



## PLAY WITHIN THE KINDERGARTEN CURRICULUM OF GREECE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON KINDERGARTEN EDUCATORS AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### **Abstract:**

Play is a dominant activity towards children's development and learning and its significance as an educational means is widely acknowledged. However, regardless its importance, investigational data show that current Curricula do not rely on emphasizing in play at the degree they should. This study was conducted during the 2018 School Year investigating on views of Kindergarten Educators (N:100) of the Epirus Region and Senior Students at the Department Of Early School Education of the University of Ioannina (N:100) regarding play during the Kindergarten's educational process according to the Greek Analytical pre-school education Curriculum. The importance of play within the Curriculum was clearly demonstrated. Educators, however, trivialize School-Family collaboration concerning play while Students deem it as substantial, comprehend the benefits free-style team play poses on learning, being thus amenable on implementing it within the school Curriculum. Students and Educators consider teachers and pupils should co-determine on scholastic play activities. Finally, the study accentuates the training of Greek Educators, to aim at better utilization of play during the educational process.

**Keywords:** play, curriculum, kindergarten educators, university students

### **1. Introduction**

Play constitutes a thematic domain which has been widely scrutinized over the last decades (Brock, Dodds, Jarvis & Olusoga, 2016- Cheng & Johnson, 2010- Johnson & Wu, 2019- Oliver & Klugman, 2007- Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2012a). Emphasis on the research concerning play is mainly attributed to the fact that every kid has the right to take part in play (Ginsburg, 2006- Loizou & Avgitidou, 2014) with this being taken as a means of

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learning and teaching in the context of pre-school and school education, as well as a process which contributes on the child's full development (Aypay, 2016- Gal-Szabo, Spinrad, Eisenberg & Sulik, 2018- Jagoda, Gilliam, McDonald & Russell, 2015- Loebach & Gilliland, 2016- Trawick-Smith, Wolff, Koschel & Vallarelli, 2015- Veiga, Neto & Rieffec, 2016- Wood & Attfield, 2005).

On the field of Pre-school pedagogics play is defined as being one of the crucial means of cognition and development (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009). Curricula based on play Pedagogics and play activities are a part of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) field since it is widely recognized that play fundamentally affects full growth and learning of children (Einarsdottir, 2014- Loizou, Michaelides & Georgiou, 2017- Lynch, 2015- Ridgway & Quinones, 2012- Wood, 2014).

In the Greek Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2014a) play is regarded as a "*dominant activity*" in terms of children's development and cognition (p. 29). Through play kids evolve basic skills such as: a) interacting and cooperating with their peers or adults b) communicating by exploring and using various means of expression and representation of their thoughts, experiences and emotions (such as socio-dramatic play) and c) functioning responsibly and autonomously, taking up initiatives and standing up for their choices (thus building up their own, unique personality). Emphasis is given to the categories of play such as kinetic, music-kinetic, social, creative, imaginary, socio-dramatic, game of object utilization, game with rules, investigatory play, play by using raw materials (e.g. stone, wood, leaves, sand), play with construction material, educational digital game, traditional game, freestyle game, organized play and team-cooperative play.

The Curriculum, under the influence of research on play (Alexander, Frohlich & Fusco, 2012- Burdette & Whitaker, 2005- Cammilleri, 2009- Gray, 2011- Strife & Downey, 2009- Wood, 2014) underlines the importance of children involving themselves with freestyle play. More specifically, it states that freestyle play contributes on the education and development (cognitive, physical, social) of children alongside the formation of a healthy and robust personality, helps them acquire the sense of one's identity and instills important values upon them, such as the value of freedom (freedom of speech, expression and willingness that is).

One of the most significant play categories which are proposed within the Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2014a) is the team-cooperative play because it contributes at the development of communication, interaction, collaboration and socialization of children. When kids work and play in teams they learn to abide by the existing rules, take up roles, speak alternately, wait for their turn, manage their defeat and fight their egotism (Zaragas, 2011).

Various researchers claim that most of the times, the play domains are prepared and constructed by adults resulting in the creational and spiritual growth of kids to be inhibited rather than promoted (Elias & Berk, 2002, Ness & Farenga, 2016). On the contrary, within a Curriculum that follows the principles of play-learning, the Educator

provides pupils with directions and guides their learning process towards the achievement of specific cognitive goals. Pupils frequently choose their activities as well as the materials of their play freely, their teacher, however, is always standing by, in order to guide and direct them (Lillard, 2013).

The objective of our present project is to investigate whether a) the Kindergarten Educators exploit play within the educational process based on the Curriculum and b) whether the University Students are familiarized with the Curriculum after the completion of their internship in a kindergarten facility. The study is founded on the following research arguments:

- 1) To what extend is play important throughout the educational process?
- 2) Are Educators and University Students fully aware of the play's role within the Curriculum which is being implemented at the Kindergarten?
- 3) Do the Educators know the most preferable games by the Kindergarten pupils?
- 4) Which sort of play do the Educators use most at school?
- 5) Who chooses the toy- objects and activities that are to be played- performed at the Kindergarten?
- 6) How important do present and future Educators deem the collaboration between them and the children's family when it comes to play issues?
- 7) What is the role of the Educators on children's free-style play?

## **2. The role of the Educator within the educational process, based on the Kindergarten Curriculum**

Studies that have been conducted with regards to the role of current and prospective educators concerning play within the educational process of the Kindergarten are insufficient (Jung & Jin, 2014- Klein, 1996- Lee, 2006- Walsh & Fallon, 2019). The majority of the studies have focused on the Educators' aspects on teaching and learning in general (Calderhead & Robson, 1991) as well as on the definition and categorization of play (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010), while they have neglected to debate on the Educators' views regarding the significance of play within the overall educational process and the role they themselves hold on children's play.

The importance of the Educators' role on children's play is, however, acknowledged by the Greek Educational System. According to the Kindergarten Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2014a), the Educator's basic goal is to "*promote the cognitive level of their pupils throughout play and exploration as well as to seek after the children's practicing participation in the daily play activities*" (p.560). The Educator can, in the context of play within the pre-school cognitive domains, take up a variety of roles such as participating in their pupils' play, forming challenges, adopting behaviors and roles, suggesting innovative ideas towards activities, listening to their pupils, collecting important information concerning the cognition and development of children as well as ameliorating their vocabulary and range of topics.

