Preschool Teachers' Conceptualizations and Uses of Play Across Eight Countries

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Abstract. Increased emphasis on academics has led to play becoming a controversial and topical issue in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Although play has been extensively researched we still lack consensus on what play is and how play is actually implemented and used in ECEC classrooms. The present cross-cultural study aims at understanding how play is conceptualized and provided across eight different countries. The study investigates whether and how conceptualizations of play affect uses of play; whereas it also examines similarities and differences in conceptualizations and uses across countries. Results have revealed the existence of both universal and non-universal characteristics of play. Despite the existence of universal characteristics, however, variations in the extent to which they were mentioned across countries have been revealed. Differences were identified in terms of how early childhood educators act on their ideas about children's play within early childhood programs. Various patterns of correlations between definitions and uses have been revealed. Some countries seem to be characterized by an 'ethos of play,' both in terms of how play is conceptualized and used, whereas others seem to struggle between offering a more child-initiated, play-based curriculum versus a more teacher-led approaches to instruction.

Keywords: Early childhood education, play, definitions, uses, cross-cultural comparison

Introduction

Play has been extensively researched and its importance for children's overall development is well documented (International Play Association [IPA] 2014; Hewes 2006). However, although play is acknowledged as a universal right of all children (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013), international research and practice indicates that children are increasingly deprived of play (IPA 2014; Coughlan 2007). In addition, play is more and more silenced from educational research and practice and it constantly has to prove its place, status and role not only in children's lives but also in ECEC programs. In fact, despite the need to focus on a play-based pedagogical approach (Walsh et al. 2010; McInnes et al. 2011), schoolification of ECEC and an emphasis on academic skills prevail both in Europe and in the USA (Rentzou 2017; Fisher et al. 2008; Hewes 2006). For instance, according to the 2017 OECD Staring Strong report, curricula are becoming more aligned between pre-primary and primary levels and "learning of factual knowledge [is promoted] at the expense of playful exploration" (Fisher et al. 2008, p. 307).

This overemphasis on learning and under-emphasis on play (Hewes 2006, p. 5) has led into time and space available for play being threatened (Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015; Fisher et al. 2008), and also to a shift from child-initiated, unstructured play to adult-led, structured activities (Fisher et al. 2008).

This 'silence' and shift of play may be attributed among others to the fact that we still lack clear definitions of concepts which are the cornerstone of ECEC theory and practice (Rentzou 2017). Among those concepts, play is featuring high. Consequently, although the play-learning belief is emphasized both by theory and research, little is known about how ECEC professionals conceptualize and use play in their classrooms (Fisher et al. 2008; Fesseha and Pyle 2016). However, gaining insight on this is crucial since teachers facilitate or inhibit playful learning experiences and the way they perceive play affects the way they implement it in their classrooms (Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015).

The aim of this study, which is part of a larger research design, is to explore and compare conceptualizations and uses of play amongst ECEC professionals in Denmark, Tur- key, Cyprus, Italy, Estonia, Spain, Greece and the USA. The findings aim to contribute empirical data about how play is conceptualized, used and provided across countries. The study was

designed to facilitate an investigation of whether and how teachers' conceptualizations of play affect uses of play in diverse early childhood contexts. The comparative nature of the study aims to shed light in the similarities and differences in perceptions of the ECEC professionals from each country and to discuss the meaning of the findings in terms of how cultural aspects affect definitions and uses of play. Although previous research has explored cultural variations of play, this research emphasizes either on specific types of play (e.g. social play) (e.g. Göncü et al. 2000) or on play beyond formal schooling (e.g. Singer et al. 2009). The present study adds significantly to the existing research and aspires to expand the discourses of play both in those countries and internationally.

After presenting existing literature on whether play can and needs to be defined and how culture affects definitions and uses of play, the paper outlines the status of play in each of the eight countries where the study was conducted. The next section describes thoroughly the methodology and methods adopted in the context of the study. Results on how play is defined and used across countries are presented as well as similarities and differences across countries. Results are then discussed and implications for future research are formulated.

Theoretical Framework

Defining Play? The Elusiveness of the Concept

Literature review suggests that although we can recognize when children play, defining play is not an easy task due to its multifaceted character (Fesseha and Pyle 2016). Ail- wood (2003) has described play "as an elusive concept that refuses to be pinned down" (p. 288), whereas according to the EECERA SIG "Rethinking play" position paper (2017) "play is a broad concept that can be viewed from a range of theoretical strands and can therefore be observed and interpreted in many different ways" (p. 2). Eberle (2014) has thoroughly described the reasons why a definition of play is notoriously difficult to be achieved as well as play's transcendence (Eberle 2014, p. 218).

Running through the relevant literature one comes across an abundance of definitions and taxonomies of play. Play is often defined as a self-initiated activity that is intrinsically satisfying (Hansen et al. 1999). When children play they are absorbed in the present—just being. Play in this definition has no external goals regarding children's learning skills for the future (becoming). In line with this definition, Rubin et al. (1983) have defined play 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. Eberle (2014) has maintained that in order to "distinguish play from its fellow travelers as well as its opposites, we need to extract a working definition for play that accounts for play as an event that unfolds spontaneously (but not randomly), that notices the volition of the participants (but still accounts for both rule making and rule breaking), and that recognizes its benefits (while acknowledging the risks)" (pp. 229–230).

Overall, although beliefs about the nature of play vary widely between play theorists (Fisher et al. 2008). Literature review indicates that definitions may be focusing on the attributes, functions or beneficial effects of play (Eberle 2014) and may be variously based on category, criteria or continuum (McInnes et al. 2011). Thus, play may be viewed as a disposition, an observable behavior or a context (Rubin et al. 1983).

