The role of play in early childhood education curricula in Greece and the world: A systematic literature review

Maria Stamatoglou [1]*

[1] Department of Early Childhood Care and Education, International Hellenic University, Thessaloniki, GREECE
*Corresponding Author: maria.stamatoglou@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The scope of this systematic review is to present the role of play within early childhood education curricula in Greece and around the world. In particular, findings will be presented from 25 early childhood education curricula from the past 15 years (2004-2018). Seven of these come from countries of the European Union, one from a country that used to be a member of the European Union, two from countries of Africa, seven from countries of North and Latin America and the Caribbean, six from counties of Asia and two from Oceania. Findings present the role of play within the early childhood education curricula and where possible the role of the educator in relation to play in preschool settings. From the systematic review and the analysis of the curricula we can conclude that early childhood education curricula are in their majority child-centered, they vary in form and recognize the importance of play in children's holistic development and learning. Educators on their behalf tend to adopt various roles in order to support and promote play at the nursery school, indoors and outdoors in cooperation with parents and other professionals. Factors that influence the content of early childhood curricula and the role of play in them, are geographic location, cultural heritage, structure of society, knowledge of history and respect for the past and the future always in relation to the needs of the children of this age.

Keywords: early childhood education curricula, play, systematic review

INTRODUCTION

This research is an attempt to study curricula from different regions of the world regarding the role of play in the learning of preschool children. To this end, an extensive study of the curricula was followed in terms of the role of play and where possible, the role of teachers towards children's play. Initially, the definitions and dimensions of curricula in general and those for preschool age in particular will be discussed, then the role of the teacher in play will be presented, and finally the research findings will be analyzed according to the country of origin of each curriculum and their relevance for pedagogical practice.

Analytical Programs: Definition, Dimensions, & Ideology

Setting the curriculum is a difficult task. If the curriculum is seen as the stuff of what happens in schools, there are many possibilities for considering what the above phrase might mean. Curriculum is often the formal products and documents that guide what happens in classrooms (Mueller, 2012, p. 54).

The term curricula refers mainly to the basic aspect of the educational process that has concerned teachers, students and parents with their content, as they constitute a fundamental dimension of the whole process of education (Flouris, 2008, p. 9). The term "curriculum" is often identified with the Latin term "curriculum", which denotes a cycle in a stage (Chatzigeorgiou, 2004, p. 100). According to Hamilton (1989, p. 43), the term "curriculum" as a pedagogical term first appeared in scientific articles in various European countries.

Also, according to David (2001, p. 57) the new Oxford dictionary describes 'curriculum' as 'a course of study', while it defines 'syllabus' as 'summary statements of a course'. There seems to be little difference between these two definitions, although 20 years ago 'curriculum' would have meant a broader concept, focusing on the general aims and processes (including the 'hidden' or 'hidden' aspects of a learning environment) and 'curriculum' would have had a more limited and detailed content (i.e., what the child was to be taught/or learnt). It is therefore a document that refers to aspects of the learning environment.

In the literature there are also various classifications of curricula based on the general direction they seem to take. Starting from (Hadjigeorgiou, 1991, p. 17), three main directions are distinguished: cognitive, individual and social direction, while Xochellis and Dendrinou (1999, p. 2) present four categories, which are defined by them as programs and are, as follows:

a. *subject-centered*, whose central axis is scientific knowledge and whose aim is the transmission of knowledge,

b. *child-centered*, which emphasize the interests, needs and psychology of children,

c. *social effectiveness*, prioritizing needs and social conditions, and

d. *social reconstruction*, aimed at improving the social system.

On the other hand, Rubin (1990) identified seven types of curricula for primary school, which are similar to those of pre-school institutions. These are humanistic, behavioral/mechanistic, elementary, social imperatives, progressive, and developmental. Applying the typology to different models of early childhood education can mean exploring the philosophy of the model, on the one hand, while on the other hand it can demonstrate the combination of curriculum models that may work in a society or setting.

Around the same time Bernstein (1996) had argued that there are essentially two models of curriculum and that all curricula fall into one or both categories. According to Bernstein (1996), the curriculum is either performance-oriented or ability-oriented with the former (performance model) dominating throughout the world.

More recently, Pantazis and Sakellariou (2003), similarly, identified two types of curriculum orientation

(a) the humanistic and

(b) the technocratic.

The latter, according to the authors, tends to predominate and this can be seen from the clearly formulated contents, objectives and modes of assessment, which results in 'an emphasis on the managerial performance of the various educational processes, rather than on the achievement of substantive educational goals that will promote the improvement of educational practice'. Of course, the same article stresses the importance of the humanistic-oriented curriculum, particularly with a social dimension as 'it is organized on the basis of the

Concluding the reference to these two types of curricula, it is stressed that a curriculum characterized by its social dimension through all-round practices can lead to changes in the child's way of thinking and help him/her to acquire critical thinking, to become responsible, to be able to make decisions and to take part in constructive dialogues. The emotional dimension of the learning process is emphasized, and the ultimate goal is both to develop positive attitudes towards the child's life towards himself and the people around him and to develop his autonomy and conscience. Avgitidou and Gourgotou (2016) agree with the preceding researchers when they state that there are the open curricula, those that allow a form of flexibility for the teacher to make changes according to the needs of the children and "place more emphasis on the process through which the student is led to learning" and on the other hand there are the closed curricula that focus on the process of learning and the way of assessment.

Curricula, however, need some educational approaches in order to be implemented, and some of these are work plans, inquiry and differentiated instruction, discovery learning as recognized by authors such as Vrettos and Kapsalis (2009). According to Scott (2008), a curriculum can be specifically organized to include four dimensions:

(a) objectives,

(b) content or subject matter,

(c) methods or procedures, and

(d) assessment and evaluation.