The Curriculum also underlines that Educators should devote a significant part of the daily routine time on play, inside and outside the class, offering pupils the opportunity to acquaint themselves therefore interact with each other, encourage children to propose of sorts of play that they most prefer, utilize various play categories (e.g. team-kinetic or traditional play) in order for all kids to take part in the educational praxis, as well as to observe them during play. Observation, especially a systematic one, constitutes an important asset for assessing children's learning, development, needs and interests. It offers teachers the opportunity to a) observe children in spontaneous, often unpredictable and, by extension, authentic moments, b) focus on specific behaviours of children, c) design appropriate activities which will help children acquire useful learning experiences, and d) change play environment to meet the pupils' needs and interests (Brock et al., 2016- Bulunuz, 2012- Gullo & Hughes 2011- Ridgway & Quinones, 2012- Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2012b).

Closing, the Kindergarten Curriculum emphasizes on the active participation of parents, children and Educators in the Kindergarten's educational process itself, as well as on the collaboration among them on issues that concern selection, designing and evaluation of toy-objects and play activities. Since play is a practice that actually takes place everywhere, especially within the family environment, the Educator is the one who demonstrates its different dimensions towards the parents, as well as the way in which play contributes on their children's learning and development. The Educators acknowledge this way, the significance of play (Institute of Educational Policy, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2014a).

Bibliographical consultation advocates that high-quality pre-school Education Curricula encourage and support collaboration between the Kindergarten and the Family since they recognize that: 1) Families are a vast resource of information about children, information which is crucial towards organizing learning experiences that are meaningful to children and meet their needs and abilities and 2) both, Educators and Parents are to share the responsibility of children's learning and the "continuity" necessary between the two major environments of under-aged kids (Sakellariou, 2008- Zachrisen, 2016).

The philosophy of the Greek Curriculum in terms of the Educator's role towards children's play comes in full alignment with the one of Cyprus (Loizou, Tilemachou, Kontovourki, Irakleous, Meletiou-Charalambous, Karapataki, Siakalli & Panagiotou, 2019), which states that an Educator can take up a series of different roles within play, such as observing, evaluating, organizing, developing, intervening in order for the play to be preserved or pausing it, depending on the circumstances, participating, along with the children, on the framework and scenarios that they determine. Moreover, the Educator is due to cooperate with the families on the purpose of a more efficient experience provided to children, but also on the purpose of a more effective implementation of the Curriculum.

Regardless of the high significance of the Educators' role within children's play, investigational data (Vera & Geneser, 2012, Kraus, 2006) clearly demonstrate that

Educators fail to practically implement the playing procedure and adopt the aforementioned roles, and this is a fact that may be due to either insufficient educational training or to the fact that they have failed to make a profound study of the Curricula (Anderson, 2001) or even to the fact that they had never been taught of courses which regard play, by the University Departments of Pedagogics during their studies' years. Play constitutes the subject of scrutiny for many researchers. The investigational data that debate on pre-school education regarding play during the Kindergarten's educational process according to the Greek Analytical pre-school education Curriculum, however, are far from adequate within the greek literature. The current study contributes towards a comprehensive discuss on such issues.

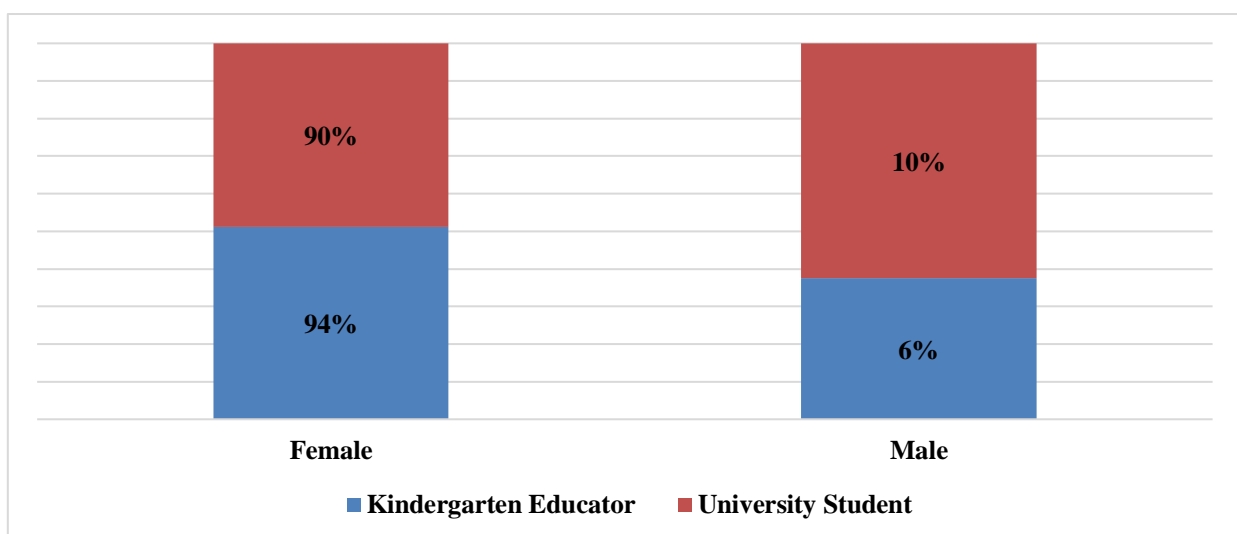
### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Sample

On the purpose of conducting the current research a random sample of 200 Educators was used. It includes 100 Kindergarten Educators (N:100) who work on State Kindergartens at the Epirus Region, Greece, and 100 Senior Students (N:100), at the Department of Early School Education of the University of Ioannina during the 2018 academic year. The Greek educationalists that participated on the research and answered the inventories were picked through random sampling. The study was carried out from January 2018 through April 2018.

#### 3.2 Demographics of the Kindergarten Educators and the Students of the research specimen number

A 94% of the Kindergarten Educators consisted of female teachers to a 6% consisting of males. 90% of the Students were of female gender while 10% were males (Chart 1).



**Chart 1:** Distribution of Kindergarten Educators and University Students regarding gender

An 80.6% of Kindergarten Educators and 64.1% of Student Teachers have been trained into courses regarding play pedagogics during their undergraduate studies while 19.4% of Educators and 35.9% of Students have not taken courses on play pedagogics (Chart 2).

