

# Rethinking play and child-centredness within early childhood curriculum in Croatia

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**Abstract:** Within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) the child-centred approach, with all its various and diverse contextual interpretations, is well-established as a cynosure of contemporary theoretical discourses as well as endeavours in everyday practice, at least on a declarative level. Play is positioned as a high priority within the child-centred approach; more specifically, play is conceptualized as the central activity of the child through which they learn. Whilst these two concepts seem to be coherent and based upon similar theoretical underpinnings, there is much room for critical discussion concerning the conceptualizations and rationale behind both of them. This paper discusses how the academic community, in this paper, exemplified by specific policy-makers and early childhood educators in Croatia, see play and child-centredness in the curriculum-framed ECEC context. An e-focus group was conducted with twelve (12) early childhood educators in Croatia, showcasing the educators' uncertainties regarding thinking about and 'doing' play and child-centredness while realising their planned curriculum. The paper concludes with deliberations on the position of adults within child-centred ECEC practice, based on both literature and research results with a potential impact in terms of rethinking ECEC practices as well as documentation practices in Croatia.

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## Introduction

It could be said that the three key notions this paper focuses on are, in a way, buzzwords within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) community 'vernacular', be it within the academic discourse, lived practice or in popular how-to articles. The notions of play and curriculum, and how they need to be child-centred, are well known by academics and ECEC professionals, but how they are interpreted is a completely different matter (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Catalano et al., 2023; Frankel, 2023; Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020; Pinter, 2023; Rasmusson et al., 2010; Shah, 2019; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). The different interpretations of these notions could be discussed in terms of (for example) ownership of play, openness/flexibility or rigidity of a curriculum as well as the position/role/place or even presence of adults within an enactment of child-centredness. These and other different stances are discussed in separate sections of the theoretical part of this paper, paying special attention throughout to the relationship between the principle of child-centredness focusing on the importance of play, or, more specifically, learning and play, and the principle focusing on children's participation and decision-making (Bogatić et al., 2018). The empirical section of the paper provides insight into early childhood educators' thoughts about *the three notions* and their role as related to them, proving that although *the three notions* are well-known amongst early childhood educators, they require further research as well as comprehensive theoretical discussions.

## Child-centredness as an Epitome of ECEC Theory and Practice

It could be stated that in current discussions within early childhood education and care child-centredness is viewed as the foundation of the contemporary approach to education (Catalano et al., 2023;

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Langford, 2010; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). Although the concept of child-centredness – along with its differing theoretical and contextual interpretations – is a longstanding one (see, for example, Campbell-Barr, 2017; Rasmusson et al., 2010; Shah, 2019), it seems that educational practices are currently rediscovering it. An awareness of the existence of differing theoretical and contextual interpretations of the concept of child-centredness served as one of the starting points of this paper as the construct's ambiguous nature proves it to be a valuable research interest. These different interpretations can be grounded in the different disciplines accommodating for the construct of child-centredness and translating it into their own theoretical schemata (e.g. Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020; Carter et al., 2024), they can be grounded in the different sociocultural contexts in which the construct of child-centredness is being lived (Rasmusson et al., 2010), or, among other things, they can be grounded in the different individual characteristics and values of the educators enacting the child-centred concept (Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021). From an academic level, Frankel (2023) views child-centredness as a prerequisite for exploring the value ascribed to children's voices, taking into consideration their situatedness as well as multiplicity; collaborating in rethinking the (asymmetrical) adult-child power relations; and exploring the methodologies delineating children's impact (up)on the social world. Bringing it to the lived practices, Sak et al. (2016) define child-centredness as a multifaceted process which includes a variety of activities and relations respecting children's individual developmental differences and needs.

Therefore, both in theory and practice, the underlying idea it seeks to 'bring to life' are the best interests of children. The principle of the child's best interests arises from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (1989), in the sense of fulfilling the child's developmental needs and respecting their identity. Adults are presumably in the position of power, which theoretically grants them the necessary individual and structural conditions to meet the children's needs. Consistent with the current literature on ECEC, there is a potential shift away from solely relying on adult perspectives regarding children's needs – a sort of a denunciation of a pure adult perspective in research, policy and practice (e.g., Clark, 2005; Hanson & Nieuwenhuys, 2020). While adults may be trying to capture the perspective of children, there remains an ongoing academic debate about whether they are genuinely listening to children's perspectives on their needs, or merely interpreting their own adult understanding(s) of what children's perspectives about their needs are (see, e.g., Sommer et al., 2010). Following the discourse set out here and relating it to the notion of child-centredness, a discussion on whether child-centredness is closer to the notion of child perspectives or children's perspectives (as explained by Sommer et al., 2010; Babić, 2014) is continuously necessary (Višnjić Jevtić & Bogatić, 2024). For example, in relation to the concept of time, Gillis (2003) and Halldén (2005) see child-centredness as an adult-created construct, thus making child-centredness as thought about and lived through the prism of what the adults think is important, best, needed, etc. for children, an issue more recently discussed by Frankel (2023).

