

Representations of play

– A praxeological analysis of Norwegian ECEC research on play 2020-2023

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Abstract

This article analyses Norwegian research on play in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) published between 2020 and 2023. Rather than treating play as a stable object of inquiry, the study examines how current research practices within higher education ECEC environments enact specific understandings of what play is and what it is for.

Researchers who publish about play in ECEC are also teacher educators and key contributors to shaping knowledge in the kindergarten teacher education. As agents with a dominating position within their field of knowledge, researchers' understandings of play will have a high symbolic value. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the views on play that dominate the research literature also circulate into the ECEC education, which is supposed to be research-based, and so, stand as the dominating understandings of play in kindergarten teacher education. At the same time, academic ECEC environments are highly heterogeneous, composed of staff from a broad range of disciplines, each with their epistemological and ontological foundation. This suggests that the understanding of play within academic ECEC as a field may be equivocal.

¹The second author is an editorial board member of the journal but has been excluded from all forms of editorial work related to this article.

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To identify and develop an understanding of current understandings of play in ECEC, the study analyses and discusses how researchers, methods, institutional traditions and political guidelines are part of an interaction that both shapes and limits what play is and can be in the ECEC field.

The study shows that dominant research practices construct play primarily as a means for learning, regulation and measurable outcomes. Such practices make certain understandings institutionally powerful while more existential, relational or imaginative dimensions of play are less conspicuous. The study argues that the field's methodological and discursive orientations do not merely describe play but co produce and shape the conditions for how play is valued, facilitated and lived in contemporary ECEC. Reasoning in line with praxeological perspectives, we call for more explicit and deeper reflexivity regarding researcher positionality, institutional dependencies, and the normative consequences of the research and the knowledgebase transferred to ECEC student teachers.

Keywords: play, ECEC research, developmental and academic learning, understandings of play

Introduction

In Norway, kindergarten as an institution has over the last couple of decades gradually become connected to national education strategies, including a much stronger connection between kindergarten and school than what has traditionally been the case (Håberg, 2022a). In 2006, administrative responsibility for kindergartens in Norway was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research, marking a significant policy shift that emphasized early childhood education as an integral part of the educational system (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). As a consequence, ECEC is now defined as the first step in the national education system (Nilsen, 2021) and is considered an important part of an individual's lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). The development in this direction has led to an increased emphasis on childhood as preparation for further education and adult life, and on children's formal learning and achievements in kindergarten (Nygård, 2017). In Norwegian ECEC, one may consequently observe a shift from viewing play as a central activity in its own right in young children's everyday life to emphasising play as a means for learning (Hu & Ødegaard, 2019), mirroring a more school-oriented ECEC pedagogy (Håberg, 2022a).

At the level of research, this development can also be observed in the Nordic Base of Early Childhood Education and Care's research (ECEC-NB, 2021), a database that compiles quality-assured Scandinavian research on children aged 0–6 in early childhood education and care. According to ECEC-NB (2021), the dominant areas in ECEC research in Scandinavia are pedagogical practices, along with teaching and learning, which are predominantly explored qualitatively. In contrast, there is little research related to play practices despite their central role in Scandinavian ECECs (Klippen et al., 2024). This is evident in the report *Empirical Research on Scandinavian Early Childhood Education and Care in 2022 and 2023* (Guldbrandsen et al., 2025), which shows that of the 546 Scandinavian studies on ECEC identified by the authors (Guldbrandsen et al., 2025, p. 12), 4-7% of the research annually falls into the category 'play practices' in the period 2021-2023 (Guldbrandsen et al., 2025, pp. 29-30).

Given the shift toward a learning-oriented approach and the limited research on how ECEC researchers themselves perceive play; in our data set we only identified one study (Pyle & Danniels, 2017) that examines researchers' views on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education, this review seeks to address the following research question: How do Norwegian ECEC researchers view play?

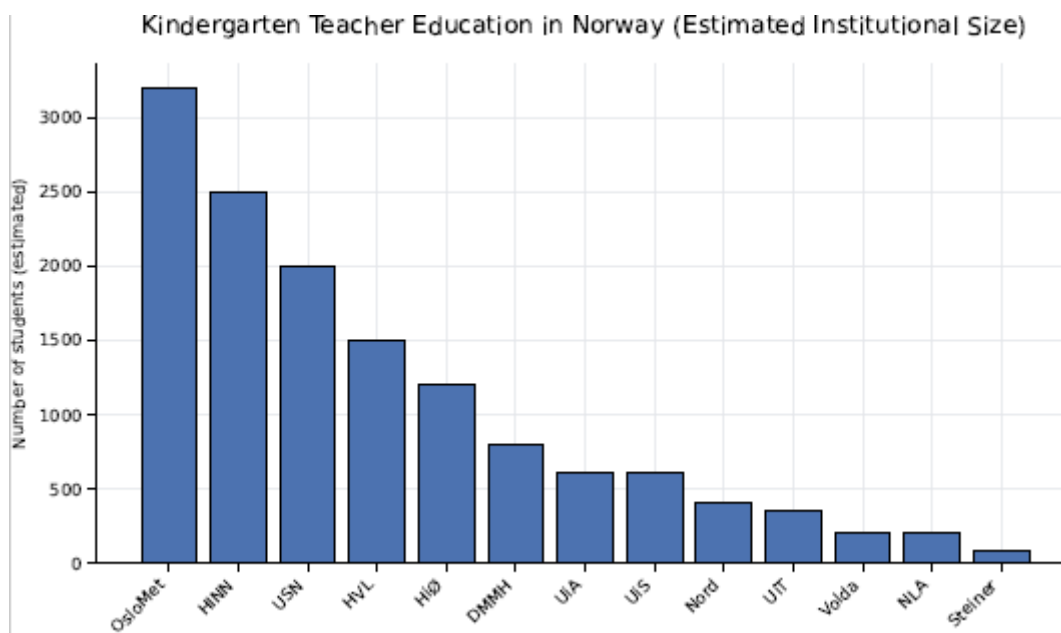
We chose to provide an overview over recent research on play in Norway, and to offer an analysis over the studies we identified. There is generally a shortage of overview studies on ECEC research in Scandinavia and in Norway. According to Guldbrandsen et al. (2025, p. 28), a mere 4% of studies in this field are reviews. We have not been able to identify any recent reviews about research on play. Thus, our study offers an account of a subfield within ECEC research that appears to have been little described in recent years. Although our material does not allow for proper investigation of what lies behind the views we identify, we briefly bring this question up in the Discussion section albeit without offering any conclusions.

The epistemological lens through which the findings in the review were analysed, is shaped by praxeological understandings of social fields, including that of research, positioning the review as a situated scoping review.

In our review, we scrutinised 37 published scientific articles on play from 2020 through 2023. The articles are drawn from a larger empirical material consisting of all scientific publications (418) on ECEC produced by Norwegian kindergarten education milieus. The larger material included scientific articles, book chapters and Ph.D. dissertations on ECEC at the 12 universities and university colleges in Norway that offer kindergarten teacher training. The universities and colleges are University of Tromsø (UiT), Nord University (Nord), Queen Maud University College (DMMH), Volda University College (Volda), Western Norway University of Applied sciences (HVL), University of Agder (UiA), Østfold University College (HiØ), Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), University of South-Eastern Norway (USN), University of Stavanger (UiS), University of Inland Norway (HINN) and NLA University College (NLA). In addition, one institution, Rudolf Steiner University College (Steiner), offers kindergarten teacher education based on Waldorf pedagogy. We found relevant articles at 10 of the universities and university colleges.

Figure 1 shows the number of students enrolled in kindergarten teacher education at each institution, indicating the institutions' position in the field of kindergarten teacher education and ECEC research in Norway. Of the five institutions with more than 1000 students, four are in the southeastern part of the country, not too far from the capital. The fifth is in western Norway. Of all the institutions, OsloMet has by far the most students, indicating that this university holds a strong position also within ECEC research.

Figure 1. Estimated number of students enrolled in kindergarten teacher education programs across Norwegian higher education institutions



Estimates are based on aggregated data from Statistics Norway (SSB), reconstructed at institutional level.

In addition to seeing institutions' position in relation to student numbers, we have assumed that hosting a research centre strengthens a ECEC research environment's position in the field, as such centres are associated with increased economic resources and better conditions for research, and so,

they are prestigious. Three institutions are hosts to such a centre: The University of Stavanger (the centre Filiorum), the University of Southeastern Norway (the centre SEBUTI), and Western Norway University of Applied Science (the centre KINDKnow).

However, ECEC research and kindergarten teacher education is a heterogeneous field, composed of academics with quite dissimilar disciplinary backgrounds, comprising for example drama, mathematics, pedagogy, language and literature, music and sports education, with staff having earned their own academic qualifications primarily in one of those disciplines. This means, that while ECEC in higher education may be considered a separate field, or perhaps a subfield to the field of pedagogy, it is not a discipline. Whitley (2000) explains that academic disciplines and fields each have unique systems for producing and validating knowledge, which are dependent on epistemological traditions, and influenced by historical and social contexts. This diversity leads to varying intellectual structures and practices across disciplines, as well as different areas of interest. In a multidisciplinary field such as academic ECEC, one may expect that researchers position themselves and their work differently, at least partly depending on their disciplinary background.

