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Between Structure and Creativity – Romanian Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Reasoning in Selecting Didactic Strategies

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Abstract: *This qualitative study explores how kindergarten teachers make professional decisions when selecting didactic strategies in their daily classroom practice. Drawing on fifty semi-structured interviews with teachers, the research examines how educators navigate the balance between structured teaching methods—such as memorization, observation, and exercises—and creative, play-based approaches including storytelling, modelling, and artistic expression. Using a grounded theory approach, the analysis reveals that teachers' choices are shaped by multiple interrelated factors: curriculum requirements, children's developmental needs, the emotional climate of the group, and teachers' personal beliefs about learning and play. Findings indicate that teachers engage in a dynamic process of reasoning that blends experience, intuition, and reflection to ensure both cognitive progress and creative freedom. The resulting conceptual model highlights the central role of professional judgment and flexibility in early childhood education, portraying teachers as reflective practitioners who continuously adapt their strategies to promote meaningful, holistic learning experiences for young children.*

Keywords: *early childhood education; teacher agency; reflective practice; creative pedagogical decision-making; grounded theory.*

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Introduction

Teaching in early childhood education requires an ongoing balance between structure and creativity. Kindergarten teachers are constantly negotiating the tension between ensuring that children achieve curriculum goals and allowing them the freedom to explore, imagine, and learn through play. Within this dynamic environment, teachers' professional reasoning—their internal decision-making processes and justifications for choosing particular didactic strategies—plays a crucial role in shaping children's learning experiences. The ability to combine structure with flexibility defines the quality and responsiveness of educational practice in early childhood settings.

In everyday work, teachers use a wide range of didactic strategies to support children's development. These include structured approaches such as memorization, exercises with individual materials, or observation, as well as creative and exploratory strategies such as storytelling, modeling, painting, and role-playing games. Each method carries distinct pedagogical intentions: while structured techniques promote precision, discipline, and gradual cognitive growth, creative activities nurture imagination, emotional expression, and social cooperation. The challenge lies in knowing how and when to combine these contrasting approaches in ways that respond to the needs, moods, and developmental levels of young learners.

Teachers' choices are not random or mechanical applications of curricular recommendations. They are the result of professional reflection, sensitivity to context, and pedagogical judgment formed through experience. This reasoning process often remains implicit, yet it represents a vital dimension of teaching expertise. By examining how teachers describe and justify their choices of didactic strategies, it becomes possible to understand how professional reasoning guides classroom practice and contributes to meaningful learning.

The present study investigates the factors that influence kindergarten teachers' selection of didactic strategies and explores how they balance structured teaching with creative, play-based learning. Using a grounded theory approach, it aims to construct a conceptual model of teachers' professional reasoning in strategy selection, based on their own narratives and experiences. Through this lens, the study seeks to highlight the teacher's role not only as an implementer of curriculum but as a reflective and adaptive practitioner capable of designing educational experiences that are both intentional and imaginative.

Despite the extensive body of research on early childhood pedagogy, relatively few studies have examined how kindergarten teachers reason about their instructional choices in real classroom contexts. Much of the existing literature focuses on the outcomes of using specific strategies or on the implementation of curriculum frameworks, while the underlying decision-making processes that lead teachers to choose certain methods over others remain largely unexplored. This gap limits our understanding of teacher agency and the professional thinking that sustains flexible, responsive pedagogy. By focusing on teachers' voices and lived experiences, the present study addresses this gap by revealing the complex reasoning processes behind the integration of structured and creative approaches in early childhood education.

The main objectives of the study are threefold. First, to identify the key factors that influence kindergarten teachers' selection of didactic strategies in everyday practice. Second, to explore how teachers balance structured, goal-oriented methods with open-ended, play-based learning experiences. Third, to develop a conceptual model that explains teachers' professional reasoning in the process of choosing, adapting, and combining different strategies to meet both curricular requirements and children's developmental needs. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of reflective practice and pedagogical judgment in early childhood education.