Important in "bridg[ing] the gap between listening to children and learning" is the early childhood educator, according to Clark (2005, p. 500), who emphasizes the connection between early childhood educators who listen to children and children who are capable learners. Ryan (2005) sees the role of adults not as interpreters but as facilitators of children's learning, while a child is seen as an active participant in their own learning (and interpreting) of ideas and experiences, which should encompass the child being listened to. Learning as a process is comprehended as an indistinguishable part of children's participation, and vice versa (Bogatić, 2023), and as Rogoff et al. (2015) idiomatically put it, *learning by observing and pitching in*.

Chung and Walsh (2000) assert that, through time, the meaning of child-centredness changed in terms of the position of the child. A child is perceived (a) in the centre of the world, (b) in the centre of their own learning, (c) as the leader of their own learning. The perception of the child in the centre of the world could be exemplified by the overprotection of children, e.g. adults tending to focus on organizing a safe and enabling environment for the child instead of the child's actual current needs or interests. Winkworth and McArthur (2006) discuss this in terms of child-centredness being a protective discourse in child rearing. Munro (2011) also discusses policy perspectives on child-centredness as a demand for protection, recognizing the need for respecting a child's individuality within this framework of protection. This might

be perceived as respecting children's individual freedom to develop at their natural pace as elaborated within the romantic discourse on child-centredness (Campbell-Barr, 2014), while at the same time putting a protectionist stance in the forefront. This contradiction is also visible in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) in terms of emphasizing both child protection and child participation (Campbell-Barr, 2021). The perception of the child in the centre of their own learning might reflect the educators' view on child-centredness. The main part of their professional competence is to provide an enabling learning environment for the children, in other words, to put the child in the centre of the learning process (Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2018). The perception of the child as the leader of their own learning might be interpreted as 'true' child-centredness. Recognizing the child as a competent learner, able to participate in organizing their learning reflects the ideas behind child-centredness, which Helavaara Robertson et al. (2015) describe as a child-initiated pedagogy. The different perspectives on child-centredness (Chung & Walsh, 2000) might be connected to differences/inequality in power positions between children and adults. Children could be seen as the ones with less experiences and therefore less competences, as the ones who need protection and support, which all leads to them having less power. If adults see themselves as responsible for the children and their development, then the children's power to decide about their learning might be perceived as a lack of responsibility on the part of adults or as not acting in the best interests of the child.

Bogatić et al. (2018, p. 11-12) draw on international ECEC literature to define eight principles of child-centredness: (I) focusing on children learning through play; (II) respecting children's needs, interests, strengths, and capacities; (III) recognising children's learning strategies; (IV) recognising children's uniqueness; (V) respecting children as capable learners; (VI) respecting children's participation and decision making, (VII) respecting children's diversity and individuality; (VIII) respecting children's family and culture. It is hypothesized that following these principles in educational settings should lead to child-centred practice. While some principles are well-established and embodied in early childhood education (e.g. learning through play) others might prove to be more challenging in terms of actually existing in everyday practices (e.g. children's decision making). As discussed earlier, the challenges might stem from adult-perceived changes in positions and responsibilities of both adults and children.

### **Play-setting the Stage**

In ECEC literature focusing on both theory and practice, as well as in child's rights literature, conceptualizations of play and the child's right to play could be thought of in at least two ways (Bogatić, 2021): on the one hand, researchers are discussing play as authentic children's play (e.g. Rengel, 2014), i.e. play as a children's project (Babić, 2015), determined by their choice and autonomy (Colliver & Doel-Mackaway, 2021), "intrinsic", "autotelic" play, in the sense of playing for play's sake (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 10). On the other hand, researchers are discussing conceptualizations of play as "instrumental", "utilitarian" (Lester & Russell, 2008, p. 10), in terms of viewing play as an educational tool, means of instruction within the context of play (Rengel, 2014), i.e. play as a project of adults (Babić, 2015). These two differing conceptualizations contrast but also make visible the connection between at least two principles of child-centredness, as identified by Bogatić et al. (2018): focusing on children learning through play (In this paper, it is considered that learning comes from the nature of play itself and that the two notions are intertwined and indivisible (e.g. Pramling Samulesson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008) and respecting children's participation and decision-making. The core of these two contrasting but connected principles is in the position of children and adults in relation to play.

The process of recognising that power relations exist in children's play may be uncomfortable for early childhood educators, especially if they are steeped in universal certainties about the efficacy of play for children's learning and development. Recognising how those power relationships are played out presents another discomfort, because it requires educators to see play as a political and negotiated terrain and to focus on issues of agency, power and control between adults and children, and between children. (Wood, 2014, p. 16).

Wood (2014) attempted to trouble the dominant discourses in literature about "free choice and free play" (p. 16) in terms of developing a sociocultural and poststructural theories-inspired conceptualization of agency. She emphasizes the need for the adults to be aware of "children's repertoires of choice" (p. 16)

as well as the ways in which freedom is individual – in terms of advantaging some and disadvantaging others, instigating a need for a critical discussion about freedom as related to play and choice. This involves an acknowledgement of “the complexity of children’s experiences” which could be contrasted with “reductive versions of play in many national policy frameworks and educational effectiveness discourses” (p. 16). Wood (2014) advocates profound attention be paid to the “microanalyses of play, alternative meanings and interpretations” thus opening “the possibility for deeper engagement with the socio-political dimensions of children’s play cultures and practices” (p. 16). This investigation of play is certainly important at a macro level, but also at a micro level, in terms of each early childhood educator re-examining the play that ‘goes on’ in their own learning context, the meanings this has for the children and their everyday life, for each individual child and their everyday life as well as for the(ir) practice.