This abundance of definitions rather creates more problems than solves the problem for a play definition, since choosing among them is difficult. Avgitidou (2001) cautions that we should have reservations about a common definition of play and pay close attention to reading definitions in terms of: (1) who defines play; (2) under what procedures this defi- nition has emerged; and (3) which structural or functional elements of play are highlighted in the definition and why. Eberle (2014) also suggests that the existence of different "rhetorics led play scholars and play practitioners to talk past each other in ways that sometimes create insuperable snags" (pp. 218–219).

Central role to this vigilance has also the fact that the theories, definitions, categorizations and uses of play "reso- nate with the wider cultural and political themes" (Hyder 2004, p. 14) of the age. In addition, the meaning of play varies "across time, culture and contexts" (Fisher et al. 2008, p. 306).

Do We Really Need a Definition of Play?

Taking into consideration the above barriers, one might ask if we really need a definition of play. Based on the assumption that being aware of the main arguments and theories of play is essential since they affect the way we conceptualize and practice it (Hyder 2004; Loizou and Avgitidou 2014), we could maintain that accordingly the way we conceptualize play affects the way we use and implement it in our practice.

Furthermore, research indicates that practitioners' beliefs and theoretical understanding about play may challenge the implementation of play within ECEC settings and affect the activities they offer in the classroom (Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015), whereas according to Fisher et al. (2008) "a particular belief about play fundamentally limits the activi- ties that are identified as play" (p. 306). In addition, ECEC professionals' attitudes towards the importance of play affect the

implementation and use of play in their practices (Jung et al. 2017; Loizou and Avgitidou 2014) whereas their understanding of play affects the pedagogy adopted and forms "the type of early years setting experienced by children" (McInnes et al. 2011, p. 123) and subsequently children's attitudes towards play (McInnes et al. 2011; Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015).

Drawing on previous research which showed that the amount of learning value assigned to structured activities varies in relation to how play is conceptualized (Fisher et al. 2008), it could be argued that if for example play is primarily viewed as an activity that must serve educational purposes, then we could hypothesize that emphasis on educational play or structured play would be given. Results of the study conducted by Faas et al. (2017) support this assumption since the authors found significant variations between Hong Kong and German pedagogical professionals' and parents' understanding and perceptions of learning at play. More precisely, the results of the study indicate that, for the participants from Hong Kong, the focus of play was on learning in the group, whereas for German participants, examples contained only individual activities or activities in small groups based on the children's aims and psychic needs (Faas et al. 2017, p. 86). Those results highlight both how our conceptualization of play affects our practice and the important role culture plays in our conceptualizations, an aspect which will be discussed in the next section.

However, before we see how culture affects definitions and uses of play we have to stress that previous research has frequently revealed a mismatch between ECEC professionals' understandings and perceptions of play and their practice as well as their intention to integrate play in their practices (McInnes et al. 2011; Jung et al. 2017; Fesseha and Pyle 2016). This mismatch has been attributed to teacher education (Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015), teachers' self-efficacy (Jung et al. 2017) and teachers' confidence and knowledge on the effective implementation of the play-based curriculum (Walsh et al. 2010).

Is Play a Universal Phenomenon? Cultural Considerations of Play

Although play is a universal activity it is also a culturally specific activity and has a cultural basis. According to Roopnarine et al. (1994) "play is an expression of a particular culture [and] an important context or vehicle for cultural learning/transmission" (p. 5). Furthermore, Roopnarine (2012) states that "although accepted as universal, the expression of different forms of play and their meanings are tied to the cultural beliefs and practices that are evident/not so evident in specific ecological settings" (p. 228).

So while many aspects of play are similar across cultures it is necessary to consider, recognize, explore and value the cultural foundations of play, since culture seems to affect conceptualizations, uses and beliefs about play. According to Huizinga (1955), the values and norms of any given culture shape the way in which play is experienced. For instance, research has revealed universal and culturally specific aspects of play (Hyder 2004; Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010), variations across countries on children's opportunities to engage in play and on the degree to which curricula frameworks embrace play as a means for children's learning and development. Research has also shown cultural differences on the patterns of parent–child play as well as on the importance assigned by parents on the role of play in child development (Hyder 2004; Roopnarine 2012). In terms of a definition of play, Eberle (2014) has maintained that in order to form a definition of play we have to bear in mind that "play can- not be pulled away from where and when and with whom it takes place…. Play changes with time and place and as culture changes" (p. 230).

For Van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015), the way play is put into practice varies not only between countries, but also between schools and even between classrooms and subsequently the need to understand perspectives of play in the social environments where it occurs arises. This argument is further substantiated by Roopnarine (2012) who suggested that "internal working models about the role of play in childhood development can influence the structuring of social and cognitive experiences for children, and beliefs about the benefits of play may moderate and/or mediate the influence of play activities on childhood development" (p. 229).

Although some research has attempted to examine parents' internal working models, limited emphasis has been given on ECEC professionals' models, as well as to the 'where and when' across cultures. More precisely, although we have some research on attitudes towards conceptualizations of play across cultures, participants were primarily pre-service teachers or the emphasis is placed on children's free play and adults role in play (e.g. Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015; Wu and Rao 2011; Jung and Jin 2015). In addition, previous research aimed at comparing cultural believes on play primarily among European (or American) and Asian (Chinese and Japanese) kindergarten teachers (e.g. Wu and Rao 2011; Faas et al. 2017; Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010, 2016).