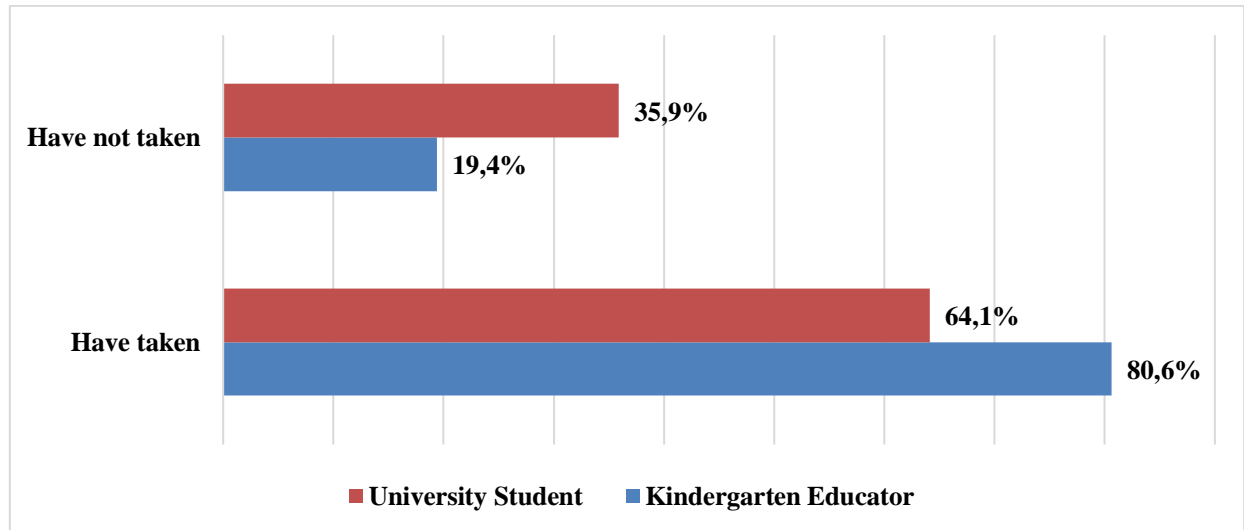


Chart 2: Courses on play pedagogics

The majority of Kindergarten Educators (75%) have attended further training seminars on play, whereas 25% have not undertaken such training. 53% of the Students have attended further training seminars concerning play, as opposed to a 47% of the Students who haven't done so (Chart 3).

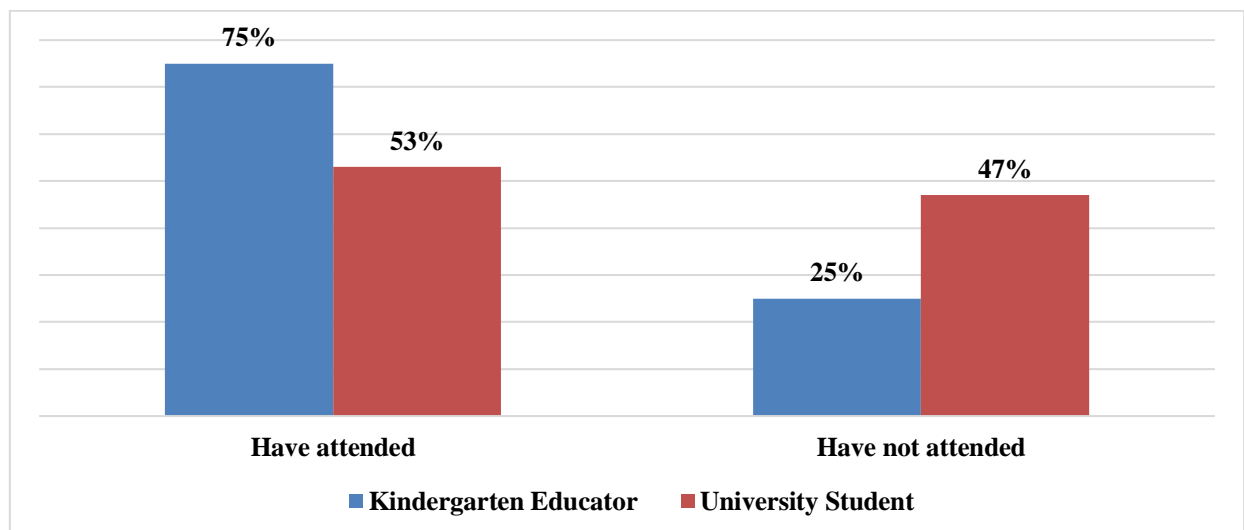


Chart 3: Further training Seminars on play

### 3.3 Research Tool

Questionnaire survey: Conducting research with the aid of questionnaires was considered to be the most suitable method of collecting data with regards to the Educators' and Students' aspects on play within the educational process of the

Kindergarten in accordance to the Curriculum relevant to pre- school education in Greece. The questionnaire was built on “open” and “closed” type inquiries after an exhaustive study of relevant literature and the Greek Analytical pre-school education Curriculum (Institute of Educational Policy, Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, 2014a). A total of 100 questionnaires were distributed to Senior Students and 100 to Kindergarten Educators in January 2018. The questionnaires were collected in March 2018 and they were analyzed in April 2018.

### **3.4 Limitations of the study**

In our study Kindergarten Educators with an educational experience (spanning from 10 to 20 years) participated, who had undertaken a University education Curriculum during their studies years, and had been working in state Kindergartens of the Epirus Region, Greece. Furthermore, Senior Students at the Department Of Early School Education of the University of Ioannina who had completed their internship in Kindergarten facilities took part. We deem that even more research needs to be conducted, on a national level, in order the findings of our study to be generalized on a higher degree of certitude.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The answers to the questionnaires were collected, coded and processed with the help of the SPSS 20 statistical analysis package and, where appropriate, analyzed.

Responses to open-ended questions were collected, recorded and categorized according to their content, so as to integrate responses of the same content into the same category and to avoid any loss of information.

#### **3.5.1 Pearson chi square test**

For the inspection of the existence of a correlation between two qualitative variables a  $\chi^2$  independence check was implemented, where, in order for the significance level  $p$  to be observed a respective to the absolute frequency of the observed responses, Pearson's asymptotic check was implemented. For  $p > 0,05$  we shall admit, on a significance level, that the responses show no statistical difference for both cases, while for  $p < 0,05$  a difference is present.

## **4. Presentation of the Study Results**

In this section the findings of our study are presented, according to the aspects of the Educators and the Students on play during the Kindergarten educational process based on the Pre- school education Curriculum in Greece.