While free play is sometimes considered as “the opposite of receiving guidance from adults” (Hjelmér, 2020, p. 146) – for example by equating choice time and free play time within a classroom (e.g. Berkhout et al., 2013), the adult influence is always there, be it in the setting of the environment (Bogatić, 2023), the provision of materials, structure of the day allocating certain parts of the day for “free play” or everyday interactions between the children and early childhood educators, in which educators, knowingly or not, try to guide and constrict children’s choices (Rengel, 2014). The number of children within a classroom is also relevant here, where a social crowd could restrict children’s opportunities for free play (Howes et al., 2011), as well as provide for niches free from adult intervention (Edwards, 2002). Kytä (2004), writing from the perspective of the theory of affordances, in terms of “an individual’s perception of the environment surrounding him/her” - the physical environment as the one that can “afford different actions and behaviours”, sees children as “actualiz[ing] affordances in their environment through exploration and play”, which is regulated through “cultural and social rules and practices” (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019, p. 66). Kytä (2004) provides three regulatory structures in “child-friendly environments”: (1) “the field of free action”, emphasizing children’s agency, (2) “the field of promoted action”, regulating what can go on in an environment, where and in what way; and (3) “the field of constrained action”, in terms of restricting and excluding factors (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019, p. 66). Pramling et al. (2019) refrain from attempts to define play, but start from analysing different participants’ perspectives on an activity, their fluctuation(s) and negotiation(s).

All these different discussions on the sole definition of play, play as contextualized within ECEC guided by a curriculum and the interplay between adult perceptions of a child, children, play, ECEC and their own position have a part in the (lived) reality of the playing and learning that is emphasized within child-centred practice. From a researcher’s perspective, based on these discussions, two important questions arise: (1) How much of play within the child-centred approach could be interpreted as authentic children’s play and how much as an adult dominated playful ‘activity’? (2) Does an early childhood educator’s provision of time and space for play in terms of taking responsibility for play mean they are taking professional responsibility for the co-construction of a child-centred curriculum or does it mean they are taking ‘leadership over’ play? The line between the two could be quite thin.

### **Play in (Child-centred) Early Childhood Curricula**

Contemporary early childhood education is typically guided by curricula. McLachlan et al. (2010) explore the idea of whether curricula can be considered as policy documents, models, or frameworks for organizing the learning environment. Ross (2000) defines curricula as any socially constructed or prescribed activities which are in some way selected from the culture of a particular society, and result in the transformation of the individual. The definition of curriculum is shaped by how its aims and areas of application are understood, but it is primarily framed by its theoretical foundation. In this regard, McLachlan et al. (2010) and Sekulić-Majurec (2007) argue that variations in curriculum definitions reflect differing foundational perspectives, which are influenced by philosophical, psychological, and political considerations, as well as value orientations regarding the educational purposes, the nature of the child, the child’s learning and development, and the nature of knowledge itself. If the context of curriculum implementation is considered, i.e. the complexity, dynamics, unpredictability and authenticity of

educational practice, then neither the definition nor the interpretation of a curriculum can be consistent and unique. Early childhood curricula could be understood in terms of describing the overall reality of ECEC (Bergen et al, 2001; MacNaughton, 2003). Babić (1996) asserts that in the broader sense of the notion, curricula are pedagogical documents encompassing early childhood educators' implicit pedagogies as well as the actual curricula, i.e. reality, practices and social context in which the different curricula are taking place.

National curricula could be defined as documents, written by experts but founded in the current state policy. Depending on the political image of the child and childhood, they may differ. Opposite to the policy approach, curricula could also be seen as learning and environment guidelines. Scott (2008) defines curricula using four dimensions – aims, content, methods, and evaluation. The above-mentioned types of curricula could be developed using these dimensions. The question that prevails is whether a specific curriculum is performance- (the most common) or competence-oriented (Bernstein, 1996). Since competence-oriented curricula acknowledge the child/learner as the co-creator of the curriculum, they could be thought of as child-centred. Schiro (2008) defines a learner-centred ideology of curricula as the one in which each individual learner achieves an active learning experience. Therefore, aims, content, method and evaluation of the curricula cannot be rigid, nor strictly planned. It is important to discuss if policy documents can be open and adjustable to meet the individual needs of each child. Assuming that curricula are based on child-centred principles, they can serve as guidelines to practitioners suggesting possible ways of arranging the learner-centred social, emotional, and physical environment.

