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PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' SUPPORT FOR THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN'S PLAY

Abstract: This paper is grounded in socio-cultural theory as a theoretical approach to understanding children's play, while teachers' ways of supporting play are explored from the perspective of the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, the current national preschool curriculum in Serbia. The aim of the study was to examine the ways in which practitioners³ understand their role in supporting the co-construction of open-ended, extended, and guided play. The research was designed within an interpretative methodological framework, combining quantitative and qualitative procedures. The sample consisted of 103 preschool teachers and nurse-teachers from Belgrade and Novi Sad. The findings indicate that practitioners highly evaluate their own support for children's play, while open-ended and extended play are most frequently supported through the provision of materials and spatial conditions for play. Forms of support involving more direct participation of adults as co-players and co-constructors are less represented. Guided play is most commonly supported through dialogue with children about play. As the main difficulties in supporting the co-construction of children's play, participants identified the lack of unstructured and semi-structured materials that support play construction, as well as the number of children in groups exceeding the prescribed standards. According to the participants, professional development focused on supporting children's play, along with systemic support in equipping preschool spaces with inspiring play materials, represent the main ways of overcoming the previously identified challenges.


Keywords: children's play; play support; socio-cultural theory; preschool teacher's perspective; early childhood education and care.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary socio-cultural context, in which increasing attention is being devoted within both academic and professional communities to the significance of the preschool period for successful functioning in later life, support for children's play represents one of the fundamental issues in the overall support of children's development and learning.

The research presented in this paper is aimed at examining practitioners' perspectives on the significance of and ways of supporting children's play within the real preschool curriculum. The study is grounded in the observed tension between the curriculum understanding of play as a space for the co-construction of meaning and the possibility that, in everyday practice, support for play is

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³ The term „practitioners“ refers to all research participants, including preschool teachers and nurse-teachers.

predominantly understood as the provision of material, spatial, and organizational conditions. Although these conditions are important for the development of play, from the perspective of the socio-cultural approach they do not exhaust the role of adults in play. Therefore, it is important to examine the extent to which practitioners recognize their own role as direct participation in the construction, extension, and transformation of children's play. The aim of the study is to examine how preschool teachers and nurse-teachers understand and perceive their role in supporting the co-construction of open-ended, extended, and guided play, with particular emphasis on the relationship between support provided through the organization of conditions for play and support that involves more direct adult participation in the co-construction of play.

Before turning to the research findings, we would like to emphasize that the question of researching teachers' support for the co-construction of children's play, as well as any issue addressed within pedagogical research, is grounded in particular ontological and epistemological assumptions held by the researchers themselves. From our perspective, making explicit the assumptions on which the research is based contributes to a deeper understanding not only of the findings themselves, but also of the scope and limitations of the study as a whole. Therefore, the following sections present the theoretical and methodological framework that informed the design of this research.

1.1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Children's play represents one of the central topics in pedagogical research. The reasons for this may be found both in the understanding of the significance of play for children's development and learning and in viewing play as one of the fundamental expressions of children's ways of relating to the world. Although play constitutes one of the core concepts through which processes of children's development and learning are understood across different theoretical frameworks, there is still no single definition of play, nor a unified understanding of how preschool teachers support the co-construction of children's play within the real preschool curriculum.

This study is grounded in the understanding of play as a „capacity of flexibility in action“ (Marjanović, 1979, p. 9), a generative transformation of reality and an act of imagining experience (Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja – Godine uzleta, 2018). The capacity of flexibility represents a unique human potential, since only children (in comparison to all other living beings) are capable, within play, of changing the purpose of the objects they use, as well as of transforming patterns of adult behavior rather than merely reproducing them through imitation (Marjanović, 1979). Since children's play does not represent an activity in itself, but rather a way in which children approach activity, within such an understanding of play the capacity of flexibility represents a „generative relationship of the child toward the self and the world“ (Krnjaja, 2012, p. 254), enabling children to transform the world in play according to their own imagination while simultaneously transforming themselves through that process (Lazarević, 2024).

The presented understanding of children's play is grounded in the socio-cultural theoretical approach to children's learning and development, according to which children's development and learning are processes constructed through interaction with others (Vigotski, 1977), deeply embedded within the socio-cultural context and shaped by that same context (Edwards, 2004; Krnjaja, 2011). In this regard, research aimed at examining the context in which practitioners support the co-construction of children's play in preschool settings may provide important insights into the contribution of adults (in this study, preschool teachers and nurse-teachers) to the manifestation and further development of the capacity of flexibility in play.

Similarly to various theoretical approaches to children's development and learning, play also occupies a central place within preschool curriculum frameworks and is emphasized as one of the fundamental activities in preschool settings. Historically, from the emergence of the first

kindergartens founded by Friedrich Fröbel, through Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio approach to the present day, the question of play has remained unavoidable in defining the foundations of preschool education. However, it is important to emphasize that, just as different theoretical and pedagogical approaches offer different understandings of children's development and learning, preschool curriculum frameworks also differ in how they conceptualize the place of play within the real preschool curriculum, as well as the role of preschool teachers in supporting children's play.

At the same time, growing global pressures related to the standardization of educational processes and the monitoring and assessment of children's development and learning, together with attempts to transfer such forms of assessment from school contexts to early childhood education, have contributed to diminishing and even neglecting the value of play as a capacity of flexibility in action within preschool curricula. Consequently, many contemporary preschool programs increasingly promote academically oriented activities (Wisneski & Reifel, 2012), instead of positioning play as the central element of the preschool curriculum.

The analysis of the place and significance of play in different preschool curriculum frameworks exceeds the scope of this paper. Therefore, in further consideration of this topic, the focus is placed on the role and significance of play within the *Years of Ascent* Preschool Curriculum Framework (Osnove programa, 2018), as the current curriculum conception in Serbia. The *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework is grounded in socio-cultural theory, the sociology of childhood, and poststructuralism, while also emphasizing the traditional grounding of preschool education in Serbia in "humanistic values, an integrated approach to care, education and upbringing, respect for children's age-specific characteristics, and the leading role of play in children's learning and development" (Osnove programa, 2018, p. 4). The emphasis placed on the significance of play in this document „does not remain at a merely declarative level; rather, the construction of possibilities for its cultivation can be recognized throughout the entire structure of the document“ (Mitranić, 2022, p. 50). Across all segments of the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, a consistent understanding of the relationship between theoretical-value postulates and the real preschool curriculum can be identified, while the understanding of play as a „capacity of flexibility in action“ (Marjanović, 1979) represents a foundation for all actors within the preschool education system in reflecting on possible directions for developing the real preschool curriculum.

