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# Play during Recess: Primary School Children's Perspectives and Agency

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## Abstract

School recess as a valued component of school life is under challenge. The present study aims to investigate the pupils' perspectives about the role and the meaning of play during school recess recognizing the role of the children as agents in their own development and considering play as a socio-cultural

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activity undertaken, developed and invested with meaning by the children themselves. The study was conducted in a primary school in the area of Athens, Greece and 82 children between the ages of 6 and 12 years participated in 12 focus groups. The data were analyzed utilizing thematic analysis and four central themes emerged: (1) social interaction, (2) freedom in choosing and making decisions, (3) personal satisfaction and development, and (4) intense feelings and struggle. These themes indicate the value of play for the children themselves and its role in children's exercising and affirming agency. The findings of this study generate opportunities to consider the need to respect children's perspectives about issues that matter to them and to consider further implications for research as well as for policy and practice.

**Key words:** children; play; recess; primary school; agency

## **Introduction**

School recess constitutes the most important function in the schoolyard, with play occupying a central position among other children's activities. According to Pellegrini and Smith, "school recess, or play time, is a break period, typically outdoors, for children" (1993, 51). The developmental importance of playing during recess in primary school has been related to the physical, cognitive, emotional and social development of the child (Baines and Blatchford 2011; Blatchford 1998a; Faulkner and Woodhead 1999; Smith 2010). Actually playing during recess composes the spatio-temporal framework where social interaction among peers takes place, enabling children to share common experiences that are substantial to the creation of social relations in childhood (Blatchford 1998a; Nova-Kaltsouni 2010).

In the existing literature it has been argued that during recess children act under limited surveillance and with a greater degree of freedom compared to the rest of the

school curriculum (Baines and Blatchford 2011). This argument generated a lot of debate epitomizing the field as having two dominant views about school recess: the “problem” view and the “romantic” view. These two opposing views have implications for schools which need to manage recess time and, consequently, children’s play during this time period, leading to a conflict between the need to control children’s behaviour on the one hand and the need to ensure opportunities for their developing independence on the other (Blatchford 1998a; Blatchford, Pellegrini and Baines 2016; Gol-Guven 2016).

A number of researchers (Blatchford 1998a; Faulkner and Woodhead 1999; Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002; Zavacky and Shannon 2017) propose that the “romantic” view values recess and free play anticipating positive effects for the development of children. These are achieved mainly through the development of social and other skills in the context of play and communication among peers as well as through the formation of peer culture and the parallel separation and diversification from the adult world. Contrary to the “romantic” view, the “problem” view supports shorter recess periods in favour of longer teaching hours and considers free play as well as other child-controlled recess activities with suspicion. This is mainly because it foresees problematic content in the peer culture and the danger of bullying in low-supervised social interactions as well as inhibitory forces for the socialization process (Olweus, 1993; Pellegrini, 1995; Towers, 1997). Despite their differences, the two views retain an unproblematized (Fleer 2013; Wood 2014) view of play and its role in educational contexts: they recognize a positive or a negative side in play, overlooking its nature as a complex and ambiguous phenomenon (Gougoulis, 2003).

The latter is emerging through a theoretical shift in the conceptualization of play which is witnessed in the context of changing views about child development and children’s socialization practices. Until the 1980s, play was mainly conceptualized as

natural, universal, intrinsic and unfolding in predictable ways (Fleer 2013), in accordance with the prevalent views about child development and socialization which emphasized universality, orderliness and adaptation to the adult society (Corsaro 2011; James and Prout 1997; Prout 2005). However, after the 1980s, theoretical trends such as the new example of the sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1997) as well as sociocultural and contextual approaches (Bronfenbrenner 1992; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1933) led to new conceptions about child development and play, and gave new directions for researching child play. These new approaches highlight the social and cultural origin of personal development and give prominence to the multiple contexts in which human development is situated. In such a theoretical framework, play is conceptualized as an intrinsically cultural and social activity in which the motive, the characteristics, the form and its meaning are related to the context, the experiences and the interactions of those involved (Fleer 2013, 2014). These theoretical changes coupled with Corsaro's (1997, 2011) influential 'interpretive reproduction theory' which approaches play as a form of cultural appropriation and emphasizes the importance of children creating their own unique peer cultures (Corsaro, 1997, 2011), led to a new conceptualization of play. This, addresses play as a central activity of particular importance to children, being created and acquiring meaning within the particular circumstances in which it is generated (Fleer, 2013). Consequently, play is not examined with regards to predetermined characteristics or in relation to what is expected based on age, developmental stage, cognitive, emotional and social abilities. Rather, it is approached in terms of how it is formed and changed by children themselves, always within the sociocultural contexts in which it takes place (Gaskins, Haight and Lancy 2007; Corsaro 2011), one of which is school recess. In this view, children are appreciated not only as active participants but also as agents whose decisions, choices and actions create and give meaning to their play. Consequently, it is