Curricula serves as a support to practitioners' actions towards child-centred learning, in terms of promoting play as a foundation of children's learning. The playing/learning principle could be influenced by the practitioners' understanding of play itself. Wood and Attfield (2005) state that curricula should empower both children and early childhood educators - children to express their intention and follow their own learning path and early childhood educators to understand meanings of children's play and to use these for the planning of next steps. Van Hoorn et al. (2015) claim that:

(T)he idea of play at the center of the early childhood curriculum is grounded in work from four early childhood traditions: (a) early childhood practitioners, (b) theorists and researchers who study play, (c) researchers and theorists in the field of development and learning, and (d) educational historians. (Van Hoorn et al., 2015, p. 5)

Play-based curricula are widely recognized in early childhood education and are, at least in principle, integrated into national and institutional curricula. However, it remains unclear whether practice aligns with these official documents or whether it follows its own distinct educational trajectory. Orientation towards play could be discussed within the notions of spontaneous play, directed play and/or adult guided play (Van Hoorn et al., 2015). While spontaneous play is child initiated and intrinsically motivated, directed and guided play are adult initiated. If play is a free, child-led activity (e.g. Hjelmér, 2020), whether the latter two forms of play can be described as play at all is a matter of discussion. Early childhood educators have the responsibility for supporting children's development (Višnjić Jevtić, 2021), therefore, their engagement in all activities, including play, is expected. But, is this expectation truly child-centred? Or does their involvement disrupt children's play?

A society that prioritizes the ideal of success may introduce academic goals at earlier stages of education. Consequently, time for play in early childhood settings is decreasing (Miller & Almon, 2009). Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) state that play and learning are still separated in the context of early childhood settings. Early childhood educators can be caught between the society's expectations (children's academic success) and professional demands (play-based child development and learning). Curricula could provide a framework to balance the two, but would these curricula then be considered child-centred?

Given the laid out flexibility in the use of the term 'curriculum' and the fact that it is conceptualized at various levels, it is possible to propose that the development of a child('s) rights-centred curriculum could help reconcile the tensions between the emphasis on early academic skills and children's perceived needs and rights (Caplan et al., 2016; Jerome & Starkey, 2022), many of which are outlined in the principles

of child-centredness (Bogatić et al., 2018). If this kind of formulation of curriculum were to clarify its conceptualisation of play, child-centredness, learning and other key notions that are often understood to be self-explanatory and therefore left vague (meaning their practices depend on individual values and implicit theories of those bringing the curriculum to life - early childhood educators (Bogatić, 2023; Višnjić Jevtić & Visković, 2021)), in order to delineate its stance on children's agency, freedom, the role of the educators, etc., the question that would still remain open is whether this would pose an intrinsic tension to the sole conceptualisation of an early childhood education and care curriculum as such, predominantly viewed as a notion characterised by emergence, openness and flexibility (Borovac & Somolanji Tokić, 2024).

In order to better understand the context of the research presented in this article, it is important to provide insight into the context of ECEC in Croatia. Early childhood education and care has long been under the jurisdiction of the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education mirroring the country's policies emphasising the intertwining aspects of education and care in the early years. Children can attend early childhood institutions starting from 6 months until the start of elementary school. Children start elementary school in the autumn if they turn 6 by the end of March that year. Although institutions catering for children from 6 months to 3 years old have a special name that could be provisionally translated to *nurseries*, in practice they are mostly integrated in early childhood institutions catering for all children prior to starting elementary school, comprising just separate educational groups. While there is a lot of momentum and emphasis being put on the advantages of heterogenous groups of children, homogenous, age-segregated groups still dominate in ECEC practice in Croatia. Early childhood educators working with children need to have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and care studies, and more and more of them have a master's degree. Two qualified educators work with children throughout the day (Bogatić & Campbell-Barr, 2017; Višnjić Jevtić et al., 2021). There is a National curriculum in place since 2015 and a new one is currently in the making. All early childhood institutions must adhere to the National curriculum, even though their founders are local municipalities, who also provide the funding, which can therefore differ from institution to institution. Along with adhering to the National curriculum, each institution makes their own curriculum for each pedagogical year. While the National curriculum emphasises the basic theoretical ideas (values, principles, starting points) guiding ECEC in Croatia, the institutional curriculum plans for some content, allowing for the realisation of ECEC curriculum in practice in Croatia to be (somewhat) emergent and flexible.

The Croatian National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta Republike Hrvatske [MZOS], 2015) (hereinafter NKRPOO) stresses the importance of providing "learning while playing" for children (p. 16), however there is a lack of guidance on how to do that. The word play is mentioned four times within the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015):

- within the explanation of knowledge as a value: "Within early childhood, it is especially important to provide the child with the joy of discovery and learning that relies most on play and other activities that are interesting to the child." (p. 8)
- in describing the competence for communication in foreign languages: "Children learn a foreign language in a stimulating language context, through play and other purposeful activities." (p. 13)
- in a table relating conceptualizations of children and the educational process: "Children learn through play, exploration and other activities that are purposeful for them, i.e. through direct experience with a variety of learning resources." (p. 16)
- part of the short pre-school curriculum (Mandatory short programme (250 hours per year) attended by children about to start elementary school, who have not been enrolled in an early childhood setting thus far.): "Acceptance of play and other activities that contribute to purposeful learning and overall development of children and the development of physical exercise habits and maintaining one's own health." (p. 27)

The NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) emphasizes the strong connection between playing and learning, without using the term "learning through play", but rather "learning while playing" (p. 16). The role of the

early childhood educator in regards to play, other than “support” is not comprehensively specified. Play as such is not defined. The openness of the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) could provide early childhood educators with the freedom to construct an early childhood setting's curriculum related to the needs, interests and development of their children as well as the sociocultural context. By not providing details on how to support play it could implicitly support play as a children's project (Babić, 2015), thus supporting child-centredness, as related to children's perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010). However, this openness could also lead to early childhood educators being lost and their practice being dominated mainly by their own implicit pedagogy, which has its own challenges and possible pitfalls. To gain insight into everyday practice – the life of the curriculum as viewed by early childhood educators themselves, as well as their understanding of the curriculum, child-centredness and play and their own place in it, a research was conducted.