Taken together, this indicates that OsloMet holds a strong position because they by a wide margin are the largest ECEC environment in Norway. However, we find it reasonable to assume that even the University of South-Eastern Norway and Western Norway University of Applied Science hold a position similar to that of OsloMet, as both these institutions host a ECEC research centre in addition to being among the country's largest providers of kindergarten teacher education. We do not know how researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds position themselves in the local or national higher education ECEC environment, but our review shows evident differences in disciplinary representation when it comes to research on play.

The study rests on the assumption that researchers in the ECEC field, who are frequently also kindergarten teacher educators, shape both student kindergarten teachers' understandings of play and the field's prevailing conceptions of state-of-the-art insights about play. While studying the academics' teaching practices would prove a demanding task, it is possible to study their publications, which, we hypothesise, are likely to resonance with their teaching. Consequently, analysing these writings may provide insight into what underpins the understanding of play within ECEC higher education and research. Whether this understanding is reflected in kindergarten practices, is a quite different matter (cf. Bourdieu, 1990, 1998; Nørholm & Brinkkjær &, 2005; Callewaert, 2004, Reckwitz, 2002), and one that is outside the scope of this study.

The review reveals that ECEC researchers claim to view play as free play. At the same time, there is a prevailing tendency to frame play in utilitarian terms in the reviewed articles, specifically as a means to support developmental and academic learning. We identified four subcategories in the discussions of play and learning. These are: (1) physical environment, (2) play materials, (3) academic skills, and (4) social relations. Methodically, the research is predominantly qualitative, ranging from various types of observations to interviews and document analysis.

The article is organized as follows: It begins with a brief reflection on how play is understood within ECEC research. This is followed by an examination of the educational impact on play and a presentation of the study's methodological framework. Subsequently, the review outlines and critically discusses the data material and key findings, before concluding with a summary of the main insights and knowledge gaps within current research on play in ECEC.

Understandings of play in research

Internationally, play as a topic of investigation is enjoying what has been described as a renaissance (Whitebread, 2018). Academic publications on this topic span natural, social and health sciences, including ethology, zoology and neuroscience to anthropology and evolutionary, clinical psychology, developmental psychology, educational sciences and more (Whitebread et al., 2017). However, the definition of play remains a topic of debate among researchers (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012), who often distinguish between two main types: free play which is also termed child-directed play (e.g. Fleer, 2011) and teacher-directed play (e.g. Newbury et al., 2015), which together form a continuum of play-based learning.

Free play, often conceptualized as child-directed play, is generally understood as play that allows children to engage in diverse forms of play that are self-selected and self-regulated, and that occurs without any pedagogical intervention or structured guidance from educators (Weisberg et al., 2013; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Free play is typically characterized by its flexibility, intrinsic motivation, absence of externally imposed goals, active engagement, and frequent incorporation of imaginative and make-believe elements (e.g. Fisher et al., 2011; Pellegrini et al., 2007; Sutton-Smith, 2001). Teacher-directed play, in contrast, is described as play activities and games that are intentionally structured and guided by educators to serve specific pedagogical purposes (Gmitrova et al., 2009; Newbury et al., 2015). In this type of play, play is employed as a learning opportunity, wherein children follow specified rules of play established and often directed by teachers.

In addition to these two types of play, researchers have identified a third category; mutually directed play - characterised by shared initiative and involvement from children and adults (Henry, 1990; Synodi, 2010). In mutual directed play, the teacher participates in children's free play in a manner that is supportive and non-intrusive, thereby preserving the child-led nature of the activity while subtly guiding its development (Henry, 1990).

Research on how play supports children's learning and development is commonly framed within two main perspectives: developmental learning (e.g. Bodrova & Leong, 2003) and teacher-directed learning (e.g. Ihmeideh, 2015). Research on the role of play in developmental learning emphasizes the overall development of the child, including social-emotional development (e.g. Tal et al., 2008), general cognitive development (e.g. Hansel, 2015) and self-regulation (e.g. Bodrova & Leong, 2008). In this approach, children's playtime is frequently conceptualised as a time for child-directed free play which is proposed to be beneficial for multiple areas of development (e.g. Fredriksen, 2012).

Research on play in academic learning tends to adopt a narrower focus, primarily investigating how specific play activities may support the acquisition of prescribed skills and general academic learning (e.g. Riek, 2014), for example related to early mathematical skills (e.g. Presser et al., 2015) and verbal skills, including oral language skills (e.g. Elvin et al., 2007) as well as reading and writing (e.g. Wohlwend, 2008).

Much of the research included in this review highlights free or child-directed play as beneficial for children's developmental learning. While this view is widely endorsed, some scholars emphasize that play is at the same time culturally embedded, and that the emphasis on free play, teacher-directed play, and mutually directed play varies across cultural contexts (Hu & Ødegaard, 2019). While Nordic kindergartens have been strongly influenced by Froebelian pedagogy (Håberg, 2022b) and are often characterized as part of a social pedagogical tradition that embraces a holistic

approach to children`s play, learning, care, and participation with play occupying a central and valued role, other countries tend to emphasise formal education and to view children primarily as future citizens (Naudeau et al., 2010). For instance, in the United States, teacher-guided play is given significantly more emphasis than in the Nordic tradition (Jensen, 2009).

Analytical lens

In this article, play and play research are understood as two distinct socially and materially situated practices (cf. Callewaert, 2004). A literature review can therefore only inform us about the latter, that is research on play and views on play within the research environment. In line with this understanding, we moreover hold that actions, tools, institutional frameworks and research traditions are woven together in what appear to be ‘natural’ understandings; the field’s doxa, in Bourdieu’s terminology (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992). For example, ECEC researchers’ conceptions of play are thus not understood as neutral representations of play, but as something that is produced in and produces specific practices within this specific field.

Bourdieu demonstrates that social structures do not exist as fixed rules that underpin practice, but are realized and maintained through practical, embodied actions–practices (Bourdieu 1977; 1990). The social and cultural thus unfolds in practice, not before it. In line with Bourdieu’s reasoning, we see academic reasoning and research as part of a social practice, where people, material surroundings, concepts and institutions are part of an interwoven field of action (Bourdieu 1992; 1998). The methods and concepts of research are not outside this field, but constitute practices that arrange what can be seen, measured and valued as the field’s core concepts and research objects, such as ‘play’ in ECEC research.

Also with regard to understanding how research practices gain institutional power, Bourdieu (1990a) is central. As indicated in the introduction, we hold that ECEC researchers operate in a field where certain ways of understanding and investigating play have higher symbolic capital than others. Through their association with the kindergarten teacher education, the researchers convey the terms for the field’s legitimate forms of knowledge to future professional practitioners. In this way, the field’s dominant perspectives, for example the utilitarian understandings of play identified in our review, is likely to become the field’s doxa: a tacit, self-evident truth that does not need to be justified. This gives dominating understandings of play a long life beyond academia, intended to form the basis for action in the practice of the profession. Whether this really happens, is a different matter (Nørholm & Brinkekjær, 2005).

A praxeological view moreover requires attention to how methods work performatively. In line with praxeological reasoning, we understand research as a network of practices, tools, and translations that stabilize certain ways of knowing. Methods are not passive tools but produce the phenomena they investigate (Bourdieu, 1990c, 2004). When play is studied through short observational sequences, which is the case in several of the studies in our review, play is created as something definable, measurable and purpose oriented. When policy expectations regarding learning outcomes and development goals are intertwined with research perspectives, this impacts the practices in kindergartens.

Following Bourdieu and other theorists who have developed practice theories, Reckwitz (2002) provides a powerful conceptual framework for understanding how practices consist of bodily,

affective, material and cultural dispositions. Considering this, observation as a dominant research practice can be seen as a culturally established way of constructing knowledge; a disposition in the field that makes it more likely that play is understood as observable behaviour, rather than as relational, open, bodily or affective experience. Such an outline is not accidental, but an expression of the cultural logics of the field.

Overall, this theoretical framework makes it possible to analyse the research literature as a field of practice that not only describes play, but contributes to shaping the meaning of play, pedagogical priorities and children's experiences. A praxeological view thus highlights how research, education and profession are interwoven through practices that produce specific conditions of opportunity for what play can be, and for whom.

Method

To get an overview of how current ECEC researchers view play and to reveal knowledge and possible assumptions about the ECEC research on play we employed a scoping review methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). This method was chosen to map the field, and this map constitutes the basis of our analysis and discussion. We outlined the review through five framework stages, discussed sequentially: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) summarising and reporting the results (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

Research question

The research question 'How do Norwegian ECEC researchers view play?' served as the foundation for defining the scope of this study (cf. Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The general concept of play pedagogies served as a guiding principle throughout the research process encompassing different views on play, allowing all articles on play to be included. As a follow up, we also tried to understand the background of the views we identified in the research we reviewed.