recognized that they have views and opinions of their own regarding play, as well as other matters that are of importance to them, which need to be heard in order to gain an understanding of play from their own perspective and not from that of the adults (Glenn, Knight and Holt 2012; Nicholson et al. 2014).

Existing research on play during recess falls into two broad categories: (1) ethnographic studies from a sociological or anthropological perspective, and (2) mainly quantitative approaches adopting a more educationally or developmentally oriented perspective. The sociological and anthropological ethnographic studies focus primarily on the culture of the schoolyard during recess and shed light on the different structures and norms of the culture, its diversity regarding boys and girls, the socializing practices or bullying behaviours, through examining children's activities and interactions, among which play is central. With the use of both participatory observational methods and non-structured interviews (Creswell 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), these ethnographic approaches study the meaning and the experience of play (Aydt and Corsaro 2003) as a form of children's negotiation with social order, in order to understand peer culture, representations of gender and children's conceptions of the world they live in. However, they do not focus on how children experience recess play as such, examining what children do when they play and what playing during recess means to them. Goodwin (2001), for instance, studied ethnographically the way primary school children use instructions and forms of exclusion to organize an activity (the game of jump rope over the span). She concluded that the initial female dominance in making decisions about the game changed as time went by and as the boys became better acquainted with the game. Although this ethnographic approach proves valuable in order to understand the way in which an activity is socially organized in the course of time, it is less informative about children's play as such. Within this framework, a small number of research studies have

been conducted in Greece and examined play during recess (Gougoulis 2003; Frederikou and Folerou 2009). Gougoulis (2003) focused on play as children's appropriation and transformations of space and materials in relation to age, gender and power relations. Frederikou and Folerou (2009) studied representations of gender among girls through the games played in a primary schoolyard during recess and concluded that play in the schoolyard is the context in which the psychosocial processes of gender construction are revealed as well as the context where the girls are apprenticed in both adaptation and dispute.

The second category of studies on play during primary school recess, conducted within an educational or developmental perspective, appear to acknowledge that contextual approaches contribute to the adequate understanding of play and its connection with learning and development (Baines and Blatchford 2011; Fler 2013, 2014). However, relevant studies (Blatchford and Baines 2006; Blatchford, Pellegrini et al. 2002; Boulton 2005; Pellegrini and Blatchford 2002) have failed to adjust to a different approach to the study of play during recess in three important ways: firstly, they preserved the use of quantitative research methods which, alone, cannot ensure the comprehension of the way in which individuals deal with the world they live in (Cohen and Manion 1994); secondly, the results and conclusions of this research do not connect findings to the cultural and contextual factors as well as their interconnections which affect free play in the schoolyard; thirdly, they do not approach play from the viewpoint of children themselves. For example, a longitudinal research study conducted in primary and secondary schools of England and Wales (Blatchford and Baines 2006), recorded systematically all changes in school recess from 1995 to 2005 by means of questionnaires addressing students as well as teaching staff and assistants. Findings witnessed a reduction in recess time, mainly associated with the worry about bullying and aggressive behaviours

which staff identified as the main problems during recess. At the same time, results designated children's positive views about recess and the activities taking place in it, including playing, with the opportunity for physical exercise and socialization identified as the most important benefits of recess in primary school. However, it is not clear how children themselves perceive their participation in peer play, as a comprehensive analysis of their perspectives was not undertaken.