## Method

Based on the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015), play and child-centredness could be thought of as the foundation for early childhood education and care in Croatia. While it is possible to conduct a document analysis and draw conclusions based solely on educational policy, reaching conclusions about practice is more challenging. Therefore, the aim of the presented research was to gain insight into:

- early childhood educators' understanding of child-centredness and play within the national and their own institutional curricula
- early childhood educators' perception on their role as related to play and child-centredness.

Gaining insight into early childhood educators' views was done through a focus group discussion. Focus groups provide a secure environment for sharing ideas on professional topics while acknowledging the views of all participants. Cyr (2019) indicates the advantages of focus groups as a research method, especially in social sciences as they are social, emic and produce data on several different levels (individual, group and interactive).

## Participants

Fifteen early childhood educators were invited to participate in the focus group. Participants were chosen according to their work experience (5 years minimum), professional development (participation in different forms of continuous professional development), educational levels (B.A. and M.A.), professional status (mentor/adviser), region and willingness to participate. The invitations were sent out using networks of several early childhood educators' associations in Croatia.

Twelve participants decided to participate in the focus group discussion. The participants who agreed to participate have 5 to 37 years of work experience as early childhood educators, and all of them regularly participate in continuous professional development activities (at least 50 hours per year). Seven participants have a bachelor's degree in ECEC and three of them are currently studying for their masters degree. Five participants have a master's degree. Six participants had been promoted to a higher professional status – three of them are early childhood educators-mentors and three of them are advising early childhood educators. Participants work and live in different regions of Croatia (the city of Zagreb, and regions Slavonija, Dalmacija and Međimurje).

## Data Collection Methods

The focus group discussion was organized on a platform for virtual (online) meetings. While focus groups are usually organized face to face, virtual ones are not a discovery of the COVID pandemic or post-COVID pandemic era. The so-called eFocus groups have been conducted even in the last century (Rezabek, 2000). Virtual focus groups enable the participation of a wider community compared to what a locally-based approach would allow (Morrison et al., 2020). Possible obstacles might be technical issues or a lack of ICT competences. Some researchers (i.e. Chase & Alvarez, 2000) see a lack of a group dynamic in virtual

environments as a disadvantage of online focus groups, but Hoffman et al. (2012) have not found a difference between online focus groups and those conducted face-to-face.

A link for the online meeting was sent by e-mail to participants who agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. The researchers prepared initial questions related to play, child-centredness, curriculum and the early childhood educators' role as related to those three notions. At the beginning of the focus group, researchers/moderators introduced guidelines for the discussion, especially those related to participants' anonymity in the final report and a possibility for them to withdraw from participating at any time during the focus group discussion. The participants gave their consent to record the session. The discussion lasted for 105 minutes.

The discussion was transcribed verbatim. The transcript was then analysed independently by two researchers. The content analysis was done as per Bader and Rossi (2002; see also Stewart et al., 2007): reading through the transcript at a macro level to get a broad picture of the data; eliminating irrelevant data straying from the topic; identifying and coding broad themes (patterns following the researchers' questions); adding supplementary codes if necessary; re-reviewing of the transcript; grouping of codes into themes; checking for clarity; dividing themes into smaller themes if necessary; summarizing themes reflecting the most important points. The three core themes were: view of play; view of child-centredness and view of the (national) curriculum with an underlying fourth theme intertwined within the first three themes, which could be called *professional engagement* as the early childhood educators' role as related to play, child-centredness and curriculum respectively.

## Findings

The findings of this research are presented according to the three themes identified in the analysis (view of play; view of child-centredness and view of the (national) curriculum), highlighting the key points of each theme with specific examples written in italics accompanied with anonymized identifiers for the early childhood educators who provided the selected examples. The fourth theme, *professional engagement* as the early childhood educators' role as related to play, child-centredness and curriculum respectively, is described within each of the first three themes as it was seen throughout the analysis that early childhood educators' perspectives on the three aforementioned key concepts were deeply intertwined with their perception of their own professional engagement with the respective notion.

### View of Play

The first part of the focus group discussion focused on play. Participants of the focus group discussion approached play as a child's right, at times explicitly referencing the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)

P1: Play is a child's fundamental right. This must be our starting point and something we should never forget.

When discussing play as a child's right, the focus group discussion quickly shifted to talking about play as a child's need.

P6: Play is a need arising from the child.

Some participants expressed a romanticised view of play, emphasizing its importance while using metaphors to define it

P3: For me, play is a kind of magic, a magic that unfolds at every moment. (...) It is a story we can read better the more knowledge we have. The more we develop professionally, the better we are at following and understanding children's play.