Theoretical foundation

This study draws on three key perspectives: teacher agency, reflective practice, and the integration of structured and creative pedagogies in early childhood education. Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual lens for understanding how kindergarten teachers make professional decisions when selecting didactic strategies.

Teacher agency

The concept of teacher agency refers to the capacity of educators to act intentionally and make context-sensitive pedagogical choices within and sometimes beyond institutional or curricular constraints. According to Priestley et al. (2015), agency is not a fixed attribute of teachers but a situated achievement—one that emerges from the interaction between individual capacity, professional experience, and contextual opportunities. Teachers exercise agency when they adapt prescribed curricula to meet the developmental needs and interests of their students (Robertson et al., 2023). In early childhood education, this often involves choosing between structured instructional activities (such as memorization or exercises) and

open-ended, exploratory experiences (such as storytelling or creative play). Such decisions demonstrate teachers' ability to balance educational objectives with sensitivity to children's autonomy, curiosity, and emotional well-being (Pantic, 2015).

Teacher agency is closely linked to professional identity and autonomy. Day & Gu (2014) argue that agency enables teachers to act as moral and intellectual professionals, rather than as mere implementers of policy. This view underscores the importance of understanding the reasoning that underpins teachers' pedagogical decisions, particularly in early childhood contexts where responsiveness to learners' needs is central to effective practice.

Reflective practice

The notion of reflective practice provides a complementary framework for understanding how teachers think about and refine their professional actions. Schön (1983) introduced the idea of the reflective practitioner, describing how professionals engage in "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action" to respond to complex, uncertain situations. In the educational field, reflection allows teachers to connect theoretical principles with lived classroom experience, enabling ongoing adaptation and growth (Chen, 2023a; Larrivee, 2000).

In early childhood education, reflection often occurs spontaneously during interactions with children. Educators continually observe children's responses, assess engagement, and adjust activities in real time to maintain interest and support learning. Zeichner & Liston (2013) emphasize that reflective teaching involves not only technical problem-solving but also moral and ethical deliberation—teachers consider not only what works, but also what is right for children's development. This study adopts the view that reflection is a key mechanism through which teachers develop and exercise professional reasoning when selecting and combining didactic strategies.

Structured and creative pedagogies in early childhood education

A third theoretical strand concerns the relationship between structured and creative pedagogies (Escamilla, 2021). Structured pedagogies emphasize organization, sequencing, and direct instruction, providing the scaffolding necessary for foundational cognitive and linguistic development (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). In contrast, creative pedagogies foreground exploration, imagination, and learner agency, fostering curiosity, self-expression, and emotional development (Craft, 2011). Scholars argue that effective early childhood teaching integrates both dimensions: structure

provides stability and clarity, while creativity nurtures flexibility and engagement (Cremin & Chappell, 2021).

Play-based learning exemplifies this integration. Research shows that play provides both freedom and structure—offering opportunities for spontaneous exploration while also serving as a medium through which teachers intentionally guide learning (Wood, 2014). Teachers' ability to shift between these modes reflects their professional judgment and capacity for adaptive expertise (Hatano & Inagaki, 2017). Hence, the intersection of structure and creativity can be seen as the practical manifestation of agency and reflection in early childhood teaching.

Integrative perspective

Bringing these frameworks together, this study views kindergarten teachers as reflective agents who navigate the dynamic interplay between external expectations and internal pedagogical judgment (Chen, 2023b). Their choices of didactic strategies are not merely technical actions but expressions of professional reasoning shaped by experience, reflection, and responsiveness to children (Jones et al., 2023). By grounding the analysis in theories of agency, reflection, and creative pedagogy, the study seeks to illuminate how teachers construct meaningful, flexible, and child-centered approaches to learning in early childhood education.