In conclusion, the review of the relevant literature designates play as a most important children's activity during recess (Blatchford 1998a), which has a significant role in children's development (Jarvis, Newman and Swiniarski 2014). However, the recent recognition from both theory and research that play is generated in different contexts and that when playing, children have the opportunity to act for and in themselves and to actively engage into the adult world constructing their own meaning of it (Bronfenbrenner 1992; Corsaro 2011; Faulkner and Woodhead 1999; Prout 2005; Tanakidou and Avgitidou 2016), is not clearly reflected in existing studies on play during recess. Those studies rarely examine this significant dimension and when they do, as is the case of anthropological studies, the focus is not on play during recess as such. As a result, there is further need to investigate the characteristics and developmental dimensions of play during recess in relation to the meanings they have for children themselves because they emphasize the significance of listening to children's voices about a matter of central importance to them (Nicholson et al. 2014).

In this vein, the present study aims to investigate pupils' understanding of the role of play during primary school recess and what meaning they give to it by investigating their perspective on this matter for the first time in the field. The ultimate goal is for the findings of the present study to contribute to the literature which gives emphasis to the necessity of approaching and understanding children's play from their own perspective in



the different contexts that it takes place, highlighting the role of agency in children's development.

### **Purpose of the study**

The main purpose of this study, which constitutes part of an extensive ethnographic project, is the investigation of the meaning primary school children themselves attribute to playing during recess.

The present study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the role of play during recess?
2. What is the meaning that children give to play during recess?

With the term 'play' we mean every activity that takes place in the schoolyard and is acknowledged as play by the pupils themselves, which is freely chosen by them and accomplished using their own initiative.

### **Method**

#### ***Methodology and methodological tools***

The current project is a qualitative study with an interpretive methodological approach. This approach has been adopted based on the fact that the comprehension of social reality, the expression of personal opinions and the experience of emotion, which are central constructs in this research, do not follow fundamental regularities but they rather constitute subjective experiences (Beck 1979; Cohen and Manion 1994). Focus groups were selected as the most appropriate research method because it provides the opportunity for observation of the interaction and counteraction of the participants' perspectives, beginning with the responses to the question set by the researcher (Creswell 2012; Fetterman 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The study was conducted in a primary

school located in a middle-class neighborhood of Athens, Greece, in which the first author worked as a teacher.

### ***Participants***

A total of 82 children between the ages of 6 and 12 years (which included pupils of all grades from 1st to 6th grade) participated in 12 focus groups. Each focus group consisted of six to nine pupils including boys and girls who were classmates as well as playmates in the schoolyard, as observed by the first author during her supervision duties at school recess. The composition of the focus groups was based on purposeful sampling, according to which the researcher selects intentionally the participants s/he believes will provide most relevant information. For the purposes of the present study, mixed sampling technique was selected which combined the “criterion” strategy and the strategy of “maximum variation” (Creswell 2012; Palinkas et al. 2015; Patton 2002). The first strategy led to the selection of groups consisting of pupils who played together in recess with the conviction that they had the knowledge and the experience to contribute to understanding of the focal issue. The second strategy led to the selection of pupils based upon age and grade. The choice of both these strategies ensured the participation of pupils with shared play experiences on the one hand and potential differences based on age and grade on the other. Table 1 shows the composition of the focus groups; the focus groups are stated in the text as FG and A, B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>1</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, D<sub>1</sub>, D<sub>2</sub>, E<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>2</sub>, F<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>2</sub>, F<sub>3</sub> are the classes of the pupils who took part in the study.

Table 1: Participants and the composition of focus groups

Focus group (FG)	Focus group grade	Boys (n=42)	Girls (n=40)	Age group (Range 6-12 years old)
FG <sub>A</sub>	1st	3	5	6-7 years old
FG <sub>B1</sub>	2nd	4	3	7-8 years old
FG <sub>C1</sub>	3rd	3	4	8-9 years old
FG <sub>C2</sub>	3rd	3	3	8-9 years old
FG <sub>D1</sub>	4th	6	3	9-10 years old
FG <sub>D2</sub>	4th	2	5	9-10 years old
FG <sub>E1</sub>	5th	6	2	10-11 years old
FG <sub>E2</sub>	5th	0	7	10-11 years old
FG <sub>F1</sub>	6th	5	3	11-12 years old
FG <sub>F2</sub>	6th	5	3	11-12 years old
FG <sub>F3</sub>	6th	5	2	11-12 years old

### ***Procedure***

The study was conducted between April and May 2016 in a primary public school of Athens, with a capacity of 300 students and 25 teachers. The current primary school comprised of six grades of one or two classes in each grade with a pupil age range between 6 and 12 years. According to the compulsory curriculum, the school day for all grades starts at 8:10 am and ends at 2:00 pm and there are four recess periods with a total duration of 55 minutes (20,15,10,10 minutes each). In Greek primary schools, recesses are allocated playtime according to the National Curriculum and school regulations. In recess periods, children are urged to go to the schoolyard and stay out of their classrooms. During

recess, children's activities are supervised by 3 school teachers on a rotation basis. Teachers in this school were university graduates (as required by the Greek law) with at least 6 years of experience.