The first dimension refers to the reasons for including certain elements in the curriculum and excluding others. The second dimension is content or subject matter, and this refers to the knowledge, skills or provisions implicit in the choice of subjects, and the way in which they are arranged. The third dimension is the methods or procedures, i.e., the pedagogy and is determined by the choices made for the first two dimensions. The fourth dimension is assessment or evaluation, i.e., the means of determining whether the curriculum has been successful.

Of course, all the previous references to curricula can be considered from the perspective that the educational environment is not devoid of conditions that affect the educational process and therefore the learning experience. Pinar (2004) states that the curriculum is in fact the school, as a whole, as experienced by students and teachers, agreeing with (Nason & Whitty, 2007, p. 272, in Katsarou & Tsafos, 2014) 'teachers and learners are never "just" teachers and learners. They are struggling, sorted, gendered individuals whose particular personal, social and cultural histories and world views shape and inform their actions in the context of ongoing social change.'

Schiro (2008) argues–and converges in view with the accusations made by Xochellis and Dendrinou (1999, p. 2)–that there are four dominant ideologies that shape curriculum practice in the United States. These four ideologies, then, are, as follows:

1. *The ideology of academic scholars,*

2. *The ideology of social efficiency,*

3. *Learner-centered ideology,* and

4. *The ideology of social reconstruction.*

Finally, emphasizing that the job of teaching is to fit the student into the curriculum and to fit the curriculum to the student (Schiro, 2008, p. 86). It involves stimulating students to operate the curriculum and adapting the curriculum to the students' capabilities. This implies that by knowing the students and considering their idiosyncratic natures, the curriculum designer will develop a curriculum for a typical student and the teacher will adjust for specific students.

Play & Learning

Play in preschool and childhood has been the subject of much study and research for more than 100 years. Reference to well-known theorists from various fields such as developmental psychology, biology, social psychology, sociology among many others is beyond the intentions of this paper. For the purposes of this paper, references will be made to key theorists and researchers of preschool and childhood play in general in relation to learning and how this relationship has influenced the writing of preschool curricula, not only those presented in the second part of this paper, but many others.

Play is increasingly institutionalized, not so much spontaneous but a means of learning placed in schemes and programs and used as a teaching method or pedagogical style applied with the aim of achieving and mastering skills on behalf of children. Of course, there are positive aspects to the discussion of play and learning. Children can learn and develop skills through pedagogically organized situations and environments while having fun learning. However, it may not be necessary to disguise learning processes and activities with play for the sake of the child. Empirical research has shown that children have specific and often positive expectations of both play and learning,

without necessarily operating connections between the two (Cecchin, 2013, p. 56).

Curtis (2002, p. 4) refers to well-known names in the field of early childhood education and training, such as Friedrich Froebel, Rudolph Steiner, Maria Montessori, Margaret McMillan, and Susan Isaacs, who continue to influence early childhood education today, either directly or indirectly. These five educators all held the view that young people, and primarily the child, are a whole person, with thoughts, feelings and imagination that need to be cared for and loved by adults. These young children are no longer seated in rows of desks or tables all day and are free to perform various activities in and out of the classroom and this is because these educators took a child-centered approach to education and believed that young children are intrinsically motivated and have a desire to learn.

On the one hand, Froebel, influenced by Rousseau and Pestalozzi, believed that play is a serious and profoundly important activity for preschool children (Curtis, 2002), but who believed that children's play should be bounded by teachers and not free. And on the other hand Maria Montessori who advocated that play is children's work, Steiner who was a proponent of outdoor play and believed that children should be engaged in free play with materials that serve in a variety of ways and enhance children's learning and creativity, and Isaacs who advocated the importance of social play and its benefits for young children have all influenced how curricula treat play and its relationship to learning. Vygotsky, finally, spoke of the importance of social play and believed that imagination and creativity have a dialectical relationship. He observed that children do not have to reproduce what they observe or experience in their daily lives in play, otherwise nothing new will ever emerge. Instead, they take elements from their observations and experiences and synthesize them to create something new (Vygotsky, 2004).

Recently, Wood (2013) argued that children should be involved in free play through which life attitudes are cultivated and furthermore, she believes that if early childhood teachers focus only on assessing the forms of play, knowledge, skills and understanding that are embedded within the curriculum, they will only achieve stable and partial concepts and interpretations of children's free play. Rather, paying attention to micro-analyses of play, alternative meanings and interpretations made accessible, opens up the possibility for deeper engagement with the socio-political dimensions of cultures and practices derived from play.

It is clear that there is a variety of views in the literature on the role of play and the form of play that should be followed in early childhood education. So in addition to free and structured play, we find guided play, which refers to learning experiences that combine the child-led nature of free play with a focus on learning outcomes and adult guidance. Children thrive when they participate in free play that involves their active engagement and is characterized by its fun, voluntary and flexible nature (Burghardt, 2011). But to achieve specific learning goals, some feel that adult support is essential. Therefore, guided play has two main elements: child autonomy and adult guidance. This makes it more interesting, and with the advantage of the child focusing on learning (Weisberg et al., 2016, p. 177-178).

The types of play vary according to their content. For example, in the literature we find social play, role play, symbolic play, imaginary play, play with or without objects, solitary and parallel play, plays with rules, outdoor play. In engaging in these different types of play, children
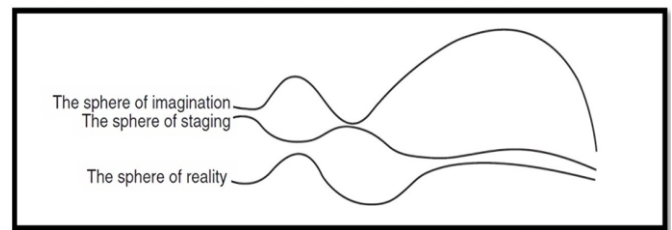

Figure 1. Model of three interdependent spheres of reality (Schousboe, 2013, p. 19)

are involved in realms of imagination, stage presence of play and reality (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1 suggests that the realm of fantasy includes the realm of performance in pretend situations, while the realm of stage presence of play focuses on organization, planning and negotiation. In the realm of reality, attention is paid to the present, physical location, laws of nature, objects and props chosen by the play partners. Schousboe's (2013) model allows researchers to consider play as a multi-level activity in which each play incident can be literally real and also be an act of imagination. This is possible because, in this play, scaffolding and reality are in balance with pretense. The interdependent spheres are seen as permeable and transparent. The connections are open and dynamic. During a play episode one sphere can transform the other sphere.