Within this document, play is defined as a form of children's activity that represents „freely chosen, self-regulated, and intrinsically motivated activity through which the child „feels good“, activates all of their potentials, and transcends their own boundaries“ (Osnove programa, 2018, p. 23). Furthermore, the document connects this understanding of play, on the one hand - with its theoretical-value foundations and, on the other hand - with the significance of play from the child's perspective, as an opportunity for identity and relationship building, exploration and (re)construction of meaning, symbol creation, enjoyment, and joyfulness (Osnove programa, 2018).

As previously emphasized, the theoretical framework of our study is grounded in the socio-cultural approach to understanding play, within which Lev Vygotsky highlighted the importance of the adult's role (primarily parents and preschool teachers) in supporting the co-construction of children's play and shaping children's experiences in play (Singer, 2013). Contemporary research within this approach further emphasizes the role of the adult as an active participant and co-constructor in play, who, through joint participation with children, contributes to the development of more complex forms of play and meaning-making (Fleer, 2017). Within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, ways of supporting the co-construction of children's play are conceptualized through support for open-ended, extended, and guided play (Osnove programa, 2018, pp. 23–24). Support for open-ended play primarily refers to the creation of an inspiring environment for play through the provision of materials, space, time, and relationships that enable children's autonomous exploration and meaning-making. Support for extended play involves adult participation aimed at extending the course of play through dialogue, joint exploration, and the

introduction of new ideas and materials, while support for guided play refers to situations in which adults more actively guide and organize play while remaining responsive to children's interests and initiatives. The different ways in which preschool teachers support open-ended, extended, and guided play constitute the basis of our investigation into practitioners' perspectives on the significance of supporting children's play, and they are presented in detail within the research findings as an integral part of the themes concerning the frequency of different forms of practitioners' support for the co-construction of children's play.

In order to further ground the understanding of the adult's role in supporting the co-construction of children's play, it is important to consider findings from contemporary studies addressing this topic in different practice contexts. The case study conducted by Westerberg and Vandermaas-Peeler (2021) aimed to examine how children develop inquiry processes through play. The study analyzed the role of preschool teachers, peers, and materials in supporting children's engagement in exploring different questions and phenomena. The findings indicate that more complex levels of child-led inquiry are possible in situations where preschool teachers select materials that stimulate curiosity and respond to children's interests, while simultaneously participating in play as co-researchers (Westerberg & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021, p. 15). Similar insights are provided by studies focused on adults' experiences regarding children's engagement with play materials (Simoncini & Lasen, 2021). By examining the process of creating „pop-up playgrounds“, the authors demonstrate that adults, while organizing and observing children's play, reconsider their own understanding of play, its significance for children's development and learning, as well as the role of semi-structured materials and their own role in supporting open-ended play. A key finding of this study is that adults' active participation in shaping the physical environment for play significantly contributes to their professional development.

The findings of the aforementioned studies indicate that adults' support for the co-construction of children's play goes beyond the provision of material conditions and includes adults' active participation in play, as well as reflective consideration of their own practice. Nevertheless, studies conducted in the local context indicate that preschool teachers most frequently support children's play through the provision of materials and the organization of space, while their active participation in play as co-players is less represented (Lazarević, 2024). Research has also shown that different play situations may render visible imbalances in power relations between children and adults in preschool settings (Lazarević, 2023). It is precisely this discrepancy between theoretical assumptions and findings from practice that represents an important starting point for the present study within the context of early childhood education and care in Serbia.

Starting from the presented theoretical framework and the understanding of play within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, the question of how practitioners understand and perceive their own role in supporting the co-construction of children's play in everyday practice emerges as particularly significant. Although contemporary research and the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework emphasize the importance of adults' active and co-constructive participation in the joint construction and extension of play, findings from previous studies indicate that support for play in practice is still often predominantly realized through the provision of material and spatial conditions for play. It is precisely this possible discrepancy between theoretical-curricular assumptions and the ways in which practitioners understand and perceive support for play that represents the central point of departure for this study and raises the question of the implicit assumptions shaping practitioners' approaches to supporting children's play in everyday practice.

The presented theoretical framework and the conceptualization of play support within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework served as the basis for the construction of the research instrument and the definition of analytical categories related to different forms of practitioners' support in open-ended, extended, and guided play, such as the provision of materials and organization of

space for play, dialogue with children, play documentation, and adults' participation in play as co-players.

Methodological Framework of the Study

Grounded in a socio-cultural theoretical perspective, the study is situated within an interpretative methodological framework (Creswell, 2007; Vilig, 2013), in which meanings are understood as constructed within the context of participants' professional practice. The combination of quantitative and qualitative procedures made it possible to examine the phenomenon of support for children's play from different perspectives. The quantitative component of the study was aimed at identifying the frequency and distribution of different forms of play support, while the qualitative component enabled a deeper understanding of the ways in which practitioners interpret their own roles and experiences in the co-construction of children's play.

The research sample consisted of 103 practitioners employed in public preschool institutions in Belgrade and Novi Sad. Of this number, 56% of the sample (N = 58) were preschool teachers, while 44% (N = 45) were nurse-teachers. All participants were female. Table 1 presents participants' responses regarding the number of years of professional experience in preschool institutions.

Table 1. Years of Professional Experience of Research Participants in Preschool Institutions

Years of Professional Experience	%	N=103
1-5 years	27%	28
5-15 years	35%	36
More than 15 years	38%	39

The research sample was a convenience sample, since the study included practitioners employed in public preschool institutions who were available and willing to participate in the research. Both professional groups were included in the study because, within the real preschool curriculum, both preschool teachers and nurse-teachers participate in supporting the co-construction of children's play. At the same time, considering the differences in initial education and the age groups of children with whom they most frequently work, it is possible that certain differences in professional experience and role may influence practitioners' perspectives on play support, which was taken into account during the interpretation of particular findings.

For the purposes of the study, a research instrument consisting of two parts was constructed. The first part referred to participants' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, educational level, years of professional experience, and workplace), while the second part included a rating scale as well as closed-ended and open-ended questions. The rating scale was constructed on the basis of the conceptualization of ways of supporting children's play within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework and referred to different forms of support in open-ended, extended, and guided play, whereby each statement in the scale represented one of the ways in which practitioners may support open-ended, extended, or guided play, as defined in the curriculum framework. The closed-ended questions enabled a more structured examination of the frequency of particular practices and dominant forms of play support, while the open-ended questions were aimed at collecting descriptions of practitioners' experiences, their understanding of the significance of play support, the difficulties they encounter, and the support they need in this process.

The data collected through the rating scale and closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistical methods in order to examine the distribution of responses and identify patterns in the frequency of different forms of support for children's play. Although the study employed descriptive quantitative indicators, they were not intended for statistical generalization of the findings, but rather served as a means of mapping dominant patterns in practitioners' self-

assessments. Within the interpretative framework of this study, percentages and rankings were not viewed as a basis for drawing conclusions about the actual frequency of practices at a broader population level, but rather as a starting point for understanding the ways in which practitioners describe their own support for the co-construction of children's play.