The study received ethical approval from the Greek Ministry of Education. The headmaster and the teachers of the school were informed about the purpose and agreed on the implementation of the study. Written informed parental consent as well as pupils' assent was obtained. The children were informed about the procedure, participated on a voluntary basis and were reassured that they could drop out of the study at any time. The organization of all focus groups, which lasted from one to one and a half hours, as well as the process of the interviews, was conducted by the first author within the school premises. Discussions were recorded with handheld digital voice recorders and later transcribed verbatim. The prior acquaintance of the researcher with all participant pupils, because of her role as a teacher in the school, contributed to the creation of a familiar atmosphere so that children could trust her and express themselves freely. The interviews were based on a semi-structured set of questions, which served as a starting point for further discussion and exchange of views among participants (Roulston 2010). The semi-structured interview guide included three sets of questions grouped around three main themes as outlined below.

The first group of questions aimed at introducing the subject and finding what the children's favourite games were during recess.

- (1) *What are your favourite activities during recess?*
- (2) *Do you enjoy playing during recess? Why?*
- (3) *What is your favourite game during recess? Why do you prefer this game?*

The aim of the second group of questions was to sketch the children's interactions while playing during recess.

(4) *How do you decide on what to play during recess?*

(5) *How is it to cooperate in order to play a game?*

(6) *What happens usually when you win or when you lose in the game you play?*

The third group of questions aimed at understanding how the children perceived the school rules concerning playing in recess as well as their perspectives about schoolyard infrastructure and the teachers' supervision.

(7) *What do you think of the rules set by teachers for the play during recess? What do you like and what do you dislike?*

(8) *If you could set the rules in the recess and the games in it what would you allow and what would you forbid?*

(9) *Do your teachers intervene in your games during recess? Do they tell you how to play a game? How do you feel when your teachers tell you what to do with your game?*

(10) *Do you believe that the schoolyard has everything you want to enjoy your break?*

Focus groups were carried out in Greek. Examples and fragments from the conversations have been translated into English in order to illustrate the results.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was chosen for the analysis of the data collected during the focus groups. Data analysis was conducted in six phases as described by Braun and Clarke (2012). At the beginning of the thematic analysis there was familiarization of the data through the careful repetitive reading of it, and active searching for meanings, issues and patterns that were important for the phenomenon under investigation. After examining the

texts line by line, a code number was allocated to every part of the text according to the meaning that was given to it. After that, further interpretation followed and through the combination of different codes, possible themes and sub-themes were sought in which groups of the initial codes were condensed (Langdridge 2004). Then the themes and sub-themes were re-examined, improved, set and named. The coding which was initially set by the first author was discussed and double checked by the second and the third authors to ensure a second and a third opinion. Finally, after collecting all the processed data, a written analysis that included several examples derived from the data was issued. During the presentation of data analysis, the parts of the interviews displayed are exclusively presented with the use of pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

## **Results**

The children in the focus groups talked about what they play as well as the reasons why they like playing, pointing out this way the significance of the play for them and the benefits they gain from their participation in it. From the analysis process four main themes emerged which are discussed below: (1) socializing, (2) freedom, choice and decision-making, (3) personal satisfaction and development, and (4) intense feelings and struggle. Some examples and fragments from the conversations are provided to highlight and explain these four main themes.

### ***Socializing***

The main content of “socializing”, as derived from the children’s answers, concerns the social interaction and relations among peers who take part in play and comprises the following three subthemes: “interaction among peers”, “participation” and the sense of “belonging”.

*Interaction among peers*

As becomes evident from the children's answers, playing in recess appeals to them because it constitutes a unique opportunity for interaction with their peers. In this context, which provides one of the few opportunities to meet with their friends and play freely, they manage to strengthen their friendships, to create new ones or even to end older ones. The following extracts illustrate the above.