#### 4.1 The importance of play throughout the educational process

**Table 1:** Views of Kindergarten Educators and University Students regarding the significance of play within the educational process

			Position you hold		Total
			University Student	Kindergarten Educator	
Significance of play within the educational process	Moderate	Count	4	3	7
		% within Position	4,0%	3,0%	3,5%
	High	Count	46	25	71
		% within Position	46,0%	25,0%	35,5%
	Extremely high	Count	50	72	122
		% within Position	50,0%	72,0%	61,0%
Total	Count	100	100	200	
	% within Position	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	

Both, Educators and Students were asked about how significant play is within the educational process. The majority of Educators (72.2%) and that of Students (50%) replied that play holds a highly significant role in the educational process. Also, play was considered as significant among 46% of the Students and 25% of the Kindergarten Educators. None of the subjects responded as play to be “somewhat” or “slightly” significant. The above-mentioned results are confirmed by the use of  $\chi^2$ , where  $\chi^2 = 10,321a$ ,  $df = 2$  and  $p = 0,006$ . From the checking  $\chi^2$  (Pearson chi square test) a statistically significant difference occurs between the views of the Students and the Kindergarten Educators ( $p = 0,006$ ). This differentiation concerns the large percentage of Educators who deem play as extremely significant within the educational process compared to the 50% of Students regarding such (Table 1).

#### 4.2 Play within the Kindergarten Curriculum

**Table 2:** Views of the Kindergarten Educators and the University Students on the role of play within the Kindergarten Curriculum

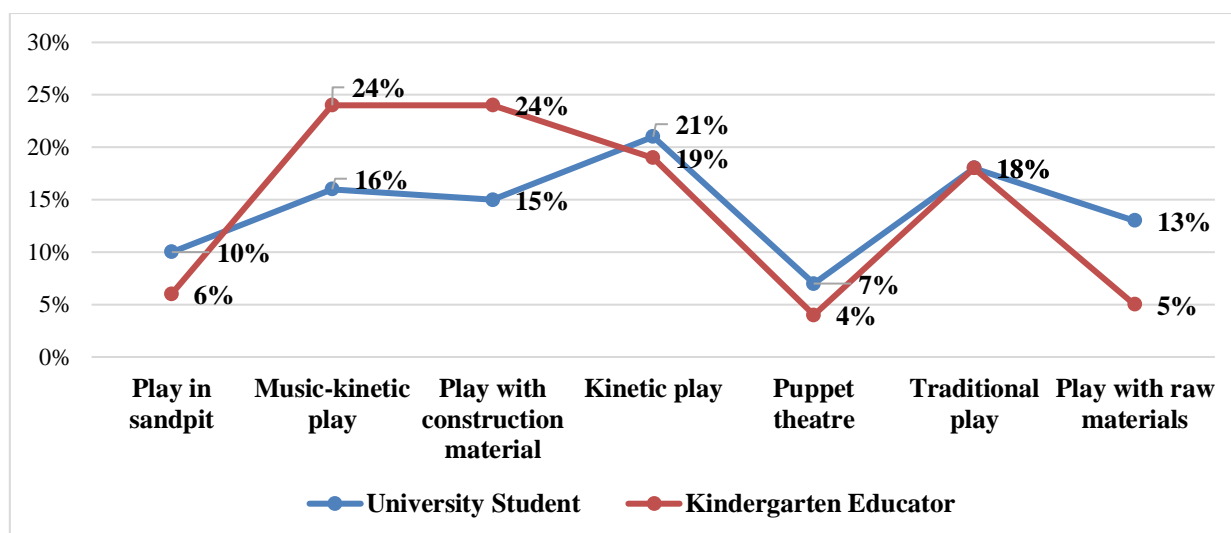
			Position you hold		Total
			University Student	Kindergarten Educator	
Play in the Kindergarten Curriculum	Slightly	Count	4	0	4
		% within Position	4,0%	0,0%	2,0%
	Moderately	Count	30	25	55
		% within Position	30,0%	25,0%	27,5%
	Highly	Count	55	60	115
		% within Position	55,0%	60,0%	57,5%
	Extremely	Count	11	15	26
		% within Position	11,0%	15,0%	13,0%
	Total	Count	100	100	200



% within Position	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
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The Educators as well as the Students were inquired as of the extent at which the role of play in the Kindergarten Curriculum is promoted. The majority of the Educators (60%) along with that of Students (55%) answered that the role of play is “highly” promoted within the Curriculum. A 15% of the Educators and 11% of the Students answered that the role of play is “extremely” promoted, whereas 25% of the Educators and 30% of the Students responded that play is “moderately” promoted. Only a limited amount of Students (4%) replied that the role of play is “slightly” promoted within the Curriculum. From the checking  $\chi^2$  (Pearson chi square test) no significant statistical difference seems to occur ( $p= 0,152$ ) between the aspects of the Educators and the Students. The above-mentioned results are ascertained by the utilization of  $\chi^2$  where  $\chi^2 = 5,287a$ ,  $df = 3$  and  $p = 0,152$  (Table 2).

### 4.3 Forms of play according to the Kindergarten Curriculum



**Chart 4:** Views of Kindergarten Educators and University Students on the categories of play in which Kindergarten pupils more frequently participate

Both, the Educators and the Students were asked about the games in which pre-school children more often involve themselves at the Kindergarten. As far as the Educators are concerned, 24% of them responded that kids at school take frequently part in a music-kinetic play, another 24% responded that children play with construction materials, 19% answered a kinetic play, 18% traditional play, 6% play on the sandpit 5% play with raw materials, and 4% answered puppet theatre. On the contrary, a 21% of the Students replied that kids at School would rather involve in kinetic play, 18% traditional play, 16% music-kinetic play, 15% play with construction materials, 13% play with raw materials, 10% play in the sandpit, while 7% of the Students answered puppet theatre (Chart 4).

#### 4.4 Kinds of play in the educational process

**Table 3:** Views of Kindergarten Educators and University Students on the kind of play they utilize most throughout the educational process

			Position you hold		Total
			University Student	Kindergarten Educator	
Forms of play during the educational process	Free-style team play	Count	60	20	80
		% within Position	60,0%	20,0%	40,0%
	Organized team play	Count	30	70	100
		% within Position	30,0%	70,0%	50,0%
	Free-style individual play	Count	7	2	9
		% within Position	7,0%	2,0%	4,5%
	Organized Individual play	Count	3	8	11
		% within Position	3,0%	8,0%	5,5%
	Total	Count	100	100	200
		% within Position	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The Educators and the Students were inquired about the sort of play they mostly utilize throughout the educational process. From the data analysis it is clear that the majority of Kindergarten Educators (70%) apply organized team play to a higher degree than others, 20% apply free-style team play, 8% organized individual play, while 2% free-style individual play. The vast majority of Students (60%) utilize free-style team play to a higher degree than others, within the educational process, 30% organized team play, 7% free-style individual play, while 3% make use of organized individual play. From the checking  $\chi^2$  (Pearson chi square test) a significant statistical difference seems to occur ( $p=0,000$ ) between the aspects of the Educators and the Students, since 70% of the Educators prefer to use organized team play as opposed to a mere 30% of the Kindergarten Educators. The above-mentioned results are confirmed by the use of  $\chi^2$ , where  $\chi^2 = 41,051a$ ,  $df = 3$  and  $p = 0,000$  (Table 3).