This example demonstrates how the discussion among early childhood educators about their views on play shifted towards an attempt to discuss their own positions in relation to play. Early childhood educators who participated in this research see their role in recognizing ways to ensure an encouraging play environment

P8: Providing children with different incentives, we, in a way, hold ladders for them while they're developing through



play.

Different perspectives on early childhood educators' roles led to a discussion that brought *scaffolding* as the early childhood educators' primary task to the forefront. A participant (P9) explained that this would entail:

children actually guiding their own play without our interference. We will help them via provision, observation, documentation... But we will let them organize their own play the way they want to.

An alternative perspective arose during the conversation, according to which early childhood educators should lead and guide children towards a higher developmental level. One of the participants (P3) added that they are not talking about 'traditional guidance', but

guiding and moderating play, directing children's interests towards some new concepts or things that might, for whatever reason, be unfamiliar to them.

In child-centred practice, the role of the early childhood educator is not (and should not only be) reduced to the role of a provider, observer and documenter. The early childhood educators think that their professional engagement (P3) entails

observing, planning as well as guiding children's play.

Almost all participants accentuate that early childhood educator's involvement and interest extend children's play experience. One of the participants gave an example of a child who she perceived as having difficulty establishing social relations with other children in her group to the extent that *she seemed non-existent to the other children* (P10). The early childhood educator then took the role of a co-player. She explained her intention was to attempt to ensure the child had at least some play experience and also to encourage others to join them in play. This participant estimated that it is appropriate to take on an active role in play in order to enable the child to participate in play with others. Another example of how early childhood educators perceive the complexity of their roles and the need for their professional engagement is visible from the following excerpt:

P7: Usually, at the beginning, when children start kindergarten, I make sure to remind the parents that, in the whole process, neither they nor we as educators are the most important; it's actually the children themselves. They are the ones who are very, very small and coming into the unknown, especially when it comes to adjusting to a new space. All of our energy needs to be focused on them to make their transition easier, and of course, we will make it easier for them mostly through play. The goal is for them to gain trust, relax, and feel safe. When we talk about being child-centered, it's important that they feel secure, and they feel safest at home with their parents or someone they know. I believe that, as educators, we need to focus on making this whole process easier for them – the play and socializing in kindergarten – so they can accept the other children, us, and the whole routine of going to kindergarten, staying there, and playing.

### **View of Child-centredness**

Focus group participants see *child-centredness* as flexibility of the educational process and child autonomy

P8: So, they are, in a way, free to circulate through all the activity centres. They choose activities according to their own interests... Child-centredness is visible through the entire context of their activity and through giving them autonomy in their activity.

This and similar statements from other participants instigate a need for further research on early childhood educators' view of autonomy as such and supporting children's autonomy in early childhood settings. This need for further research on early childhood educators' perspectives on autonomy is supported by the views of some research participants, who regard child-centeredness as a future-oriented practice, focused on recognizing and fulfilling all the child's potentials

P6: Child-centredness means making maximum use of the child's contribution, self-actualisation in all their different aspects, with all their possibilities and needs, then we can say that we are focused on the child.

This is also visible in the following example, accentuating the relationship between the concept of child-centredness and the readiness discourse:

P10: The most important learning is about understanding oneself, believing in oneself, recognizing both strengths

and weaknesses, and being aware that one won't succeed in everything. However, in areas where improvement is possible, one can work on it through knowledge. For example, as a society, we tend to focus heavily on this cognitive aspect. In my opinion, when we send a child to school, I always think about how I send them, because that's all I can offer—sending them with confidence in themselves and the ability to ask for help without shame. They need to know that knowledge is built over time, that it's a collaborative process, and that it's okay not to know everything but to explore and seek answers. Ultimately, they should leave with social skills, which I believe is very important. So, this focus on the child, for me, is about creating a space in kindergarten where they feel comfortable and at home.

Some participants emphasize the importance of cooperation with parents as a prerequisite of achieving child-centredness. They see child-centredness in all segments of their work, e.g. their view of the child, offering incentives and their own role. One of the participants (P4) views child-centredness as

a day-to-day self-reminding about the importance of play and as ensuring that the principles of the curriculum are achieved through play.

### **View of the (National) Curriculum**

Early childhood educators' autonomy and freedom are seen as the greatest value of the national and institutional curricula by the research participants

P4: Just now have I become aware what a treasure this curriculum of ours is and how much freedom it provides us with. Freedom!

They conclude that their autonomy provides them with the flexibility to create the educational process, which they find necessary when following child-centred principles. One of the participants (P6) states that the

curriculum is so flexible that it enables early childhood educators to engage with and see the child, and not just units to go through.

However, they point out that the existing pedagogical documentation in early childhood settings does not support planning based on children's current interests because it expects long-term planning. Participant P8 elaborates:

P8: If our starting point is following children's interests, following the child and respecting the child and giving him some sort of autonomy, then long-term planning of activities is impossible. ...if I plan something out for the next day, some incentives to support them in their further learning, sometimes they take it to a totally different direction and of course then thematic planning, and especially those three-monthly plans we still keep writing in the "yellow book" fall through.