The Status of Play in Participant Countries' ECEC Curricula

As we have seen in the previous section, play is an activity with a cultural basis. Table 1 presents briefly the status of play in participant countries' ECEC curricula.

Table 1 The status of play in participant countries' ECEC curricula

Country	Play and ECEC curricula
Denmark	The 2017 (framework) law, which covers six learning areas, underlies that children's free play must be given space in everyday practices, thus emphasizing children's entitlement to a childhood in its own right. The law was changed, reflecting widespread criticism from professionals and parents that children should not be pushed into academic learning too early (Kragh-Müller 2017)
Turkey	The Preschool framework (MoNE 2013) places great emphasis on children's play. Children are described as "play experts" (MoNE 2013, p. 47) and play as children's work and language (MoNE 2013, p. 15). Play has a twofold aim: (1) to learn (or teach) some skills and (2) to meet children's needs. Three types of play are mentioned: free play (choice time at the beginning and end of the day), semi-structured play activities (creative play), and structured play activities (traditional games with rules) (Aras 2016)
Cyprus	Play is seen as a social practice and as "a learning and developmental process, a context and a way for organizing learning and at the same time children's right" (MOEC 2016, pp. 5–6). Play should occupy the largest part of the daily program. Depending on children's age there is a differentiation on the time spend on free and structured play. What differentiates free from structured play is teachers' role and that "structured play constitutes with a direct and predetermined way and part of a wider context of evolutionary activities" (MOEC 2016, p. 9)
Italy	Play and language are viewed as the main vehicles for learning and development (Ministero dell'Istruzione dell' Universita e della Ricerca—MIUR 2012).Teachers facilitate and mediate learning by engaging children in play experiences where children express themselves, engage in dialogue revisiting their personal and social experiences in a creative and imaginative way (MIUR 2012). Play is also considered a tool for exploring and establishing relationships and "incontri" (encounters) that promote values, respect and optimal development
Estonia	Play is seen as one of the main principles in ECEC. According to the Curriculum, playing skills form the basis for general skills, educational activities and knowledge in various fields. To ensure that children obtain an elementary set of playing skills, the expected learning outcomes for children of age 6–7 are defined (Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava 2008)
Spain	Play-based activities are one of the cornerstones of the preschool education curriculum. Play is privileged as the main way in which children learn and assist them in their physical, cognitive and socioemotional development (MEC 2008)
USA	Play has a secondary role to academics. Although play-based learning is still valued and children spend time playing, that play is being fostered with specific learning outcomes focused on preparing children for school and less so on children just playing for the sake of playing and developing their physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills which are so critical to school success at their own rates (Elkind 2007)
Greece	According to the operational regulation for child and infant/child center, time for free play either indoors or outdoors depends on children's age and on their personal and biological needs. No other reference is made on play (Government Gazette 4249 2017)
	In kindergarten, play is acknowledged as one of the most important learning contexts. Play is presented as one of the five ways in which we can organize learning and teaching and is described as the prime activity for preschool children's (4–7 years) development and learning. A classification of play accompanied by indicative examples is offered. In addition, emphasis is given on the basic skills children develop through play and on play's function as a useful context for collecting useful information about children (through observation). Reference is also made in kindergarten teachers' role during play, as well as on their important role in introducing parents into the importance of play (Kindergarten Curriculum 2011)

Methodology

Design

This mixed-methods comparative research study was a collaboration of researchers from 7 universities (2 in the U.S. and 5 in Europe). The research presented here is part of a larger study looking at dimensions of play in ECEC across 8 countries. This particular study aims at exploring the links between ECEC professionals' understandings and conceptualizations of play and the ways they use and pro- vide play in their classrooms. The study also attempts to explore variations across eight countries in terms of how play is conceptualized and used in ECEC settings. It is hypothesized that the way ECEC professionals understand and conceptualize play would affect the way play is used in their classroom. It was also hypothesized that the cultural aspect would significantly affect both conceptualizations and uses of play.

The countries represented in this research study are as follows: Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and the United States. Data from Greece and Cyprus was collected by one researcher having access to both countries. Data from Italy was collected by a researcher based in the United States.

Sample and Demographics

Data for the present study were collected in autumn 2016. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the authors employed snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The total number of participants was 212. Table 2, presents the sample and demographics of participants from each country.

Table 2 Participants' demographic information

Country	Denmark	Turkey	Cyprus	Italy	Estonia	Spain	USA	Greece
N	25	30	18	25	29	18	36	31
Females (N)	22	30	18	25	29	17	36	30
Mean age in years	44	30.5	30	38	39	40	37	38
Mean teaching experience in years	15	8	7	14.5	12	15	12.5	13
Race/ethnicity	White: N=25	White: N=30	White: N=18	White: N=25	White: N=29	Spanish: N=18	White: N=31 African American: N=2 Other: N=2	White: N=31
N of full time employed	13	23	16	13	29	18	33	25
Highest level of education	Bachelor: N=22 Master's: N=2 High school graduate: N=1	4-year college: N=18 2-year degree: N=11 High school graduate: N=1	Bachelor: N=10 Master's: N=7	High school graduate: N=12 4-year degree: N=5 5-year degree: N=5 2-year degree: N=2 Master's: N=1	University level degree: N=22 Vocational secondary education: N=6 Master's: N=1	3-year degree: N=6 4-year degree: N=1 5-year degree: N=5 Master's: N=4 Vocational training: N=2	High school graduate: N=1 Some college: N=12 2-year degree: N=7 4-year degree: N=16	4-year degree: N=24 Master's: N=3 Vocational training: N=2 PhD: N=1
Age group of children	0–35 months: N=11 3–5 years: N=13	3–5 years: N=24 Older than 5 years: N=5	0–35 months: N=5 3–5 years: N=8 Older than 5 years: N=5	3–5 years: N=25	18–35 months: N=8 3–5 years: N=10 Older than 5 years: N=10	3–5 years: N=14 0–35 months: N=2	0–18 months: N=2 18–35 months: N=8 3–5 years: N=21 0–35 months: N=5	3–5 years: N=27 18–35 months: N=4

Data Collection

Data were 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 22 closed and open-ended questions aiming at recording participants' definitions, uses and beliefs about play.