#### 4.5 Selection of toys- objects and play activities

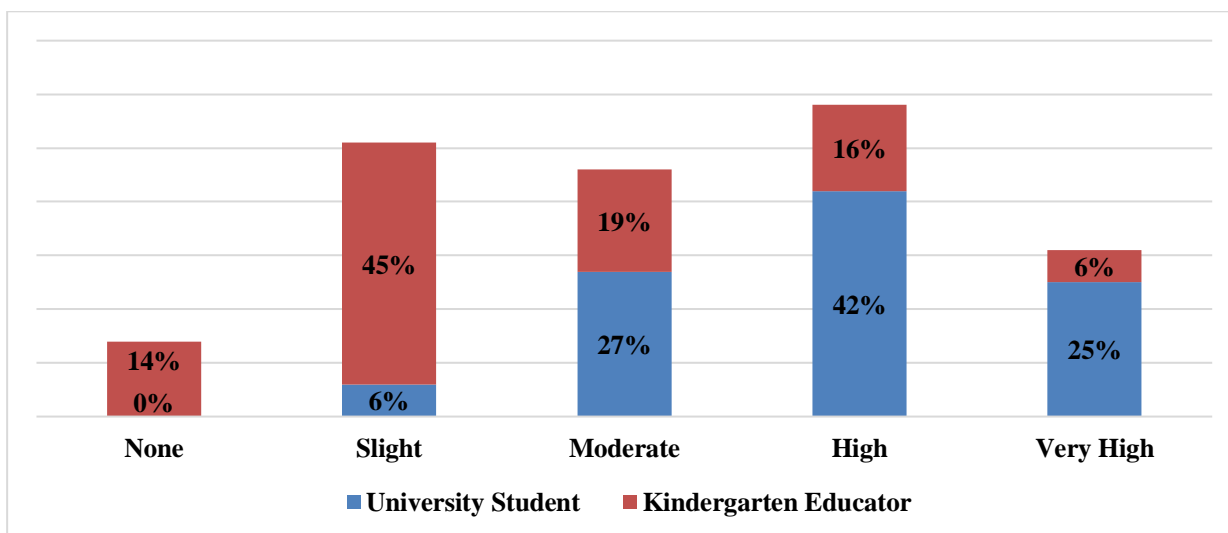
**Table 4:** Views of Kindergarten Educators and University Students on the selection of toys-objects and play activities in the Kindergarten

			Position you hold		Total
			University Student	Kindergarten Educator	
Selection of toys-objects and play	Children	Count	4	0	4
		% within Position	4,0%	0,0%	20,0%

activities	Educator	Count	16	17	33
		% within Position	16,0%	17,0%	16,5%
	Educator and children	Count	80	83	163
		% within Position	80,0%	83,0%	81,5%
Total		Count	100	100	200
		% within Position	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

The participants were inquired on who chooses the play activities and the toys- objects that are used in class. 83% of the Kindergarten Educators and 80% of the University Students answered that the selection of play activities and toys- objects inside the school is made by both, the teacher and the pupils. 17% of the Educators and 16% of the Students responded that the selection is done by the teacher only, whereas 4% of the Students answered that only kids choose the toys- objects and the play activities. The above-mentioned results are confirmed by the use of  $\chi^2$  where  $\chi^2 = 4,086a$ ,  $df = 2$  and  $p = 0,130$ . After applying the Pearson chi square test no statistically significant difference seems to occur ( $p = 0,130$ ) between the opinions of Educators and Students whatsoever (Table 4).

#### 4.6 Collaboration between School and Family on Play Issues



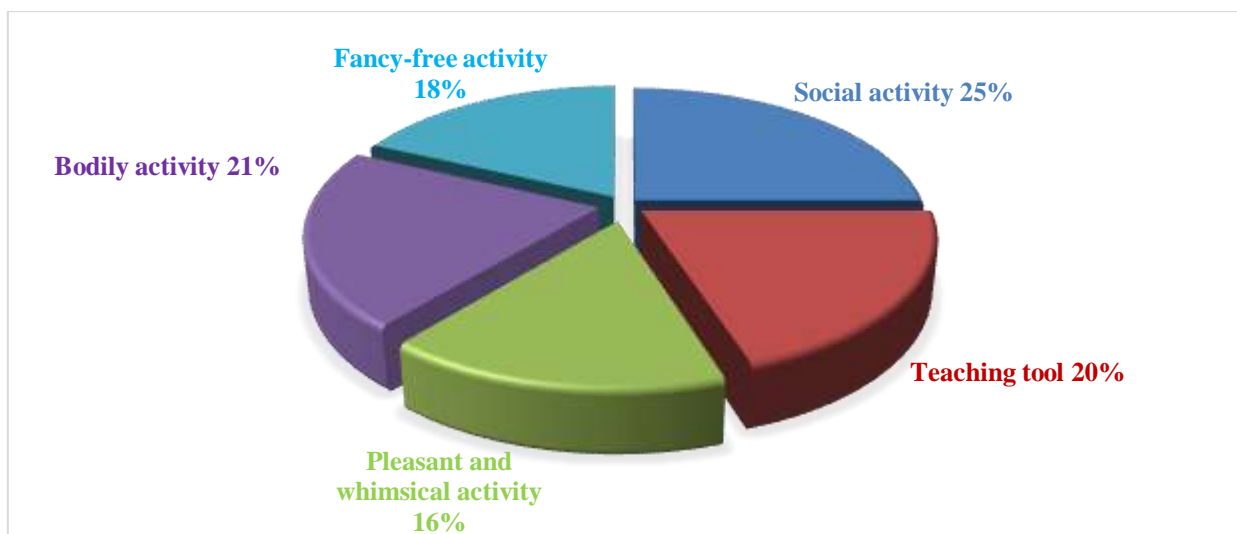
**Chart 5:** Views of Kindergarten Educators and University Students on the Collaboration between School and Family concerning play issues

The Kindergarten Educators and the University Students were respectively inquired about at what degree do they collaborate with the parents when it comes to issues that concern play. From the data analysis it seems that the majority of Students (by 67% that is) deem the collaboration with the family as being highly or extremely significant, as opposed to a 22% (16%+6%=22%) of the Educators who consider it as such. A 45% of the Kindergarten Educators deems collaboration with the family as being of minimal

significance, 19% as being neither significant nor insignificant while a 14% regards it to be of no significance at all. After the implementation of the Pearson chi square test a statistically significant difference seems to occur ( $p = 0,000$ ) between the opinions of Educators and Students. This differentiation is related to the higher percentage of Students (67%) who would be highly or extremely willing to collaborate with the family, in contrast to the 22% of the Educators that would seek such collaboration. The above results are confirmed with the use of  $\chi^2$  where  $\chi^2 = 68,515a$ ,  $df = 4$  and  $p = 0,000$  (Chart 5).

