-related learning outcomes are presented in the National Curriculum. According to the Curriculum educators are seen, on the one hand, as learning guides and creators of a supportive environment for children's play and development, and on the other hand, they are expected to plan activities in advance and follow (albeit flexibly) created action plans.

Greece

As far as child and infant/child centers are concerned, there is not any reference to children's agency in the Model Regulation (Government Gazette 4249, 2017). The Regulation emphasizes however that educators should provide such an environment and such opportunities that enable children to experience a climate of freedom and security and to develop abilities, such as self-acting and trust in their self and in their potentials.

Turning to kindergartens, according to the Curriculum (Kindergarten Curriculum, 2014) one of the basic skills that should be developed is children's autonomy, which is promoted by offering children opportunities to take initiative, to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings and to pose questions. In addition, the Curriculum places

emphasis on critical thinking and meta-cognitive strategies, which pre-suppose and can be promoted by giving children the opportunity to take initiatives, assume responsibilities, expressing ideas and co-constructing meanings. The Curriculum highlights that one of the ways that the learning process should be organized is play. Among other things, play supports children to function responsibly and with autonomy, to assume initiatives, to defend their choices and to dare to experiment. Educators' role is to act as mediators and with their interventions to support, propose and guide. Although the Curriculum encourages relative autonomy, there is no reference to children's agency, whereas there is only one reference to encouraging children's participation in decision-making.

Spain

The Spanish National Curriculum Framework is well aligned with UNCRC and children have opportunities to be active agents in their everyday lives, as the acquisition of autonomy in children's day-to-day activities is included as a specific aim for the early childhood framework in Spain (MEC, 2007). In fact, the Curriculum promotes children's responsibility, autonomy and initiative in the day-to-day classroom activities and the use of classroom space and materials.

In addition, the Curriculum specifically indicates the importance of incorporating meaningful activities based on children's interests in the ECEC Curriculum and of supporting children's ability to initiate their own learning and exercise choice about games and activities (Comunidad de Madrid, 2008). Although children are given the opportunity to take active part in their learning, educators also support children's play experiences and assess their active participation in different types of play. In fact, educators are encouraged to implement teaching methods and practices to help children develop their competencies through experimentation and play (Ministerio de Educación y Formación Profesional, 2022). However, children are often dependent on their educators' decisions which can prevent children's opportunities for participation.

Turkey

The Turkish Ministry of Education (MoNE) published a Framework in 2013 that guides ECEC professionals to support children to behave independently in a democratic context. Both social behaviors (e.g., collaborating with others, showing affection, respect, tolerance, and solidarity to others, being responsible, communicating and sharing behaviors), individual awareness (e.g., being respectful to self, trusting oneself, and developing self-regulation), emotional (e.g., being aware of and expressing emotions), and cognitive skills (e.g., creative, and critical thinking, imagination) are targeted. The Framework is written in a way that guides educators how to support development in the process of acquisition of those skills. The focus is to provide opportunities to explore and to feed children's in-born characteristics that are curiosity and creativity. Educators are advised to not damage children's personality by putting limits and showing pressure while communicating with them. Yet, children's participation and rights are limitedly addressed whereas providing time and space for children's voices to be heard of and children as agentic being do not seem to be openly acknowledged. In addition, there is no consensus about the Turkish concept of agency (Turkish words: *eylemlilik*,

faillik, öz-elçilik) neither in theory nor in practice. Some of the objectives in the Framework that could be related to agency are securing own and others' rights, being self-starters for certain tasks and completing those tasks on time, and showing responsibility (MoNE, 2013).

United States (US)

In US, choice is typically decided upon by the teacher. Children do not have much choice in what takes place in their daily routines as a whole. Although there are no specified guidelines how individual programs implement choice their daily classrooms, play is one of the few areas where children get to decide what they do and how they do it. There are no guidelines for play that are required, but the overall consensus is that children often play for pleasure with play also perceived as an important way that children learn. Classrooms provide many open-ended play opportunities for children to engage alone or with others, but that is often at the discretion of the educators in the classroom, when play time is available. The overarching belief is that in play children's overall development is promoted. However, with a push down of academics in US into the preschool years, there is a greater emphasis being placed on learning. That is not to say that children are not playing, it is rather that children are spending more time in academic directed experiences that take time away from play. Educators plan experiences that promote open play opportunities, but also time for academic, school readiness and skill building.