Identification of relevant studies

We identified the articles on play from the larger dataset of 418 publications on ECEC in relevant research milieus in Norway in the period 2020-2023. The dataset comprises all publications from the relevant milieus, and included published scientific articles, book chapters and PhD dissertations. Publications from this specific period were chosen firstly, since we were primarily interested in charting current views within the field, and secondly, because time span boundaries are often necessary from a practical standpoint in scoping literature reviews (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). To identify relevant publications, we examined the various research groups and research centres affiliated with universities and university colleges that offer kindergarten teacher education. From these institutions, we collected publications on early childhood education and care (ECEC) authored by members of these groups. From this body of work, we then extracted all peer-reviewed scientific articles specifically focused on play. The search terms used for this review were 'play', 'ECEC research', 'kindergarten' and 'learning'. The articles were catalogued in a table with the categories: author(s), (year), title, author(s), scientific position, aim/purpose, method, abstract and stated keywords (Appendix 2).

Study selection

To be selected for inclusion in the review, the articles must have been written by researchers affiliated with kindergarten teacher education (overview in Appendix 1), peer reviewed and published between 2020-2023. Additionally, inclusion criteria related to the topic of the article rather

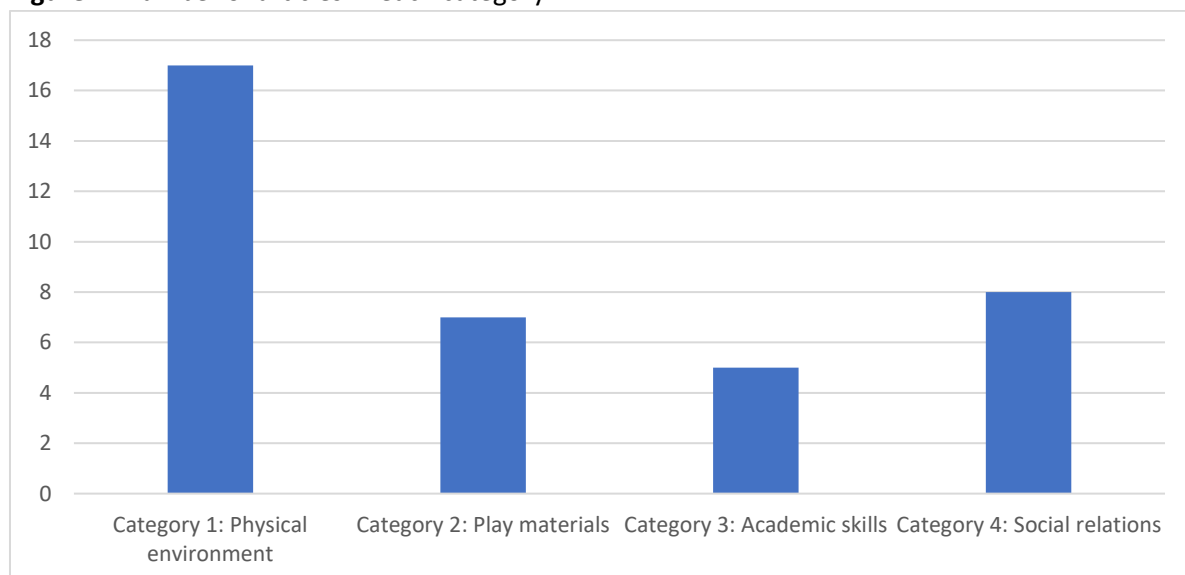
than the format, therefore both theoretical articles (e.g. literature reviews) and empirical articles were included. Our research question guided the search, and we found a total of 37 articles that met all the criteria.

Charting the data

The charting of the articles was done in a detailed manner. After extracting the articles on play from the larger dataset of all publications (418) on ECEC from 2020 to 2023, the articles were read thoroughly. Approaches, methods and disciplinary affiliation were charted, and relevant concepts were underlined. We examined the articles' aims, perspectives, disciplinary affiliation, methods and findings (cf. Campbell et al., 2023). Then, concepts were grouped in themes, followed by a discussion of the views on play in each article. The initial charting included scrutinizing concepts in the abstracts, stated keywords and concepts in the main texts. Each article was assessed against the research question. The synthesis of the articles resulted in 4 categories:

- 1) Articles on play related to physical environments (both indoors and outdoors), physical activity, sustainability, nature, risky play, rough and tumble play (RT) were mapped to category 1. 'Physical environment'.
- 2) Articles on play related to materials, affordances, mobile/moveable material and loose parts were mapped to category 2. 'Play materials'.
- 3) Articles on play related to learning, play skills, mathematical skills, education, digital practises, digital childhood, preparation for school, playful learning, deep-level learning and policy were mapped to category 3. 'Academic skills'.
- 4) Articles on play related to belonging, identity narratives, care, children's perspectives, empathy, belonging and flow were mapped to category 4. 'Social relations'.

Figure 2. Number of articles in each category



In some articles, themes were intertwined, making categorisation challenging. The majority of articles was classified under Category 1) Physical environment (17/37), followed by Category 2) Play materials (7/37), Category 3) Academic skills (5/37), and Category 4) Social relations (8/37).

With regard to institutional affiliation, the distribution of the 37 reviewed articles is as follows: 17 are affiliated with DMMH, 6 with HVL, 4 with UiS, 3 with USN, 2 with UiN, and one each with OsloMet,

UiA, Volda, UiT, and HiØ (cf. Appendix 2). Almost half of the articles (18/37) have either sports sciences or educational sciences (pedagogy) as their disciplinary base. We note that at the most publishing institutions, some researchers are particularly active. We provide the figures from DMMH, the institution with the far most publications, as an illustrative example (cf. Appendix 2):

Table 1. Authorship at Queen Maud University college

Author or co-author	1	1	1	1	1	2	8
Number of publications (x/17)	12	8	7	5	3	2	1

Regarding approach and methodology, we noted that the studies are predominantly qualitative. This is in line with Gulbrandsen et al., who found that 69-75% of the studies from the period 2021-2023 included in their review were qualitative (Gulbrandsen et al., 2025, p. 23). Many of the articles rely on various forms of observations as their primary data collection method, while fewer studies employ interviews, content analysis, literature reviews, or theoretical approaches. In comparison, Gulbrandsen (2025, p. 26) found that 34% of the studies in their review used observation as their main method, 34% used one-to-one interviews, and 23% used video recordings. In our review, we have counted observation and video as one category. A total of 22/37 studies use either of these methods; 25/37 if we count the three that use observation in combination with another method (see Table 2).

The articles span descriptive, normative/prescriptive, and exploratory designs. While theoretical perspectives vary, almost 2/3 of the articles (22/37) do not contain any specification of their epistemological or theoretical approaches.

Table 2. Categorization of articles included in the review

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>Methods for data collection and analysis</i>	<i>Descriptive, analytical, explanatory or prescriptive/normative research</i>
1. Physical environment	17	observation (10), observation +interview (1) walking alongside (1), questionnaire (1), systematic review (2), theoretical (1), interview (1)	Descriptive, prescriptive research
2. Play materials	7	observation (5), interview + content analysis (1), interview (1)	Descriptive, prescriptive research
3. Academic skills	5	observation (1), local model + observation (1), interview (1), content analysis (2)	Descriptive, prescriptive research
4. Social relations	8	observation (6), observation + interview (1), content analysis (1)	Descriptive, exploratory research

Findings and analysis

In this section, we present the study's findings and analysis. We have sorted the findings in four categories, based on the focus in each article: 1) Physical environment, 2) Play materials, 3) Academic skills, and 4) Social relations.

Category 1: Physical environment

In the Nordic countries and internationally, there has been a growing interest in the role of physical environment and children's physical activity in ECEC (Berti et al., 2019; Whitebread et al., 2017; Moser, 2009). This interest is reflected in our study; almost half of the studies on play in our review (17/37) discuss different kinds of play and learning in relation to physical environments (e.g. Sandseter et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2020; Obee et al., 2021).

One study (Øvreås et al., 2020) explores how conditions for children's physically active play in kindergarten may be improved by evaluating an intervention design in which staff groups actively participated in shaping and implementing the intervention's content. As pointed out by Øvreås et al. (2020), structured intervention programs implemented in early childhood settings are often not adapted to the diverse contexts and complexities of kindergartens. The findings suggest that conceptualizing the kindergarten as a learning organization enabled staff to engage actively in the design of the intervention, thereby facilitating a successful implementation.

Eight of seventeen studies in category 1. examine what is commonly termed risky play (Sandseter et al., 2020; Kleppe et al., 2020; Obee et al., 2020; Sandseter et al., 2023; Sando et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2021; Obee et al., 2020; Liu & Birkeland, 2021), while two studies address rough and tumble play (Storli, 2021; Siklander et al., 2020).

Sandseter et al. (2020) aim to examine the occurrence and characteristics of children's risky play, both indoors and outdoors, within ECEC institutions. The study's findings indicate that children are drawn to risky forms of play and that, when given the opportunity to choose, children engage in such activities as frequently as in other common play types, such as symbolic play.