#### 4.7 Qualitative Aspects of the Educators' views regarding play

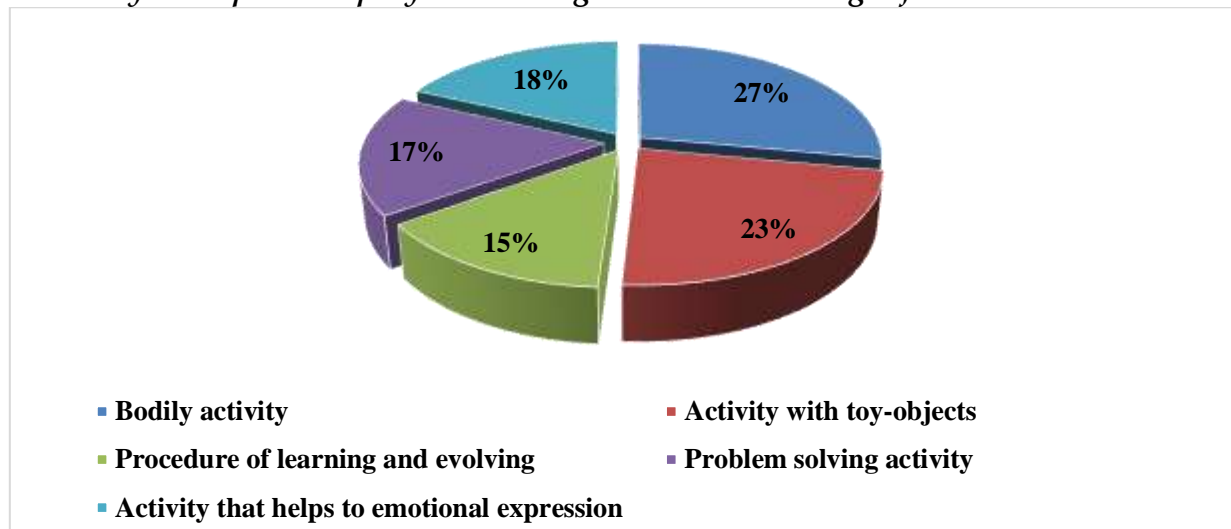
##### 4.7.1 Question: From the implementation of the Curriculum, please describe your aspects on play and the cognition which emerges from it



**Chart 6:** Kindergarten Educators' views regarding play

When the Kindergarten Educators were asked of “what play really is” they replied that it is a) a social skill (25%) (“Play teaches children of social abilities such as sharing, fair play, wait for their turn, develop self- discipline and tolerance towards others”), b) a bodily activity (21%) (“Play gives children space; to physically exercise, to equilibrate their longings with their capabilities, to test their limits”), c) a teaching tool (20%) (“Play constitutes a guiding tool and a vehicle for cognition and development. A child’s involvement with organized play activities contributes to the enhancement of their academic skills such as reading, writing, arithmetic”), d) a fancy-free activity (18%) (“Play gives kids the opportunity to choose. And being able to choose goes hand by hand with being free as well as being able to practice one’s critical thought – a most valuable capability that is. Opting a certain game or activity over another is, indeed, an act of critical thinking”) and e) a pleasant and whimsical activity (16%) (“Play is fun! Children, by learning how to play well with themselves but also with others, not only do they found on achieving abilities of autonomy and –mainly- socialization; they found on just...being happy!”) (Chart 6).

**4.7.2 Question: From the attendance of University Lectures concerning Curricula, please describe your aspects on play and the cognition which emerges from it**

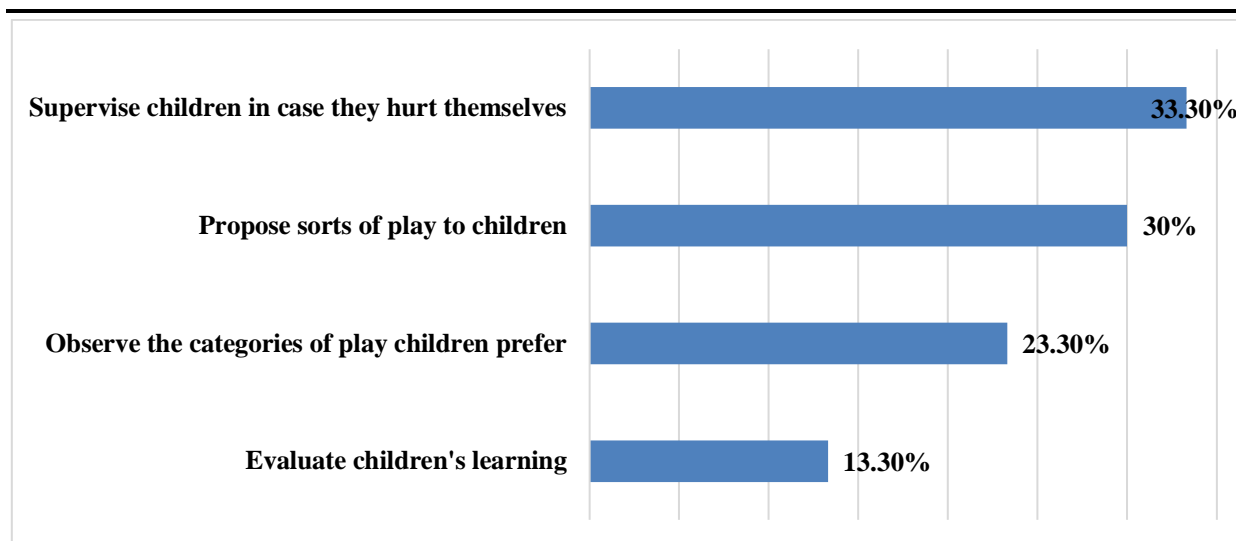


**Chart 7:** University Students' views regarding play

The University Students, when inquired on “what play really is”, answered that it is a) a bodily activity which involves “running” and “climbing” (27%), b) an activity during which children use toy- objects such as “Lego bricks” (23%), c) an activity which helps children express their feelings (18%) (“As children participate in play activities, they learn how to express their feelings and deal with intense emotional situations, such as anger, envy or stress”), d) an activity that helps children resolve their problems such as “processing their defeat during a game” (17%) and e) a procedure of learning and evolving (15%) (“Play is the basis for every cognitive process, actually. Through it, development is motivated, redeeming thus, children’s innate need to learn, discover, satiate their curiosity”, “Play constitutes a fundamental ability of pre- school age kids and has been proved to contribute towards a whole development and cognition”, “Children’s lives improve throughout play. As they play, they simultaneously learn and evolve as individuals. Play remarkably contributes to a person’s emotional and spiritual growth as it does to their psychological sanity”) (Chart 7).