Methodology

Design

This mixed-methods comparative research study was a collaboration of researchers from 6 universities (1 in US and 5 in Europe). The research presented here is part of a larger study exploring dimensions of play in ECEC across 7 countries. This particular study aims at exploring the extent to which ECEC systems in the participant countries are enabling children to be agentic and provide opportunities for children's agency development during play. The study also attempts to explore variations across 7 countries in terms of children's prerogative to choose when to play, with what to play and for how long they can play without interruptions. In addition, the study aimed at exploring educators' stated purpose of play and stated role during children's play and how these limit children's opportunities to exercise agency and control. Finally, the study explored whether and how educators' characteristics (e.g., years of experience and participation in professional development) and children's age affect the opportunities for agentic action.

The countries represented in this research study are Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Spain, Turkey, and US. Data from Greece and Cyprus was collected by one researcher having access to both countries.

Sample and Demographics

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the authors employed snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The total number of participants was 187. Table 1 presents the demographic information of participants from each country.

Data Collection

Data was collected by each author from their respective countries using a co-constructed 30 item questionnaire. The questionnaire created by the authors had two parts. The first part consisted of 8 items that aimed at collecting participants' demographic information. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of 12 closed and 10 open-ended questions aiming at recording participants' definitions, uses and beliefs about play. Closed questions aimed at mapping among others whether children can play whenever they want or there are limits, the time spent in different types of play, accessibility of toys and materials, the purpose of play in the classroom, etc. Open-ended questions recorded participants' definition of play, their role during children's play, and how they utilize play to support learning, development, empathy, etc.

Surveys were administered either in the form of paper questionnaires (Estonia, US, Turkey and Denmark) or online (Greece, Cyprus and Spain).

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method was utilized to analyze the data stemming from the open-ended questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This approach allowed the researchers to stay close to the data as well as to what was happening in the field. The constant comparative method is a credible and trustworthy approach to data analysis that ensures the results, and any theory generated, remains true to the data that was collected. Constant comparative method uses multiple back and forth movements sometimes referred to as iterations, and the process continues until the researcher is satisfied with the review of codes and themes (Creswell, 2013). The themes emerged directly from the questionnaire's open-ended questions. Teacher responses from the questionnaire were then compared across the different countries to evaluate differences and similarities from participating teachers. Responses to closed-ended questions were analyzed using SPSS, using descriptive and correlation statistics.

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

Country	Denmark	Turkey	Cyprus	Estonia	Spain	US	Greece
N	25	30	18	29	18	36	31
Females (N)	22	30	18	29	17	36	30
Mean age in years	44	30.5	30	39	40	37	38
Mean teaching experience in years	15	8	7	12	15	12.5	13
N of full time employed	13	23	16	29	18	33	25
Highest level of education	Bachelor: <i>N</i> = 22 Master's: <i>N</i> = 2 High school graduate: <i>N</i> = 1	4-year college: <i>N</i> = 18 2-year degree: <i>N</i> = 11 High school graduate: <i>N</i> = 1	Bachelor: <i>N</i> = 10 Master's: <i>N</i> = 7	University level degree: <i>N</i> = 22 Vocational secondary education: <i>N</i> = 6 Master's: <i>N</i> = 1	3-year degree: <i>N</i> = 6 4-year degree: <i>N</i> = 1 5-year degree: <i>N</i> = 5 Master's: <i>N</i> = 4 Vocational training: <i>N</i> = 2	High school graduate: <i>N</i> = 1 Some college: <i>N</i> = 12 2-year degree: <i>N</i> = 7 4-year degree: <i>N</i> = 16	4-year degree: <i>N</i> = 24 Master's: <i>N</i> = 3 Vocational training: <i>N</i> = 2 PhD: <i>N</i> = 1
N of trained on children's play (<i>N</i>)	12	12	10	13	4	28	15
Age group of children	0–35 months: <i>N</i> = 11 3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 13	3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 24 Older than 5 years: <i>N</i> = 5	0–35 months: <i>N</i> = 5 3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 8 Older than 5 years: <i>N</i> = 5	18 – 35 months: <i>N</i> = 8 3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 10 Older than 5 years: <i>N</i> = 10	3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 14 0–35 months: <i>N</i> = 2	0–18 months: <i>N</i> = 2 18 – 35 months: <i>N</i> = 8 3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 21 0–35 months: <i>N</i> = 5	3–5 years: <i>N</i> = 27 18 – 35 months: <i>N</i> = 4

Results

Children's Prerogative to Choose When to Play

Allowing children to play when they want is an important indicator of how educators value and promote children's agency in play in their classroom. As seen in Table 2, in most of the counties a fixed schedule (that is a definite time for daily routines, for learning and for playing) limits children to enact their agency in selecting when to play. Specifically, very few educators stated that children could play freely without limits, whereas the majority replied that children can play for the most part when they want. In Spain, Turkey and Cyprus the majority of the participants replied that play is more limited due to a more routinized daily schedule that needs to be followed.