A common finding in the reviewed articles on the importance of physical environments for children's risky play, is the frequent references to various developmental benefits of play, such as social, cognitive, emotional, and physical health benefits (e.g. Obee et al., 2020; Sandseter et al., 2023; Kleppe et al., 2020; Obee et al., 2021). Sandseter et al. (2021), for example, refer to research on risky play which indicates that such play can lead to increased physical activity and improved motor and physical skills (Brussoni et al., 2015; Fjørtoft, 2000), higher ability to assess risks and appropriately handle risk situations (Ball, 2002; Boyesen, 1997; Lavrysen et al., 2015), and positive psychological outcomes (Brussoni et al., 2015; Sandseter & Kennair, 2011), in addition to having general health benefits (Brussoni et al., 2015).

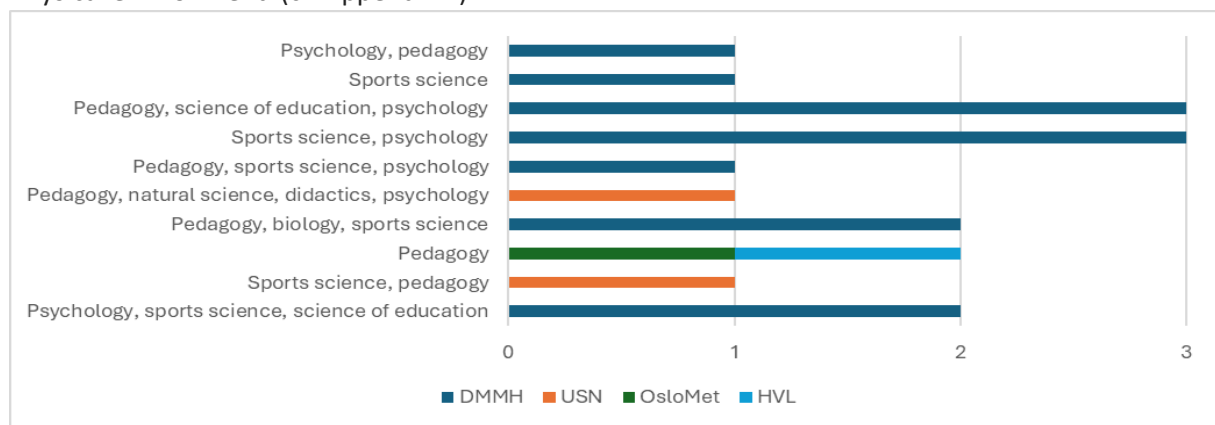
Supporting the role of play in developmental learning, research in this category also examines children's opportunities for holistic learning in general (Aslanian et al., 2023) as well as various outcomes associated with young children's nature play (outdoors play in nature) (Ernst et al., 2021). Regarding nature play, Ernst et al.'s article (2021) concludes, like those on risky play and on indoor and outdoor environments, that nature play has several positive physical, social and cognitive outcomes. In addition, nature play affords children to acquire knowledge, skills, dispositions and actions that are fundamental to sustainability and future educational growth.

Liu and Birkeland (2022) examine how teachers in Norway and China perceive risky play. Findings indicate that teachers in Norwegian kindergartens have theoretical knowledge and practical experience of understanding risky play within their cultural background, whereas kindergarten

teachers in China have learned a little about risky play, yet they are gradually developing their views on it in practice.

One single study takes the perspective of the child (Hagen & Skaug, 2022). This study examines children's own views on their preferred play spaces and games in their kindergarten's outdoor playground. Central to this study is the idea that children understand the world through interactive participation, and that play is children's genuine way of being and their primary way of expression. Storli et al. (2022) seek to understand what children do when they appear not to be playing during free play periods. In this study, play is conceptualised as a form of language, a system of communication and expression (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Building on this view, Storli et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of defining play broadly to include both active participation and more passive vicarious forms. They further argue that such an inclusive understanding is relevant for interpreting children's non-play behaviour within environments designed to support play.

Table 3. Represented disciplines and number of articles affiliated with institutions in category 1: Physical environment. (cf. Appendix 2).



Summary Category 1

A predominant part of the articles in category 1 is affiliated with DMMH and address the significance of the physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, and various types of play, such as risky play, rough and tumble play, nature play and non-play. One study focuses on cultural differences in risky play (HVL), whereas one study takes the perspective of the child (OsloMet). A common finding in the articles on the importance of physical environments and risky play is the research's references to various benefits, such as physical health, social and cognitive development, mirroring a view on play as means to developmental learning. The articles are drawn from various disciplines, including psychology, sports science, pedagogy, natural science and didactics.

Category 2: Play materials

This category comprises seven articles that investigate the significance of play materials' availability and how various materials, objects, and practices can influence children's diverse play and learning opportunities (e.g. Nilsen, 2021), including deep-level learning (Sando et al., 2023).

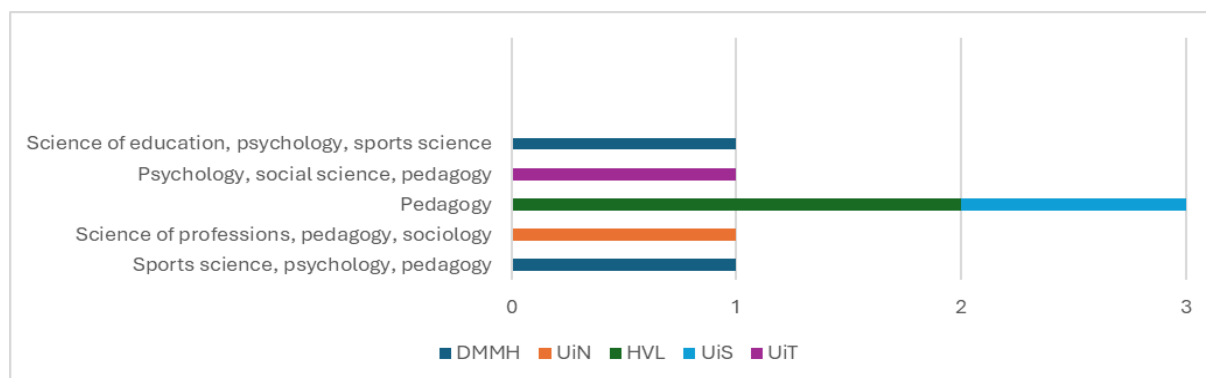
In one study, Nilsen et al. (2022) discuss how the physical indoor environment, with an accessible and varied selection of play materials, combined with pedagogical practices that promote play, may stimulate children's play opportunities, highlighting the connection between the design of the physical environment and children's behavioural, cognitive, and emotional development. Similarly, Storli et al. (2020) investigate the relationship between children's involvement in free play and the

use of play materials in outdoor environments, aiming to examine how diverse play materials may contribute to what the author calls ‘optimal outdoor learning environments.

Pedersen (2020) examines movement play with moveable parts, such as tricycles and balls, in outdoor environments. The study shows that the use of mobile materials appears to encourage a certain type of movement play and social communities-something that shapes or limits children’s opportunities for participation. Pedersen argues that knowledge about what materials are available and how they may stimulate participation in movement play should therefore be developed in kindergartens.

Two articles concern digital practices and children’s play with digital toys. One presents a study by Kyrkjebø (2022), who found that digital practices in kindergartens appear as a purpose-rational, pedagogically facilitated, and controlled activity that does not allow for free play. The study demonstrates how a value-rational perspective on play - where play is valued for its own sake - is increasingly being overshadowed by a goal-rational perspective, in which play becomes a means to achieve other ends. By contrast, Palaiologou et al. (2021) demonstrate that children’s interaction with the Internet of Toys (IoToys) at home allow children to think creatively, develop their imagination and think unpredictably during make-believe play.

Table 4. Represented disciplines and number of articles affiliated with institutions in category 2: Play materials (cf. Appendix 2).



Summary Category 2

The studies in category 2 are conducted at DMMH, HVL, UiN and UiT and examine how play and play materials influence children’s development. DMMH focuses on free play and deep-level learning, HVL explores mobile and digital materials, and other universities investigate material selection and digital play (UiN and UiT). The research consistently highlights play as vital for children’s behavioural, cognitive, and emotional growth, emphasizing that its benefits depend on available materials and context. These studies draw from the disciplines of sports science, psychology, pedagogy, sociology and education.