Various learning theories have at various times been associated with play in early childhood. Fleer (2018, p. 337-341) refers to a range of learning theories in her attempt to help early childhood educators evaluate play situations in preschool settings based on theories that influence their own practice. The theories, therefore, presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 shows that different development theories give weight to learning from different perspectives, as each theorist considers learning to be influenced by different factors. Therefore, we can easily consider the different approaches to learning from Gesell's biological theory and Piaget's psycho-genetic theory, which emphasize developmental milestones based on specific European standards as an independent process and the cultural/sociocultural theory of Vygoskty, Rogoff, and Fleer), where emphasis is placed on learning as a cultural and social process. On the other hand, we can observe similarities between the theories of behaviorism/social behaviorism and that of social learning by Skinner and Bandura, where learning occurs through the observation of social norms and can be observed through the behavior of the individual. Finally, in Blaise's critical/poststructuralist theory learning is challenged as it can be influenced by power relations. But what is the role of the educator in terms of children's play and in terms of the learning that takes place in this age period?

The Role of the Educator

The reference to the role of play in preschool curricula and the relationship between play and learning could not be considered complete without reference to the role of the educator towards play. Fleer (2015) points out that the role of the educator towards play for preschool children has been neglected. And she believes that Pellegrini's (2011) view that play is the children's business and therefore adults should not be involved may be responsible for this. She went on to research by analyzing the pedagogical practices of educators in order to understand the pedagogy of play (Fleer, 2015).

Table 1. Theories of development

Biological (Gesell)	Reference is made to the development and evolution based on some milestones which are generally based on middle-class children of European origin.
Behaviorism/social behaviorism (Skinner & Bamdura)	The focus is on observable behavioral outcomes.
Social learning (Skinner & Bandura)	Learning takes place through observation of patterns.
Psycho-genetics (Piaget)	Learning that is perceived on the basis of children's development and as a separate and independent process.
Cultural-historical/socio-cultural (Vygotsky, Rogoff, & Fleer)	Learning is perceived as a cultural and social process.
Critical/poststructuralist (Blaise)	Learning and learning processes are contested and subject to power relations and development is seen as diverse.

Therefore, there are the views of researchers who want educators to be active during children's play in early childhood education and training settings, providing support and encouragement for them to engage in more elaborate activities (Bodrova & Leong, 2006). On the other hand, Brown and Freeman (2001) present educators as those who should encourage observing children's play, as they should be given the opportunity to decide and organize their play. Similarly, Bennett et al. (1997) reinforcing the view that children's free play is highly beneficial to children, suggest that educators should avoid involvement in children's play and let them decide for themselves what their next actions will be.

Researchers agree with the above, pointing out that there are advantages and disadvantages to the influence that educators can have on children's play, and this depends on when educators become involved in children's play. Bodrova and Leong (2007) state that effective involvement of educators helps children to enrich and develop their play. Attention should be paid at this point to children's attitudes towards play, as the involvement of educators can help those children who find it difficult to interact with other children in the classroom, while children who are more independent need less involvement from educators.

Apart from the involvement of educators in the play of preschool children, observing children during play is one of the most common practices of educators in early childhood education and training settings. Through observation, educators can identify interests, emotions, and perceptions in order to take them into account when planning activities and assessing children (Abbott, 1994; Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Whether observers, they are involved in the play, educators play a key role in the development of preschool children's play. As Wood (2014) points out, the challenge for educators lies in successfully engaging or observing children's play in order to enable them to enhance the educational process and enrich children's knowledge based on a play policy. And Fleer (2015) notes that a broader policy and perspective on play is needed in order to harness play through curricula and provide the foundation for achieving learning outcomes for children of this age.

Aim of the Research–Research Questions

As presented earlier, the purpose of this research is to reveal the role of play in preschool curricula, the relationship between play and learning and the role of the teacher in relation to play. The research questions are therefore the following:

1. *How is play defined in the curricula of different countries and what types of play are mentioned?*
2. *How is the relationship between learning and play mentioned in these curricula?*
3. *What is the role of the teacher in relation to play in the curricula of these countries?*
4. *What are the similarities and differences between the curricula?*

With the above research questions in mind, a systematic literature review of the curricula began in order to find answers to these questions. It is worth noting at this point that in the literature we can find articles with literature review and comparison of three to five curricula (such as Fleer, 2018; Synodi, 2010), with some of these studies focusing on play, which was the reason for conducting this research. Differentiating the research on early childhood curricula conducted by 30 academics coming from 12 different countries out of a total of 10 countries (five European and five non-European) by Oberhuemer (2005) with the aim to investigate the objectives, theoretical orientation, learning areas, assessment methods and the connection of these curricula to primary school.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology followed for the realization of this work is a systematic literature review. According to the literature, the term systematic literature review is used in identifying and synthesizing a research that addresses a specific question using organized, transparent as well as iterative procedures at each stage of the process. Good systematic reviews take adequate precautions to minimize errors and bias. This is particularly important in research synthesis because biases can arise in the initial studies, as well as in publication, dissemination and review, to project procedures, and these biases can accumulate and can consequently overstate or understate results and can lead to incorrect conclusions. Like any good study, a systematic review follows a protocol that defines the central aims, concepts and methods in advance (Jesson et al., 2011; Littell et al., 2008).