Children's Prerogative to Choose with What to Play

Materials and toys are an important ingredient in children's play and providing access to them helps set the tone and longevity of play episodes. As seen in Table 3, most educators across the countries reported that children had access to materials freely, either all the time or most of the time. Only a few participants from Cyprus and Spain and one from Turkey reported that children had to ask adults to use some materials (Table 3).

Children's Prerogative to Choose for How Long They Want to Play Without Interruptions

Once children engaged in play, they were often provided with opportunities to play for long periods with little to no interruptions. In fact, play was a sustainable option in every classroom studied, with the exception, of one educator in Turkey (Table 4). Participants reported many diverse ways that they protected play in their classrooms to ensure children could play without interruptions. In the US and Cyprus, room arrangement was set up to delineate spaces for play and those for other classroom activities as well as limiting the number of children allowed to enter a space or center designed for playing. If children were seen trying to interrupt the play of a group, educators in US and Estonia would redirect the child to help protect the play. Educators in Estonia would further protect children's play by discussing with children how to share resources. Educators in Greece used a card system to allow children to choose center/play experiences, while consistently reminding them of classroom play rules. Educators in Spain removed children from experiences if they were disruptive as well as teaching them to take turns and respect others. Turkish educators joined in the play to help sustain it. Additionally, they used negative reinforcement and timeout to control the groups.

Table 2 Children's agency to choose when to play

Indicator	Cyprus (<i>N</i> =18)	Denmark (<i>N</i> =25)	Estonia (<i>N</i> =29)	Greece (<i>N</i> =31)	Spain (<i>N</i> =15)	Turkey (<i>N</i> =30)	US (<i>N</i> =36)
Yes, there are no limits	11.1%		3.4%				2.8%
Yes, there are some limits	33.3%	96%	79.3%	54.8%	6.7%	30%	83.3%
No, there is a fixed schedule	55.6%	4%	17.2%	45.2%	93.3%	70%	13.9%

Table 3 Availability of materials and resources

Indicator	US (<i>N</i> =36)	Estonia (<i>N</i> =32)	Cyprus (<i>N</i> =16)	Greece (<i>N</i> =31)	Spain (<i>N</i> =16)	Denmark (<i>N</i> =25)	Turkey (<i>N</i> =30)
Yes, all materials and toys are accessible	36.1%	22.6%	38.9%	16.1%	11.1%	0%	33.3%
Materials and toys are accessible most of the time	55.6%	71%	33.3%	67.7%	55.6%	76%	56.6%
Some materials and toys are accessible and some are not	8.3%	9.7%	16.7%	16.1%	11.1%	24%	6.6%
Mostly they have to ask adults for them	0%	0%	0%	0%	11.1%	0%	3.3%
No, they have always to ask the adults for them	0%	0%	11.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 4 The extent to which children can play for long periods of time without interruptions

Indicator	Cyprus (<i>N</i> =17)	Denmark (<i>N</i> =25)	Estonia (<i>N</i> =29)	Greece (<i>N</i> =31)	Spain (<i>N</i> =16)	Turkey (<i>N</i> =30)	US (<i>N</i> =36)
Never	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Rarely	17%	8%	6%	3%	19%	7%	3%
Sometimes	12%	16%	38%	32%	37%	27%	11%
Often	59%	72%	56%	65%	44%	43%	75%
Always	12%	4%	0%	0%	0%	20%	11%