The qualitative data collected through open-ended questions were analysed using an open coding procedure conducted through several interconnected phases. In the first phase, participants' responses were repeatedly read and openly coded, whereby dominant ideas and meanings in practitioners' descriptions of experiences related to supporting the co-construction of children's play were identified. In the second phase, related codes were grouped into broader thematic units referring to different ways in which practitioners support children's play in practice, practitioners' perspectives on the adult's role in play, the difficulties they encounter, and the support they require in the process of supporting the co-construction of children's play. The thematic units were formed inductively, based on patterns recurring across participants' responses. In the third phase, the thematic units were interpreted in relation to the socio-cultural theoretical framework of the study and the conceptualization of play support within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, with the aim of examining the meanings practitioners attribute to their own practices and experiences. Finally, the frequency of the occurrence of particular themes in participants' responses was examined in order to identify dominant patterns in practitioners' perspectives on supporting children's play.

The reliability of the qualitative coding procedure was verified through the inclusion of a second independent coder. The level of agreement between coders was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, with values for the open-ended questions ranging from $\kappa = 0.756$ to $\kappa = 0.953$, indicating a high level of agreement between coders and confirming the reliability of the coding procedure.

Such an approach enables the identification of the meanings practitioners attribute to their own practices and contributes to a deeper understanding of the context in which support for children's play is constructed. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings makes it possible to connect the frequency of particular behavioural patterns with the ways in which practitioners interpret and conceptualize those patterns within everyday practice, thereby achieving methodological triangulation and providing a more comprehensive insight into the phenomenon under study.

Research Findings

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Open-Ended Play. Within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, support for open-ended play involves creating an inspiring environment in which children are provided with opportunities to independently explore and construct meanings through play in interaction with materials, space, peers, and adults. The findings indicate that practitioners perceive themselves as supporting open-ended play in ways envisaged by the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, through the provision of materials, space, and time for play, monitoring and understanding the context of play, as well as preserving products and materials created during play. All forms of support for open-ended play were rated with scores of 4 or 5 in more than 85% of responses. The highest percentage of participants (94%) stated that they usually or always support play through the continuous provision of diverse materials accessible to children, as well as through the continuous reorganisation of space in ways that stimulate play.

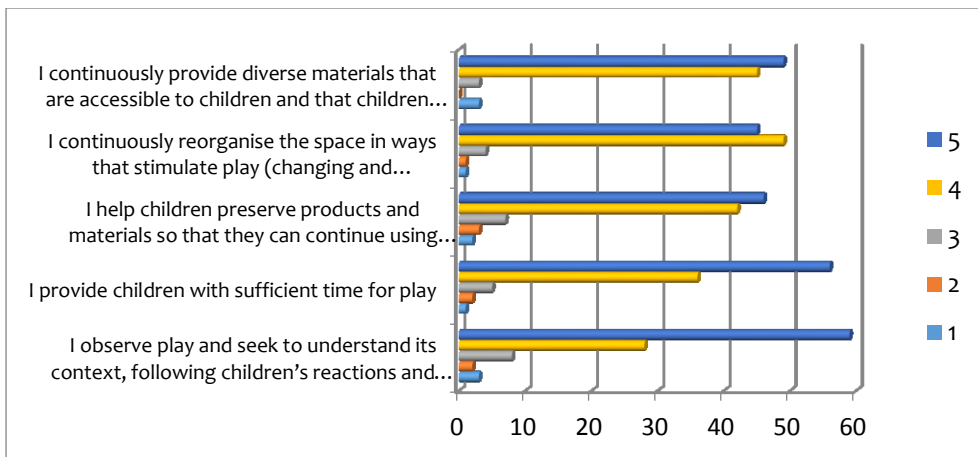


Figure 1. Forms of Practitioners' Support in Open-Ended Play

Research participants ranked, on a scale from 1 to 5, the ways in which they most frequently support open-ended play in practice, where rank 1 indicated the most frequent and rank 5 the least frequent form of support. These data are presented in Figure 2.

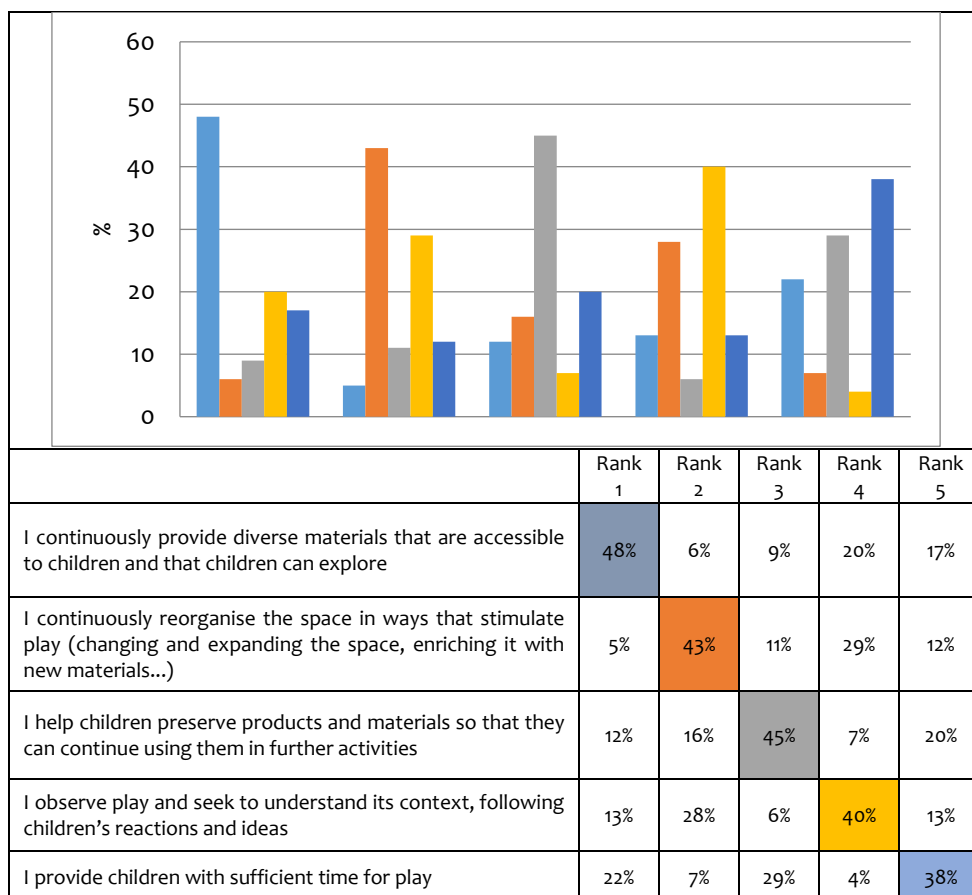


Figure 2. Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Open-Ended Play

Figure 2 presents findings indicating that participants most frequently support open-ended play through the continuous provision of diverse and appropriate materials that are easily accessible to children and available for exploration. Slightly less than half of the participants (48%) ranked this form of support as the most frequent. The second most frequently ranked form of support was the continuous reorganisation of space in ways that stimulate play, which 43% of practitioners assessed as the second most frequent way of supporting open-ended play. The third-ranked form of support referred to preserving products and materials after play for their repeated use, which 45% of practitioners assigned rank 3. The least frequent forms of support identified by participants were observing play and attempting to understand its context (40% of participants ranked this form as fourth in frequency), as well as providing children with sufficient time for play (38% of participants ranked this form as the least frequent).

