

International Journal of Education & the Arts

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ISSN: 1529-8094

Volume 17 Number 18

May 28, 2016

Improving Peer Relations Through Dramatic Play in Primary School Pupils

Asterios Tsiaras
University of Peloponnese, Greece

Citation: Tsiaras, A. (2016). Improving peer relations through dramatic play in primary school pupils. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 17(18). Retrieved from <http://www.ijea.org/v17n18/>.

Abstract

In this paper, the role of dramatic play was examined as a means of developing primary school pupils' peer relationships. A research study was conducted in 120 public primary school classrooms in Greece. The research data came from 2428 children aged 8 through 11 years (1202 boys, 1226 girls) in an experimental process of pre-testing and post-testing, using Moreno's sociometric test. Statistical analysis of research data revealed that dramatic play activities have positive effects in pupils' peer relationships. Moreover, the positive effect that dramatic play has on pupils' friendships is not related to the age of the children because the research expectations were confirmed in all experimental classrooms. Thus, more attention should be paid to a dramatic play-based curriculum in primary education if the development of pupils' peer relationships is to be facilitated.

Theoretical Background

Introduction

This paper discusses the effects of engaging students in a planned intervention of dramatic play activities and how this affects pupils' peer relationships. Friendships in childhood are essential to concurrent and future psychosocial adjustment and early peer relationship problems may have a negative psychological impact on the child's later personal, social and emotional development. Preventive interventions that targeted specific problems such as social rejection and isolation were found to be especially effective when they are undertaken early in a child's life (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2014; Nevid, 2012). Dramatic play has a key role in social development by providing a context in which children can obtain many social skills related to social competence, such as cooperation, sharing, empathy and social problem solving. Consequently, group activities like dramatic play have a much more significant influence on children's development, helping them to learn and practice new social skills and become acquainted with the social norms and processes involved in interpersonal relationships (Hughes, 2010; Mayesky, 2012). In the dramatic play area, it is easier for pupils to be led to a fertile exchange of their own opinions in order to improve their collaboration and to share common experiences and ideas, a fact that encourages the establishment and improvement of their relationships (Doctoroff, 1997; Koster, 2014).

Dramatic Play in Primary Years

The term dramatic play is generally used to describe all the kinds of pretend play, that is, symbolic play, role-play, imaginative play, fantasy play, make-believe play, and socio-dramatic play (Miller, 2010; Torgerson, 2001). Dramatic play is a child-oriented activity and has seven identifying characteristics: imitative role play, make-believe with objects, make-believe with regard to actions and situations, interaction, non-verbal communication, persistence and narratives (Ciussi, & Gebers Freitas, 2012; McCullough, 2000). Children's ability to participate conventionally in dramatic play is related to the following factors: enacting dramatic social situations in an isolated or cooperative way, manipulating objects to be used in different functions, using verbal interactions, and agreeing to treat the emerging context of play as real (Charlesworth, 2011; Saracho, 2012).

In the lower primary school years, pretending behavior has developed into a complex recreation of routine events or scripts from family life, story books, and television, reflecting pupils' life experiences. As children get older, their references for dramatic play resources expand as they increase their repertoire of personal, cultural, historical, and fantastical information. Gradually, pupils acquire the ability to substitute objects, persons, and actions for their representative contexts, without the use of props, using gestures and language to note their transformations in their spontaneous play (Hancock, 2006; Sierra, 2010). They can also

represent their visions in the form of symbols and images which are closely related to their personal experiences in developing dramatic play roles, and in a dramatization of social events (McGuinn, 2014; Luongo-Orlando, 2010; Woodard & Milch, 2012). The quality of dramatic play can be enriched if primary school children receive teacher intervention in the form of specific play-tutoring strategies that stimulate the pretend situation. Similarly to other areas of the primary curriculum, the teacher's role is primarily that of facilitator so that dramatic play remains a child-initiated activity. Teachers can take on different roles in play, from helping children initiate or enter play with others to encouraging them to maintain and extend play interactions (Baldwin, 2012; Mayesky, 2012).

Dramatic play is an eminently social activity constructed through pupils' understanding of their social worlds, their personal histories and cultural backgrounds. Children must constantly negotiate play content, roles, actions, props, and scenery with one another (Sierra, 2010). The dramatic play area provides excellent opportunities for fine-tuning the roles which they play. Children may impersonate characters and shape the perception of their own attitude as this is differentiated through their role in their play (Jackman, 2011; Stone & Farberman, 1986). Thus, by providing the opportunity to engage in pretend play in a social setting, dramatic play may enable children to acknowledge and demonstrate their competence and provides a safe setting for exploring and practicing new and more satisfying ways to play their current roles (Koster, 2014; Sternberg & Garcia, 2000). Aside from being lots of fun, taking on fantasy roles helps to spark children's spontaneity and creativity (Newman & Newman, 2011; Saracho, 2012). Dramatic play gives them an escape from their daily concerns and a chance to deal with them in imaginative ways. It also provides a supportive community for children to learn how to be group members and to learn how to express their individuality (Grainger, 2003; Wilson, 2012). Dramatic play is something more than a drama technique. It motivates children to enter their world imaginatively, to develop their autonomy, to extend their sovereignty and to develop a healthy sense of their self (Gestwicki, 2014).