Educators' Stated Purpose of Play

Whether children are offered opportunities to be agentic during their play, may be linked to the way educators view play and its role. In line of this, participants were asked about the purposes of play in their classroom. The majority of educators reported that children play for fun or for fun and academics equally (Table 5). This trend was evident across all the countries studied. Thirty participants, across the 7 countries, reported that play has an academic purpose, but children can also play for fun at times. Only 2 participants (Cyprus, Turkey) reported that play was used solely for academic purposes. Some specific rationales for the purposes of play in the classroom included the following. In US, participants stated that children learn best through play, but that play has an academic purpose, and that social interaction and exploration are important in the learning process which play affords children. Educators from Cyprus stated that play has a myriad of educational objectives and is important for children's development and socialization. Greek educators said that play is learning and that most educational activities occur during play. In Spain, play and games are directed largely by the educators for educational purposes and learning takes place in the form of play most of the time. In Denmark, children have the possibility of free play most of the day, but sometimes have adult-initiated activities for 1½ hours in the morning. In Turkey, participants stated that free play is provided for children to learn how to be social and make friends, but there is also an emphasis on education, where educational games are planned and directed by educators to support learning. In Estonia, educators pointed out that learning activities are mostly playful and during free time (before and after the educational activities) children can play for fun.

Educators' Stated Role during Children's Play

Educators' beliefs about their role during children's play may also affect the opportunities children are offered to be agentic during their play. As seen in Fig. 1, which presents the most frequently mentioned types of support and as it is discussed in detail in Authors (2022), there are both commonalities and differences among countries. For example, helping with social and emotional situations and guiding/leading play were each of them mentioned in 4 out of the 7 countries. On the other hand, in Estonia, introducing, reminding the rules, and making sure that they are applied by children was mentioned by the majority of the participants, as opposed to other countries. Observation and playing with the children were mentioned in 3 out of the 7 countries, whereas setting up the environment and the resources was mentioned in 2 out of the 7 countries 9.

Educators' and Children's Characteristics and Opportunities for Agentic Action

Building on the hypothesis that the more trained and experienced the educators are the more opportunities they offer to children to enact their agency, we ran correlation analysis to explore whether years of experience and whether participants have received training and/or CPD on children's play, affect opportunities offered to children to choose when to play. Results are presented in Table 6. Confirming our hypothesis, there is a weak positive correlation among CPD/training, children's agency on when to play and the opportunities they have to play without interruptions.

Table 5 Purposes of play in the classroom

Play purpose	Cyprus (<i>N</i> =18)	Denmark (<i>N</i> =23)	Estonia (<i>N</i> =31)	Greece (<i>N</i> =31)	Spain (<i>N</i> =16)	Turkey (<i>N</i> =30)	US (<i>N</i> =35)
Play for fun, no educational purpose	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	26%
Mostly fun, sometimes educational	44%	87%	29%	42%	13%	20%	51%
Equal fun & education purpose	33%	13%	58%	52%	56%	67%	23%
Play mostly has educational purpose, sometimes for fun	11%	0%	13%	6%	31%	10%	0%
Play only for educational purposes	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%