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Extended Play. Within the Years of Ascent curriculum framework, support for extended play involves adults' participation aimed at extending the course of play through different forms of verbal and non-verbal support, the introduction of new ideas, roles, and materials, joint problem-solving in play, the inclusion of other children in play, documentation of play scenarios, as well as adults' direct participation in play as co-players. The findings presented in Figure 3 indicate that the majority of practitioners report that they usually or always apply each of the aforementioned forms of support when seeking to extend children's play.

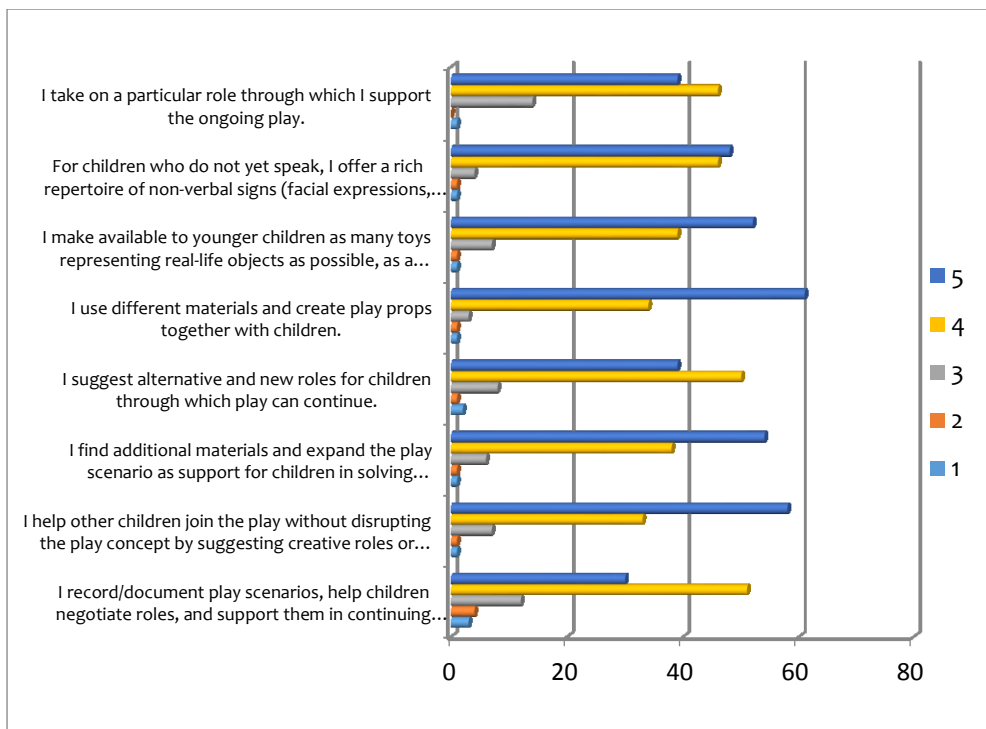


Figure 3. Forms of Practitioners' Support in Extended Play

The highest percentage of participants (95%) assigned ratings of 4 or 5 to the form of support referring to the use of different materials and the creation of play props together with children. The lowest percentage of participants (81%) assigned the same ratings to the form of support referring to the documentation of play scenarios and supporting children in negotiating roles and continuing the play. The rankings of the presented forms of support according to their frequency in participants' practice are presented in Figure 4.