FG<sub>F1</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Diamantis (boy): *It's nice to play with our friends. Madam, I live farther from the others, so I don't see them very often outside school, we don't even meet at the weekends. Our parents must arrange it. It's not easy. If we didn't play here we couldn't meet each other at all.*

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Researcher: *So you mean that by playing in recess you have the chances to maintain your friendships.*

Vangelis (boy): *That's right. Where else? We keep them with the play.*

Alexia (girl): *Ok ... or even harm them (laughter).*

Researcher: *What do you mean when you say you harm them?*

Alexia: *Eh ... when you play with Mania (laughter) she's always gossiping and really getting on my nerves.* (Please note: Mania is a student of this class but she doesn't take part in the focus group).

Researcher: *You mean when you play all together?*

Alexia: *Yes*

Researcher: *Does this affect your friendship?*

Alexia: *Which friendship Madam? We are not friends any more. I can't stand her. I don't play with her anymore.*

### *Participation*

The above-mentioned desire to be and interact with peers is also reflected in the children's views about playing for the sake of participation regardless of the result of the game. A boy, commented:

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Gregory (boy): *I don't care if I win or lose. Ok I want to win but I don't care (laughter). I just want to play, to take part.*

### *The sense of "belonging"*

From the children's point of view, playing offers them the opportunity to feel that they belong to their own team, which is strengthened with the adoption of a special peer game culture/code. This is characterized by certain gestures, particular key



words or phrases that the children use, as well as particular values which regulate playing with peers. As children mentioned:

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Sotiria (girl): *We are not a class like all the others. We play all together during breaks. I mean almost all together because we are a team. We are a good company and we don't ruin it. And the more we play together, as I have already said about the spies on the upper floor, the more we bond with each other. This makes us on.*

Michael (boy): *And we have our own codes too. Secret ones* (laughter is heard).

Researcher: *That is ...?*

Michael: *What I have said about the "killer", the headmaster, you are not going to tell him are you?* (laughter).

Researcher: *Of course not.*

Michael: *We are cool. And when we are caught we don't "break".*

Researcher: *What do you mean you don't "break"?*

Thimios (boy): *We never give anyone up no matter what. We said we are "against the law"* (laughter).

### ***Freedom, choice and decision-making***

The second main theme emerging from the children's answers is the sense of freedom, choice and decision-making that playing during recess offers to them, composed of two sub-themes: "initiative-freedom of action" and "dispute of adult authority".

#### ***Initiative-freedom of action***

According to the children, playing during recess gives them the opportunity to act freely, to take initiatives and to make their own choices and decisions. This gives special pleasure to them because of the limited opportunities to do so in their everyday life.

FG<sub>F1</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Manolis (boy): *when we play here it is one of the few times we are free to do whatever we want, the way we want it. It is as if we lived in our own world.*

#### ***Dispute of adult authority***

Moreover, the children reported that they like playing during recess because they particularly enjoy disputing adults' authority. They demonstrate this in two ways: either by disobeying teachers and breaking school recess rules (FG<sub>F1</sub>) or by making fun of the adults (FG<sub>E1</sub>). The following extracts support the above.

FG<sub>F1</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Researcher: *You said that you love spying on the teachers. What exactly do you do?*

Makis (boy): *We try to cross the upper floor without being noticed.*

Researcher: *All this that has been going on for so long during recesses, that we see you going up the stairs to the upper floor which is forbidden and we reprimand you, is it part of your spying?*

Argyris (boy): *Exactly (laughter).*

Researcher: *And don't you care about the consequences of your constantly breaking the rules?*

Michael (boy): *When we are caught ... no we don't. Actually we do actually because we don't want to get caught and taken to the headmaster, the killer as we call him (laughter).*

Researcher: *I know you have been taken to the headmaster several times because you have been going up the floor during recess which is forbidden. Doesn't this discourage you from playing this game?*

Sotiria (girl): *we have been taken hundreds of times to the headmaster but we don't give up. We won't stop. We have said we wouldn't give up. We are a strong team. We are united.*

Thimios (boy): *We are outlaws for sure (laughter). Since you (teachers) keep saying no to everything during recess, we said we would do something that we really like even if it is forbidden.*

FG<sub>E1</sub>, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 10-11 years old

Sotiris (boy): *It's fun to pretend being beaten. We pretend slapping someone but in fact we don't even touch him. It's fun.*

Researcher: *Why do you believe its fun?*

Valia (girl): *Its fun when you (teachers) think we do it seriously but we are just doing it for fun. And then you (teachers) blame us for this and we know you say nonsense (all laugh).*

### ***Personal satisfaction and development***

The main theme “personal satisfaction and development” which emerged from the children’s answers, comprises the following sub-themes: “creation-imagination”, “personal expression”, “improvement of self-image”, “rest, relaxation and emotional discharge”.

