Play as an Inclusive Pedagogical Tool: Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Supporting Young Children with Special Educational Needs

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Abstract

This research paper explores the perspectives of early childhood educators regarding the role of play in supporting the learning and inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within both formal and non-formal early education settings. Drawing upon qualitative data collected through open-ended questionnaires administered to seven early childhood educators in Greece, the study examines how play is employed as a pedagogical strategy, the adaptations made to include children with SEN, and the broader challenges and opportunities surrounding inclusive education. Results show that early educators view play as fundamental to babies' and toddler's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. However,

early educators face significant barriers such as lack of specialized training and professional support in this regard. This paper emphasizes the need for systemic changes, including ECEC professional development and collaborative practices, to harness the full potential of play as an inclusive educational tool in early childhood typical and non-typical education settings. It also highlights the importance of adapting play activities for children with SEN to enhance their participation and social inclusion from early years onwards.

Keywords: Play, Learning, ECEC, Special Educational Needs, qualitative study

1. Introduction

1.1 Play and Young Children with SEN

Play is a natural, instinctive activity of early childhood, essential not only for young children's overall development. In educational theory and practice, play is recognized as a crucial medium for learning and a powerful tool for inclusion. Particularly in early childhood education, where learning is deeply embedded in experience and interaction, play offers opportunities to foster problem-solving, communication, creativity, and emotional resilience (Auerbach et al., 2015; Weisberg et al., 2015; Antoniou, 2016; Papadaki, 2018). However, when it comes to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), ensuring inclusive participation in play-based learning presents both challenges and opportunities (Dimitriou, 2018; Karagianni, 2020; Nikolaou, 2021; Brown & Lynch, 2023).

Drawing on the qualitative stance this study focuses on the perspectives of early childhood educators in Greece regarding the role of play in supporting the learning of babies and toddlers with SEN in formal (structured preschool settings) and non-formal (less structured or therapeutic environments) education. It aims to address addresses how early educators adapt play to meet diverse needs and explores their experiences navigating inclusive education. In particular, the authors will try to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the role of play in the daily kindergarten program and how is it connected to the learning of children with typical development and SEN?

2. How do educators adapt play for children with Special Educational Needs and what strategies do they use to promote inclusive education through play?

3. What is the communication between educators and parents of children with SEN and how does this communication affect the children's learning development through play?

Theoretically, this study reinforces constructivist views of learning (Piaget; Vygotsky), showing that play is not merely recreational but a developmental necessity. The role of play in supporting young children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth—particularly for children with SEN—confirms its alignment with the Zone of Proximal Development framework. This research also contributes to inclusive education theory by demonstrating how play can serve as a vehicle for meaningful participation and adaptation.

Practically, the findings have wide-ranging applications in early childhood settings. They

suggest that inclusive, play-based learning environments should be embedded into curricula and supported by professional training. The need for greater educator support, tailored instructional strategies, and collaborative engagement with families and specialists emerged as central recommendations. Ultimately, this study urges policy makers and institutions to view play not as an ancillary activity but as a central strategy for achieving equity and inclusion in early learning.

1.2 The Importance of Play for Children with SEN

The issue of supporting children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) through inclusive play is a matter of both developmental urgency and educational equity. Early childhood is a sensitive and formative period during which foundational cognitive, emotional, and social competencies are established (Kuhaneck, Spitzer, & Bodison, 2020). When children with SEN are excluded from high-quality, play-based experiences, their opportunities for development, participation, and learning are significantly compromised (Loizou & Olympiou, 2024).

Inclusive education is promoted through frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for equitable, quality education for all. Yet in practice, many early years settings—especially in under-resourced or non-formal environments—lack the structures, training, and resources to implement inclusive pedagogy effectively (Sidhu et al., 2022). In Greece and similar contexts, the gap between inclusive ideals and everyday classroom realities remains a major challenge (Tsiridou, 2017). Furthermore, this research addresses how inclusive play can serve not merely as a pedagogical tool, but as a right. Play is recognized by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31) as essential to children's well-being and development. Ensuring access to meaningful, inclusive play experiences therefore reflects broader social justice concerns and affirms the dignity of all learners (UNICEF, 2021).

By examining the role of educators, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the micro-level factors—such as training, attitudes, and professional collaboration—that influence whether play-based inclusion is achieved. As such, it emphasizes the urgency of equipping early childhood professionals with tools, frameworks, and institutional support to ensure no child is left behind during these crucial early years. On the other hand, non-typical education refers to learning programs and activities that do not follow traditional, structured educational methods (Nikolaou, 2021).