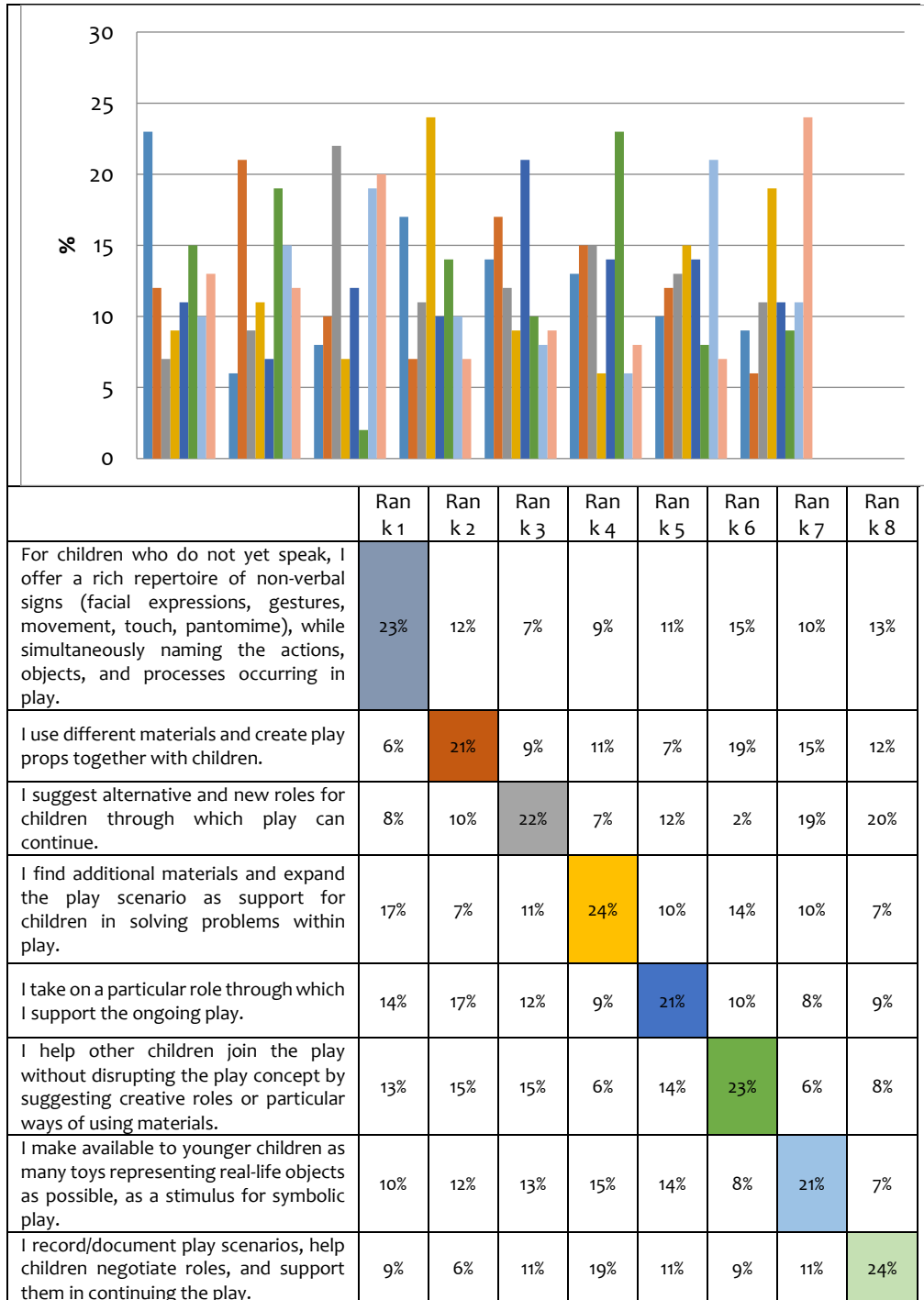


Figure 4. Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Extended Play

The presented findings indicate that participants most frequently reported supporting extended play by offering a rich repertoire of non-verbal signs (facial expressions, gestures, movement,

touch, pantomime) to children who do not yet speak, while simultaneously naming the actions, objects, and processes occurring within play. This form of support differs from the distribution of agreement levels presented in Figure 3, where the same statement ranked second according to ratings of 4 and 5.

When ranking the frequency of different forms of support, the form of support for extended play that the highest percentage of participants (24%) placed in the last position referred to recording/documenting play scenarios and helping children negotiate roles and continue the play. This form of support was also the one that the lowest percentage of participants (81%) rated with scores of 4 or 5 within the rating scale.

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Guided Play. Within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework, support for guided play involves more active adult participation in organising and directing play through dialogue with children, offering play concepts and rules, supporting the grouping of children within play, demonstrating movements and rule-based games, as well as encouraging the appropriate use of equipment and materials. The findings indicate that 95% of participants reported that they usually or always support guided play through dialogue with children about play. The lowest percentage of participants (85%) reported using demonstrations of movements in play, leading obstacle-course games, and demonstrating rule-based games as forms of support.

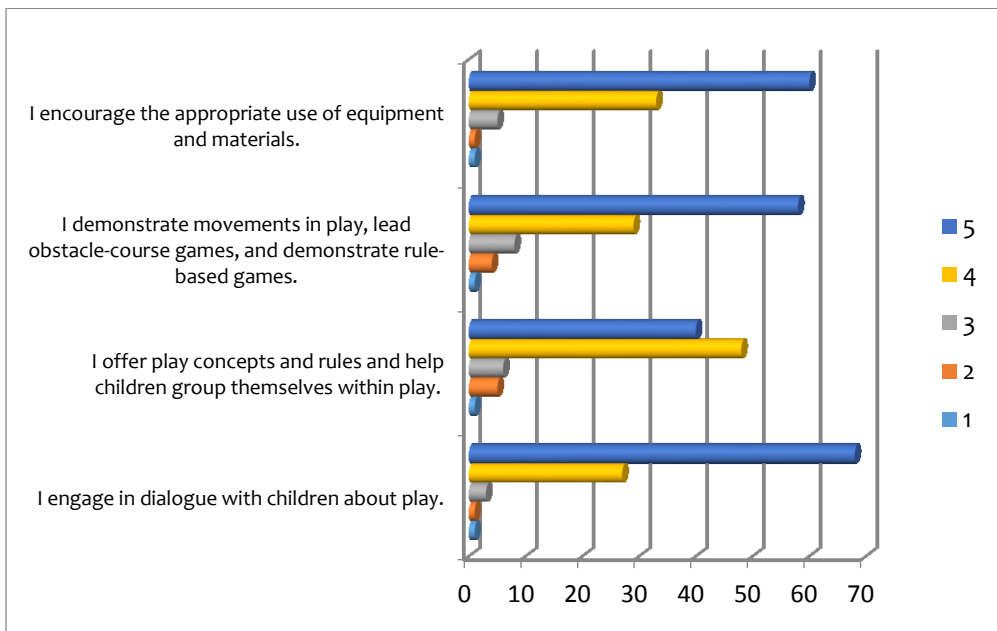


Figure 5. Forms of Practitioners' Support in Guided Play

The data presented in Figures 5 and 6 indicate that participants identified engaging in dialogue with children about play as the most frequent form of support provided in guided play.

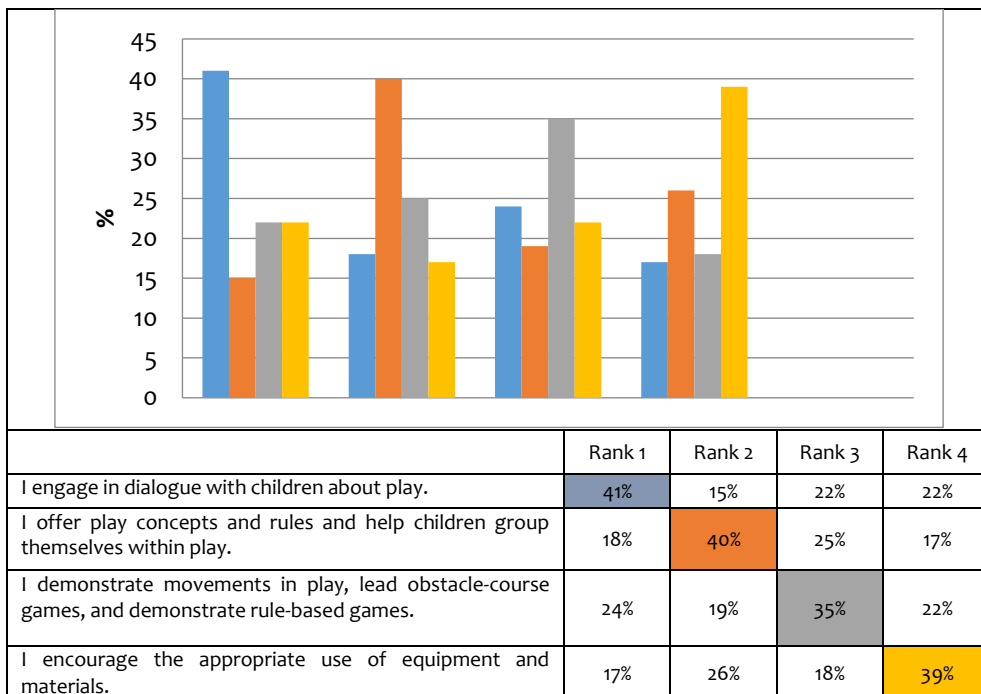


Figure 6. Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Guided Play

The findings presented in Figure 7 indicate that nearly the same percentage of research participants reported that extended play (45%) and open-ended play (43%) were the forms of play most frequently developed on a daily basis in their groups, while the smallest percentage of participants (12%) identified guided play as the most prevalent form.