#### ***Creation-imagination***

The children reported that they enjoy playing during recess because during their play they use their imagination, gain satisfaction and the pleasure of creation.

FG<sub>C2</sub>, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 8-9 years old

Charilaos (boy): *It's nice to make up stories. To plan things, to have new ideas! It's like scripting new films, like being movie directors!*

#### *Personal expression*

Another dimension of why the children play during school recess and what they believe they gain out of it is related to their need to express their special skills or to overcome their weaknesses (FG<sub>C2</sub>). In play, they also act in accordance with their personal desires and, as a result, they satisfy personal needs and feel stronger (FG<sub>F3</sub>). Furthermore, in the views of the children, play during recess gives them the opportunity to interact with the opposite sex (FG<sub>B1</sub>) and to negotiate conflicts and/or negative feelings (FG<sub>D2</sub>).

FG<sub>C2</sub>, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 8-9 years old

Charilaos (boy): *These days we are playing something cool. We are zombies!*

Irene (girl): *Yes, it's cool! Some of us are zombies while some others are something else. Each one of us is something different. And there is also a chase.*

Researcher: *So each one of you becomes whatever they want?*

Effie (girl): *Whatever we like and we are capable of doing, whatever we are good at.*

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Vangelis (boy): *When we were little we played James Bond.*

Researcher: *You played? Who?*

Vangelis: *The boys of the class.*

Researcher: *What did you do?*

Nikiforos (boy): *Eh ... I watched a James Bond movie at home and when I came here I suggested playing the spies, me and Lucas for example against Gregory, Alexia and Vangelis.*

Researcher: *And you made up a spy story?*

Nikiforos: *Yes indeed.*

Researcher: *What do you like most about this game and you played it?*

Vangelis: *You become tough like the character of the game.*

Gregory (boy): *You feel tougher.*

Researcher: *You mean you like being tougher than you really are?*

Gregory: *Oh yes, one wants to be strong and tough.*

FG<sub>BI</sub>, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 7-8 years old

Researcher: *Why do you enjoy spying Demos in particular? (Demos is a 4<sup>th</sup> grade pupil).*

(Girls look at each other and smile playfully).

Gianna (girl): *Because we are in love with him and we want to be close to him.*

Researcher: *All of you?*

All the girls together: *All of us!*

FG<sub>D2</sub>, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, 9-10 years old

Researcher: *You have said that when you play you enjoy yourselves a lot. When you play for example "family" what makes you feel so happy that you want to play it again?*

Antigoni (girl): *We want to be mothers, fathers and have a lot of siblings because some of us might not have any brothers or sisters.*

Researcher: *And how do you make up your "family" in this game?*

Asimina (girl): *The way we like it.*

Researcher: *You mean that you make up a "family" as you would like it to be?*

Asimina: *That's right. In our games families don't argue and moms always find the time to play with their kids.*

Stella (girl): (Changing the tone of her voice) *And they don't keep on saying: "Give me a break, I'm busy now, I don't have time and blah blah blah" (all laughed).*

### *Improvement of self-image*

Improving their self-image was another reason the children mentioned in relation to play during recess. This is accomplished as their self-esteem is reinforced through acquiring several kinetic skills and becoming better players which, in turn, leads to heightened recognition from their classmates. It was mentioned:

FG<sub>E1</sub>, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, 10-11 years old

Lia (girl): *I like playing football. I didn't know how to do that but now I'm very good at it.*

Valia (girl): *Yes I didn't know very well either, but I've learnt. It's good to know.*

Researcher: *What exactly do you like when playing a game in which you constantly improve yourself?*

Valia: *Basically, this gives us confidence since the others look up to us.* (Valia shows off theatrically. Laughter).

### *Rest, relaxation and emotional discharge*

This last sub-theme in the present unit relates to play during recess as a way to rest, release stress and to get rid of the tension and the pressure caused by school work and the children's hard everyday routine.