Play in non-typical education has an equally important role as in typical education, but is often used in a different way, adapted to the needs of the children participating in these programs (Chung-Yuan Hsu et al., 2017). Non-typical education includes activities designed to enhance children's social and emotional development, as well as autonomous learning (Papadaki, 2018). Children with special needs, learning disabilities or developmental delays often benefit from adapted play activities that respond to their unique needs and allow them to participate equally in the educational process (Chung-Yuan Hsu et al., 2017).

An important part of non-formal education involves adapting play for children with special

needs (DeFreitas, 2018; Theodoridis, 2019). These children may have different physical or cognitive abilities, and therefore, need personalized toys that allow them to participate actively and effectively (Dandashi et al., 2015). For example, children with motor disabilities may benefit from play that has adapted components, such as special handles or large cards for easy handling. Non-typical education places special emphasis on using toys that help strengthen children's self-regulation and autonomy skills (Dandashi et al., 2015). For example, sensory play, such as playing with bright colors and sounds, are suitable for children with sensory difficulties or autism. Through these adapted play activities, children learn to explore their environment, improve concentration, and enhance their sensory skills (DePietro, 2013).

In non-typical education, therapeutic play has a central role, especially for children who are experiencing emotional or psychological difficulties (Durand & Schank, 2015). This type of play is specifically designed to help children express their feelings, cope with stress, or overcome psychological trauma (Durand & Schank, 2015). Therapeutic play is a type of play used by specialist child psychologists and therapists as a means of communicating and managing emotions (Engerman & Carr-Chellman, 2017). In therapeutic play, children are encouraged to express their feelings and thoughts through imagination and creativity (Engerman & Carr-Chellman, 2017). For example, a child experiencing intense anxiety may use role-playing to act out stressful situations, thereby learning to manage them. Therapeutic play enhances children's self-confidence, the ability to recognize and express their emotions, and manage difficult situations (Engerman & Carr-Chellman, 2017).

1.3 Play and Development

The developmental significance of play has been documented extensively by theorists like Piaget and Vygotsky amongst others. While Piaget viewed play as a mechanism through which children assimilate knowledge, develop cognitive structures, and test hypotheses (Brown & Lynch, 2023), Vygotsky emphasized its role in social development and the Zone of Proximal Development, where play enables children to perform beyond their independent capacities with peer or adult scaffolding (Chen et al., 2020). In contemporary research, play is classified into genres including symbolic, structured, sensory, and social play, each contributing uniquely to development (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015; Ke, 2016). For children with SEN, these benefits are magnified. Play facilitates experiential learning, language development, emotional regulation, and social interaction, making it a cornerstone of inclusive pedagogy (Dandashi et al., 2015). Play, as an activity that occurs naturally and spontaneously, is a complex concept that has occupied researchers, educators, and psychologists for many years. Despite the difficulty of having a commonly accepted definition, there are some key characteristics that distinguish it. Play is usually defined as a voluntary, spontaneous activity that does not aim for an immediate external result, but only for the pleasure and internal satisfaction of the participants (Gibson, Pritchard & deLemos, 2021).

Studies such as this of Pyle et al (2020) show that kindergarten teachers face the challenge of integrating contemporary assessment practices with play-based pedagogy and to address this

issue, they contacted a study that aimed to address this challenge through 10 teacher interview and observations from 20 kindergarten classrooms. The study results showed seven different assessment pathways that teachers follow through play pedagogies and assessment in order to mobilize their learning goals. Through their study Pyle et al (2020) suggest a framework that supports teachers' play based pedagogy to promote both academic and developmental learning goals for the young children in their care.

In the same line lays the study of Abdolmalaki et al (2024) that aimed to develop a framework for applying play in the ECEC curriculum based on the preschool educators lived experience. Through the phenomenological method interview data were analyzed and a model of integrating play into the preschool curriculum was designed. The model identified nine relationships between play types, educator roles, and curriculum learning objectives. Each pathway provides teachers with suggested instructions for using play in the curriculum based on the type of play, their role in the play, and the learning objective, through links between play types and curriculum goals.