In the present mixed-methods comparative study results stemming from the following open and closed- ended questions are presented: (1) How would you define play?
(2) How much time do you use play for developing social and emotional skills? (3) How much time do you use play for academic purposes? (4) Can children play when they want? and (5) Can children play for fun or does play tend to have an education purpose in your classroom?

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

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, they were coded into SPSS and then into a separate Excel file based on questions from the questionnaire. Responses to closed—ended questions (Numbers 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the previous section) were analyzed using SPSS. In order to analyze responses concerning the amount of time play is used for academic purposes and for the development of social and emotional skills (question numbers 2 and 3), the non-parametric ANOVA (Kruskal–Wallis) test was employed due to the small sample size.

Responses to the open-ended question (number 1) were transported into Excel files and analyzed manually. Based on the literature review the first author of the paper developed a taxonomy of play. After developing the codes (18 initially), the first and the second authors of the paper coded data stemming from two countries, in order to check the functionality of the coding scheme and the inter-rater reliability. After the first coding, the first and the second author met via a virtual call in order to discuss considerations regarding the coding scheme. The authors decided to merge some codes and develop a new one, based on our data and the frequency of the occurrence of several keywords. After this step the authors developed a revised coding scheme including the 14 codes presented in Table 3. The authors tested again the revised scheme and met via virtual call to discuss potential considerations. Upon reaching agreement, the first author of the study coded data stemming from all countries. In order to test inter-rater reliability, the second author coded randomly selected responses.

Table 3 Codes used for the definitions of play, descriptions of codes and example keywords

Code	Description	Examples
Play supports social/emotional development	Keywords referring to the social nature of play and to the social skills developed through play	E.g. "socializes", "friendship", "interaction", "self-expression"
Play supports learning/academic development	Keyword referring to the educational and learning function of play, as well as to the academic skills developed (e.g. numeracy skills, reading, etc) through play	E.g. "play = learning", "concentration", "children can learn new things and practice it through play", "play is an activity with educational purpose"
Play supports overall development	Keyword referring to development in general and do not mention social or academic development, to overall development and/or types of development	E.g. "essential for child development", "play is a part of the development and growing up", "all the developmental domains"
Play as fun	Keyword referring to the fun, amusing, joyful, etc. character of play	E.g. "play is an activity which children have fun", "entertaining", "enjoyment", "pleasure", "excitement"
Play as creativity	Keyword referring to creativity, fantasy and imagination either developed through play or being a prerequisite for play	E.g. "creativity is developed through play", "they use their imagination", "play is full of fantasy"
Play as children's work	Keywords referring to the innate character of play, direct reference as children's work, reference to the rewarding aspect of play	E.g. "children cannot help playing", "impulsive", "children's inner world", "play is the work of the child", "inherent characteristic"
Voluntary	Keywords referring to the free, spontaneous, voluntary nature of play	E.g. "self-initiated activities", "play is spontaneous", "free, play is a voluntary act. It happens via players' spontaneous participation", "freedom", "it is the situation in which the child acts with intrinsic motivation"
Rules	Keywords referring to the existence or lack of rules	E.g. "no rules", "there are rules", "they learn rules", "respect of the rules"
No external goals	Keywords referring to children's ability to exert full control, reference to (lack of) structure, and the open character of play	E.g. "the situation in which he/she has the ability to exert full control", "structured", "open", "free activity", "no useful purpose", "child directed activity—decided by the child"
Play as an opportunity to explore and understand the world	Keywords referring to play as a means by which children explore and create an understanding of the world around them (natural and artificial), discovery, curiosity, experience, pretend	E.g. "juggling between different 'worlds'", "research of the world", "play is initiated from curiosity", "understand the world—e.g play dentist. Research the world—e.g. looking for little animals under stones etc.. To do your own experiments"
Play as a recreational activity	Keywords referring to the liberating, carefree, relaxing character of play	E.g. "actions that are free of worries", "to discharge", "relaxation, tranquility", "carelessness", "relief"
Fundamental	Keyword describing play as fundamental, essential, important, etc	E.g. "play is the most important tool for children and adults", "important", "necessary", "the most important nutrition for children"
Play as a physical/energetic activity	Keyword referring to the active, energetic (movement) aspect of play	E.g. "physical activity", "energy", "moving freely", "motor skills"
Other	Keywords that do not fall in any of the above codes	E.g. "games", "role playing", "motivation", "life", "period of time", "types of play", "symbolic", "system", "multifaceted", "age appropriate", etc

Results

How Play Is Defined Across Countries

Although common keywords have been used across countries in order to define play, deeper analysis revealed differences among countries in terms of how play is conceptualized and defined. In *Denmark* primary emphasis is placed on social skills developed through play (solving conflicts, feeling yourself/others, empathy, relationships, friendship, etc). This reflects Danish policies and research showing that pedagogues and parents consider socio-emotional competences very important for children's doing well in future society (Kragh-Müller 2013). Also participants refer to types of play depending on the social aspects that is solidary versus playing with others. Special attention is given to play as a context/activity which gives children the opportunity to discover the world around them. The relationship between play and fantasy and creativity is also stressed.