Method of Data Collection

In order to achieve this systematic literature review, the key words were the terms 'curricula' and the search of various countries in English. Furthermore, a prerequisite for the inclusion of a curriculum was that it had to be under the auspices of the ministry of education of the country concerned or an institute cooperating with the ministry (i.e., an official body). Using Google search engine on the Internet, the search words were: 'early childhood curriculum', 'kindergarten curriculum', in combination with country names and the words AND/OR.

According to Jesson et al. (2011, p. 24) the main challenge for the traditional literature review is based on a critique of the process, as critics argue that the design and method for a traditional review is also open and flexible. A key difference is that in a traditional review there is no obligation to state the method of data collection, only that the reader needs to be informed of the purpose of the review and does not

also need to be informed of how the sources were identified, what was included , what was excluded and why. The systematic review is therefore more suited to answering specific questions and test hypotheses than the traditional review. It is not a simple discussion of the literature but more of a scientific tool. It can be used to summarize, assess and communicate results and implications of different research. But it is widely believed that at least one of these elements, namely communication, needs to be significantly improved if systematic reviews are to be truly useful (Petticrew & Roberts, 2010, p. 10).

Thus, in the case of the present research, it should be noted at this point that the search resulted in a number of curricula for children aged zero-eight years of which the curricula for children aged three-six or three-eight years that mentioned the term play were used for this work. This resulted, as will be discussed below, in the exclusion of the Zimbabwean curriculum, in Africa, as there was no mention of the term 'play' in the entire curriculum, but little mention of the term 'recreation'.

The search resulted in 35 curricula that also referred to the term play of which 10 were removed for practical reasons, as an analysis of all the curricula would be far beyond the time, purpose and scope of this study. Following the geographical placement of the curricula on the world map (**Table 2,** p. 19), 25 curricula remained with the attempt to make a representative mapping of the five continents.

Table 2. Summary table of systematic review of curricula

Country	Title	Reference	Objectives of curriculum	Types of play	Role of educator
Saint Mauritius	National curriculum framework pre-primary 3-5 years (parts 1 & 2)	Mauritius Institute of Education & Early Childhood Care and Education Authority (2008a, 2008b)	The development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, & values	Social, fine motor skills, mathematics, role-playing, & sensory	Organize, evaluate, & create safe environment
Alaska	Early learning guidelines: A resource for parents and early educators	Palin et al. (2007)	The social development of children	Fantastic play & language play	Support & working with parents
Australia	Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia	Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2009)	The child-centered nature of the program	Social, teamwork, play with materials from nature, & play with rules	Observe, embolden, & play
Brazil	Diretrizes curriculares nacionais da educação básica [National curriculum guidelines for basic education]	Moll (2009)	Knowledge through social relations affecting identity construction & human rights	Outdoor play with materials from nature, drama, & musical play	Create environments & interact
France	Programme d'enseignement de l'école maternelle [Kindergarten curriculum]	Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche [Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research] (2015a)	Kindergarten foundation is a first step in ensuring success of all children in a fair & challenging school & establishes the educational & pedagogical foundations that support & develop students' future learning throughout their schooling	Symbolic play, exploration play, construction and manipulation play, cooperative play, & board play	Observe &organized by assess
Germany (Bavaria)	The Bavarian education plan for children in day care facilities up to school enrolment	Bavarian State Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Family and Women State Institute for Early Education München (2016)	The social process and holistic development	Free play & role playing	Observe, evaluate, & interact
Switzerland (Zurich)	Curriculum for the kindergarten level of the Canton of Zurich	Education Diractorate of the Cantone of Zurich (2008)	Development in various sectors	Free play & unstructured	Observe
Greece	Kindergarten teacher's guide educational designs: Creative learning environments	Dafermou et al. (2014)	The acquisition of knowledge through interdisciplinary practices	Free play, rules play, symbolic, movement, & rules play	Observe, evaluate, discuss, & working with parents
Japan	幼稚園教育要領解説 [Yōchien kyōiku yōryō kaisetsu]	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (2017)	Early childhood, through direct & concrete experiences in flow of physical life. It is time to cultivate foundation of personality formation. Thus, in kindergarten, child must be motivated & empathetic & interested in happiness of other children.	Free play, play with materials from nature, & social play	Support & guide
Iceland	The Icelandic national curriculum guide for preschools	Ministry of Education and Culture (2011)	Democratic character with an emphasis on national heritage & community values	Social play, movement play, & dramatic play	Create, support, contact, & provide