Research methodology

Research design

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz, 2014), chosen for its suitability in exploring complex social processes and generating theory grounded in participants' experiences and perspectives. Grounded theory was used to uncover how kindergarten teachers reason about their pedagogical choices and how they balance structured and creative approaches in their daily teaching practice. Rather than testing preexisting hypotheses, this design allowed the analysis to emerge inductively from teachers' own narratives, focusing on the processes, meanings, and contextual factors that shape their didactic decisions.

Participants

The study involved 50 kindergarten teachers from various regions of Romania, representing both urban and rural educational contexts. The participants varied in years of professional experience, ranging from novice educators with less than five years of teaching to veteran teachers with over

twenty-five years in the field. This diversity ensured a rich and comprehensive understanding of how teachers across different career stages interpret and apply didactic strategies in early childhood education.

All participants were actively working in public kindergartens and were familiar with the Romanian national curriculum for early childhood education. Their inclusion provided valuable insights into the realities of kindergarten teaching in different institutional settings, reflecting a broad spectrum of pedagogical reasoning, classroom practices, and local adaptations.

Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore kindergarten teachers' reasoning processes and decision-making when selecting didactic strategies. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their daily teaching practices, the methods they employ to engage children, and the factors that influence their pedagogical choices. Questions invited teachers to discuss how they use various strategies—such as didactic and sensory games, memorization, observation, storytelling, modeling, and creative play—to achieve specific learning outcomes. The interview guide was developed based on the objectives of the study and aligned with key themes in early childhood pedagogy, including structure, creativity, and reflective practice. Its flexible design allowed the interviewer to probe for clarification, examples, and elaboration, ensuring both depth and richness of the responses. The instrument was reviewed by two experts in early childhood education for content validity and clarity before being used in data collection, ensuring that the questions were comprehensible, relevant, and capable of eliciting meaningful insights into teachers' professional reasoning.

Data collection procedure

The data consisted of fifty semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Romanian and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to elicit teachers' reflections on the instructional strategies they use most frequently, the factors influencing their choices, and their experiences in balancing cognitive, affective, and creative dimensions of learning. Questions also probed teachers' perceptions of how specific activities—such as didactic games, storytelling, memorization, painting, modeling, or role play—support children's development.

The semi-structured format offered flexibility for participants to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences, while maintaining consistency across interviews to allow for thematic comparison. Field notes taken during and immediately after the interviews captured additional contextual details, such as teachers' tone, emphasis, and illustrative examples.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic procedures of grounded theory coding as proposed by Charmaz (2014): open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Open Coding: Each interview transcript was read multiple times to identify key words, phrases, and actions that revealed teachers' reasoning processes. Codes such as adapting strategies to children's mood, balancing structure with play, and linking activity choice to developmental goals were generated during this phase.

Axial Coding: Relationships among codes were explored to form broader categories that captured recurring patterns in teachers' reasoning. Emerging categories included curricular alignment, child responsiveness, pedagogical reflection, and contextual adaptation.

Selective Coding: Core categories were integrated into a conceptual model illustrating how teachers balance structure and creativity through reflective decision-making. The emerging model represents the dynamic interaction between external constraints (curriculum, institutional expectations) and internal professional reasoning (beliefs, values, intuition).

Throughout the analysis, constant comparison was employed—each new piece of data was compared with existing codes and categories to refine conceptual understanding. Memo writing was used to document analytical insights and relationships between themes, ensuring the development of a coherent theoretical framework grounded in the data.

Researcher's role and reflexivity

As the researcher, I acknowledged my interpretive role in shaping the analysis and sought to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process. Personal assumptions about effective teaching, creativity, and structure were continuously examined to minimize bias. Interpretations were validated through iterative reading, peer debriefing, and the inclusion of representative quotations to preserve participants' authentic voices.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and all participants provided informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by assigning pseudonyms or alphanumeric codes (e.g., I1–I50) to each participant. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. The data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes.