The participants agreed that they often have the feeling they are *burdened*, in terms of *doing something they feel they must do* (P5) and that they have to follow the plans that exist in an "imaginary calendar of activities". They find this is not in agreement with the NKRPOO (MZOS, 2015) nor with the principles of child-centredness. The (thematic/calendar) planning is an area where the early childhood educators find the biggest discrepancy between the educational policy documents and early childhood practice.

P4: I remember a colleague of mine who had been doing the same things with the children for four years in a row, I don't know, for example, for St. Nick's Day they always made exactly the same red paper boots together... I mean, if the children aren't currently interested in bakery products, during the Bread Festivities, I mean, what's the point? Just because the Bread Festivities usually take place in October? Actually, what we need most of all is to start from the children themselves and see what they are currently interested in.

P6: It is currently autumn. And there is not a single yellow leaf in Dubrovnik, but everyone will say they are well into the themes about autumn because the calendar says it's autumn.

Considering the fact that one of the principles of curriculum is the flexibility of the educational process, how is it possible that in contemporary early childhood settings flexibility is being respected only declaratively? One of the participants (P11) concludes that, in spite of the documentation that sets a firm structure, which is not always flexible, it is possible to respect children's interests and needs because, as she puts it:

I write up a bunch of incentives, I prepare it all for myself, and then whatever goes, goes.

The participants expressed their interpretation of the contemporary curriculum as a starting point and a foothold of child-centredness. As one of the participants (P9) puts it:

For me, the curriculum is an early childhood educator's basic setting, or, as it says in smartphones - factory setting. I think every novice, every educator needs to know the curriculum and its values, principles and starting points. I can't find better words for it other than - an early childhood educator's factory setting.

## Discussion

The focus group participants' perception of play indicates that they see play as a child's fundamental activity and a way of learning, a finding similar to the results obtained by, for example, Altun (2018), Davis (2024), Jensen et al. (2020), Lazić et al. (2020), Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006), Tsai (2017) and Vogt et al. (2018). However, early childhood educators also see play as something that contributes to the overall respect of children's rights, a view that has recently been supported in research of children's rights *in play* (Lagerlöf et al., 2022). Interestingly, two participants described play as a means of *contributing to understanding a child's world*, i.e. understanding the way children learn. They emphasized the importance of observing play in order to ensure the child's development and learning. Despite stemming from a declarative intention to gain insight into seeing things from children's perspective, early childhood educators' focus swiftly shifts towards utilization of this knowledge for their own educational agendas. Similarly, Jensen et al. (2020) found that when discussing the relation between play and learning, to the early childhood educators "play became a 'stage' for children to demonstrate proficiency with adult- and curriculum-prescribed content, rather than an engaging context for exploring and practicing according to children's interests" (p. 309). Aras (2016) obtained comparable results in her study, where educators view play as useful in achieving their own educational purposes or fulfilling their tasks (keeping children busy while doing something else, e.g. documentation). This might indicate a distortion of the focus put on children's rights by the demands perceived by adults as important, whether they are intrinsic (a demand an educator places upon her/himself based on personal attitudes) or extrinsic (a demand placed upon an educator by the institution, policy or other external agents). This also places play as the fundamental activity and child-centredness as an underlying approach of ECEC in a precarious position within the early childhood curriculum. There are other examples of research findings that implicitly or explicitly suggest the same issue, with some choosing not to problematize the instrumentalization of play in depth (e.g. Lundqvist et al., 2021; Vogt et al., 2018) and others discussing this issue through a critical lens (e.g. Lazić et al., 2020; Pyle & DeLuca, 2016). On the other hand, there are also discussions about surpassing these types of dichotomies within the ECEC academic narratives (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Veraksa et al., 2021)

The emphasis the participants of the focus group placed on their departure from "traditional guidance" (or their interpretation of "traditional guidance", to be more precise), as illustrated in the excerpt in the Findings section, could be interpreted as their attempt to get the message across that they have departed from a (traditional) focus on contents towards a contemporary concept of child-centredness. Although these two views seem quite different at first, attention must be paid to the vocabulary used when describing and elaborating the idea that was intended to come across, which can at times be normative and adult-centred, emphasizing the power inequity between children and adults (e.g. adults are the ones who 'let' children organize their play) (for a discussion on this see Babić, 2014). This need felt by early childhood educators to ensure that we, as researchers, understood what they meant by the term "guidance" could also be interpreted as their uncertainty about their role, as noted by Pyle and Danniels (2017). The nuances in the early childhood educators' role in play have long been a topic of research. For example, Lemay et al. (2016) find that, in practice, early childhood educators respect children's play, but have difficulty sustaining it, which is also supported by Colliver (2019). Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) conclude that educators should be supportive, but not disturbing, while Pyle and Danniels (2017) find that educators could be afraid of hijacking children's play, and therefore emphasize that their guidance is not necessarily a synonym for passive learning and direct instruction. On the other hand, Colliver (2019) found that "educators believe children's learning from their play was associated with educators' passive rather than active practices. Rather than intentional, it seemed to be merely coincidental that child-chosen play resulted in learning of curriculum content" (p. 182). Similarly, Pui-Wah and Stimpson's (2004) research concluded that when focusing on specific learning objectives, early childhood educators often chose direct teaching practices, inspite of being aware that within the child-centred curriculum, play-based learning is

considered more appropriate. Although it is expected that novice early childhood educators would want and need guidelines and 'rules' in order to feel successful in their professional activity (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), the research participants find this is also present with more experienced early childhood educators.