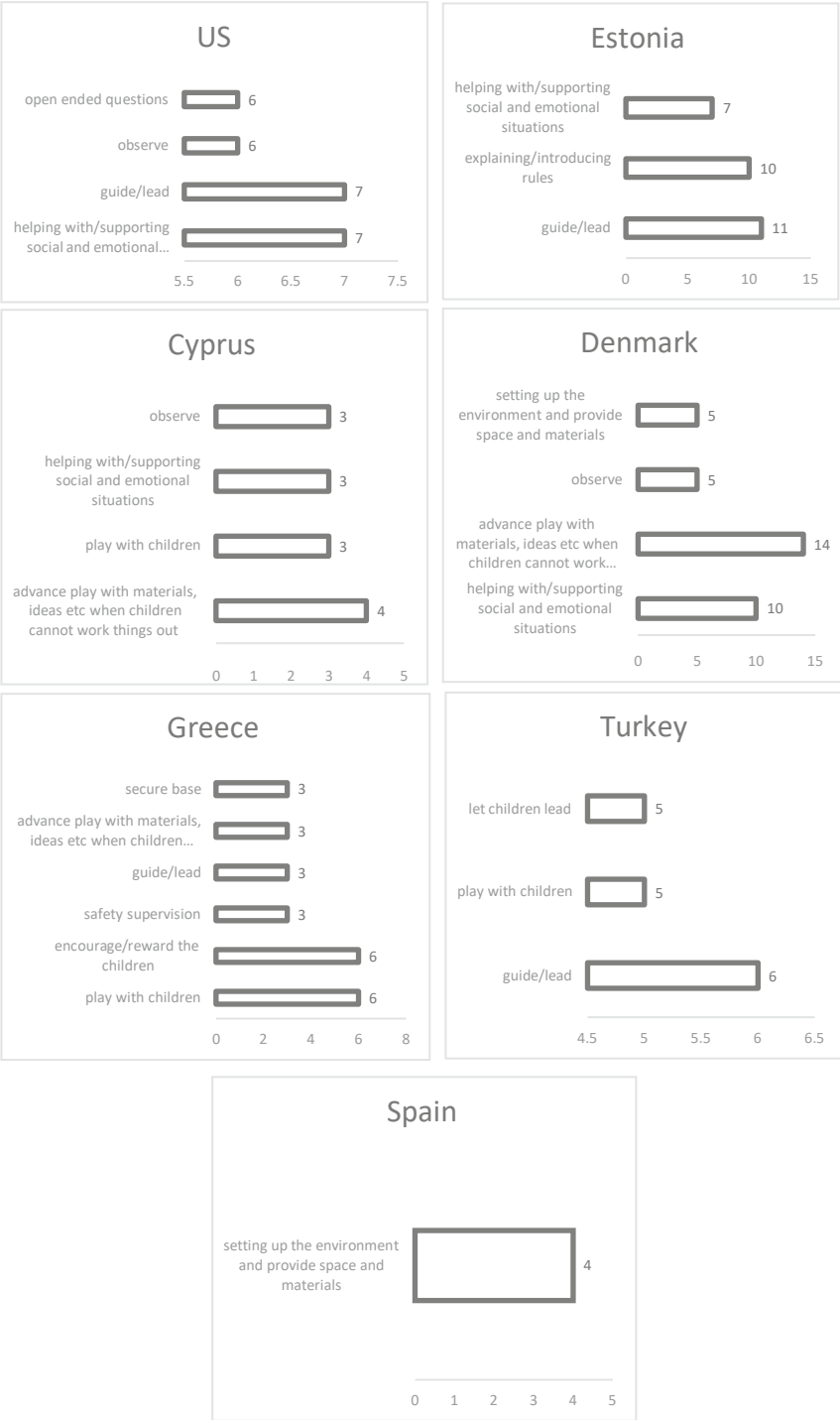


Fig. 1 Types of supports educators view as important

Table 6 Bivariate correlation results among years of experience, CPD and children's agency to choose when to play

Factor	1	2	3	4
Years of experience (1)				.174*
Training (2)			.180*	.159*
Can children play when they want? (3)				.150*
How often can children play without interruptions (4)				

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

In addition, we have used crosstabs analysis in order to explore whether years of experience, CPD and children's age affect the opportunities they are offered to enact their agency in terms of time and materials. Crosstab analysis has revealed that there is a significant association between children's age and whether they are having opportunities for spontaneous ($\chi^2 (6) = 30.74, p. < 0.001$) and whether children play primarily for fun or education ($\chi^2 (15) = 46.64, p. < 0.001$). On the other hand, analysis indicated that children's age does not affect the availability of materials and the opportunities they have to play without interruptions. Thus, analysis indicated that there is an association between CPD/training and availability of materials ($\chi^2 (5) = 10.94, p. = 0.052$) as well as play purposes in the classroom ($\chi^2 (4) = 10.71, p. = 0.030$).

Discussion

Children are agentic beings that have a right to influence their lived experiences. Play is one of the fundamental activities that allow children to be agentic. The present study, which is part of a larger research design, aimed at exploring the extent to which ECEC educators in seven countries offer children opportunities to be active agents in their play experiences. Based on the literature review presented in the theoretical part, in the present study the indicators used to explore the opportunities children have for agentic action are their prerogative to choose when to play, with what to play and for how long they can play without interruptions. In addition, their agentic action was explored through educators' definition of play and their stated role during children's play.