Table 2 (Continued). Summary table of systematic review of curricula

| Country	Title	Reference	Objectives of curriculum	Types of play	Role of educator
India (New Delhi)	Preschool curriculum	Senapaty and Rajput (2018)	Physical, cognitive, emotional & social development	Outdoor play, free play, guided play, & dramatic play	Observe, they plan, & evaluate
California (USA)	California preschool learning foundations	Abbott et al. (2008)	It is foundation for children's development.	Dramatic play, role-playing play, natural environment play, & construction play	Participants &observe
Canada (Ontario)	Early learning for every child today: A framework for Ontario early childhood settings	Best Expert Panel for Early Learning (2007)	It is a key element in children's development & a link to primary & secondary education.	Dramatic play & dramatic-dramatic	Create environments, observe, participants, promote play, & provide opportunities
Korea	The kindergarten curriculum of the Republic of Korea	Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (2007)	Development of whole personality, happiness, autonomy, & creativity of children	Social play & play with words	Collaborate, organize, & implement
South Africa	The South African national curriculum framework for children from birth to four	Department of Basic Education (2015)	Organization of development & learning opportunities	Cooperative play, sensory, & role-playing play	Create interactive learning conditions
New Jersey	Preschool teaching and learning standards	New Jersey Department of Education (2014)	It increases children's perception of difference & similarities with others.	Dramatic play	Provide
New Zealand	Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o aotearoa [An educational mat for New Zealand's children]. Early childhood curriculum	Ministry of Education (2017)	A program of gender, ethnicity, & past & future inclusion activities	Dramatic play, kinetic play, & indoor & outdoor play	Involved & provide
Norway	Framework plan for kindergartens	Ministry of Education and Research (2017)	Promoting prosperity, good health, & global development	Social play, role playing, & outdoor play	They organize, help, observe, analyze, support, & participate
Russia	Guidelines for working with an exemplary basic educational program of preschool education and the Federal State educational standard of preschool education, Russia	Federal Institute for the Development of Education (2014)	Program has been designed to ensure a holistic pedagogical process aimed at child's full integrated development–physical, social, & communicative, cognitive, verbal, artistic, & aesthetic.	Social play, play with materials from nature, math play, & music play	Observe, organize, & evaluate
Scotland (UK)	The early years framework	The Scottish Government & COSLA (2008)	Vision of this curriculum is to establish a new vision of early years–that children should be valued & are active members of community, that relationship with parents & caregivers is both strong & sensitive, that children have right to a high quality of life & access to play.	Social play & outdoor play	Create environments, interact, support, & evaluate
Singapore	Nurturing early learners: A curriculum framework for kindergartens in Singapore	Ministry of Education (2012)	Learning & thinking outside box	Free play & undirected play	They play, organize, & evaluate
Sweden	Curriculum for the preschool Lpfö 98	Skolverket (2010)	Development of knowledge & values & democracy as foundation of kindergarten.	Imaginative play, creative play, maths play, & outdoor play	Contact, observe, & evaluate
Jamaica	The Jamaica early childhood education curriculum guide	Maye-Hemmings and Wint (2010)	More freedom of movement to get involved in activities	Dramatic play, sensory play, outdoor play, & building material play	Participants, evaluate, & observe
Texas	Revised Texas prekindergarten guidelines (2008)	Texas Education Agency (2008)	Learning experiences as a foundation for later academic, social, & emotional development	Dramatic play, imaginative play, role play, outdoor play, emergent writing play, & observational play of materials from nature	They help, guide, & cooperate with parents
Hong Kong	Kindergarten education curriculum guide: Joyful learning through play balanced development all the way	The Curriculum Development Council (2017)	Development in areas of ethics, intellect, physique, & social skills	Social play & kinetic play.	Create safe environments, participants, observe, & encourage
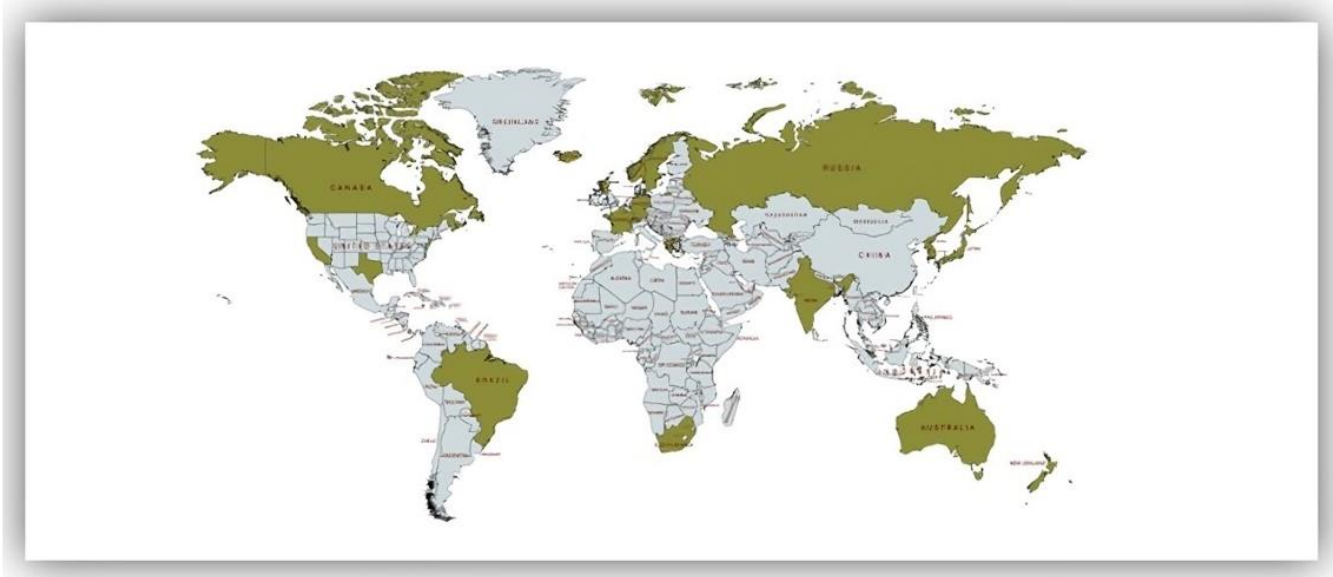
Figure 2. Detailed schedules & play by region (Source: Author)

Finally, an attempt was made to identify the most recent curriculum text, resulting in the analysis of curricula from 2004 to 2018. In total, more than 4,000 pages of curricula were indexed in order to be able to answer the research questions. Finally, a limitation can be seen as the fact that this research was carried out by one researcher and not by a group of researchers as found in the literature (Chambers et al., 2016 & Peleman et al., 2017).

RESULTS

This section presents the preschool curricula from different regions of the world. A total of 25 curricula emerged from the internet search, which could be used in the context of this work (**Table 2**).

Figure 2 shows in green the regions covered by the curricula discussed below, as an attempt was made to have as much coverage as possible at different latitudes and longitudes.

According to the presented curricula of preschool activities, play appears in a variety of ways (Schousboe, 2013), as the emphasis given to each of them is influenced by the specificity of the geopolitical position of the country, as mentioned before. Play is the main axis of development and learning for preschool children. According to the curricula studied, it is through play that children understand the world in which they grow up (Alaska, Australia, Ontario [Canada], Singapore), is the focus of all activities (Iceland), and is directly linked to learning (in 18 of the 25 countries).