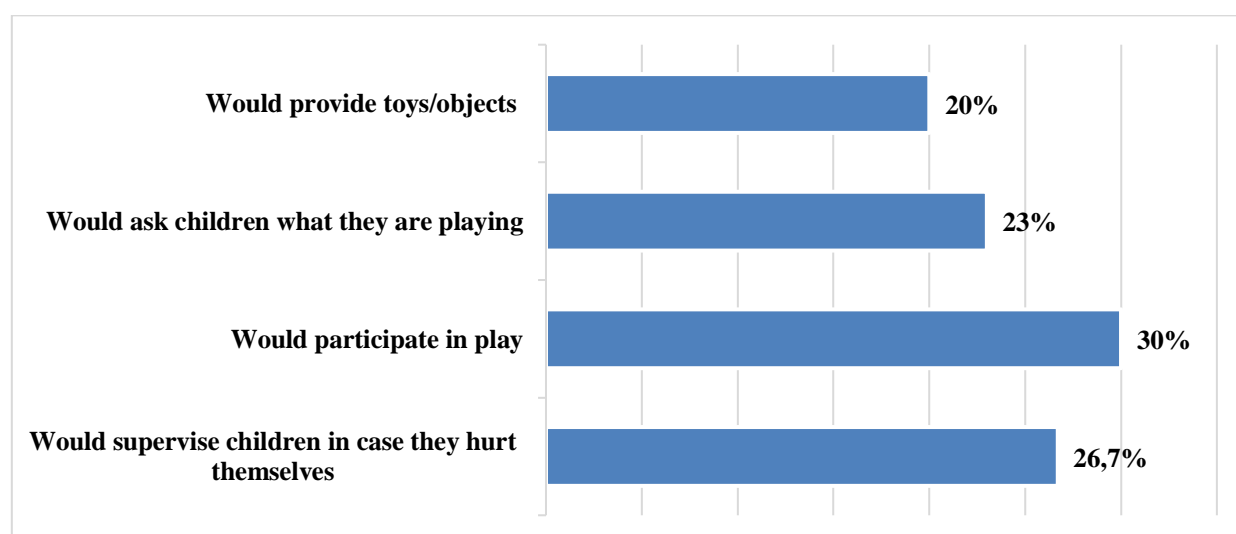
**4.7.3 Please, describe your views on the role that you hold during children's free-style play**

Both, current and prospective Educators were inquired about their role during their pupils' free-style play.



**Chart 8:** Views of Educators on their role during children's free-style play

The highest percentage of the Educators (33,3%) replied that they supervise children in order for them not to hurt themselves ("I do watch over kids to avoid any injuries while playing in the courtyard or in class because their physical integrity is of uttermost importance"), 30% proposes of kinds of play to children ("Most of the times I propose play activities to my pupils such as team-cooperative games with the use of some sort of toy-object- e.g. a ball- as well as games that involve the use of raw materials"), 23,3% observe the play categories opted by the children ("I observe children during play, because I want to comprehend their cognitive and developmental level. Play is, indeed, a key asset of evaluation within the context of pre-school education so I definitely count on it"), whereas the lowest percentage (13,3%) evaluates the children's development and learning ("I observe children's play and I utilize the games most preferred by them such as dramatic play, on my teaching motif") (Chart 8).



**Chart 9:** Views of the University Students on their role during children's free-style play

The highest amount of the University Students (30%) replied that they would take part in children's free-style play ("I would be eager to participate in the children's play because I believe that kids are quite happy when they see their educators playing with them, regarding thus that their playing is in fact something important"), 26,7% would supervise kids not to hurt themselves ("I would be watching over children not to injure themselves or squabble with each other. I would be extra attentive in the courtyard, because I consider that playing outdoors is far more hazardous than the one taking place inside the classroom"), 23% would ask children what they are playing ("I would ask kids what they're playing and what role each of them is holding within their play. It is essential that one shows interest on children and their playing activities") while the lowest amount (20%) would provide children with various toy-objects ("I would hand children out useful toys and objects in order their play to become more interesting. For example, when dramatizing a fairy tale, I would give them the outfit suitable for each part") (Chart 9).

## 5. Discussion and Recommendations

Play is regarded as a basic activity of pre- school age children and, according to investigational data it should constitute a key element to every Curriculum as well as promote cognition and development of children (Anning, Cullen & Flear, 2004- Aypay, 2016- Brock et al., 2016; Edgington, 2004- Wood, 2009- Moyles, Adams & Musgrove, 2002). The data of our current study stress out the importance of play within the educational process and the fundamental role which play holds in a Curriculum. The Kindergarten Educators, however appear to be more appreciative compared to the University Students, towards the significance that play holds in the context of educational process, by reason of their personal and experiential contact with play.

Both groups, Kindergarten Educators and University Students encourage their pupils to involve themselves with the play categories that the Curriculum itself accentuates (music-kinetic, kinetic, traditional, play with raw materials, play with construction materials, puppet theatre and digital game, free-style play, organized play) and they seem to implement them in their faculty.

From the data themselves, however, a statistically significant differentiation seems to occur, regarding the aspects of either the Educators or the Students as of the form of play each of the groups deem that should be more extensively used in the Kindergarten class. This differentiation concerns the majority of the Kindergarten Educators who mostly utilize organized play as opposed to the majority of the University Students. Kindergarten Educators deem organized play activities to be more important than the free-style ones and this is an aspect that is partially supported by both the Curriculum and International Literature (Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Nicolopoulou & Collins, 2013- Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Newcombe & Golinkoff, 2013- Weisberg, Kittredge, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff & Klahr, 2015) since a large amount of it points out the value of free-style play in children's learning and development (Gardner-Neblett, Holochwost,

Cranley Gallagher, Iruka, Odom & Pungello, 2016- Singer, Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

It is important, however, that the Educators a) provide pupils with a fully supportive cognitive environment, replete with stimuli and materials, b) promote all play forms, c) offer their pupils the opportunities for quality play activities which shall correspond to children's age, abilities, needs and interests and d) take under account any previous experiences of their pupils in terms of play (Jung, Lee & Jung, 2015- Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2014- Sakellariou & Rentzou, 2012b).