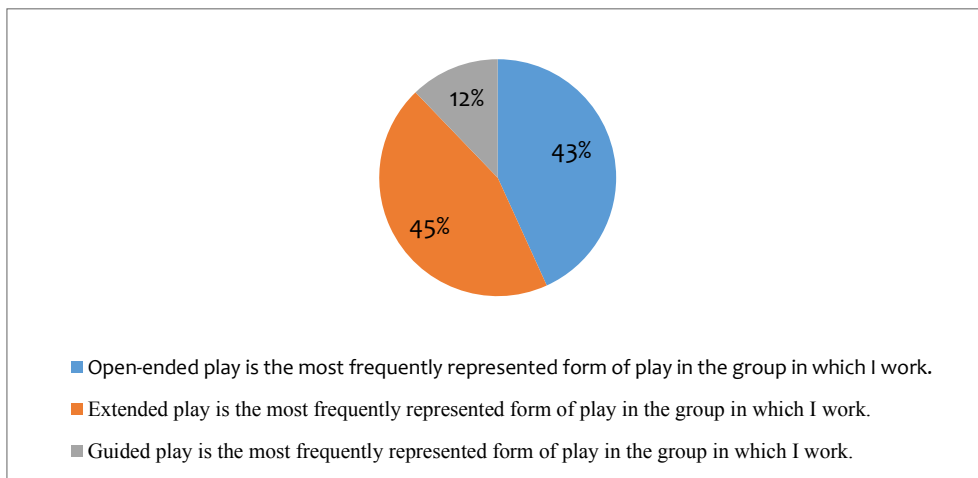


Figure 7. How Do Children Most Frequently Engage in Play During the Course of a Day?

Practitioners' Contribution to the Co-Construction of Children's Play. The majority of research participants (N = 87; 84%) described examples of their own participation in play through which they supported the co-construction of children's play. The responses were analysed using an open coding procedure and grouped into thematic units presented in Table 2. The highest percentage of

participants (36%) described their contribution through introducing new ideas into play and suggesting possible directions for its further development. This was followed by examples referring to the introduction of materials and the provision of conditions for play (26%), as well as examples of adults' participation in play in the role of co-player or co-constructor (20%). A total of 11% of participants provided responses that could not be interpreted as support for the co-construction of play, while 7% of responses were classified as reflecting an instrumentalised or didacticized understanding of play support. Illustrative examples of responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Practitioners' Experiences in Supporting the Co-Construction of Children's Play

Theme: Introducing New Ideas into Play / Extending the Course of Play	N=31	36%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A boy took some blocks and started building a bus. I approached him and asked what he was making, but he stopped and said that he did not know how to make the wheels. I took two small balls from another box and placed them under the blocks, thus helping the boy, who then happily continued building. – At the moment when a child started crying because they were afraid to cross an improvised river made of many blue plastic bags, I entered the play by suggesting that we make a cardboard boat and cross the river. – A child took some blocks to build with but without a specific idea. I approached the child and suggested that we make a garage for cars out of the blocks. – The children were playing with rattling sounds, and we extended the play by encouraging them to bring boxes, various materials, blocks, and adhesive tape from different spatial areas and connect them into one musical percussion instrument. – Within the project, children were trying to make a water filter in order to purify water from a puddle. I suggested that we search for ideas on the Internet. During the search, we found several variations. The children then continued experimenting following the examples they had found. One filter was unsuccessful, so they continued trying different variations using the same materials. 		
Theme: Introducing Materials into Play	N=23	26%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Children were playing with construction materials, and boxes were added as new materials in order to build an even larger tower. – Children often talked about places they had travelled to, so we brought smaller bags and backpacks into the room, which children used to pack different items needed for holidays. – During ball play in the outdoor area, we added hoops so that children could throw balls through them. The hoops and balls were of different sizes. 		
Theme: Joint Play / Adult Participation in the Shared Space of Play Co-Construction	N=17	20%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Since I was taller than the children, I helped them make the tower as high as possible. The children handed me boxes and cheered for me to succeed in stacking them without them falling down. – I was the locomotive leading the children on a trip to the seaside. – The children were pretending to celebrate a birthday, after which I joined and extended the play by celebrating the birthday together, making a cake, and using kitchen utensils. 		
Theme: Examples That Could Not Be Grouped into a Theme	N=10	11%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I support children's existing knowledge, and together we arrive at new understandings. – During play, a child told me to take a toy car and place it in a box so that we could keep it safe. 		
Theme: Instrumentalised Understanding of Support for the Co-Construction of Play	N=6	7%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learning rules of behaviour (obstacle course – waiting in line). – A colour experiment, "little scientists," which was first carried out together with me and then independently by the children... 		

Practitioners’ Perspectives on the Significance of Adults’ Support for the Co-Construction of Play. A total of 73 research participants (71%) responded to the open-ended question referring to their perspectives on the significance of adults’ support for the co-construction of play and the roles of adults in play. The responses were analysed using an open coding procedure and grouped into thematic units presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Practitioners’ Perspectives on the Significance of Adults’ Support for the Co-Construction of Play

Theme: Support for Play as an Opportunity for Adults to Extend Play	N=22	30%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>The preschool teacher has the role of a co-player whom children seek out, as well as someone who is there to extend play, encourage children toward something new, provide encouragement, and create materials for play...</i> – <i>The preschool teacher is a motivator, someone whose actions children at this age closely observe, but also someone whose participation in guiding and extending play is needed more than it is for older children. [children in nursery groups]</i> – <i>The adult’s role in the co-construction of play is highly significant, because adults have the opportunity to organize and direct play in accordance with children’s interests, while also encouraging and motivating children to actively participate and explore through play.</i> 		
Theme: Support for Play as an Opportunity to Understand Children’s Perspectives	N=17	23%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>It is important for the preschool teacher to listen to and observe children during play, as this forms the basis for further planning of support.</i> – <i>In play, it is most important for the preschool teacher to observe and support children who have not joined the play, while attempting through their own participation to bring other children closer to the play as well.</i> – <i>It is important for the preschool teacher to recognise the moment when it is necessary to join the play and when it is more appropriate to actively observe and document children’s ideas for exploration.</i> 		
Theme: Focus on Adults’ Support for Play Through the Creation of an Inspiring Environment	N=16	22%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>...introducing materials that may encourage children to extend their play.</i> – <i>The preschool teacher has a role in providing children with sufficient materials for play, as well as a safe and inspiring environment.</i> – <i>Adding new and different materials and observing how the play unfolds.</i> 		
Theme: Examples That Could Not Be Grouped into a Theme	N=8	11%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>The adult’s role in play is very important because children learn through observation. The manner and tone of communication, as well as consistency in actions, are important.</i> – <i>In working with children of nursery age, I often have the opportunity to extend children’s play so that it lasts longer and becomes more educational and engaging.</i> 		
Theme: Support for Play Through Adults’ Scaffolding of Play	N=5	7%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Children sometimes need support in realizing their ideas. Certain things can only be achieved with the help of an adult, for example, access to objects and materials or assistance in handling particular tools or equipment.</i> – <i>Providing support when children are unable to do something independently in play, especially when they need assistance in using particular materials.</i> 		
Theme: Support for Play as “Control”	N=5	7%
Illustrative Examples of Responses:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Providing guidance in situations when something should not be done or is not safe or appropriate.</i> – <i>Explaining and teaching rules, control.</i> 		