One of the central elements of play is freedom of choice (Gibson, Pritchard & deLemos, 2021). Children participate voluntarily and there is no pressure or obligation to complete the activity (Grunloh & Mangel, 2015). In addition, play is characterized by the use of imagination, creativity and ingenuity (Grunloh & Mangel, 2015). Through play, children have the opportunity to represent the world around them, transform it and explore alternative scenarios and situations (Grunloh & Mangel, 2015). According to Vygotsky, play is not just a random activity, but a means through which children can understand and manage social norms and adult expectations (Hart, & Nagel, 2017). Accordingly, Piaget considers play as a central learning tool, where children test, verify, and learn through interaction with objects and other children (Hart, & Nagel, 2017).

Finally, an important dimension of play is the pleasure and enjoyment it provides to children (Hassan, 2024). This pleasure, however, does not necessarily come from competition or winning, but mainly from the process of participation and interaction with the world around them (Hassan, 2024). Essentially, play is a form of expression and communication for children, through which they can learn, build relationships and gain experiences (Jabbar & Felicia, 2015).

However, inclusive play requires intentional adaptation and sensitivity. Educational games in formal settings enhance structured learning (Stran et al., 2012), while therapeutic games in non-formal settings focus on emotional and behavioral support (DeFreitas, 2018). Nonetheless, educators face systemic limitations: insufficient training, lack of specialized staff, and inadequate resources (Engerman & Carr-Chellman, 2017).

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach, using open-ended questionnaires distributed to seven early childhood educators in Greece. Participants were selected based on their professional experience with both typically developing children and children with SEN. The

questions focused on daily educational practices, the use of play, experiences with children with SEN, communication with families, and perspectives on inclusive education (Quick & Hall, 2015).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were read multiple times, coded, and grouped into emergent themes such as "play and cognitive development," "adaptation for SEN", "understanding and challenges to inclusion," and "parent-educator communication" (Frisby, 2024).

To conclude, it is understood that although both typical and non-typical education use play as a basic tool for development and learning, there are significant differences in the way play is implemented and the aim of play itself (Tsiridou, 2017). Play in typical education focus more on learning and acquiring knowledge and skills through fun and creativity, while play in non-typical education focus on individualized support and enhancing the capabilities of children with different needs, skills and abilities (Hart & Nagel, 2017).

2.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of this study consist of 7 ECEC educators all working in day care centers, both public and private, in the Northen part of Greece. All participants were approached by the two undergraduate students that participated in reviewing the relevant literature as well as collecting and analysing the study's data. All participants were informed about the nature of the study and the fact that all responses would ensure their anonymity. In addition, all participants signed an informed consent form and were informed that they could withdrew from the study anytime they wished to.

2.2 Sampling Procedures

As previously presented participants were recruited by the two undergraduate students. The sample was one of convenience as all participants worked at the ECEC settings that both students had finished their practicum as a requirement for completing successfully their studies for the Early Childhood Education and Care Bachelor's degree. All interviews were carried out during out of school hours in the nursery setting that the ECEC were employed. All participants were graduates from university institutions throughout Greece and their working experience ranged from 11-24 years of employment. All participants were responsible for the care of children under the age of 4.

2.2.1 Measures Research Design

The method used to collect data was through interviews that consisted of 12 questions related to ECEC educators' views on play, their daily routines as school, their use of play as a pedagogical tool for the inclusion of young children with SEN, any relevant training they had in relation to caring for children with SEN, their collaboration with the children's families as well as their awareness of the needs of children with SEN. All interviews were carried out in Greek, transcribed and later translated for the purposes of this paper.

3. Results

The findings affirm that early childhood educators recognize play as a powerful medium for both learning and inclusion. Their pedagogical strategies align with international literature that positions play as central to development (Weisberg et al., 2015). The use of symbolic play to build empathy, structured games to teach math, and sensory play to support children with autism echoes best practices advocated by scholars and institutions (Loizou & Olympiou, 2024). The overall thematic coding table presented below is followed by the excerpts of the participants interviews.

Table 1. Thematic coding overall

Theme	Sub-theme / Code	Representative Quotes
Daily Routine & Structure	Thematic & structured play	*"The weekly program… thematic activities… observing insects… musical movement…" – Educator A*
	Free play for autonomy & creativity	*"free play is an essential part… develop social skills…" Educator B*
	Emotional security via routine	*"structured routine… helps children feel secure…" Educator F*
Play in Learning	Diagnostic / conceptual & emotional	*"through it… understand behaviors and emotions… pre-mathematical" – Educator B/C*
	Structured vs free play integration	*"covers both sides… organized play… free play" – Educator A*
Inclusive Play for SEN	Adaptation of play	*"Modifications… don't want to alienate… simplify instructions" – Educator E/F/A/B*
	Constraints: time & class size	*"no luxury of time… class of 24 children" – Educator E*
Training & Confidence	Basic seminars but not enough	*Educator C: I attend seminars but lack deep confidence with SEN*
Parent–Educator Communication	Daily dialogue & resistance	*"daily basis… refusal to talk" – Educator B; "differ at home" – Educator C;*
Inclusive Education Awareness	Principles vs systemic barriers	*"no special educator… children resent… helpful" "family-funded only" photos lack policy support, Educators D/E/F;*