Category 3: Academic skills

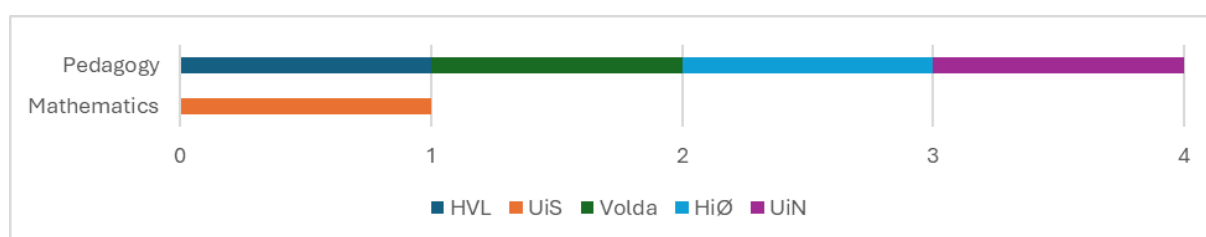
This category comprises five studies that stress the importance of play as a foundational element in children’s learning (e.g. Sträng, 2020; Fosse et al. 2023). One study (Reikerås, 2020) demonstrates a strong correlation between toddlers’ play abilities and their mathematical skills, claiming that this shows that play and learning are interconnected. Similarly, Fosse et al. (2023) investigate the

relationship between play and mathematics in kindergarten, aiming to inform early years mathematics educators, rather than ECEC teachers, about the potential of play in fostering problem-solving and problem-posing skills. Their study illustrates how play can serve as a medium for fostering mathematical learning.

Kangas et al. (2022) examine how play and playful learning is conceptualized in Finnish and Brazilian early childhood education curricula. In both countries, the curriculum documents emphasize the importance of high-quality early childhood education, highlighting a playful and holistic approach to learning as way of adapting to culture and society. Yet, according to the study’s findings, playful learning practices remain vague and are not clearly defined.

Håberg (2022) investigates how kindergarten teachers articulate and reflect on their professional practice as they navigate the tension between preparing children for school and preserving the intrinsic value of play. The findings indicate that play remains the most valued aspect of kindergarten education. The informants emphasized that children learn through play, and that in their view, this understanding of learning contrasts with the more structured, outcome-driven methods typical of school settings.

Table 5. Represented disciplines and number of articles affiliated with institutions in category 3: Academic skills (cf. Appendix 2).



Summary category 3

Category 3 includes five studies that all address formal education. There are studies that address mathematics (HVL and UiS), the transition from kindergarten to school (Volda) and adult perspectives on play and learning (HiØ). One study explores cultural differences in relation to play-based learning (UiN). Four out of five studies draw from the discipline of pedagogy whereas one study draws from the discipline of mathematics.

Category 4: Social relations

Eight studies fall under category 4, which we labelled ‘social relations’. These studies explore children’s play in relation to the core values of the Norwegian Framework Plan (2017) such as empathy, belonging and care (Nergaard, 2020; Eidsvåg & Rosell, 2021; Aslanian & Moxnes, 2020), children’s development of a sense of coherence (Heldal, 2020), identity formation (Zachrisen, 2022), ‘now-moments’ in children’s play (Pedersen & Fusche, 2020), and children’s experience of flow and play characterized as freedom from constraint (Nordbø, 2022; White, 2020).

Nergaard (2020) explores children’s need for empathy when experiencing rejection from peers in free play situations in ECEC. Nergaard asserts that promoting children’s empathy skills, social understanding, and prosocial behaviour strengthens the children’s ability to intervene in situations of bullying (Van Noorden et al., 2015). This study indicates that children benefit from adult involvement

in free play, particularly through social and emotional support, when they experience rejection from their peers.

Eidsvåg and Rosell (2021) investigate how educational staff leverage their structural power and pedagogical insight to foster children's sense of belonging within play groups. The study also examines how children demonstrate agency in their peer interaction. Most notably, the authors found that the staff's use of authority facilitated the creation of social spaces for children who typically assumed secondary or passive roles in play, while also offering socially dominant children's opportunities to engage with the perspectives and initiatives of their peers.

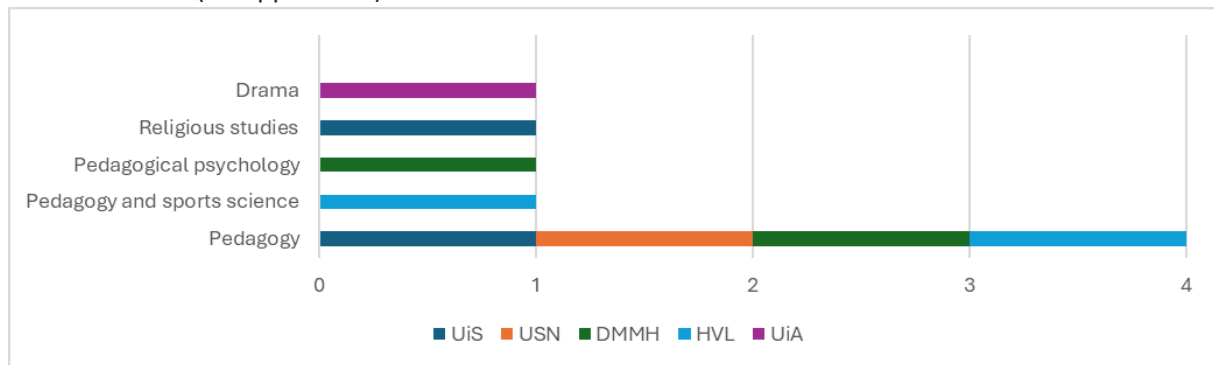
In a study on young refugees, Heldal (2021) suggests that play may be important for developing children's sense of coherence (SOC), highlighting the significance of fantasy, love, play, meaning, purpose and underlying social structures in helping people cope with stress and adapt to their environment. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of a trusting relationship between children and adults and discusses how adults can facilitate meaningful play experiences that support children's well-being.

Zachrisen (2022) investigates how children construct identity narratives in social play. The findings in this study show that the children engage in constructing 'we-communities' and collective identity narratives, and that nonverbal communication plays a decisive role in children's construction of identity narratives. The construction of a 'we-community' is mainly associated with three aspects of children's interaction: congruence, physical closeness, and a receptive and open bodily attitude.

One study raises awareness of how children's playful shared movements have some characteristics that promote the creation of now-moments and moments of meeting (Pedersen & Moe, 2020). In line with this perspective, Nordbø (2022) explores how kindergartens can foster good conditions for flow experiences during dramatic play. The study concludes that both internal factors - such as the flow of improvisation - and external factors - such as space conflicts or staff involvement in the play - significantly influence the potential for children to experience flow.

White (2020) aims to reveal the nuanced state of play that exceeds established curriculum ideals of learning. In adult-centred discourses that aim to define and categorize learning according to established curriculum ideals, the educator's task becomes a search for evidence of learning that risks becoming an ontological trap that binds teachers to serve interests and priorities of the state. Taking a very different position herself, the author portrays play as inherently free from constraints and ambivalent toward authority, audience, and intervention, and she asserts that ECEC should allow space for this kind of play.

Table 6. Represented disciplines and number of articles affiliated with institutions in category 4: Social relations (cf. Appendix 2).



Summary category 4

The studies in category 4 are conducted at UiA, HVL, DMMH, USN and UiS and address play in relation to broader developmental constructs. DMMH examines children`s need for empathy and refugee children`s sense of coherence, whereas HVL explores movement play and the multifaceted nature of play beyond the formal curriculum. UiS focuses on belonging and identity construction. USN addresses the importance of care, whereas UiA explores `now moments` and flow experiences in play. The articles draw from the disciplines of pedagogy, sports science, pedagogical psychology, religious studies and drama.

Discussion

Our views on childhood, society, and play shape our fundamental beliefs about what the upbringing of children entails (Lillemyr, 2009). In a praxeological perspective, these views are social, cultural and historical constructs (Bourdieu, 1990). Yet, across cultures, play is considered an activity that children are naturally inclined to engage in and enjoy (Gaskins et al., 2007).

Globally, play is increasingly recognized as central to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Heyi, 2020), a perspective echoed in our review. At the same time, a deeper philosophical engagement with the nature of play is practically absent in the reviewed research, reflected in the reliance on observational methods and a focus on contextual factors that support free play mainly as a tool for developmental learning.

Observation as the predominant data source

A predominant part of the articles in our review (25/37) uses various kinds of observation to gather data. As shown by Guldbrandsen et al. (2025), this is characteristic for current Scandinavian ECEC at large. We note that the observation typically takes place within a very limited space of time. In a considerable part of the articles in category 1 `Physical environment`, children were filmed/observed in two-minute sequences (e.g. Sandseter et al., 2020; Sandseter et al., 2020; Sando et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2022; Kleppe et al., 2020). These are multiple, yet short empirical observations of children in play. Therefore, while frequent, these snapshots may fail to capture the fluid, evolving nature of play (Whitebread et al., 2017), instead offering glimpses of children`s play experiences. Similarly, in category 2 `Play materials`, children were observed over a somewhat longer period - three days, from morning to lunch - to highlight how various practices may affect children's play opportunities (Nilsen et al., 2022). In the use of brief observation of children`s play in different environments and of the mere availability and facilitation of play materials, it may

appear as though the research focuses on context (environments and objects) and loses sight of what play itself is. At least there are no discussions of the nature or purpose of play in the reviewed articles.