Findings

The analysis of the fifty interviews revealed a rich and nuanced understanding of how kindergarten teachers select and combine didactic strategies in their everyday classroom practice. Through open, axial, and selective coding, four interrelated core categories emerged: (1) curricular alignment and goal orientation, (2) responsiveness to children's needs and context, (3) reflective reasoning and professional intuition, and (4) balancing structure and creativity. These categories form the basis of an emerging conceptual model that illustrates the dynamic and reflective nature of teachers' pedagogical reasoning. The model suggests that teachers' choices are shaped by an ongoing negotiation between external expectations (curriculum and institutional demands) and internal factors (beliefs, experience, and sensitivity to children's learning processes).

These frequencies (Figure 1) show that teachers most often rely on storytelling, reading, and observation — strategies that emphasize language development and comprehension. Conversely, creative and sensory strategies such as sensory games and creative play are rarely mentioned, suggesting that structured or teacher-led methods dominate in Romanian kindergartens.

Figure 1. Frequency of Strategy Use in Kindergarten Teachers' Interviews



(Source: the result of the author's analysis)

Curricular alignment and goal orientation

Teachers consistently emphasized that their selection of didactic strategies begins with the curricular objectives and the competencies that must be achieved. They described the curriculum as a guiding framework that provides structure and continuity across activities. For many, the didactic game, memorization, and observation are perceived as tools for achieving specific learning goals, particularly in cognitive and linguistic domains.

One teacher explained:

"I start from the objective. If the goal is to develop logical thinking, I choose the didactic or logical-mathematical game. If it is language development, then storytelling or memorization fits better." (I12)

Another participant noted that structured activities also support discipline and focus:

"Children learn to follow rules, to listen carefully, and to complete a task. These are important skills that structured activities help to build." (I34)

However, teachers were careful to stress that while the curriculum defines what should be learned, they have professional freedom to decide how to approach it. This autonomy in interpreting curricular goals is a key component of their pedagogical reasoning and demonstrates the exercise of teacher agency within curricular constraints.

Responsiveness to children's needs and context

A second major category highlights teachers' sensitivity to children's emotional, developmental, and contextual needs. Many participants reported that their daily choices depend not only on the curriculum but also on the children's level of energy, mood, prior knowledge, and social dynamics within the group. Teachers described adapting their strategies spontaneously to sustain engagement or respond to the atmosphere in the classroom.

For instance:

"If I see they are restless, I turn the lesson into a game. If they are calm and focused, we can do something that requires more attention, like observation or memorization." (I8)

Several teachers also mentioned using creative play or movement activities to help children regulate emotions and transition between tasks. Contextual elements—such as classroom space, available materials, and even seasonal themes—were cited as influencing factors in their decision-making. This responsiveness demonstrates that teachers' reasoning is relational and adaptive rather than procedural.

Reflective reasoning and professional intuition

The third category captures the teachers' reflective and intuitive decision-making processes. Participants frequently described how experience and reflection guide their pedagogical choices. Rather than following fixed routines, they evaluate what works best for each group and situation, often drawing on past experiences to make immediate judgments.

As one teacher expressed:

"You learn over the years what to do and when. Sometimes you feel that a story will touch them more deeply than an exercise. Other times, you know they need something active to keep their attention." (I21)

Reflection often occurred both during and after teaching activities. Teachers reported adjusting in real time to children's reactions and later thinking about how to improve future lessons. This ongoing cycle of reflection and action aligns with the idea of the teacher as a reflective practitioner—someone who learns through doing, observing, and rethinking their own practice. Many participants also linked this reflective process with professional satisfaction, viewing it as part of their growth and creativity as educators.

Balancing structure and creativity

The central theme that integrates all categories is the balance between structured and creative approaches. Teachers consistently described their pedagogical reasoning as a process of equilibrium: ensuring learning goals are met while preserving children's enjoyment and imagination.