FG<sub>F2</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old



Researcher: *You clearly stated that playing in recess is a great pleasure for you. Have you ever thought why you need it so much?*

Achilleas (boy): *To get rid of stress.*

Vladymiros (boy): *To forget about classes. Seven hours here plus three hours at home is very tiresome..*

Achilleas: *Plus two hours of English, when are we supposed to play? When do we get some rest?*

Pandelis (boy): *We never rest. We spend all day studying.*

Pandelis: *We may have sat an exam, we may have done the most difficult subject and when we go out and play during recess it is ... it is like a slowly deflating balloon. Pufffffff* (he sits back in his chair and everybody burst into laughter).

### ***Intense feelings and struggle***

The last main theme emerging from the analysis of the children's responses is labelled "intense feelings and struggle", as it refers to their strong desire to win and the effort they make to exert themselves when they compete in schoolyard games. As the children said:

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Nikiforos (boy): *I care about victory. I want to win. I'm getting crazy!*  
(Laughter).

FG<sub>F3</sub>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 11-12 years old

Menios (boy): *I prefer ball games because there is some excitement about who is going to be the winner, there is tension about the result of the game.*

Nikiforos: *Me too, I am also for the ball games because there is excitement about the outcome, it is unpredictable.*

Researcher: *You care about the game to have a winner and a loser?*

Nikiforos: *Yes, competition. Yes that's it. I don't want to score draw.*

## **Discussion**

The reported study aimed at an in depth investigation of play during primary school recess by adopting an interpretive viewpoint and approaching the issue socio-culturally and contextually. Within this framework, the reported research focused on the children's perspectives and agency about play acknowledging the significance of understanding play during school recess from the children's own perspective as well as their right to express themselves through play.

Regarding the first research question, namely "*What is the role of play during recess?*", the research findings identify that the children want to play for different reasons, which constitute the multiple facets of the role of the play during recess. They can be summarized in the dimensions of socializing, freedom of choice and decision-making, personal satisfaction and development, as well as intense feelings and struggle. These

dimensions, which are associated with the quest for playing, are met in several theoretical approaches to play and playing (Henricks 2014; Sluss 2014). Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2001) for example, spoke about the action and the tension that children experience when playing and when they compete in sports as well as the satisfaction of the participation and the joy of being creative. Traditional developmental approaches about play (Sluss 2014) and psychological theories of play (Ellis 1973) also discuss its contribution to children's discharge and relaxation from schoolwork. However, no single theoretical approach can in itself adequately explain the reasons why children enjoy playing. This is so because, as Sutton-Smith (1997) has stressed and as shown in the current study, children differ in the ways they play and the reasons why they play, while in every child reasons to play may co-exist in different ways and combinations.

The children in the present study stressed that play during school recess provides opportunities to be and interact with peers, thus representing an important context to form and regulate peer relations which, despite their significance, are neither easily nor frequently available in their everyday life outside school. In fact, socio-cultural and contextual factors (Baines and Blatchford 2011) such as living conditions in big cities, the organization of the school timetable as well as policies and practices regarding school recess, limit pupils' time for valuable peer interaction. In addition, according to Bronfenbrenner (1977) and Petrogiannis (2003), the formation and management of friendships is affected not only by the children's participation in different contexts (school, extracurricular activities or the neighbourhood for example) but also by the reciprocity, the connection and the interaction between these contexts which are not evident in a big city such as Athens, and therefore play during school recess remains a valuable opportunity for children to engage in peer activities with significant developmental gains.

The findings also revealed the children's expressed conviction that the experience of freedom to act as they wish, to take initiative, to make choices, to take decisions and implement them, constitute integral parts of play during recess. These dimensions have been emphasized in both theory and research from different viewpoints (Caillois 2001; Henricks 2014; Huizinga 1955; Sluss 2014). Their significance is further highlighted when considering the limited opportunities children have to engage in such acts of agency, in all the different contexts of their daily activities (Blatchford 1998b). It is within this context of freedom created by play during school recess that children can further experience and exercise their agency through questioning and even going against adult authority and rules, often at the risk of being found out and sanctioned.