In these articles, observation appears to be understood as a mode of knowing, as observation is treated not merely as a neutral method but as a socially and materially situated practice. We argue that the researchers' approaches seem to reveal dispositions shaped by training, professional socialization and institutional expectations (Bourdieu, 1990). It appears that these dispositions influence what is considered 'relevant', 'objective', or 'actionable' in observational practice, and that observation as a *modus operandi* is embedded in practice-complexes, shared cultural routines that define what it means to observe 'properly' (Reckwitz, 2002). This includes epistemic orientation, embodied skills, emotional attunement and material arrangements that make certain phenomena visible while obscuring others. Although our material is limited and not sufficient for a field analysis, we suggest that participants enact the epistemology of observation differently depending on their positions in the institutional field (cf. Appendix 2).

Conditions for free play as a means of supporting developmental learning

As demonstrated, the reviewed articles commonly conceptualize play as a tool for developmental learning. The authors argue that such learning can be facilitated by creating supportive ECEC environments, providing appropriate materials, and structuring learning and social interactions. In this perspective, play serves purposes beyond mere enjoyment. These purposes may be broad, such as enhancing children's cognitive, emotional, and motor development, or more specific, like enhancing mathematical skills, cultivating empathy, or fostering a sense of belonging. Play is thus framed as a means to achieving developmental goals, rather than simply an activity children engage in to amuse themselves. For instance, studies in category 1 explore how supportive environments can enhance children's opportunities for play. Several articles (e.g. Sandseter et al., 2020; Sandseter et al., 2021) argue that opportunities for free play have declined over recent decades, as children's lives have become more regulated and controlled. In response, some studies highlight the concept of 'risky play' to encourage freer and more autonomous play. While this research appears to advocate for children's need for free play, the rationale provided is largely developmental, emphasising physical benefits such as improved motor skills (Sandseter et al., 2021; Sandseter et al., 2020).

The emphasis on the measurable outcomes of risky play indicates an underlying utilitarian logic, where play is legitimized primarily through its instrumental value for developmental or educational goals. Accordingly, the conditions that support developmental learning through free play emerge as a recurring theme in this research. However, despite strong claims about the benefits of play regarding physical, social, and cognitive development, the empirical evidence supporting these claims is regarded limited or weak (Martin & Caro 1985; Whitebread et al., 2017).

A similar utilitarian logic is evident in the studies in Category 2. Here, deep-level learning is described as learning that goes beyond surface understanding, engaging children through appropriately challenging experiences that build upon their existing skills and knowledge (Sando et al., 2023). Such learning is seen as foundational for future educational success. Category 3 offers a parallel example in the field of mathematics. Research by Reikerås (2020) and Fosse et al. (2023), demonstrates a link between play and early mathematical development. Reikerås (2020) found a strong correlation between toddlers' play abilities and their mathematical skills, while Fosse et al. (2023) show that play in kindergarten can foster both problem-solving and problem-posing, suggesting that mathematical thinking can emerge naturally through playful exploration.

The analysis illustrates how a utilitarian logic permeates participants' reasoning. Across the data set, the researchers justify their work by appealing to efficiency, measurable outcomes, or institutional demands, which may indicate the force of the field's doxa (Bourdieu, 1998). The utilitarian orientation becomes a dominant discursive resource, shaping participants' positionings as rational, responsible and aligned with institutional priorities. This force can furthermore be understood through Reckwitz's (2017) notion of cultural repertoires. Mol (1999) adds an ontological dimension to this: utilitarianism performs certain versions of the child and the practice as more real or institutionally valid than others. For example, when outcomes are prioritized over processes, utilitarian enactments overshadow alternative multiplicities, such as relational, aesthetic or ethical enactments. This contributes to an institutional narrowing of what counts as legitimate practice. Consequently, in the specific context of current ECEC research, the utilitarian repertoire may be seen to privilege practices that appear productive, predictable or easily documented. This repertoire, or positioning, encourages a mode of reasoning in which value is tied to use, to what actions achieve rather than what they mean or enable.

Emphasis on learning (of measurable skills) may moreover be a result of education policies. First, there is the fact that kindergartens, which were until 2006 the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, now are part of the education system (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017; Nilsen, 2021), which may promote a stronger emphasis on (formal and measurable) learning. Second, while the national framework for kindergartens emphasises the importance of play, it also contains a rather comprehensive chapter called 'Learning areas', with sub chapters that ECEC academics may interpret to indicate a sharpened focus on measurable and academic skills. Examples of this are 'Communication, language and text', 'Nature, environment and technology' and 'Quantities, spaces and shapes' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), although kindergarten teachers may understand the framework differently (Eide et al., 2023, cf. also Petersen, 2000). Third, it is reasonable to assume that researchers choose research topics that tally with their disciplinary knowledge and skills, as well as with their position within academia as kindergarten teacher educators and researchers. We expand on this point in the section 'Praxeological considerations' below.

A fourth reason why this topic is so popular may be that the measurable is easier to research than, say, what play means to children phenomenologically, and this may also be a reason why conditions for play to support developmental learning is such a dominating category. Although we do not have data to confirm this presumption, we note that our findings agree with those of Guldbrandsen et al., and so, seem to be representative for current ECER research in Scandinavia. The most popular topics in the 546 articles they reviewed are 'teaching and learning' (40%), 'pedagogical practices' (28%) and 'methodology' (pedagogical/didactic method of work) (24%) (Guldbrandsen et al. 2025, pp. 29-30).

Marginalisation of non-utilitarian aspects of play

A consequence of the position the measurable aims of play possesses, is that other aspects of play become marginalised. For example, none of the studies ask what it is that drives children to play, neither from a philosophical nor from a social, cultural or historical perspective. Also, the question of what intrinsic value play has or may have becomes marginalized within the current discursive and institutional landscape. Although authors frequently express an appreciation of play, yet utilitarian, policy-driven and efficiency-oriented discourses seem to dominate and act as structuring structures (Bourdieu, 2000), conditioning what agents within the field perceive as feasible or legitimate. These structuring structures appear to overshadow the interest in play's inherent value. In Bourdieu's

(1977; 1992) terms, the symbolic capital, or value, of play appears diminished within the field, leading actors to position play defensively or justify it in instrumental terms (e.g., its contribution to measurable learning outcomes). In Reckwitz' (2002) terminology, the cultural repertoire of play, characterized by open-endedness, joy, unpredictability and intrinsic motivation, conflicts with dominant practice regimes that value control, measurability and efficiency. Since representing, not to speak of measuring, free, open play is more difficult than utilitarian enactments, the practice of play suffers from a misalignment with institutionalized cultural logics, which may result in a devaluation or marginalization of the intrinsic value of play.

Broadly speaking, play is enacted differently across settings, sometimes as a developmental tool, sometimes as free exploration, sometimes as social negotiation. Yet only some of these enactments (Mol, 1999) are institutionally recognized. For instance, standardized documentation tools may enact a version of the child that fits bureaucratic templates, while sidelining richer or more complex enactments emerging in everyday interactions. The child-at-play enacted through spontaneous interaction may be considered less policy-relevant, less documentable than the child performing observable competencies. Consequently, researchers may struggle to protect play's intrinsic value against measurability and utilitarian pressures, resulting in an ontological marginalization of play as an intrinsically valuable activity.

Praxeological considerations

From a praxeological perspective, we theorize that understanding is not only a theoretical or individual choice, but also a result of specific research practices: categorizations, observational designs, policy requirements, and educational traditions. This is important both for knowledge production and for professional practices, which in this context primarily means the practices that take place in academia. As noted, ECEC research and education is a multidisciplinary academic field, consisting of agents with different disciplinary backgrounds, each with its own symbolic capital, manifest in their knowledge base and their preferred research topics, research methods and epistemological approaches (cf. Bourdieu, 1982). This may be one of the reasons why two disciplines dominate in our review; sports science and pedagogy. In sports science, physical activity is an ideal and an aim. We speculate that this ideal is translated as 'play' for sports scientists in kindergarten teacher education. This hypothesis agrees with the fact that the articles by sports scientists tend to be about 'risky play', 'nature play', and generally physically active play, rather than, say, role play. As for pedagogy, the scope is broader, comprising, for example, articles on free play and imaginative play, in addition to several on physically active play. It seems unsurprising that this discipline is among the most conspicuous in our review; play has been a core topic in ECEC oriented pedagogy since the days of Fröbel and Owen (Britannica Editors, 2026), and the conviction that it is essential for children to play may be regarded part of pedagogy's doxa (Bourdieu, 1977).