The findings presented in Table 3 indicate that the highest percentage of participants (30%) associated the significance of adults’ support for the co-construction of play with the adult’s role as a participant in play who, through their example, ideas, and encouragement, contributes to

extending play. This was followed by insights referring to adults' participation in understanding children's perspectives in play (23%) and the creation of an inspiring environment for play (22%).

A portion of research participants (11%) provided general responses that could not be grouped into thematic units. In addition, 7% of participants perceived the significance of adults' support for the co-construction of play through situations in which adults scaffold play by providing help and support in situations where children are unable to use certain materials independently, while the same percentage of participants (7%) provided examples indicating the adult's role as a „controller in play“.

Challenges in Practitioners' Support for the Co-Construction of Children's Play. Research participants identified various difficulties they encounter within the real preschool curriculum that hinder or prevent their support for the co-construction of children's play. The responses were analysed and grouped into thematic units presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Challenges in Practitioners' Support for the Co-Construction of Children's Play

Theme	N	%
Lack of unstructured and semi-structured play materials	43	42%
Number of children in the group exceeding legally prescribed standards	20	19%
Presence of children with developmental difficulties in the group	15	14%
There are no challenges in supporting play	9	9%
Lack of space	8	8%
Lack of preschool teaching staff	5	5%
Lack of support from professional associates	3	3%

All research participants (N = 103) responded to this question. Slightly less than half of the participants (42%) indicated that a major challenge in supporting children's play was the lack and inability to regularly provide inspiring play materials (unstructured and semi-structured materials). The second most frequently reported challenge (19%) referred to the number of children in groups exceeding the prescribed standards. In addition, 14% of participants stated that the challenges arose from the need to provide individualised support to children with developmental difficulties.

Support Needed by Practitioners for the Co-Construction of Children's Play. In line with the previous question, practitioners were given the opportunity to indicate the type of support they personally needed in order to further develop their competences or have more opportunities to contribute to the co-construction of children's play. A total of 94 research participants responded to this question, while 9 participants considered that they did not require additional support. The responses were analysed and grouped into thematic units presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Types of Support Needed by Practitioners to Contribute to the Co-Construction of Children's Play

Theme	N	%
Professional Development / Building Practitioners' Competences in This Domain	37	38%
Provision of Sufficient Play Materials and Technical Support	24	26%
Support from Professional Associates	14	15%
Work Reorganization / Reducing Practitioners' Administrative Workload	11	12%
Support in Working with Children with Developmental Difficulties	8	9%

The highest percentage of participants (38%) identified the need for additional professional development as a form of support. This was followed by needs related to the provision of play materials and technical support (26%), support from professional associates (15%), work reorganisation and the reduction of administrative workload (11%), as well as support in working with children with developmental difficulties (9%).

Discussion of the Research Findings

The discussion of the research findings is focused on examining the relationship between the contemporary theoretical-value understanding of the adult's role in play and the ways in which practitioners describe and perceive their own support for the co-construction of children's play in everyday practice. The findings indicate that practitioners highly value their own support for play, while also revealing that different forms of support are not equally realised in practice. It is precisely from this perspective that the findings are interpreted in relation to contemporary theoretical and curricular assumptions emphasising the significance of adults' active and co-constructive participation in the joint construction of play with children.

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Open-Ended Play. The findings indicate that practitioners most often perceive their support for open-ended play through the provision of material and spatial conditions for play. Such perspectives among preschool teachers and nurse-teachers may be understood in light of the fact that the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework has been implemented in Belgrade and Novi Sad since 2019, and that the majority of practitioners have attended professional development programmes aimed at supporting its implementation, within which the significance of support for open-ended play is particularly emphasised.

From a socio-cultural perspective, open-ended play is not understood as a goal in itself, nor as a situation in which it is sufficient merely to provide materials, space, and time for play. Its value lies in the possibility for children to bring into play the previous experiences, meanings, and understandings of the world that they have constructed through everyday interactions with materials, peers, and adults. It is precisely through open-ended play that adults may recognise moments in which it is possible to extend and deepen the course of play, supporting children in transforming the meanings they attribute to materials within play. For this reason, support for open-ended play includes (among other things) adults' sensitivity in recognising opportunities for play to evolve into extended or guided play. In this context, different forms of professional support for practitioners may be considered significant in developing sensitivity towards recognising the potential of open-ended play for its further extension and deepening.

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Extended Play. The findings indicate that practitioners more frequently value forms of support for extended play that involve material and concrete activities than those oriented towards documenting play scenarios and supporting children in negotiating roles and continuing play. The findings showing that practitioners most often support extended play by offering a rich repertoire of non-verbal signs to children who do not yet speak may be understood in relation to the structure of the sample, considering that a significant proportion of participants were nurse-teachers working with children of nursery age (44%). In this context, the pronounced frequency of particular forms of support may be interpreted as reflecting the developmental characteristics of children at this age, given that children have not yet developed speech, which results in a greater prevalence of non-verbal forms of support in play.

By comparing the findings related to support for open-ended and extended play, it may be observed that, in both cases, practitioners' support is more frequently directed towards the provision of material and spatial conditions for play than towards interpreting the context of play from the child's perspective. These findings are consistent with the results of other studies (Lazarević, 2024; Rodriguez, 2019) and point to the need for further empowering practitioners to understand the significance of adults' participation in play as co-players, particularly in the context of the co-constructive building of play, in which adults, through active participation, contribute to the development of more complex forms of play and meaning-making (Fleer, 2017). It is precisely through such participation that adults may contribute to expanding the repertoire of symbolic meanings children bring into play, thereby moving beyond the reproduction of everyday experience and opening possibilities for the joint creation of new meanings in play.

These findings may indicate that the development of practitioners' competences for supporting play cannot be reduced to the adoption of individual strategies and procedures, but rather implies a transformation in the understanding of the preschool teaching profession as a „generative act“ (Marjanović, 1979, p. 31). In this context, support for extended play involves developing practitioners' sensitivity towards recognising the potential of play to move beyond the boundaries of reproducing everyday experience and become a space for joint exploration and a co-constructive process of meaning transformation.