One teacher captured this balance succinctly:

"The lesson must have order, but also joy. The children need to feel free to explore, even when we have clear objectives." (I4)

Participants discussed alternating between structured and creative moments within the same activity—for example, introducing a concept through a short explanation or observation, then reinforcing it through a game, story, or art project. Others mentioned transforming routine tasks into playful experiences by adding songs, dramatizations, or competitions.

"Even a memorization can be creative if you make it into a performance or use puppets. The method depends on how you bring it to life." (I17)

This theme reflects a pedagogical philosophy that values flexibility, recognizing that effective learning emerges when structure and freedom coexist. The teachers' narratives revealed that maintaining this balance requires not only professional experience but also a deep understanding of children's rhythms, motivations, and individuality.

Emerging conceptual model: the reflective balance framework

The four categories converge into an emerging model of teachers' professional reasoning, which can be described as the Reflective Balance Framework. In this model, teachers' decision-making is viewed as a dynamic, cyclical process involving three interdependent dimensions:

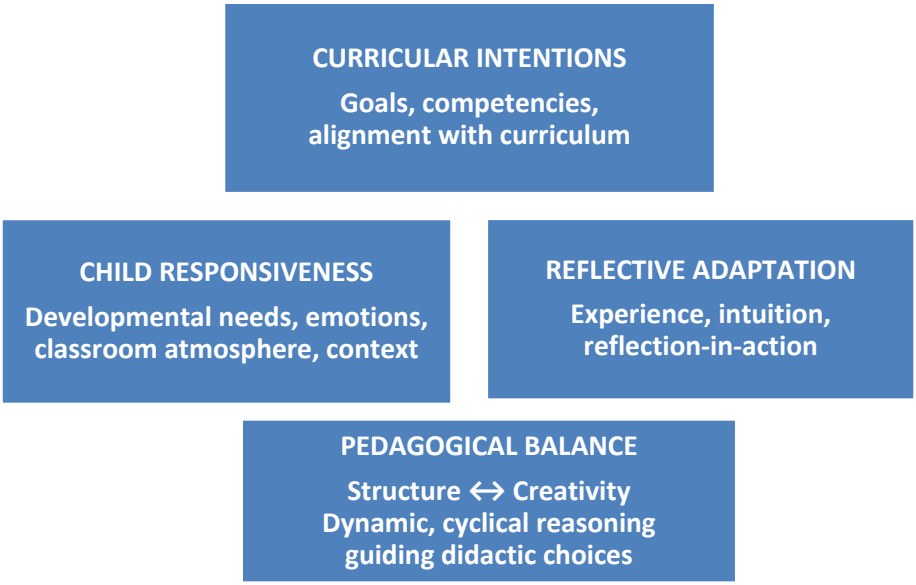
- Curricular Intentions – establishing educational goals and ensuring alignment with institutional expectations.
- Child Responsiveness – adapting strategies to children's developmental and emotional states.
- Reflective Adaptation – using professional reflection and intuition to integrate structured and creative elements.

At the intersection of these dimensions lies pedagogical balance—a state of professional reasoning in which teachers harmonize external requirements with children's intrinsic needs. This balance is not static but continuously negotiated through observation, adaptation, and reflection. The model portrays teachers as active agents who design learning experiences that are both purposeful and joyful, demonstrating the artistry and complexity of early childhood teaching.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that kindergarten teachers' reasoning in selecting didactic strategies is a dynamic, context-sensitive process shaped by the interplay of curriculum requirements, children's needs, professional reflection, and creative judgment. These results align closely with the theoretical perspectives on teacher agency, reflective practice, and the integration of structured and creative pedagogies discussed earlier, offering a deeper understanding of how teachers balance the dual demands of structure and spontaneity in early childhood education.