On the other hand, in *Turkey* primary emphasis is on the fun/entertaining aspects of play. Furthermore, participants frequently referred to play as contributing to children's holistic development by means of fun. Play is seen as an activity/ tool and as a means of developing all necessary skills and knowledge and as a learning process, but inseparably linked to fun. In *Cyprus*, emphasis is placed on the creative aspect of play as well on play's ability to relax and provide relief children. Thus participants stress the link between play and learning and play's contribution in children's imagination.

In *Italy*, emphasis is given on the social aspects of play and to learning. Participants primarily refer to types of play (individual/group, etc). The fun/entertaining nature of play is also emphasized. In *Estonia*, play is seen as children's work, linked to their development and as a learning activity/ tool primarily for developing social and emotional skills. Emphasis is also placed on the exciting character of play. In *Spain*, emphasis is given on learning and on the fun aspects of play. In the *USA*, play is primarily defined as a children's self-initiated engagement in an activity for fun, as well as a means for exploring their world. Thus, reference is made to the social aspects of play. Finally, in *Greece* emphasis is placed on learning (knowledge), entertainment and creativity. Figure 1 presents how play is defined across countries.
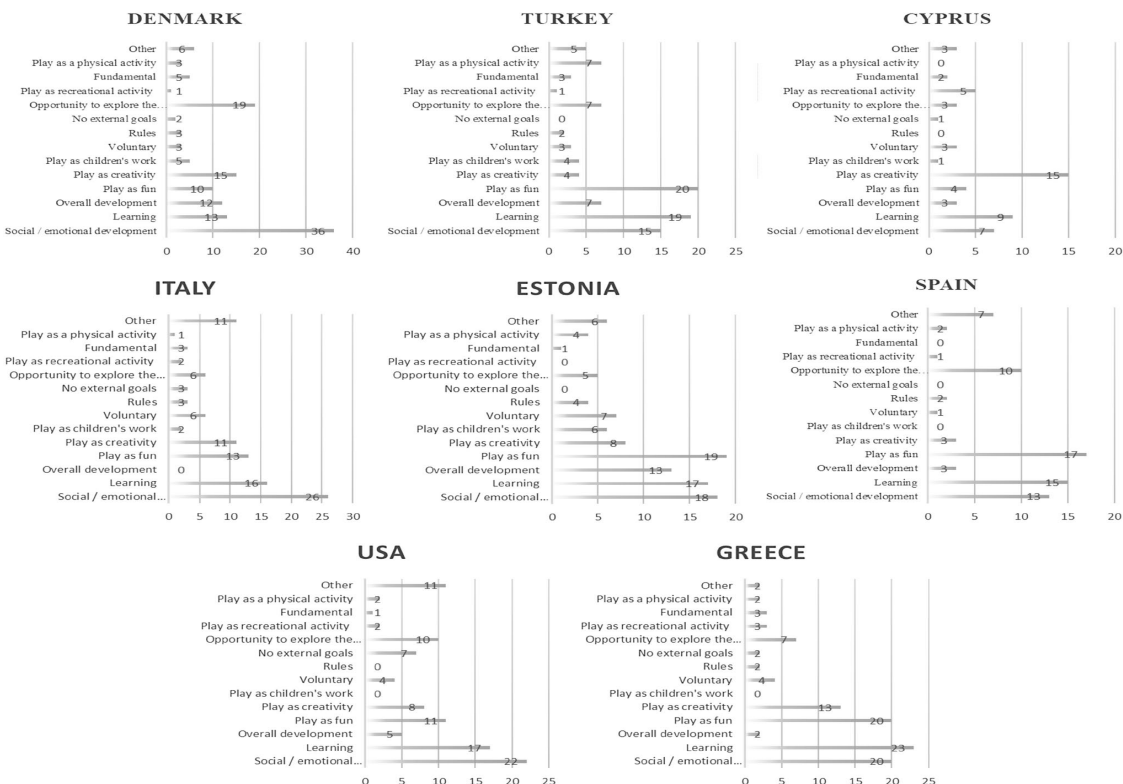

Fig. 1 Definitions of play across countries

Uses of Play Across Countries

Table 4 shows the amount of hours per week play is used for academic purposes and for developing social and emotional skills. As seen in Table 4, in the USA and Italy play is extensively used for academic purposes, whereas in Tur- key less time is spent on play with academic purposes. The non-parametric ANOVA (Kruskal–Wallis) test rejected the null hypothesis that the time spent on play for academic purposes is the same across countries (sig. = 0.000). Post- hoc analysis revealed significant differences between Turkey and Italy (adj. sig. = 001), Turkey and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.000), Spain and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.004), Denmark and Italy (adj. sig. = 0.040), Denmark and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.001), Greece and Italy (adj. sig. = 0.029), Greece and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.000) and Estonia and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.018). Turning to the use of play for developing social and emotional skills, as seen in Table 4, in the majority of countries this use of play is more frequent compared to the use for academic purposes. In the USA and Denmark play is extensively used for developing social and emotional skills, whereas in Turkey less time is spent on this use of play. The Kruskal–Wallis test rejected the null hypothesis that the time spent on play for developing social and emotional skills is the same across countries (sig. = 0.000). Post-hoc analysis revealed significant differences between Turkey and Italy (adj. sig. = 0.006), Turkey and Denmark (adj. sig. = 0.000), Turkey and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.000), Cyprus and Denmark (adj. sig. = 0.044), Cyprus and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.001), Spain and Denmark (adj. sig. = 0.041), Spain and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.001), Greece and Denmark (adj. sig. = 0.015), Greece and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.000), and Estonia and the USA (adj. sig. = 0.006). As seen in Table 4, in almost all countries, apart from Cyprus and Italy, preschool teachers use play for developing social and emotional skills more often than for academic purposes.