Not only does it contribute to learning, but it is also important for development (Sweden), be it physical/physical (Hong Kong), social or mental (France) and emotional (California, USA). In other countries play is believed to be the joy of life (Japan and New Delhi), while in others play is a culture (St. Mauritius). Through play, children construct their personal identity and respect for their natural environment (Brazil).

References to play included both free (Burghardt, 2011; Wood, 2013) and structured play as well as indoor and outdoor play. In most of the early childhood curricula analyzed there appears to be a balance between free and structured play by teachers. As will be shown below,

teachers tend to structure play either indirectly (through the configuration of the classroom and the outdoor space of the kindergarten) or directly (through their own intervention, where necessary). An exception is the attitude of the Zurich (Switzerland) curriculum, where it is made clear that play ceases to be play as soon as the teacher intervenes.

As can be seen in the summary **Table 2**, social play is prominent (Vygotsky, 2004), outdoor play itself and free play dominate the references in the curricula. Few curricula, including the Greek one, refer to a variety of play activities. The rest are dominated by dramatic and social play and outdoor play with materials from nature. The relationship between learning and play, as reflected in the curricula, although taken for granted, is not always evident. This can be deduced from the fact that of the 25 curricula studied, 18 make direct reference to the relationship between play and learning. It is therefore clear that play and learning in the above curricula are inextricably linked and interdependent. While the emphasis on types of play varies, and the theoretical framework varies for the above countries, there is no learning without play as it is the driving force and numerous play activities lead children to learning in different areas (Cecchin, 2013).

Play is learning (Russia) and is one side of the coin while learning is the other (Bavaria/Germany). The present findings are consistent with the literature that supports the importance of play in early childhood education programs and the importance of free play as opposed to structured learning contexts, where children are allowed to choose the activities they engage in alone or with other children. Nevertheless, the role of teachers is not marginalized, but remains important for an effective learning experience.

The role of the teacher in relation to play in the curricula included in this research is multifaceted. In several curricula, references are made to parents' educational partners (Alaska, Ontario, Texas, Korea, Korea, South Africa, and Greece). Teachers are also presented as observers and evaluators of play (Hong Kong, Japan, Norway, Australia, Australia, Greece, and Iceland) and as helpers and supporters of children during play (Iceland, Norway, Australia, Greece, California, California, Jamaica, New Zealand, South Africa, and Iceland). Teachers therefore adopt different roles in order to support children during play and to

Table 3. Development theories & curricula: Similarities & differences

Growth theory child	Theoretical	Program country
Organic	Gesell (1925)	Canada (Ontario), California, New Jersey, Texas, & New Delhi
Behaviourism/social behaviourism	Skinner (1957)	Brazil, New Delhi, Japan, Bavaria (Germany), & Australia
Social learning	Skiner (1957) & Bandura	Alaska, Norway, & Scotland
Psycho-genetics	Piaget (1950, 1952)	Hong Kong, St. Mauritius, Switzerland (Zurich), & Greece
Cultural-historical/socio-cultural	Vygotsky (1999), Rogoff (2003), & Fleer (1995, 2010)	Texas, Sweden, France, Iceland, New Zealand, & South Africa
Critical/post-structuralist	Blaise (2005)	Jamaica, Singapore, Korea, & Russia

support the learning process (Curtis, 2002). There is agreement as to the importance of the role of teachers and the fact that they must allow space and time for children to actively engage in free and undirected play.

The curricula in this systematic literature review were divided into categories according to the developmental theory they appear to embrace (**Table 3**), following Fleer's (2018) table.

It is obvious that most curricula emphasize children's social and cultural development and less on biological and psychogenetic development, without this meaning that the importance of play in children's all-round development is undermined. Evidence presented on child development converges with that reported by Spodek and Saracho (1999) based on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, Gesell, Skinner, and Erikson among others. It should not be overlooked at this point that the curricula studied in this literature review are child-centered, which is in line with Bernstein's (1996) literature and aim at the child's all-round development as well as the conditions for interactive and effective learning. In an ever-changing society, and with the above in mind, it can be said that the study of early childhood education curricula from different countries can make educators aware of practices - current and future - and the findings can be used to give play an essential role of communication between children and educators, respecting the specificity of each country of origin of children and educators.

CONCLUSIONS & RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The present study attempted to present the place of play in 25 preschool curricula in Greece and in different regions of the world. After a brief bibliography on the definition and types of curricula and types of play and the relationship between play and learning, the methodology and presentation of the results followed. The findings converge with the literature that wants there to be a variety of types of curricula and for teachers to adopt practices influenced by the developmental theory they embrace. Play occupies a dominant position with social and outdoor play being most frequently encountered and structured and guided play being secondary.

Future research can include more curricula for a more comprehensive picture, and an effort should be made to communicate countries' practices within existing curricula so that the educational community is aware of practices from other regions of the world and to enhance their own.

REFERENCES

Abbott, D., Lundin, J., & Ong, F. (2008). *California preschool learning foundations.* https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/psfoundations.asp#psfoundvol1

Abbott, L. (1994). Play is ace! Developing play in schools and classrooms. In J. Moyles (Ed.), *The excellence of play.* Open University Press.

Australian Government Department of Education and Training. (2009). *Belonging, being & becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia.* Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council.

Avgitidou, S., & Gourgiotou, E. (2016). The teacher as a reflective professional. In S. Avgitidou, M. Tzekakis, & V. Tsafos (Eds.), *Prospective teachers observe, intervene and reflect: Proposals to support their practice* (v. 1). Gutenberg.

Bavarian State Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Family and Women State Institute for Early Education München. (2016). *The Bavarian education plan for children in day care facilities up to school enrolment.* Cornelsen Verlag.