Figure 2 Pedagogical Framework Model



(Source: the result of the author's analysis)

Teacher AGENCY IN PRACTICE

The teachers in this study demonstrated a strong sense of professional autonomy and agency in interpreting and enacting the curriculum. Although curricular goals provided a clear framework, participants consistently emphasized their freedom to decide how to reach those goals in ways that fit their context and their group of children. This finding supports Priestley et al., (2015) conceptualization of teacher agency as an ecological achievement—emerging from the interaction between individual capacity, institutional

constraints, and situational opportunities. Romanian kindergarten teachers in this study exercised agency by designing learning experiences that respected curricular objectives while adapting methods to children's developmental and emotional characteristics. Their reasoning was thus guided not by compliance but by professional judgment and pedagogical creativity.

This agency was especially evident in how teachers described adapting activities in real time, switching from a structured task to a playful or sensory activity when they sensed a decline in children's attention. Such responsiveness underscores the importance of viewing teachers as designers of learning environments rather than executors of instructional plans—a theme that resonates with international discussions on empowering teachers as curriculum-makers rather than curriculum-deliverers.

Reflective practice as a foundation of pedagogical reasoning

A second key dimension emerging from the findings is the centrality of reflective practice in teachers' decision-making. Participants frequently described analyzing the effectiveness of their activities, both during and after implementation, and making continuous adjustments to maintain engagement and ensure learning outcomes. This process mirrors Schön's (1983) concept of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, demonstrating that reflection in early childhood education is not only a post-hoc analytical act but an ongoing, embodied way of thinking during teaching itself.

Teachers' narratives revealed that reflective practice functions as a bridge between experience and intuition. Experienced educators often relied on tacit knowledge—what one participant called "knowing what works"—which evolved through years of trial, error, and observation. Reflection transformed these experiences into professional wisdom, helping teachers anticipate children's reactions and select strategies with confidence. This aligns with Larrivee's (2000) assertion that reflection deepens professional awareness and promotes adaptive expertise. The study thus affirms that reflection is both a cognitive and moral process that enables teachers to make pedagogically and ethically sound choices.

Balancing structured and creative pedagogies

Perhaps the most distinctive finding of the study is the teachers' ongoing effort to balance structure and creativity in classroom practice. The data revealed that educators do not view these as opposing forces but as complementary elements of effective teaching. Structured methods—such as memorization, observation, and exercises—were used to build discipline, focus, and conceptual understanding, while creative and play-based

methods—such as storytelling, painting, and dramatization—were seen as essential for emotional expression, curiosity, and social learning.

This finding supports previous research by Craft (2011) and Cremin & Chappell (2021), who emphasize that creative pedagogy thrives when it is intentionally structured and when teachers design learning environments that support both freedom and focus. The Romanian teachers in this study exhibited what might be termed guided creativity: an ability to weave playful and imaginative activities into lessons without losing sight of educational objectives. They demonstrated that structure provides security and coherence for children, while creativity fuels engagement and discovery.

Moreover, this balance reflects a culturally embedded professionalism—teachers view creativity not as chaos or indulgence but as a meaningful pathway to achieving learning goals (Guerrero & Camargo-Abello, 2023). Their reasoning suggests a sophisticated pedagogical philosophy that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning, resonating with holistic educational principles in early childhood development.

The reflective balance framework and its implications

The Reflective Balance Framework emerging from this study conceptualizes teachers' professional reasoning as an iterative cycle involving curricular intentions, child responsiveness, and reflective adaptation. The framework highlights that teachers' decisions are not linear or predetermined but rather negotiated in response to real-time classroom dynamics. This cyclical reasoning process aligns with Biesta's (2012) view of teaching as a situated and moral practice, where educational judgments involve navigating tensions between what is educationally desirable and what is practically possible.

From a professional development perspective, this framework underscores the need to cultivate teachers' reflective and adaptive capacities (Guyton & Hewitt, 2022). Pre-service and in-service programs could benefit from explicitly addressing how teachers make decisions in uncertain or fluid situations—helping them to articulate, analyze, and refine their reasoning. Encouraging teachers to share and document their reflective processes may also contribute to a stronger professional culture that values thinking and dialogue as much as doing.