Table 4 Time play is used for academic and social/emotional purposes

| Country	Hours per week play is used for academic purposes				Hours per week play is used for developing social and emotional skills			
	N	Mean (SD)	Median	Min–max	N	Mean (SD)		Min–max
Denmark	22	6.84 (4.74)	5.00	2–20	19	17.03 (9.14)	17.50	6–37
Turkey	30	5.57 (3.64)	4.50	2–15	30	5.93 (4.07)	5.00	1–20
Cyprus	12	8.58 (7.63)	5.50	3–30	13	8.00 (7.14)	8.00	2–30
Italy	19	13.53 (6.56)	10.00	4–25	19	12.95 (6.69)	10.00	2–25
Estonia	29	8.79 (6.91)	8.00	1–35	29	11.17 (9.12)	10.00	2–40
Spain	15	7.07 (5.39)	5.00	1–20	14	7.57 (5.47)	5.50	1–20
USA	31	19.90 (15.20)	15.00	1–70	30	23.86 (14.98)	25.00	4–70
Greece	29	6.90 (4.37)	6.00	1–20	28	7.78 (4.34)	6.00	3–20
Total	187	9.92 (9.28)	7.00	1–70	182	12.17 (10.50)	9.50	1–70

Participants were also asked to indicate whether children play for fun or whether play tends to have an educational purpose in their classroom. As seen in Fig. 2, only in Denmark and in Cyprus most of the respondents replied that in their classroom children play mostly for fun. In the rest of the countries, respondents in their majority reported that children can play for fun and for educational purposes fairly equally. In the USA, Spain and Italy a big percentage of respondents replied that play tends to have a learning purpose.

Fig. 2 Play as a means for fun or educational purposes by country

Finally, participants were asked to report if children in their classroom can play when they want. As seen in Fig. 3, in most countries the majority of participants answered that there is a fixed schedule (a definite time for daily routines, for learning and for playing) that has to be followed. In Den- mark, Estonia, USA and Greece, the majority of participants answered that mostly children can play when they want, but there are some daily routines (eating, resting, etc.) that have to be followed. Finally, in Cyprus, Italy, Estonia, and the USA some participants replied that children can play whenever they want and that there are no limits.

Fig. 3 When children can play by country
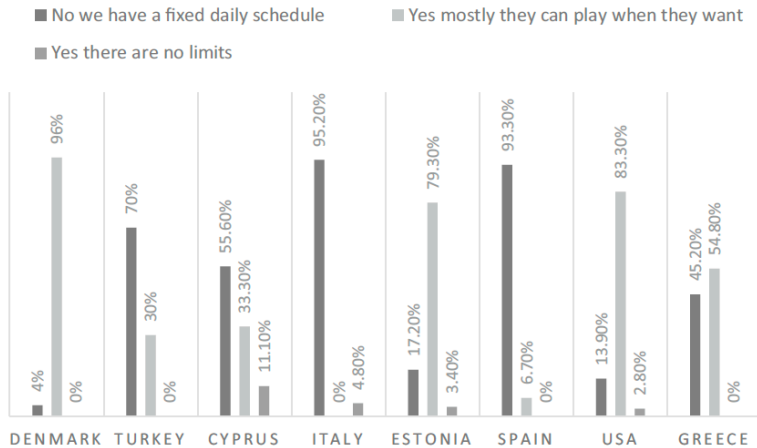
Discussion

Play has been traditionally linked to childhood and has been one of the central pedagogical approaches used in ECEC set- tings. In fact, programs traditionally offered a combination of: (i) structured, curriculum-led activities which are pre- dominantly teacher-led and emphasize on developing aca- demic skills and (ii) less structured, child-led playful activities. This segregation between curriculum-led and playful activities has led into a debate about the appropriate uses of play and about teachers' role in it (strictly child-directed versus teachers being involved). In addition, increasing schoolification of ECEC engenders questions about how a balance between play-based practices and emphasis on academics may be achieved.

Definitions of Play

The study showed both similarities and differences in the way play is conceptualized across cultures. Universal characteristics of play include: 'play supports social/emotional development', 'play as learning', 'play as fun', 'play as creativity', 'play as an opportunity to explore the world', and 'voluntary'. Previous research has also highlighted the universal aspect of these characteristics of play (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010; Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015). On the other hand, non-universal characteristics include: 'no external goals', 'play as a physical activity', 'rules', 'fundamental', 'play as children's work', 'play as a recreational activity' and 'overall development'. In terms of rules, our findings contradict the results of the study conducted by Van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015) who found that rules were more frequently mentioned as characteristics that typify play in all countries. In addition, although in our study the voluntary nature of play was mentioned in all countries, limited emphasis was given to this characteristic as opposed to other universal characteristics. This is also in contradiction with the results of Van der Aalsvoort et al. (2015).