Both the results of the present study and the frameworks that underpin ECEC practice in the participating countries highlight that although autonomy is valued and children's right to participate in shaping their experiences in the ECEC setting, in most of the countries there is not an ethos of children's agency and that children are not viewed as primary constructors of their play experiences. Specifically, as revealed from the curricula that were presented in the theoretical part, only in Denmark and Spain there is an explicit reference to children's agency. In the curricula from the other countries there is reference to children's autonomy and to children's right to shape their experiences yet only in Estonia there is a reference in children's right to participate in decision-making. In addition, even in countries where children's agency and/or participation is acknowledged there is an explicit reference to the fact that children's freedom is limited by adult-imposed rules (e.g., based on the program they decide when children can play and for how long, they make available the toys and materials they choose, etc.), that they are dependent on educators' decision and

that children are not unconditionally free to enact their agency. Confirming previous research results (Koçyiğit & Başara Baydilek, 2015; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Sirkko et al., 2019) our study suggests that children's agency to choose when and for how long to play is confined by adult-imposed limits and schedules, which include but are not limited to limited play opportunities due to structured curricula, adults' intervening to teach, and limited/inaccessible space and materials Pacini-Ketchabaw (2012 as cited in Sirkoo et al., 2019) describe those limits related to schedules and other routines as "the tyranny of the clock in an educational context" (p. 290). Other research (Markström & Halldén, 2009; Scott, 2019) also highlights that ECEC settings are highly regulated and routinized environments and that this creates tensions and inhibits children's agentic action. However, cultural dimensions shape the extent to which routines and regulations affect children's opportunities to act with agency (Kragh-Muller et al., 2022). For example, in Denmark children have planned activities and routines to follow which support children's development by providing some structure, predictability, and continuity. In Estonia, although children have limited opportunities to show freedom and choice in planned activities in a daily schedule, they have 3–7 h of free play with little or no interference from teachers.

Apart from exploring whether children can choose when to play, it is also important to explore whether children have the opportunity to play without interruptions. Having the opportunity to play without interruptions is important as, according to Göl-Güven (2017) external interruptions negatively affect the play experience as well as children's autonomy and competency, which are central features of the concept of flow, a concept that is linked to the concept of agency. Our results highlight that in most of the countries children can play often without being interrupted.

As far as availability of resources and materials is concerned, previous research (Nilsen, 2021) has indicated that it can enhance children's play opportunities and it contributes to children enacting their agency. Although the majority of the participants in our study have indicated that materials are accessible most of the time, we have to interpret this result with caution. That is because previous research from Nilsen (2021) has found that children face restrictions to the types of play materials they have at their disposal and that educators keep certain materials away from children for economic reasons or in order to avoid chaos. Recent research conducted in Greece by Rentzou and Kontou (2021) highlighted that some of children's favorite toys are not available at the preschool setting they attend. Given the fact that it is not clear from our results whether children have access to materials they really want or to materials that educators choose for them, it is important for future research to examine both the materials that are available to children as well as whether children can really play with what they want or they have to "engage in a responsive action rather than an act of agency" (Rainio, 2008 as cited in Scott, 2019, p. 150).

Previous research published under the larger project in which this study builds upon, has revealed that the way educators conceptualize play is strongly related to the way play is used in their classrooms (Rentzou et al., 2019). Göl-Güven (2017) also postulates that "adults' perspectives toward play affect how play appears, how frequently it appears, and how it is directed after it appears" (p. 195). Also, McInnes (2019) found out that adults' presence has the defining feature of play for children at 4 to 7 years of age; while practitioners are not aware of how children see their roles. By contrast, in most curricula

one of the teachers' role is to provide pre-planned and structured activities, they have confusions about when, how, and whether to intervene play (Hunter & Walsh, 2014) and how much freedom they could hand in to children in play (McInnes, 2019). To this end, we would maintain that the way play is conceptualized and used may affect the extent to which educators offer opportunities to act with agency in their play. Given that in the majority of the countries play is used equally for fun and education purposes, we would argue that educators, in order to meet academic goals, limit children's agentic action and that children lack "agency freedom" (Sen, 1985 as cited in Scott, 2019, p. 59) as their freedom to choose and pursue goals is restricted by the options defined by adults. This is confirmed by Akyol and Erdem (2021) who found that although teachers in Turkey listen to children, help them express themselves and ask for their opinions, they are making the final decisions due to given importance or priority they assign to planned activities. According to Göl-Güven (2017, p. 198), in order to describe the situations when children are not fully in charge of their "play culture" the term "adulteration" is used. Earlier studies confirm our postulation. For example, an earlier study, conducted by Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) in Cyprus found that free activities were mainly organized around structured and teacher-directed activities, with predefined goals, materials and expected outcomes. A study conducted in Greece by Tanakidou and Avgitidou (2016) has revealed a conflict between children's and adults' views by highlighting that the main dissatisfaction of children regarding play space they can use is related to adult-imposed limitations on how those spaces can be utilized. In addition, the study revealed challenges related to educators' role in children's active participation in decision-making. Time management on behalf of children and maintaining children's interest in their chosen activity is a challenge that requires educators to be sensitive and flexible (Tanakidou & Avgitidou, 2016). Koçyiğit and Başara Baydilek (2015) found that 6-year-olds in Turkey had many limitations regarding when, where and how to play. Children reported that they needed permission from the teachers and permission was not always granted and depended on the type of play children wanted to engage in, times of the day and the setting to be played in. Another study from Turkey (Akyol, 2020) revealed that activities are mostly academic and orchestrated by the teachers and that they conflicted with the children's desire to play free.