The selection of play activities and toy- objects in the Kindergarten is done by both, the teacher and the kids, and this is something which indicates that an atmosphere of freedom and equality on the relation between the Educator and the pupils is predominant within the class. Only a minor amount of the University Students stated that the selection should solely be made by the children. A plethora of studies highlight the fact that involving children with the educational process in general but also in the educational process of play specifically, aids children to develop their personal skills, their autonomy and their creativity, helps them take initiatives as well as determine what they would like to learn or do (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017- Miranda, Larrea, Muela & Barandiaran, 2017- Pascal & Bertram, 2009- Zachrisen, 2016).

The majority of the University Students reported that they would be highly or even extremely eager at collaborating with the parents on issues of play, while- in contrary- most of the Kindergarten Educators stated that they would but slightly do so. On one hand, the Students' response reveals that within the University Departments of Pedagogics, courses are offered that promote and support school- family collaboration. It should be noted that the existence of such courses will definitely help future Pre- School Educators found learning, growth and socialization of toddlers to a mutual and substantial cooperation between themselves and their pupils' parents. On the other hand, Kindergarten Educators are unwilling to collaborate with the parents on play issues, and wish not engage them with the educational process whatsoever. This may be due a) to the conviction of Educators that teachers hold a role which is completely different than the role of parents, b) to the fact that the Educators actually would not have parents intervene with their work and c) to the fact that Educators consider parents as not possessing the knowledge suitable for Kindergarten play issues (Sakellariou, 2008).

Investigatory data have shown that involving parents in the educational process (exchange of views and ideas, participation on the decision- making) is deemed as necessary, since it contributes to the enhancement of social and scholar abilities of children, the modernization of School and the amelioration of the pre-school environments' quality of learning (Jantan, Hamdan, Yahya, Saleh & Ong, 2015- Miranda et al., 2017- Pascal & Bertram, 2009- Sakellariou, 2008). It becomes vital, thus, that substantial further training programmes are implemented towards the cooperation between school and family on play issues.

Our investigational data demonstrate that only a limited amount of the Kindergarten Educators do evaluate children's learning during play, an aspect that fails



to be credited amongst the university Students; they do not acknowledge the importance of evaluation, which could be due to their lack of familiarization with the content of the pre-school Curriculum in which the value of systematic observation and assessment of learning for children on the basis of play is clearly underlined, as well as to the fact that the Students have not taken any courses in terms of the pedagogical merit of play through their studies at University Departments of Education, or even to the fact that they merely lack substantial teaching experience.

The duration of students' internship is only month-long which results in them feeling insecure towards processing play within the kindergarten class. It is considered as crucial that University Departments of Education shall not only include a longer Internship in their Courses of Study so as the future educators shall be able to utilize play as an evaluation tool towards the children's cognition and development but also include courses which regard designing and assessing the educational praxis of play itself, in order for the prospective educators to attain knowledge on a) how to form and evaluate play activities and toy- objects within the school environment and b) how to adapt their goals and methodology according to their pupils' developmental level, interests and personal needs (Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2014).

Yet more, the implementation of retraining programmes which would aim at "play" as their basic educational subject is vital. The essential retraining of the Educators is a fundamental priority in order for the quality and effectiveness of the education to be improved. The financial, social and cultural context of each era creates different educational needs hence it is necessary for the Curricula to be overhauled so that the Educators shall be provided with all methodological and cognitive tools necessary for the enhancement of their role and educational work (Karagianni, 2018).

The current research suggests the Educators should a) be retrained on issues concerning play, b) go through an in-depth study of the pre- school Curricula, c) utilize the full range of games at school, d) take their pupils' needs and interests under consideration, e) show respect to the children's play and initiatives, f) support, guide, propose but never impose, g) encourage the participation of the kids in the educational process itself, h) participate in their pupils' play i) use game as a means of evaluating cognition, skills, and possible deficits of the children, j) seek after a bidirectional interaction between school and family and the inclusion of parents in their children's learning process and k) familiarize parents with the different aspects of play, as well as with the manner in which play contributes at their children's cognition and development. Finally, this study suggests that Curricula should upgrade the role of play within the educational process.

In a future research, we shall be aiming to investigate on the Kindergarten Educators' aspects as well as those of Elementary School Teachers, regarding play within the Educational process of the Kindergarten and the Elementary School according to the Curriculum of Pre-school and School Education in Greece.

## 6. Conclusion

Conclusively, play is an entitlement of every child but also a cognitive process of major importance, that allows children to experience a plethora of emotions, interact with their peers and with their environment, express their ideas and views, develop a creative thought, take up initiatives, respond towards new situations and form their unique personality. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the views of the Kindergarten Teachers and the University Students on play in the context of the Kindergarten educational procedure, in accordance with the Curriculum of Pre-school Education in Greece.

It is clearly demonstrated by the data that both, present and future Educators acknowledge the significance of play as a tool of learning and developing within the Kindergarten's educational process as well as the position play holds in the Curriculum. Nevertheless, it is vital that pedagogical backing is provided in order for them to learn how to practically implement playing teaching, utilize all the play categories that are accentuated by the Curriculum, collaborate with the parents on issues concerning play selection, encourage the involvement of children in the play's educational process itself (co- determine on the play activities as well as on the toy-objects that shall be used), see play as a means to evaluate children's learning, development, abilities and deficits so that they hold a more active role within the educational environment.

Participants' views on this topic were also examined on the basis of variables such as courses on play pedagogics and further training seminars on play, but no statistical differences occurred whatsoever. It is essential, nonetheless, that furthermore studies are conducted in several other Greek regions, in order for a broader generalization of data to become possible.

### About the Authors

**Maria Sakellariou** is a Professor at the University of Ioannina, Greece and Managing Director of the Post-graduate Studies Programme. She studied at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) where she completed her Post- Graduate studies as well as her Doctoral Thesis, with particular emphasis on Pedagogy and Preschool Pedagogy. Her studies also include international seminars in Pedagogy and Preschool Pedagogy at Zurich University, Switzerland. She has taught as a visiting professor on the Educational Sciences Department at the University of Cyprus and on the post- graduate course under the title "Gender and New technologies within Education" which is being implemented by the Department of Pre-school Education and Educational Design (ΣΕΠΙΑΕ®- DPEED) of the University of the Aegean. Her research interests and her bibliography focus mainly on Pedagogy and Preschool/ Primary School Education, particularly on the cognitive domains of Teaching Methodology and Curricula Design, Socio- Ethical Cognition as well as School- Family- Community Collaboration. She is the author, co- publisher and editor of 13 books- scientific manuals some of which are: Cooperation between Family and the Kindergarten: Theory- Research- Teaching Proposals (2008), Teaching Methods

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