We were more surprised to discover that while theoretical perspectives vary, almost 2/3 of the articles (22/37) do not contain any specification at all of their epistemological or theoretical approaches. We understand Guldbrandsen et al. (2025, p. 29) to have found the same when they claim that since 2006, research in reports like the one they have compiled have been dominated by what they term 'descriptive studies', regardless of topical focus. In 2023, 76% of the included studies were descriptive, while 16% were 'exploration of relationships', 5% explored 'what works', and 4% were mapping research (literature reviews) (Guldbrandsen et al., 2025, p. 29). This is so, even if the research is predominantly qualitative. From a praxeological perspective, we find it intriguing that the researchers of these studies do not account for or reflect upon their position, experiences, values, approach or presumptions, all generally considered necessary to secure transparency in qualitative

research and to enable critical and fair discussion of the research (cf. Bergsland, 2021; Callewaert, 2000, p. 137). We cannot fully explain why this seems to be different in the research we have reviewed and in current Scandinavian ECEC research in general, yet we theorise that proximity to practice appears to be a key ideal in kindergarten research, in that the research is legitimised through its relevance to the professional field and its application in kindergarten practice (Guldbrandsen et al., 2025). Part of the descriptive studies may possibly be read as aiming at preserving the proximity to kindergarten practices, while the researchers, who are in most cases also kindergarten teacher educators, are simultaneously obliging the formal and informal requirements of academia, their workplace. For example, it is a formal demand that kindergarten teacher education be research based (Ministry of Education and Research, 2012). To meet this requirement, someone must produce research on which the education can be based. At the same time, academia itself has changed over the last couple of decades. These days, it is hard to get a (permanent) position or to be promoted without a PhD and a considerable publication list. In other words, both kindergarten teacher education and teaching there have become academicized. Yet proximity to the kindergarten field seems to still be a prevailing ideal, leaving ECEC researchers in an in between position, caught between the ideals, the logic and the practices of academia and those of practical kindergarten life (cf. Callewaert, 2004; Petersen, 2000). We wonder if the dominance of descriptive studies may be a result of this in between position; the studies aim to mirror daily kindergarten life, yet the depictions are constructed as research and so, they also comply with academic demands.

From this perspective, the dominance of descriptive studies may also be understood as a form of knowledge production oriented towards the field itself. Such knowledge appears less concerned with theoretical or epistemological clarification, and more with sustaining and legitimising existing practices. This resonates with what could be termed administrative or managerial knowledge, situated between science and practice. In this sense, the studies may resemble forms of practical theory and analyses of practices (e.g. Durkheim, 1956), and analyses of how practices as well as so called knowledge production contribute to the reproduction within social fields (Bourdieu, 1990b). As Frankfurt (2005) suggests, when distinctions between different types of knowledge claims are not clearly maintained, there is a risk that analytically grounded insights and more normative accounts become difficult to distinguish. There may be an element of this in the research we have reviewed.

Conclusion

Taken together, the studies in Categories 1, 2 and 3 reflect a body of interdisciplinary research that predominantly frames play as a vehicle for learning, rather than recognizing it as an intrinsically valuable activity. While it is undisputable that play serves important developmental functions (Lillemyr, 2009), and scholars such as Vygotsky have convincingly argued for its cognitive and developmental significance (Nicolopoulou, 2010), several scholars find it concerning if this instrumental framing comes to overshadow the view of play as inherently meaningful and uniquely valuable to children; a state of mind and a way of being (Fortune, 2022; Lillemyr, 2009). For children play is moreover a mode of expression; a 'language' (Fortune, 2022) that arises from within, carries joy and exists independently of external goals or circumstance.

In Category 4, researchers emphasize play as a means of safeguarding core values such as care and belonging (Aslanian & Moxnes, 2020; Eidsvåg & Rosell, 2021). These values, central to children's well-being, are also highlighted in the Norwegian Framework Plan, which states that the core values of kindergartens" shall be promulgated, practised and manifest in every aspect of a kindergarten's

pedagogical practices” (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 7). The framework plan further states that ‘the inherent value of play shall be acknowledged’ (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 20). While the articles in Category 4 affirm the intrinsic value of play, they at the same time tend to focus on how play supports core values and needs, rather than exploring play as ‘good’ in the sense describe by Bains (1976), that is as an activity is inherently ‘good’ and not merely ‘good for you’.

The focus in the articles in category 4 tends to be on the ways play can contribute to safeguarding core values and needs, and none of them display a view like that of Bains. However, three articles do touch on the essence of play, by investigating the emergence of now-moments, the conditions that foster flow experiences, and forms of play defined by freedom (Pedersen & Moe, 2020; Nordbø, 2022; White, 2020). Still, the overall tendency in this category, too, is to frame play as a vehicle to achieve something outside the activity itself.

In line with Whitley (2000), the research literature can be understood as a form of ontological practice that not only describes play but produces certain forms of play as legitimate. Although the logic and practice of kindergartens is different from that of ECEC understandings in academia, there is still a dynamic relationship between the two forms of practices and educational subfields (Petersen, 2000). Therefore, when certain research understandings become legitimate and are continued in kindergarten teacher education, they become stabilised forms of practice that may have direct consequences for children's everyday lives.

Norwegian ECEC research is a highly diverse field, consisting of representatives from a wide range of disciplines, spanning from mathematics to psychology, and from pedagogy to sports science, each with their own traditions and perspectives. All these positions are legitimate and may bring valuable insights about the nature of play and children’s play in ECEC, yet the research’s predominant focus on play across disciplines and tradition is that play appears to serve as a means to promote developmental learning, often of measurable skills, through contextual and institutional factors. This leaves an impression of a research field that to a high degree takes a utilitarian view on play, while for example discussions of the intrinsic value of play is paid little attention. One may wonder whether research’s focus on context and developmental learning indicates that research included in the review is in some ways adapted to or biased by ECEC policies that emphasise play as a means to achieve certain external aims, such as learning certain skills. While not desirable, this would be understandable, as long as the sources of the policies to some degree also fund research. Avoiding biases in research is a joint responsibility of policymakers and researchers.

Play seems to be increasingly recognized as a vehicle for learning and development (categories 1-3 in our review). This shift tends to obscure the fundamental value of play, understood as an intrinsically motivated activity with meaning and purpose independent of external educational objectives. More varied research methods might render it easier for researchers to pick up elements such as the meaning children themselves ascribe to their play, and to philosophically reflect on play as an existential phenomenon. In any case, we regard it imperative that researchers engage in a critical reflection on the premises of their research, as well as on the extent to which disciplinary traditions and underlying values may exert influence over its trajectory.

A praxeological scrutinizing shows that research's choice of method, perspective and concepts helps to shape the ontological status of play in ECEC. If the intrinsic value of play is to be safeguarded, a greater epistemological and practice-theoretical diversity is needed that allows for more ways of

understanding and exploring play. In conclusion, further inquiry and philosophical reflection into the ontological nature of play itself is desirable, as this would help maintain a nuanced understanding of play both within research and in educational practices as enacted in professional ECEC settings.

While the trends in Guldbrandsen et al. (2025) correspond to the findings in our scoping review, there are nevertheless a couple of differences between the two studies. Firstly, while the report of Guldbrandsen et al. is quantitative and descriptive, our scoping review is a qualitative and explicitly situated study that explores the data in a praxeological perspective. This allows us to focus on a specific topic; play, and to scrutinize it more closely than is the case in Guldbrandsen et al.'s report. Secondly, our situatedness and our praxeological approach reveal certain questions that Guldbrandsen et al. refrain from asking. We have suggested some answers but are aware that we do not have sufficient data to offer satisfactory explanations in this article. Therefore, we recommend further research, for example to find out why qualitative, descriptive research is so dominating in ECEC research, or why ECEC research seems to frame play predominantly in utilitarian terms.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the number of studies included in the review is not high (37), much lower than the studies included in the report from Guldbrandsen et al. (2025), which maps approximately the same time span. At the same time, the current study is thorough in that we manually went through all research for the period 2021-2023 in academic milieus associated with kindergarten education, and in that we were open to various sources, such as theses, monographs and book chapters, in addition to peer reviewed articles, which was the focus of Guldbrandsen et al.'s report. We can therefore with some confidence claim that we have been able to map current research on play in ECEC in this period in some detail. Yet also the inclusion criterion regarding institutional and research affiliation may be regarded as a limitation because this excludes studies on play from research environments that are not affiliated with kindergarten education. As examples, we mention some publications from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) that are topically relevant but not included in the scoping review because this university does not offer kindergarten teacher education: Steinsholt (2019a). 'Barns rett til lek. Et blikk på Barnekonvensjonens artikkel 31' [Children's right to play. A look at Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child], Steinsholt (2019b), 'En oase av lykke. Eugen Fink og menneskets taktfulle lek' [An oasis of happiness. Eugen Fink and man's tactful play], and Øksnes & Sundsdal (2018) Lekelyst i barnehagen: Å fremme lekens egenverdi [Playfulness in kindergarten: promoting the inherent value of play]. Finally, we mention that there is a risk that the data are somewhat biased because a relatively large percentage was conducted by a handful of authors. We note that the ratios regarding methodology as well as choice of topic are still similar to those reported by Guldbrandsen et al. (2025).

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Author statements

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in this study.