This table offers a concise thematic analysis of educators' perspectives on play, routine, and inclusion in early childhood education. Educators seem to value both structured and free play. Thematic activities support learning and engagement, while free play fosters creativity and social development and also a structured routine is linked to emotional security for children, suggesting the importance of consistency in early education settings. With regards to play and

learning, play serves diagnostic and developmental functions, aiding in emotional and cognitive understanding and at the same time a balanced approach—integrating structured and free play—is seen as beneficial, supporting diverse learning needs. For children with SEN adaptation is recognized as necessary for inclusion, with educators striving to modify play without isolating children. However, practical constraints like class size and limited time hinder effective inclusion. Educators highlight the need for training as while basic training exists, educators report a lack of confidence in dealing with SEN effectively, pointing to a need for deeper professional development. In relation to parent-educator communication practices daily communication is important but can be challenging due to resistance or differing expectations between home and school. Finally, educators denote that there's awareness of inclusive principles, but systemic barriers such as lack of specialized staff and funding limit practical implementation. They express frustration at the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities.

3.1 Structure of Daily Routine in ECEC Settings

To begin with, educators reported a structured daily schedule that integrates both organized and free play. Activities included thematic sessions, role-play, musical games, and nature-based explorations (Pellis et al., 2015). Free play was valued for fostering creativity and self-expression, while structured play supported cognitive and social goals (Patton, 2014).

Educator A. responded that:

'The weekly program at the day care center includes various activities related to the theme of the week. Some of them are: thematic activities: in each week a specific theme is chosen, such as spring, and activities are related to it, e.g. flower making, experiential activities: children participate in activities that involve observation and exploration in nature, such as observing insects, Role-play: this involves play that encourage creativity such as becoming bees and making honey, musical movement play activities: these are activities that combine music and movement, enhancing physical expression, constructions and worksheets: creative activities that help develop motor skills. All these activities promote learning through play and encourage interaction between children'.

All the educators who participated in the research confirmed that there is an organized and structured daily routine in the kindergarten, which includes a series of activities. These activities are usually thematic and include construction play, role play, music play and fine and gross motor play activities. The routine combines both organized and free activities, allowing children to participate in a variety of play opportunities that enhance their learning. It is also noted that free play is an essential part of the daily routine, offering children the chance to develop social skills and express themselves creatively. One of the most common findings of the educators is the importance of a structured daily routine for preschool children. The existence of a daily routine with specific activities helps children feel secure and stable, which is particularly crucial for young children. The educators emphasized that these activities are not means of entertainment, but are educational tools that help children develop

basic skills such as cooperation, creativity, and critical thinking. At the same time, free play is an integral part of the daily routine, as it allows children to explore their own preferences and interests, promoting their autonomy. In this process, children participate on their own initiative, which encourages their personal development and strengthens their social skills.

3.2 The Role of Play in Learning

Play was universally seen as essential to learning. Educators cited examples such as using pine cones for counting, colors for recognition, and role-playing to develop empathy (Jan & Gaydos, 2016). It was noted that through play, children naturally engaged in problem-solving, communication, and teamwork (Jong et al., 2018).

Educator A denotes that play: *'..is very important for children. On the one hand, there are children who prefer to play in organized play, as they like to be directed and organized more. On the other hand, there are children who like free play more, because they want to be free. In this way, we cover both sides by implementing both types of play'.*

Educator B agrees that play: *'...has a very important role, as through it we can understand children's behaviors and emotions. Also, through play we can identify if there is a problem'.*

Similarly, Educator C states that play is: *'...very important as children relax and express themselves. Also, through play, activities are carried out to understand various concepts, for example, pre-mathematical'.*

Finally, Educator D and E presented play as directly linked to play since children are enabled to understand concepts, communicate, understand their emotions and socialize:

'...directly related to learning, many different activities can be done to help children understand concepts. Also, through play we observe how children behave'.