Despite the existence of universal characteristics, analysis indicated variations in the extent to which they were mentioned across countries. Although in the majority of the countries play is seen as supporting children's social/emotional development and as linked to children's learning, in several countries a greater emphasis is given to other attributes of play. For instance, in Turkey, Estonia, Spain and Greece the fun aspect of play is emphasized, confirming previous research which indicates that play is generally perceived to involve fun (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010). In Cyprus, on the other hand, play is equated to creativity, whereas in Denmark, the second most frequently mentioned attribute of play—after its support to children's social/emotional development—is the opportunity it gives children to explore the world. Thus,

although in Denmark and Esto- nia play is described as contributing to children's overall development, in the rest of the countries limited emphasis has been given to this attribute. Previous research has also highlighted that the emphasis on characteristics of play dif- fers significantly across countries (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010; Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015).

Conceptualizations of play seem to be inseparably linked to the status of play in each of the eight participating countries. For instance, in Denmark where emphasis is placed on children's right to childhood and on children's need to play and have fun (rather than on being pushed into academic learning) play is conceptualized as supporting children's social/emotional development and as an opportunity for children to explore the world. Play in a Danish setting will—as explained by the pedagogues—be free play, initiated by the children and most Danish pedagogues understand their role as supporting the children if they need it, (e.g. helping children to resolve conflicts). For this reason, Danish early child- hood educators often do not consider it appropriate to use play to attain specific academic goals (Kragh-Müller 2013).

In Turkey, on the other hand, where free and structured play are seen as distinct, the emphasis is given to the fun and learning aspects of play. This finding is substantiated by previous results from the country which suggest that children in Turkey only have time to play in the daily schedule after they do Turkish, art, music, math and science (Tuğrul et al. 2014) and that during play teachers are involved in other tasks (Aras 2016). In addition, Varol (2012) found that 23% of the classroom time was spent on playing, while 12% of time was spent on academic instruction, a finding which confirms the division between play as fun and learning. The conceptualization of play as creativity by the Cypriot participants may be linked to previous research in the country indicating that free play activities are basically organized around structured and teacher-directed activities (Loizou and Avgitidou 2014). These free play activities relate according to this previous study to artistic activities and this could be a potential explanation of why emphasis is given primarily on creativity.

In Italy play is used as a means for social and emotional development (MIUR 2012). Our results substantiate this emphasis given from the Italian curriculum to play. In Estonia on the other hand, where play is seen as children's main activity as well as a means for learning both academic and social skills, emphasis has been placed both on the fun aspects of play and on the contributions that play makes to learning as well as to social/emotional development. In fact, due to this holistic approach to play in Estonia, which also characterizes Denmark, these two countries are the ones with the highest occurrences of play being defined as contributing into children's overall development. In Spain where ECEC settings may be characterized as highly structured environments, play is linked to children's fun. In the USA, on the other hand, play is linked to the development of social/emotional skills as well as to learning. This finding, although in line with previous results indicating that American teachers relate play to learning and development (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010, 2016), is in contradiction with the results of the study conducted by Izumi-Taylor et al. (2010) who found that, although American teachers agreed that play relates to social development they tended to value play for its potential to promote cognitive development. In our study, on the contrary, participants more frequently referred to the support play offers to children's social/emotional development rather than on academic learning. Finally, Greek teachers conceptualize play as learning and at the same percentage note both the support play offers to children's social/emotional development and the fun aspect of play. This finding is substantiated by the status role has in the Greek curriculum. More precisely, free and structured play is seen as distinct and play is only one of the five methods a kindergarten teacher can use to organize learning.

Uses of Play

The associations between the definition of play and the way play is used and implemented in the classroom seem to be complex. On the one hand, there are countries such as Denmark and the USA where the majority of participants defined play as supporting children's social/emotional development and subsequently participants reported that they spend more time on play for developing social and emotional skills rather than on play for academic purposes. On the other hand, there are countries such as Greece where although emphasis is given on the link between play and learning, play is used primarily for developing social/emotional skills. Finally, there are countries such as Italy where although emphasis is given on how play supports social/emotional development and on the fun aspect of play, play is primarily used for academic purposes. Previous research on play-based learning has also revealed inconsistencies in ECEC professionals' definitions and implementations. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) in their study found that although two definitions of play- based learning were provided by participants, three distinct implementation approaches were communicated in participants' responses, revealing a third undercurrent definition. Other research has also highlighted inconsistencies between definitions and uses of play. For example, although teachers report that they offer children opportunities for play, enacted practices during play indicate that they put constraints in the context of play and they put emphasis on outcomes (Loizou and Avgitidou 2014; Fesseha and Pyle 2016). This results according to Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) into children actually choosing among teacher-directed activities, rather than having a free choice. This disconnect between definitions and uses of play highlight the need for working towards an explicit and consistent definition of play.

The cultural context seems to exert an influence on those discrepancies. For example in Denmark we see that there is an

"ethos of play". As we have seen play is defined as self-initiated, free play that supports children's development in many ways, as children learn and develop through participation in everyday practices. Danish pedagogues underline the importance of play for socio-emotional development and children can mostly play when they want. Although play is used for educational purposes—in the meaning that the pedagogues plan playful activities for the children—children play primarily for fun (Kragh-Müller 2013).

In Estonia, as well we see an "ethos of play". Children can mostly play when they want and play is used fairly equally for fun and educational purposes, whereas teachers spend more time on play for social/emotional development. In Turkey, on the other hand participants defined play as a means for fun and learning. This definition is in line with the way play is used in Turkish settings. Teachers use play for academic and social/emotional purposes fairly equally and in a 66.70% respondents indicated that children can play for fun and educational purposes fairly equally. The time of play is prescribed by a fixed daily routine. In Cyprus on the country as we have seen (artis- tic) activities predetermined by the teachers may be conceptualized as play. Based on that and on the fact that the participants linked play to creativity we see a struggle between play and academics. Participants indicated that they spent more time on play for academic purposes rather than for social/emotional development and that children can play for fun and educational purposes fairly equally. However, there is a fixed routine which determines when children can play. Italy seems to follow a similar pattern with Cyprus, where a work versus play culture prevails.