The authors also declare that they have both contributed substantially at all stages of the study, including development of the concept and research question, analysis, writing of the first draft and revision of the manuscript. The first author collected the data.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Overview over educational institutions and research milieus included in the review

Institution	Research milieu
1. University of Tromsø (UiT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Early childhood education research network] • Affiliation with KINDknow- Kindergarten knowledge centre for systemic research on diversity and sustainable futures, HVL
2. University of Nordland (Nord)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Justice and Diversity in Education
3. Queen Maud University College (DMMH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non specified
4. Volda University College (Volda)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early literacy in kindergarten and school • Sustainability education
5. Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday life in preschool education (KiB) • KINDKnow-Kindergarten knowledge centre for systemic research on diversity and sustainable futures; research area 1: Framing early childhood education-Bildung- cultural historical and future scenario practices • Kindergarten as formative educational arena- children, students and teacher activity
6. University of Stavanger (UiS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centre for learning environment • FILIORUM, Centre for Research in Early Childhood education and Care
7. Østfold University College (HiØ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special education • Mentorship within education and professions
8. Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and learning environment in early years ECEC to primary school (SAMBA) • Childlife • Sustainability, nature, health, and movement
9. University of South-Eastern Norway (USN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Centre for Early Childhood Research, Development, and Innovation – SEBUTI] • Minor issues in early childhood education and care • [Teaching Quality in Early Childhood Teacher Education] • [Holistic Learning in Early Childhood Education]
10. University of Agder (UiA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art and young people

11. University of Inland Norway (HINN)
- Childhood Pedagogy
 - [Children and young people`s upbringing and socialization]

Appendix 2

Overview of the reviewed articles, including researchers' institutional affiliation, disciplinary anchoring, and theoretical perspectives.

CATEGORY 1. Physical environment

Article	Author(s), (Year), Title	Research position(s), Discipline	Theoretical perspective	Academic affiliation (first author)
1	Sandseter, Storli & Sando (2020). The dynamic relationship between outdoor environments and children's play	Psychology, sports science and science of education	None	DMMH
2	Sandseter, Storli & Sando (2021). The relationship between indoor environments and children's play – confined spaces and materials	Psychology, sports science and science of education	None	DMMH
3	Øvreås, Andersen, Moser & Borch-Jenssen (2020). Å styrke fysisk aktiv lek i barnehagen – evaluering av et intervensjonsdesign basert på en høy grad av personaldeltagelse [Strengthening physically active play in kindergarten: Evaluation of an intervention design based on a high degree of staff participation]	Sports science and pedagogy	None	USN
4	Hagen & Skaug (2022). This is where I like to climb. Do you want me to show you? Children's favourite places in the kindergarten outdoor playground	Pedagogy	None	OsloMet
5	Ernst, McAllister, Siklander & Storli (2021). Contributions to Sustainability through Young	Pedagogy, biology and sports science	None	DMMH

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6	Aslanian, Bjercknes & Andresen (2023). Children's holistic learning during self-initiated outdoor play in a Norwegian kindergarten	Pedagogy, natural science, didactics and psychology	Youdell and Lindley's biosocial approach	USN
7	Sando, Kleppe & Sandseter (2021). Risky Play and Children's Well-Being, Involvement and Physical Activity	Pedagogy, sports science and psychology	None	DMMH
8	Obee, Sandseter & Harper (2020). Children's use of environmental features affording risky play in early childhood education and care	Sports science and psychology	Gibson's theory of affordance	DMMH
9	Kleppe, Sando & Sandseter (2020). Innendørs risikofylt lek – et bidrag til spenning og variasjon i barnehagens lekemiljøer [Indoor risky play: Opportunities for excitement and variation in kindergarten play environments]	Pedagogy, science of education and psychology	None	DMMH
10	Obee, Sandseter, Gerlach & Harper (2020). Lessons learned from Norway on Risky play in early childhood education and care (ECEC)	Sports science and psychology	None	DMMH
11	Sandseter, Sando & Kleppe (2021). Associations between Children's Risky Play and ECEC Outdoor Play Spaces and Materials	Psychology, science of education and pedagogy	None	DMMH
12	Storli (2021). Children's Rough-and-Tumble Play in a Supportive Early Childhood Education and Care Environment	Sports science	None	DMMH
13	Sandseter, Kleppe & Sando (2020). The Prevalence of Risky Play in Young Children's Indoor and Outdoor Free Play	Psychology, pedagogy and science of education	None	DMMH
14	Siklander, Ernst & Storli (2020).	Pedagogy, biology and sports science	None	DMMH

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15	Sandseter, Kleppe & Kennair (2022). Risky play in children’s emotion regulation, social functioning, and physical health: an evolutionary approach	Psychology and pedagogy	None	DMMH
16	Liu & Birkeland (2022). Perceptions of risky play among kindergarten teachers in Norway and China	Pedagogy	The risk thermosta t model by John Adams	HVL
17	Storli, Tobiassen & Sandseter (2022). Nonplay in Norwegian Early childhood Education and Care Institutions	Sports science and psychology	None	DMMH

CATEGORY 2. Play materials

Article	Author(s), (Year), Title	Research position(s), Discipline	Theoretical perspective	Academic affiliation (first author)
18	Storli, Sandseter & Sando (2020). Children’s Involvement in Free Play and the Use of Play Materials in the Outdoor Early Childhood Education and Care Environment	Sports science, psychology and science of education	None	DMMH
19	Nilsen, Bjørnstad & Hannås (2022). Utvalg og tilgjengelighet av lekemateriell og barns lekemuligheter i det fysiske innemiljøet i barnehagen barnehagen [Selection and availability of play materials and children’s play opportunities in the physical indoor environment of the kindergarten]	Science of professions, pedagogy and sociology	Gibson’s theory of affordances	UiN
20	Pedersen (2020). Barn møter mobilt material i bevegelsesleik [Children	Pedagogy	Phenomenology	HVL

	encounter mobile materials in movement play]			
21	Nilsen (2021). Pedagogical intentions or practical considerations when facilitating children`s play Teachers` beliefs about the availability of play materials in the indoor ECEC environment	Pedagogy	None	UiS
22	Kyrkjebø (2022). Hva så med den frie lekens vilkår? Et kritisk blikk på digitale praksiser i barnehagen [What about the conditions for free play? A critical look at digital practices in kindergarten]	Pedagogy	None	HVL
23	Palaiologou, Kewalramani & Dardanou (2021). Make-believe play with the Internet of Toys: a case for multimodal playscapes	Psychology, social science and pedagogy	Piaget and Vygotsky	UiT
24	Sando, Sandseter & Brussoni (2023). The role of play and objects in Children`s Deep level learning in Early Childhood Education	Science of education, psychology and sports science	Gibson`s theory of affordance	DMMH

CATEGORY 3: Academic skills

Article	Author(s), (Year), Title	Research position(s), Discipline	Theoretical perspective	Academic affiliation (first author)
25	Fosse, Lange & Meaney (2023). Lek med problemer [Play with problems]	Mathematics	None	HVL
26	Reikerås (2020). Relations between play skills and mathematical skills in toddlers	Pedagogy	None	UiS
27	Håberg (2022). Bridging troubled water: Preparing school through play and special activities in kindergarten	Pedagogy	None	Volda

28	Sträng (2020). Max Weber on various types of legitimate dominance for leaders: a longitudinal study of adults`s view of play and learning in preschool	Pedagogy	Max Weber`s organizational theory	HiØ
29	Kangas, Harju-Luukkainen, Brotherus, Gearon & Kuusisto (2022). Outlining play and playful learning in Finland and Brazil: A content analysis of early childhood education policy documents	Pedagogy	None	UiN

CATEGORY 4: Social relations

Article	Author(s), (Year), Title	Research position(s), Discipline	Theoretical perspective	Academic affiliation (first author)
30	Zachrisen (2022). Konstruksjon av identitetsfortellinger i barns sosiale lek [Construction of identity narratives in children`s social play]	Pedagogy	Sociological perspective, theoretical position not stated	UiS
31	Pedersen & Moe (2020). The moment of play and movement: A qualitative study of children`s playful shared movements	Pedagogy and sports science	Phenomenological approach	HVL
32	Aslanian & Moxnes (2020). Making `Cuts` with a Holstein Cow in Early Childhood Education and Care: The Joys of Representation	Pedagogy	Barad`s relational ontology and Chaudhuri`s concepts of zoosis	USN
33	Nergaard (2020). `I want to join the play`. Young children`s wants and needs of empathy when experiencing peer rejections in ECEC	Pedagogical psychology	Phenomenological hermeneutical approach	DMMH

34	Eidsvåg & Rosell (2021). The power of belonging: Interactions and Values in Children`s Group Play in Early Childhood Programs	Religious studies and pedagogy	Lifeworld hermeneutical approach	UiS
35	Heldal (2021). Perspectives on Children`s Play in a Refugee Camp	Pedagogy	Salutogenic approach	DMMH
36	Nordbø (2022). Langvarig, dyp og kompleks dramatisk lek i barnehagen – er det mulig? [Long-lasting, deep and complex dramatic play in kindergarten – is it possible? A scientific essay]	Drama	Csikszentmihalyi`s concept of flow and Gadamer`s philosophical considerations about the nature of play	UiA
37	White (2020). Visual surplus of seeing play in ECE: Beyond the ontologic trap?	Pedagogy	Bakhtin`s dialogism	HVL