The emphasis the research participants placed on their professional engagement as related to all three key notions of this research is supported by Bašić (2011), who claims that observing the child is crucial in leading towards devising a well-thought out space for free play. If time is necessary for the development of free play in which the child is immersed with its whole being (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008), ensuring the extension of the play experience is also a part of the early childhood educator's *professional engagement*. However, what comes to the fore are the early childhood educator's competences, sensibility and context, as well as the ability to engage in play whilst trying not to disrupt the play itself as a children's project. This entails not disrupting the play's beginning, progress and closure as well as an evaluation of the child's desire for the adult to participate in play or not.

Focus group participants recognized the national curriculum as a curriculum that enables children's learning through play. Its flexibility provides space for individual development while respecting individual learning strategies, as well as respecting the importance of partnership with families. Although all participants emphasized the importance of play in children's development, they did not further elaborate on the (lacking) interpretation of play in the national curriculum. This uncertainty could lead to early childhood educators' not being able to recognize their role in ensuring play experiences and thus lead to their stepping away from the contemporary approach to children's learning and child-centredness principles that frame it. The identified uncertainty expressed by early childhood educators about their own role as related to play and 'bringing to life' child-centredness framed within an open and flexible curriculum is supported by other relevant research, like Pyle and Danniels (2017), Pyle and DeLuca (2016) and Tsai (2017). These results open questions about their implications for living the child-centred approach within early childhood curriculum, especially the child-centred principles related to play and participation and decision-making, which leads to a rethinking of the advantages and disadvantages of an open and flexible curriculum. In spite of the emphasis put on play as children's fundamental right in all settings, adults need to be reminded about that - not just in educational policy documents, but also in practice. Sahlberg and Doyle's (2019) research highlighted that more play in educational settings leads to less stress, fatigue, testing, shame and sitting still and, consequently, less apathy and demotivation in children.

### Concluding Thoughts

As balance and wandering between focusing on children's academic success and focusing on their current needs and interests as well as ways of gaining insight into their needs and interests is sometimes present in ECEC literature, and even more so in ECEC policies (and beyond), so do the early childhood educators participating in this research balance between attempts to listen and follow children's incentives and a burden they feel about making learning 'visible' in every single early childhood experience. This might put both play and child-centredness (with their differing interpretations) in a peripheral position in practice, which could be visible in institutional curricula. Although they find the national curriculum to be flexible and provide them with the desired freedom and autonomy in their work, they feel smothered by the documentation they have to keep 'doing', despite it not being in a logical theoretical accordance with the national or institutional curriculum or their own personal beliefs and expectations about their practice. If the purpose of documentation is children's learning then it could be interpreted as a contribution to child-centred practice. However, documentation with a purpose of satisfying official forms could be interpreted as an obstacle to child-centred practice. The focus group participants demonstrate an understanding of documentation as a journey through child development. Despite the curriculum that allows them to understand documentation as a process and not a current (final) moment in development, they believe that educational policy expectations do not correspond to the actual needs of everyday practice. The participants displayed a general idea about what child-centred practice should look like, however they indicated a level of uncertainty as to their own position in it, which potentially has a big impact on their everyday practice. The participants in this research are experienced early childhood educators who also

have collaborative experience with their colleagues. Therefore, it could be assumed that they have the opportunity to develop and innovate their own practice given their professional experience. Although no novice teachers were included in this research, it could be presumed that such a discrepancy between educational policy and practice could result in an uncertainty in one's own judgments and activities, especially when it comes to their role in play or in relation to child-centredness. This instigates a need for further research on child-centred competences and professional development related to child-centredness, especially when it comes to novice early childhood educators.

As child-centredness continues to be a significant notion in the ECEC academic community, it is important to shed light into the critical research on child-centredness (e.g. Floom & Janzen, 2020; Langford, 2010; Shah, 2019) focusing on (among many other things):

- a) the theoretical underpinnings of child-centredness emerging from developed, Western and Western-adjacent sociocultural and theoretical traditions, not necessarily aligning with the sociocultural and theoretical traditions of developing countries and/or 'other' sociocultural contexts;
- b) the issue with centredness as such in terms of it being a gateway to rigidity blocking the way of different and/or new ideas and practices;
- c) the issue with its aligning with neoliberal constructs surrounding the emphasis put on individuality and the individual decontextualized child disregarding other social structural characteristics 'inscribed' within the child as well as its relational way of *being* in this socially vibrant world;
- d) the issue of *uncertainty* regarding the role of educators, or more competent others, in a child-centred educational process, which has proven to be a major concern for early childhood educators participating in the research presented in this paper as they reflected on their own practice.

All of these, along with other critiques of child-centeredness, raise questions about play and child-centeredness discussed throughout this paper. This, along with the results of the research presented, paves the way for new research on the topic of child-centeredness, play, and curriculum, as a means of bringing ECEC theories and policies to life in practice.

## Declarations

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