Bennett, N., Wood, L., & Rogers, S. (1997). *Teaching through play: Teacher's thinking and classroom practice.* Open University Press.

Bernstein, B. (1996). Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *18*(1), 119-124.

Best Expert Panel for Early Learning. (2007). Early learning for every child today: A framework for Ontario early childhood settings. *Ministry of Children and Youth Services.* http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/oelf/continuum/continuum.pdf

Birbili, M. (2014). Program of studies for nicy schools "new school (school of the 21st century)–New curriculum". https://repository.edulll.gr

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2006). *Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education.* Prentice Hall.

Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2007). *Tool of mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education* (2nd Edn.). Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Brown, M., & Freeman, N. (2001). "We don't play that way at preschool": The moral and ethical dimensions of controlling children's play. In S. Reifel, & M. Brown (Eds.), *Early education and care, and reconceptualizing play.* JAI. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0270-4021(01)80010-0

Burghardt, G. M. (2011). Defining and recognizing play. In A. D. Pellegrini (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the development of play* (pp. 9-18). Oxford University Press.

Cecchin, D. (2013). Pedagogical perspectives on play. In I. Schousboe, & D. Winther-Lindqvist (Eds.), *Play and development–Cultural-historical perspectives.* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6579-5_4

Chambers, B., Cheung, A. C., K., & Slavin, R. E. (2016). Literacy and language outcomes of comprehensive and developmental-constructivist approaches to early childhood education: A systematic review. *Educational Research Review, 18,* 88-111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2016.03.003

Chatzigeorgiou, G. (2004). *Gnothi the curriculum: General and specific issues on cullicula and didactics.* Atrapos.

Curtis, A. (2002). *A curriculum for the preschool child: Learning to learn.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203131763

Dafermou, C., Koulouri, P., & Basagianni E. (2014). Kindergarten teacher's guide educational designs: Creative learning environments. *Pedagogical Institute.* http://www.pi-schools.gr/programs/depps/

David, T. (2001) Curriculum in the early years. In G. Pugh (Ed.), *Contemporary issues in the early years* (pp. 55-65). Paul Chapman Publishing.

Department of Basic Education. (2015). The South African national curriculum framework for children from birth to four. *Department of Basic Education.* https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/SAF_resources_ncfcomprehensive.pdf

Education Directorate of the Cantone of Zurich (2008). *Kinderbetreuung: Familienergänzende Tagesstrukturen* [Child care: day structures that complement the family]. Gemeinsame Erklärung der EDK und der SODK. Bern, Switzerland: EDK and SDK.

Federal Institute for the Development of Education. (2014). *Guidelines for working with an exemplary basic educational program of preschool education and the Federal State educational standard of preschool education, Russia.* http://www.firo.ru/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Metod_rec_POOP-FGOS-DO.pdf

Fleer, M. (2015). Pedagogical positioning in play–Teachers being inside and outside of children's imaginary play. *Early Child Development and Care, 185*(11-12),1801-1814. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1028393

Fleer, M. (2018). *Play in early childhood. From personal empiricisms to contemporary theories.* Thessaloniki.

Flouris, G. (2008). *Analytical programmes for a new era in education.* Grigoris Publications.

Hadjigeorgiou, G. (2004). *Know the curriculum. General and special issues of curricula and teaching.* Atrapos.

Hamilton, D. (1989). *Toward a theory of schooling.* Falmer.

Jesson, J. K., Matheson, L., & Lacey, F. M. (2011). *Doing your literature review. traditional and systematic techniques.* SAGE.

Jones, E., & Reynolds, G. (1992). *The play is the thing: Teachers' role in children's play.* Teachers College Press.

Katsarou, E., & Tsafos, V. (2014). Using action research in curriculum development in a fully-controlled educational context: The case of Greece. *European Journal of Curriculum Studies, 1*(2), 141-161.

Kennedy, A., & Barblett, L. (2010). The early years learning framework: Learning and teaching through play. *Research in Practice Series, 17*(3).

Littell, J. H., Corcoran, J., & Pillai, V. (2008). *Systematic reviews and meta-analysis.* Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195326543.001.0001

MacLachan, C., Fleer, M., & Edwards, S. (2010). *Early childhood curriculum: Planning, assessment and implementation.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511844829

Mauritius Institute of Education & Early Childhood Care and Education Authority. (2008a). *National curriculum framework pre-primary 3-5 years (part 1).* http://ministry-education.govmu.org/English/educationsector/Documents/NCF%20Pre%20Primary%20part1.pdf

Mauritius Institute of Education & Early Childhood Care and Education Authority. (2008b). *National curriculum framework pre-primary 3-5 years (part 2).* http://ministry-education.govmu.org/English/educationsector/Documents/NCF%20Pre%20Primary%20part2.pdf

Maye-Hemmings, C. (2010). *The Jamaica early childhood curriculum resource book.* The Dudley Grant Memorial Trust.

Maye-Hemmings, C., & Wint, M. (2010). *The Jamaica early childhood curriculum guide: Four and five getting ready for life.* The Dudley Grant Memorial Trust.

McCain, M., & Mustard, F. (1999) *Reversing the real brain drain: Early years study.* Ontario Children's Secretariat.

Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche [Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research]. (2015a). *Programme d'enseignement de l'école maternelle* [*Kindergarten curriculum*]. https://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/MEN_SPE_2/84/6/2015_BO_SPE_2_404846.pdf

Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche [Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research]. (2015b). *Ressources maternelle–Jouer et apprendre cadrage general* [*Kindergarten resources–Play and learn general framework*]. Eduscol.