Both the definitions and uses of play revealed from this study indicate that in countries where schoolification is more prevalent and an "ethos of play" is lacking ECEC professionals hold contradictory attitudes and struggle to balance between teacher-directed activities and more spontaneous child-initiated and directed forms of play. This result is in line with previous research indicating that although teachers acknowledge the importance of play for children's learning and development, they are, at the same time uncertain about the links between play and learning as well as hesitant to implement play in their practices (Walsh et al. 2010; Jung et al. 2017). However, ensuring that children have at their disposal time, resources and support to engage independently in free play is of outmost importance since according to Hewes (2006, p. 7) "if play always and exclusively serves adult educational goals, it is no longer play from the child's perspective. It becomes work, albeit playfully organized".

One of the challenges faced by ECEC professionals on the effective use of play is the curriculum. Even if teachers acknowledge the importance of play, curriculum prescriptions may lead them to adopt more teacher-led and formal practices. In fact, the curriculum and the emphasis it places on playful learning and play seems to exert great influence on teachers' pedagogical approaches, on their appreciation of play and on time allocation (Walsh et al. 2010). In addition, research indicates that curricula lack a concrete and sufficiently articulated definition of play (Loizou and Avgitidou 2014; Fesseha and Pyle 2016), a gap that frequently leads to misconceptions and malpractices (Loizou and Avgitidou 2014). But still the blame for the silence of play cannot and should not be placed only on curriculum and policy since frequently we have discrepancies between policy (a curriculum that supports and favors play) and actual practice. For example, Loizou and Avgitidou (2014) found three different approaches to play in the three settings they observed despite one and com- mon ECEC curriculum. According to Faas et al. (2017, p. 84) these discrepancies may be attributed to "difficulties in teachers' understanding or conceptualization of the theories of play and learning or play-based learning, as well as other factors (e.g., school management, transition issues, parents' concerns and expectations, and cultural expectations and values)". Alleviating such discrepancies in the initial professional preparation (IPP) programs attended by ECEC professionals well may be an important step in clarifying the role of play in high-quality early childhood education programs. In fact, previous studies have indicated that IPP has a central role on constructing college students' perceptions about play and on their intention to integrate it into future classrooms (Jung and Jin 2015; Walsh et al. 2010).

Implications for Future Research

The lack of a consistent definition, impacts ECEC professionals' practices and implementation of play in their class- room. It is therefore imperative to work towards developing a definition through empirical research and subsequently translate this definition into policy, in order for teachers to have the basis on which to construct their approach and implementation of play in classrooms. Based on our research results and on previous research indicating the different emphasis given on different characteristics of play across countries (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010; Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015; Wu and Rao 2011), the need for international comparative research is highlighted in order to "broaden our perspective and look beyond our own cultural boundaries" (Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015, p. 287).

The present research aimed to illuminate this long debated topic: the definition and use of play in ECEC settings. As we have seen, defining play is troubling and conceptualizations of play affect enacted practices. To fully understand what play

is and how it is used it has been suggested that we have to move "beyond the theoretical musings of philosophers and researchers" (Fisher et al. 2008, p. 314). The present study aspired to reveal implicit and explicit beliefs about play across eight countries. The need for international comparative research has been highlighted since according to Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer (2008; cited in Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010) "scholars and practitioners in early childhood education have much to learn about play from colleagues in different cultures; such knowledge could be valuable for multicultural communities". The puzzle of what play is and how it is used would be further filled by future cross cultural research which would aim at exploring children's and parents' conceptualizations and preferences of play.

Lastly, based on previous research results which indicate that activities that are actually teacher-directed are categorized as play (Fesseha and Pyle 2016), there is a need to observe play activities and explore conceptualizations of enacted practices. Finally, drawing on previous research suggesting that "if future professionals have taken play- related coursework during their college education, they would be more likely to have positive perceptions of play and increased intention to use play in their practices" (Jung and Jin 2015, p. 304), the need to examine whether play coursework in college is related to ECEC professionals' perceptions of play and the way they integrate it in early childhood education settings arises.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the international early childhood community's conviction that play is important for children's overall development, international research suggests that play is in jeopardy. The field of early childhood education still lacks a definition of play, a clear picture of how play is used across contexts and how definitions of play affect the way it is used. The present study aimed at exploring similarities and differences in the way play is conceptualized and used across eight studies and examining whether and how cultural aspects and definitions of play affect its use. Confirming previous research results (Izumi-Taylor et al. 2010; Van der Aalsvoort et al. 2015), the study revealed both universal and non-universal characteristics of play. However, despite the existence of universal characteristics, analysis indicated variations in the extent to which they were mentioned across countries. Conceptualizations of play have been found to the culture-specific and being inseparably linked to the status of play in each of the countries. On the other hand, the associations between definitions and uses of play seem to be complex. This disconnect between definitions and uses of play highlights the need for working towards an explicit and consistent definition of play. Overall, the study suggests that in some countries an "ethos of play" is prevalent whereas in others schoolification prevails, resulting in contradictory attitudes towards play and in ECEC professionals' struggle to achieve an appropriate role for play within diverse early childhood contexts.

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