Relevance to the Romanian early childhood context

The findings hold particular significance for the Romanian early childhood education context, where teachers operate within a national curriculum that provides general objectives but leaves substantial room for interpretation. The participating teachers' narratives demonstrate that this

flexibility can foster creativity and professional agency, provided teachers have the confidence and reflective capacity to navigate it effectively. The study thus contributes to local discussions about strengthening the professional identity of kindergarten teachers and promoting a reflective culture within early education institutions.

In sum, the findings highlight that kindergarten teachers' professional reasoning is characterized by an ongoing, reflective negotiation between external expectations and internal pedagogical judgment. Their agency, reflection, and adaptive use of structure and creativity illustrate the complex artistry of teaching young children. By understanding these processes, educators, policymakers, and teacher educators can better support early childhood teachers as thoughtful professionals who design learning environments that are both structured and imaginative—ensuring that education in the early years remains both purposeful and joyful.

Limitations and future research

This study offers valuable insights into kindergarten teachers' professional reasoning but has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the data were based solely on self-reported interviews, which reflect teachers' perceptions rather than direct classroom practice. Future studies could include observations or video analysis to capture how reasoning manifests in real-time teaching.

Second, the sample of 50 Romanian teachers limits generalizability, as cultural and curricular contexts vary widely. Comparative research across countries, as well as studies focusing on differences between urban and rural or public and private institutions in Romania, could broaden understanding of contextual influences on pedagogical reasoning.

Finally, the proposed Reflective Balance Framework is preliminary and should be refined and validated through mixed-method or longitudinal studies that track how teachers' reasoning develops over time. Such research would deepen theoretical understanding of how teachers integrate structure and creativity, contributing to stronger, evidence-based support for reflective and agency-oriented professional development in early childhood education.

Conclusions

This study explored how kindergarten teachers reason about their selection of didactic strategies, revealing the dynamic balance they maintain between structure and creativity in everyday teaching. The findings highlight that teachers' decisions are not mechanical applications of curricular

prescriptions but rather reflective, adaptive processes informed by experience, intuition, and responsiveness to children's needs. Teachers act as autonomous professionals who interpret and shape the curriculum through their pedagogical judgment, demonstrating agency and creativity in equal measure. The resulting Reflective Balance Framework illustrates this continuous negotiation between curricular goals, child-centered adaptation, and reflective adjustment, emphasizing the complexity and artistry of teaching in early childhood education.

The study underscores several key implications for practice and policy. First, teacher education and professional development programs should explicitly address reflective reasoning and decision-making, encouraging educators to articulate the "why" behind their pedagogical choices. Structured reflection sessions, peer dialogue, and case-based learning could strengthen teachers' ability to balance instructional goals with creative engagement. Second, school leaders and policymakers should recognize and support teacher agency by allowing flexibility within curricular implementation, providing resources and time for reflection, and valuing teachers' professional judgment as central to quality early childhood education.

Finally, the findings point to the importance of cultivating a professional culture that sees structure and creativity as complementary, not opposing, dimensions of pedagogy. Encouraging teachers to integrate play, storytelling, and artistic activities alongside goal-oriented instruction can foster holistic development and intrinsic motivation among young learners. By acknowledging teachers as reflective agents who design meaningful, balanced learning experiences, educational systems can move closer to ensuring that early childhood education remains both purposeful and joyful—a space where knowledge, imagination, and human connection grow together.

Statement on the Use of AI Tools| *The article does not include the use of AI tools for data analysis or interpretation during the research process.*

Author's biodata |

Maria Cristina Popa is a lecturer at Teacher Training Department, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania. Her academic work lies at the intersection of early childhood education, cultural identity, and innovative teaching methodologies. Her research explores how children construct identity in multicultural and acculturative contexts and how teachers can foster inclusion and well-being through reflective and evidence-based practices. In recent years, her focus has expanded toward digital and blended learning in mathematics education, educational robotics, and teacher preparation for future-ready competencies.

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