Ministério da Educação [Ministry of Education]. (2010). *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais para a educação infantil* [*National curriculum guidelines for early childhood education*]. http://ndi.ufsc.br/files/2012/02/Diretrizes-Curriculares-para-a-E-I.pdf

Ministry of Education and Culture (2011). *Almennur hluti* [The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools: General Section 2011]. http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/utgefid-efni/namskrar/adalnamskra-grunnskola/

Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. (2007). The kindergarten curriculum of the Republic of Korea. *The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.* http://ncm.gu.se/media/kursplaner/andralander/koreaforskola.pdf

Ministry of Education and Research. (2017). Framework plan for kindergartens. *Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.* https://www.udir.no/globalassets/filer/barnehage/rammeplan/framework-plan-for-kindergartens2-2017.pdf

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan. (2017). *Yōchien kyōiku yōryō kaisetsu.* http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2018/04/25/1384661_3_3.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2012). *Nurturing early learners: A curriculum framework for kindergartens in Singapore.* https://www.moe.gov.sg/docs/default-source/document/education/preschool/files/kindergarten-curriculum-framework.pdf

Ministry of Education. (2017). Te whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o aotearoa [An educational mat for New Zealand's children]. Early childhood curriculum. *New Zealand Government.* https://education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Early-Childhood/ELS-Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum-ENG-Web.pdf

Moll, J. (2009). *Diretrizes curriculares nacionais da educação básica* [*National curriculum guidelines for basic education*]. http://portal.mec.gov.br/index.php?option=com_docman&view=download&alias=15548-d-c-n-educacao-basica-nova-pdf&category_slug=abril-2014-pdf&Itemid=30192

Mueller, J. J. (2012). The curriculum theory lens on early childhood: Moving thought into action. In N. File, J. J. Mueller, & D. Basler Wisneski (Eds), *Curriculum in early childhood education: Re-examined, rediscovered, renewed*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203804360

Nason, P. N., & Whitty, P. (2007). Bridging action research to the curriculum development process. *Educational Action Research, 15(2)*, 271-281. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790701314916

New Jersey Department of Education. (2014). *Preschool teaching and learning standards*. https://www.nj.gov/education/ece/guide/standards.pdf

Oberhuemer, P. (2005). International perspectives on early childhood curricula. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 37*(1), 27-37. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03165830

Ong, F., & Bridges, L. (2012). California preschool learning foundations. *California Department of Education: Sacramento*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/preschoolfoundationsvol3.pdf

Ong, F., Bridges, L., & Solo, D. (2010). California preschool learning foundations. *California Department of Education: Sacramento*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/psfoundationsvol2.pdf

Palin, S., Jackson, K. K., & Thompson, B. (2007). Early learning guidelines: A resource for parents and early educators. *State of Alaska, State Board of Education and Early Development*. https://education.alaska.gov/publications/earlylearningguidelines.pdf

Pantazis, S., & Sakellariou, M. (2015). The curriculum through the prism of social pedagogy: The case of preschool education. *Scientific Yearbook of the Pedagogical Department of Kindergarten Teachers, University of Ioannina, 2*, 149-158. https://doi.org/10.12681/jret.954

Peleman, B., Lazzarri, A., Budginaite, I., Siarova, H., Hauari, H., Peeters, J., & Cameron, C. (2017). Continuous professional development and ECEC quality: Findings from a European systematic literature review. *European Journal of Education, 53*(1), 9-22. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12257

Pellegrini, A. D. (2011). *The Oxford handbook of the development of play*. Oxford University Press.

Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2010). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. Blackwell Publishing.

Pinar, W. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pugh, G. (2001). *Contemporary issues in the early years: Working collaboratively with children*. Paul Chapman Publishing.

Rubin, D. L. (1990). Introduction: Ways of talking about talking and learning. In S. Hynds & D. L. Rubin (Eds.), *Perspectives on talk and learning* (pp. 1-17). National Council of Teachers of English.

Schiro, M. S. (2008). *Curriculum theory: Conflicting visions and enduring concerns*. SAGE.

Schousboe, I. (2013). The structure of fantasy play and its implications for good and evil games. In I. Schousboe, & D. Winther-Lindqvist (Eds.), *Play and development–Cultural-historical perspectives*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6579-5_2

Scott, D. (2008). *Critical essays on major curriculum theorists*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203461884

Senapaty, H., & Rajput, A. K. (2018). Preschool curriculum. *National Council of Educational Research and Training*. http://www.ncert.nic.in/pdf_files/preschool_curriculum.pdf

Skolverket, (2010). Curriculum for the preschool Lpfö 98. *Fritzes Kundservice*. https://www.skolverket.se/getFile?file=2704

Spodek, B., & Saracho, O. N. (1999). The relationship between theories of child development and the early childhood curriculum. *Early Child Development and Care, 152*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443991520101

Synodi, E. (2010). Play in the kindergarten: The case of Norway, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 18*(3), 185-200. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2010.521299

Texas Education Agency. (2008). *Revised Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines*. https://www.scuc.txed.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=57&dataid=221&FileName=PKG_Final_100808.pdf

The Curriculum Development Council. (2006). Guide to the pre-primary curriculum. *The Education Bureau HKSAR*. https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/preprimary/pre-primaryguide-net_en.pdf

The Curriculum Development Council. (2017). Kindergarten education curriculum guide: Joyful learning through play balanced development all the way. *The Education Bureau HKSAR*. https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/major-level-of-edu/preprimary/ENG_KGECG_2017.pdf

The Scottish Government & COSLA (2008). *Early years and early intervention: joint Scottish Government and COSLA policy statement*.

Vrettos, I., & Kapsalis, A. (2009). Theory, *research and practice*. Idiotis.

Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology, 42*(1), 7-97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10610405.2004.11059210

Weisberg, D. S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Michnick Golinkoff, R., Kittredge, A. K., & Klahr, D. (2016). Guided Play: Principles and practices. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 25*(3) 177-182. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721416645512

Wood, E. A. (2013). Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 22*(1), 4-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.830562

Xochellis, P., & Dendrinou, V. (1999). Curricula in school education: Concepts and terms, linguistic computer. *Journal of the Centre for Greek Language and Language Education, 1*, 79-85.

❖❖❖