A third, but closely related to the above, dimension of the role of play during school recess relates to that of self-expression. Elements of psychoanalytical interpretations of play are apparent in the meaning attributed by the children of the present study to this dimension of self-expression, such as the exhibition of special skills, the overcoming of weaknesses and the consequent strengthening of the experienced self-image, the fulfillment of personal needs (Erikson 1977; Freud 1964), the management of negative feelings, the handling of difficult situations and the exchanges with the opposite sex (Drewes and Schaefer 2010; Goleman 1995). However, classic psychoanalytical approaches can partly account for the role of play in such self-expression and wish fulfillment, their explanations being mainly based on deeper instincts and desires. Yet, as has been pointed out by the findings of this and other studies, through self-expression and realization of needs children actively transform the surrounding world and construct their own meanings, overcoming the limits set by the immediate environment (Vygotsky 1933). When playing "family" for instance, they are not only working through personal

experiences but they are reproducing a social institution of the adult world while at the same time adapting its structure and synthesis to their own needs and wishes.

Finally, children like playing because they acquire skills that enhance their self-esteem and self-confidence through becoming more competent players and particularly through the recognition they receive from their classmates and this finding is consistent with previous research suggesting the importance of play during recess in achieving a number of skills of developmental importance (Baines and Blatchford 2011; Nova-Kaltsouni 2010).

As for the second research question, “*What is the meaning that children give to play during recess?*”, findings showed that the above-discussed reasons why children want to play during school recess also constitute the meaning that such play has for the children themselves. The current findings show, for the first time in the context of primary school recess, that underlying all reasons why children seek to play during recess is the opportunity it provides for exercising different forms of agency (Wood 2014). In peer play during recess, children feel capable to act freely, take initiatives, create and imagine, they make plans and compose their own situations according to their own rules and limits. Moreover, they invent strategies to handle difficulties so that their play is self-regulated, they also express themselves as they wish, they find ways to relax and finally they feel that they have control of their own life by disputing adult authority and by disobeying the relevant rules.

The latter, dispute of adult authority and adult rules, is also connected to the sense of peer-group belongingness achieved through play during recess. Play facilitates the organization of peer groups, while the adoption of special codes, gestures and values within such groups (Corsaro 2011) as well as the development of special relationships, rules and dynamics (Blatchford et al. 2016), creates their own peer culture. During play in

such peer-groups, children enjoy breaking recess rules and making fun of teachers, which represents attempts to regain adult authority according to the theory of interpretive reproduction (Corsaro 2003). Therefore, both the procedure of disputing the adult authority and the disobedience of adult rules, establish gaining control by the children and ensure their sense of belonging to a peer group. As a result, children's play during school recess proves an important means of self-awareness as well as a means of definition of their social status.

Limitations of this study include the frequency of the focus groups and the role of the researcher as teacher. Therefore, the results might be limited due to the fact that the focus groups were held only once and therefore it was not possible to collect further data and revisit children's perspectives (Creswell 2012). Secondly, the fact that the researcher who conducted the focus groups was also a school teacher, contributed on the one hand to the creation of a familiar atmosphere so that children could trust her and express themselves freely but on the other hand might have hindered children's self expressions because of her status as a teacher (Mayall 1994).

### **Conclusions**

The present study highlights the meaning of play during primary school recess, through directly investigating the children's own perspectives for the first time in the relevant literature. It appears that children during recess pursue the opportunity to function as active agents since their decisions, choices and actions give rise to, transform and develop play while at the same time attribute meaning to it. The pupils approach play in terms of sociability, in relation to the freedom it creates and the relevant opportunities for exercising choice and decision-making, as a means of personal satisfaction and

development and, finally, as a source of intense feelings due to victory or competition. They thus seek and exercise different forms of agency through acting on different levels and in different ways, always in connection with the specific context in which their play is generated. Therefore the current findings support the importance of school recess and of the play activity taking place in its context which is paramount for both policy-making as well as school practice.

It is our conviction that the current study contributes a better understanding of the play during recess in primary schools, in a specific socio-cultural environment. The above was mainly achieved through the opportunity given to the children to express themselves and indicate according to their point of view the reasons why they like playing and thus the meaning that the play has for them. This is in line with a theoretical conception of children as agents and the related recognition that children's perspectives should be heard in all activities or decisions that influence them, a position also ratified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2009).

This qualitative study contributes in theory and in research to the existing Greek and international data because studies about recess and in particular about play during recess are overall limited in the international literature. Furthermore, the findings could be a useful resource for educational tools developed for further training of teaching staff and policy makers. Last but not least, it stresses the need to consider children's perspectives about issues that concern them and on a decision-making level it optimizes the opportunities for free playing during school recess in education.

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