'Play is important and necessary for children. Through it, they cooperate with each other, understand their emotions, and socialize'.

3.3 Adapting Play for Children with SEN

All educators agreed on the need to adapt play to include children with SEN. Adaptations included simplifying instructions, modifying materials, and using visual aids (Pierucci et al., 2015). Emphasis was placed on integrating children with SEN into group play to promote social inclusion and reduce isolation (Chung-Yuan Hsu et al., 2017).

Educator E states that: *'Modifications are made, of course, but always based on the needs of all children. I don't want to alienate the child with special educational needs, so I try to adapt play as much as possible'.*

While Educator F agrees that: *'...for diagnosed and undiagnosed children, you adapt and simplify the instructions or goals. Because if they find it too difficult, they may reject it, otherwise with our help they will try and thus be encouraged'.*

Similarly, Educator A and Educator B denote that: *'I personally modify play because I don't like to isolate a child with special educational needs. I want to include him in play as much*

as he can and wants to, of course'.

'I certainly adapt the program so that all children participate, but many times it is also based on their ability and needs'.

However, Educator E stated that: *'There is no luxury of time, we adapt these children to the whole group. It is not possible in a class of 24 children, to deal with only 1-2. Play is already simplified so that everyone can participate'.*

3.4 Educator Training and Specialization

While most participants had attended seminars on special education, they acknowledged a lack of deep expertise. This gap affected their confidence in managing complex needs, especially in classes without support from specialized professionals (Sidhu et al., 2022).

3.5 Communication with Parents

Parent-educator communication was frequent but occasionally strained. Educators noted that while some parents were receptive, others were in denial about developmental concerns, complicating early intervention efforts (Pyle et al., 2020). Nevertheless, open dialogue was emphasized as critical for supporting children's holistic development.

Educator B denotes that communication with parents takes place: *'on a daily basis, either when children arrive or leave. Of course, there are also problems with parents who refuse to talk to us if we have told them something about their child that has happened in class'.*

Educator C states that: *'There is direct contact with the parents, especially when the children leave the daycare, so that they can find out how they did during the day. Clearly, there will always be parents, from my experience over the years, who will not easily accept that their child may have a different behavior compared to how he is at home'.*

And Educators E and F highlight that: *'We communicate very frequently with the child's family. Of course, I have also encountered difficulties. A mother removed her child from kindergarten after a conversation she had with the school psychologist, who told her that the child is on the autism spectrum'.*

'Direct and there is good cooperation. However, many times this is utopian, as some parents may not accept something we say about their child or if we have made an informal diagnosis and we share it with them. This is why it is very important to have communication about the work that is done at home and at school'.

As it is evident from the responses above, the educators that participated in this study emphasized that open and honest communication with parents is crucial to addressing various issues. Despite the challenges, they try to approach parents in a positive and supportive manner, recognizing the positive aspects of the child's behavior and presenting their concerns with sensitivity. In addition, in cases where there are indications of possible developmental or behavioral difficulties, educators try to direct parents to appropriate specialists for assessment and intervention. Collaboration with parents is deemed as particularly important when it comes to adapting the school's educational practices to the needs of young children. As

educators report, when there is good communication with parents, they can share the strategies they implement at school and collaborate to create a coherent framework of support for all children irrespective of the presence of SEN in both the school and family environment.

3.6 Understanding and Challenges of Inclusive Education

Although not all educators were familiar with the term "inclusive education," they endorsed its principles in practice. Most advocated for the integration of children with SEN, provided there was sufficient support from professionals such as speech therapists and psychologists (Auerbach et al., 2015).

Educators D, E and F state that: *'…since there is no special educator, play is mixed and the other children sometimes resent it. For children with special educational needs, it is definitely more helpful as this way they will feel like members of the group',* and

'Of course I reinforce it, but it also matters if the children themselves want it. I also create mixed groups to see how their cooperation and communication will be'.

Of course, they participate normally with the rest and we don't want to separate them. I also believe that children with special educational needs will be helped a lot by collaborating with the other children.

while at the same time they both agree that the difficulty in supporting inclusive education at an ECEC day care centres is strong as there is no governmental support for the support of children with SEN:

'I consider it necessary, yes, but it is not approved in daycare centers, only private parallel support is provided through the child's family' and

'It is very necessary and helpful to have it. But unfortunately, this is not possible unless the parents have searched and installed it themselves'.