Frequency of Different Forms of Practitioners' Support in Guided Play. The findings indicate that interactions based on dialogue with children stand out as the most frequent form of practitioners' support for guided play. However, within the context of everyday practice, the findings also point to practitioners' perceptions of the predominance of open-ended and extended play in comparison to guided play. Such a relationship may indicate a specific understanding of the place and role of guided play within the real preschool curriculum.

It is particularly important to consider the ways in which practitioners recognise opportunities for different forms of play to intertwine and transform within everyday practice, as well as the ways in which adults may support the transition of open-ended play into extended or guided play, but also vice versa, in accordance with the course, meanings, and relationships developing within play. From a socio-cultural perspective, open-ended, extended, and guided play do not represent separate and static types of play, but rather different modalities of the joint construction of play experience, whereby adults' competence is reflected precisely in their sensitivity towards recognising moments in which play may be deepened, extended, or transformed through joint participation with children. Similar considerations are found in contemporary studies problematizing the relationship between open-ended and guided play, pointing to the need to overcome their rigid division and to understand the adult's role as flexible and contextually conditioned (Wood, 2014).

Practitioners' Contribution to the Co-Construction of Children's Play. Practitioners predominantly perceive their contribution to the co-construction of children's play through the introduction of new ideas and material stimuli, while their participation in play as co-players is less represented. These findings may complement the results of other studies indicating that adults rarely become „fully immersed in play with children“ (Rodríguez, 2019, p. 103). At the same time, the presence of responses that may indicate an instrumentalised understanding of play, although represented to a lesser extent, opens space for reflecting on possible tendencies towards the didacticization of play within practitioners' perspectives. The literature emphasises that the didacticization of play may arise from practitioners' need to „more easily conceptualise support and justify the pedagogical value of play“ (Fleer, 2021; cited in Mitranić, 2022, p. 3). Although the question of the instrumentalisation and didacticization of play was not the direct focus of this study, the findings point to the significance of its further investigation, particularly in relation to the ways in which practitioners understand their own role in supporting children's play.

Practitioners' Perspectives on the Significance of Adults' Support for the Co-Construction of Play. Although practitioners recognise the significance of different adult roles in play, some of them implicitly perceive their role primarily through the provision of material conditions for play (example response: *The preschool teacher's support is significant mainly as encouragement and support through materials, while the rest is left to children's imagination*). Practitioners' responses simultaneously reveal the presence of different, and at times mutually tensioned, understandings of the adult's role in play. While some practitioners perceive support for play through joint participation, understanding children's perspectives, and extending the course of play, other responses indicate an implicit understanding of the adult as an organiser, director, or controller of play.

Such findings may suggest that contemporary socio-cultural understandings of play and more traditional pedagogical assumptions regarding the adult's role in children's learning and development coexist and intertwine within practitioners' perspectives. Similar insights are found in Bogdanović's research (Bogdanović, 2025), which indicates that practitioners' perspectives may simultaneously reflect more contemporary, individualised approaches to children alongside elements of more traditional pedagogical models. It is precisely this multi-layered nature and the potential tensions in understanding support for play that represent an important insight of the study and open space for a deeper examination of the relationship between practitioners' implicit pedagogical perspectives and the ways in which they provide support for children's play in everyday practice.

Challenges in Practitioners' Support for the Co-Construction of Children's Play. The findings indicate that the challenges practitioners encounter in supporting the co-construction of children's play may be understood within the broader context of unfavourable working conditions, including a lack of material resources, overcrowded groups, and limited professional support. Such conditions affect practitioners' possibilities for individualising support for each child within the group during the process of play co-construction.

At the same time, although practitioners do not recognise the lack of their own competences as a key challenge, they nevertheless express a need for their further development, which may indicate their motivation for professional growth and active participation in improving the quality of the real preschool curriculum. The expressed needs for support in the provision of materials, work organisation, and professional guidance indicate that the quality of support for children's play does not depend solely on practitioners' individual competences, but also on the opportunities the institutional context provides for the development of reflective, research-oriented, and generative practice within the real preschool curriculum.

These findings may be linked to insights from related studies emphasising the significance of contextual and reflective preschool practice, while also pointing to challenges such as lack of resources and organisational constraints (Veselinov et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The presented study aimed to examine the perspectives of preschool teachers and nurse-teachers regarding the significance of support for children's play and the ways in which they describe their role in the co-construction of play within the context of the real preschool curriculum. The findings indicate that practitioners highly value their support for the co-construction of open-ended, extended, and guided play, emphasising that in their own practice they usually or always support play through different forms defined within the *Years of Ascent* curriculum framework.

However, practitioners' preferences regarding different forms of support for the co-construction of play indicate that open-ended and extended play are more frequently supported through the provision of material and spatial conditions, while forms of support involving more direct adult participation in play are less represented. In this context, guided play is most frequently supported through dialogue with children, while extended play also involves the use of non-verbal forms of communication, particularly in work with children of nursery age.

The findings indicate that, within practitioners' perspectives, support for children's play is predominantly associated with shaping material and spatial conditions for play, while forms of support involving direct joint meaning-making with children are less represented. Such findings may point to the presence of implicit tensions between contemporary socio-cultural understandings of play and more traditional professional perspectives regarding the adult's role in children's learning and development. Since, from a socio-cultural perspective, support for play does not refer solely to

the provision of conditions for play, but also involves adults' sensitivity towards constructing a co-constructive space in play with children, the findings may suggest that the transformation of curricular assumptions is not necessarily accompanied by changes in the ways practitioners understand their own role in supporting the co-construction of play. In this sense, the findings indicate the need for the further empowerment of practitioners and the development of their competences for active and reflective participation in the joint construction of play with children.

Practitioners identified unfavourable working conditions as significant challenges in supporting children's play, particularly the lack of open-ended materials, overcrowded groups, and limited professional support. At the same time, the expressed need for additional professional development indicates practitioners' motivation for professional growth and for improving the quality of the real preschool curriculum.

Based on the highlighted key findings of the study, the implications for practice relate to the need for the systematic provision of inspiring play materials, as well as the continuous development of practitioners' competences towards reflective and generative practice. The findings indicate that practitioners critically reflect upon their own actions and are highly motivated to further develop within this area, which represents an important foundation for the development of reflective practice (Dedaj, 2019).

The limitations of the presented findings and implications may be considered in relation to the localised research sample, given that all participants were employed in preschool institutions located in developed urban areas that began implementing the new curriculum framework during the same period. For this reason, the findings cannot be fully generalised and should instead be understood within the context of the specific conditions in which they emerged.

Despite these limitations, the study points to the significance of further examining the relationship between practitioners' implicit professional perspectives and the ways in which they understand and realise support for children's play in everyday practice. In particular, the study raises the question of how practitioners' professional development may contribute not only to improving strategies for supporting play, but also to a deeper reconsideration of the adult's role in the joint construction of play with children.

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