Kragh-Müller and Isbell (2011) who interviewed children in Denmark and US, also found that for children playing with good friends is the most important aspect of ECEC quality. The authors found that children's need to have an influence over their experiences was enacted while playing as they could decide for themselves what to play, with whom to play and what materials to play with. The children who participated in Kragh-Müller and Isbell's (2011) study highlighted that they did not like activities that were chosen and strongly structured by teachers as well as strict teachers who would scold them for not following orders. It is thus paramount, that children have the time to play in environments where they are agents of influence and are instrumental in how they play, what they play and with whom they play.

The present study moves the discussion forward as it revealed that it is not only the way that educators conceptualize play that affect the opportunities children have to be agentic. Future research should explore not only how cultural and ECEC systemic dimensions affect children's agentic action in ECEC, but also how it is affected by educators' and children's characteristics. Future research considerations should also address how much the materials themselves help guide how and what children play. Do children who get to select and have access to all materials spend

more time playing? Play for longer periods of time? How much freedom and choice do children have in actuality when they have opportunities to play? How do teachers balance out between offering planned and purposeful activities and providing time, space, and materials for children to fully use the empowering features of play?

Turning to the types of supports educators view as important we would maintain that they are inseparably linked to the way the conceptualize play and at the same time they affect the opportunities children have for acting with agency. In the majority of the countries, participants adopt different roles during children's play with stage manager, co-player, and play-leader being the most frequently mentioned roles (Enz & Christie, 1993). Although teachers' role in play is discussed in detail in another article published under the larger research project (Kragh-Muller et al., 2022), as it becomes evident although in some countries educators highlight that they offer children the opportunity to lead their play and that they intervene only when children ask them to do so, in other cases children's agency enactment is limited from the roles that educators assume during their play. In these cases, educators intervene in order to promote academic purposes.

Of course, our study does not come without limitations. Although the study adds to children's agency research field, we have to caution that the data cannot be generalized as the sample was small and recruited via convenience and snowball techniques. In addition, data were collected through a self-completed questionnaire which aimed at mapping participants' beliefs about and attitudes toward children's play in general. Future studies should collect more data using other methodologies such as observation of children's agentic action during the course of the day (including play episodes) and interviews with educators and children themselves.

To conclude, our results confirm previous research which even when educators or systems have the intention to give children an influence in everyday life, it is unclear how much influence children have on routines, structure and teacher-initiated activities in everyday practices (Ringsmose & Kragh-Müller, 2013). Other studies show that space and time limitations in schools limit children's opportunities for (free) play (Göl-Güven, 2017). Yet, as mentioned in the theoretical part although play is limited by adult-imposed rules, it remains one of the few activities that allow children to enact their agency in ECEC settings and beyond. This is confirmed by the results of the study conducted by Svinth (2012), who found that although children had an influence on their play (what and with whom to play), when it came to other activities the children had little or no influence.

Given that play is, according to Bermejo and Blázquez (2016), a tool that improves children's self-esteem, affirms their very own personalities, and allows them to develop their autonomy (López, 2010), it is important for future research to explore further children's action in playful and adult-directed activities. In addition, future research should explore the ways adults exert power and control and how these ways allow the development of equality and democracy in school settings (Göl-Güven, 2017). Our recommendation would be for teachers to allow children more freedoms in the classroom to play at their pace and interests. Time is fluid so different children may require more time than others. The key ingredient we want to highlight is to allow kids the freedoms to be active in their play, to make choices, and to control the experiences with as little teacher intervention as possible. We realize that teachers will need to develop guided play opportunities that focus on academic outcomes, but

to be conscious of the open-ended play experiences children need and desire to engage in.

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