Yes, it is necessary, but unfortunately, for parallel support to come here, the child's parents must provide it.

Key challenges included behavioral difficulties, lack of training, absence of specialized staff, and limited resources (Leather et al., 2021). Despite these barriers, educators expressed commitment to inclusive practices, often relying on personal intuition and peer collaboration to address complex situations (Nadolny et al., 2017).

So, Educator B stress that: '*Of course we reinforce it. We try to encourage the other children to come into contact with them and play. Also, in various activities in the classroom we will create mixed groups so that there is cooperation… but unfortunately, there are no specialized support'.*

As it derives from the participants' responses (Table 2) enablers and challenges can be identified regarding the role of play in ECEC settings where young children with SEN attend.
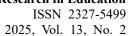
Table 2. Participants' positioning on main themes

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Routine & Structure	Strong — security & variety		
Play in Learning	Strong — diagnostic, inclusive		
SEN Inclusion	Strong intention	Time/cla0ss size limits	
Training & Expertise	Attended seminars	Lack confidence	
Parent Communication	Frequent daily contact		Parental denial/resistance
Systemic Support	Encourages inclusion		Lack of trained staff & policy support

On the positive stance, the daily routine can be seen as providing young children with security and variety, while play can be seen as having the role of a diagnostic tool and provide the grounds for inclusion for children with SEN. All participants showed that they intent strongly to use play as an inclusive pedagogical tool for young children in ECEC day care centers and also that they encourage inclusion through play, while having attended relevant training. On the positive side stands that ECEC efforts to communicate children's needs with their parents on a daily basis. On the neutral stance, themes include available time that the ECEC educator has in order to complete a task with the children in her class and also the class size. On the negative stance responses that include parental denial and resistance as far as the child's SEN is concerned along with the lack of training and policy support can be seen.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to highlight the views of early educators on the pedagogical use of play as a tool for the inclusion of children with SEN in Greece preschool settings. The responses above revealed that for the participants of this study play stands at the intersection of joy and growth, making it a uniquely powerful tool in early childhood education. For children with Special Educational Needs, play offers not just learning but belonging (Hassan, 2024). This study confirms that early childhood educators are deeply committed to using play inclusively, but their efforts must be bolstered by training, resources, and institutional support (DePietro, 2013). True inclusion requires more than good intentions; it demands a systemic alignment of pedagogy, policy, and practice. By recognizing and acting upon the insights of educators on the ground, we can move closer to educational environments where every child learns, plays, and thrives (Pyle et al, 2020; Abdomalaki et al., 2024).

However, the study reveals systemic limitations that hinder the full realization of inclusive

education. Educators' limited training in special education restricts their ability to tailor interventions effectively (Durand & Schank, 2015, Schank, 2015). The absence of professional support exacerbates this issue, leaving educators to manage behavioral and cognitive challenges with minimal resources (Engerman & Carr-Chellman, 2017). Furthermore, while educators demonstrate goodwill and creativity in adapting play, their efforts are constrained by time, class size, and institutional expectations. Inclusive play cannot thrive in isolation; it requires a systemic commitment to training, staffing, and curriculum adaptation (Tsiridou, 2017). In addition, the study highlights the critical role of parent-educator collaboration. In cases where parents resist acknowledging developmental delays, children miss out on timely interventions (Gaydos, 2015). Educators' ability to communicate constructively with parents can thus make a significant difference in outcomes for children with SEN.

Although this study was based on a small sample and the findings can not be generalized, there is a good insight of the perceptions of early educators on the use of play as a pedagogical tool for inclusion in ECEC settings. The daily encounters of ECEC educators present many challenges especially when young children with SEN attend the setting and there is no governmental support as far as the day care centers are concerned. These findings provide food for though on how ECEC educators could be initially trained and supported in implementing play as a pedagogical tool for inclusion. As literature supports play in non-typical education has an equally important role as in typical education, but is often used in a different way, adapted to the needs of the children participating in these programs (Chung-Yuan Hsu et al., 2017), somethings that was also highlighted in this study. Overall, the study highlights a thoughtful and reflective stance from educators, emphasizing the need for balance in pedagogy, improved training, and systemic support to truly realize inclusive and effective early education. As it was previously presented when it comes to children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), ensuring inclusive participation in play-based learning presents both challenges and opportunities (Brown & Lynch, 2023). Such challenges and opportunities ought to be addressed so that all young children should be given a head start while attending a quality ECEC environment with supportive educators who can address and support children's needs.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.