Over the past decades there has been an increasing interest by educators in understanding the positive impact of dramatic play on children's overall development. Many scholars consider dramatic play as a means of inspiring children with symbolic, artistic and innovative behaviours (Jennings & Gerhardt, 2011; Moyles, 2010). The majority of research studies which have focused on the benefits of dramatic play for disabled children and preschool-age children were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, when enthusiasm for play as a research topic was at its peak (Power, 2000). Some of the studies deal with the importance of dramatic play in supporting children's cognitive, social and affective development (Fein, 1989; Lieberman, 1977; McCullough, 2000). Other studies focus on the effect of dramatic play on children's literacy and narrative abilities and others investigated the evolutionary stages of symbolic play in relation to the child's age (Blake, 2007; McCune-Nicolish, 1981; Piaget, 1962). Moreover,

some studies evaluate the content of dramatic activities and the impact that these exert on the development of children's social skills (Lindon, 2001; Yassa, 1997). Finally, some surveys have sought to shed light on the therapeutic effect of dramatic play on primary age children (Curry, 1974; Fineman, 1962; Marks-Tarlow, 2012). Most of the above studies have been derived from relatively small-scale, cross-sectional studies. Therefore, the challenge for researchers is to mount more extensive and practice-oriented studies to investigate the various uses of dramatic play in diverse primary school settings (Baldwin, 2008; Wilson, 2012).

Peer Relations in Childhood

Although children's peer relationships have been the subject of research attention since at least the 1920s, it is only since the 1970s that systematic theories have been proposed to integrate the rapidly growing body of empirical knowledge (Erwin, 2013; Meece & Eccles, 2010). Children's peer relationships are distinguished from other relationships and are based on two simple characteristics: levels of equality and power. However, these relationships coexist within the wider social context in which they occur, including a range of previous and current social and personal relationships (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Rubin & Coplan, 2010).

Relationships between children display both vertical and horizontal growth. By vertical growth the relationships change as children grow older and unfold more sophisticated cognitive abilities and social skills (Cicchetti & Cohen, 2006; Underwood & Rosen, 2011). The use of the term horizontal growth refers to the development and change within a specific relationship. The significance of peer relationships increases and changes with age. Young children's close relationships display essential differences from those of children in middle-childhood and these, in turn, are essentially different from those of adolescents (Erwin, 2013; Martin & Fabes, 2009).

In the primary years the emergence of harmonious peer interactions and close friendships has often been associated with a multitude of other developmental competencies (Barbarin & Wasik, 2009; Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). During the primary grades, peer relationships and friendships become increasingly important. These social support networks are sources of intimacy and have overtaken those with parents from early to mid-adolescence. Children's peer relationships become increasingly stable, intimate and personally significant from middle childhood (ages 8-12) through late adolescence (ages 17-23) (Levesque, 2011; Shaffer, 2009).

For decades, scholars from various fields have amply demonstrated how diverse types and features of children's peer relations predict key developmental outcomes, including academic achievement, problem behaviour and schooling adjustment (Bukatko & Daehler, 2012; Meece & Eccles, 2010). One of the most significant predictors of social popularity or social rejection is the way children interact together. For peers, these behaviours appear to become important

sources of information on how they should interact with a particular pupil (Damon & Lerner, 2008; McCartney, 2011). Children who have positive playful interactions and at least one close friend adjust better in a primary school setting, achieve academically and demonstrate better mental health (Barbarin & Wasik, 2009; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999). Preadolescence (ages 7-13) is also a critical period for the development of children's relationships with peers, which are considered to be an important source of information about others, the self and the world in general increasing in importance with age (Gilmore & Meersand, 2014; Rubin, Bukowski & Laursen, 2011).

To summarize, peer relations allow children to learn and practise their social-interaction skills with equals (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). Therefore, deprivation of adequate social relationships has major dire consequences for the child's socialization and development. Many research studies demonstrate that isolated children interact with peers in defensive ways and feel lonely, marginalised and depressed (Lawrence, 2006; Chazan, 2002). However, many scholars have suggested that dramatic play may have a crucial role to play for promoting positive social interactions among young children in the school setting (Elkind, 2007; Jennings & Gerhardt, 2011).

Method

The Present Study

The main aim of this study was to find out if dramatic play can be used as a means of developing primary school pupils' peer relations. The research questions formulated for the present study are as follows:

Question 1: Do dramatic play activities have a positive effect on the development of primary pupils' peer relations?

Question 2: Is the possible positive influence of dramatic play related to the age of pupils?

The study was carried out in 30 Greek primary schools in order to identify the effect of dramatic play on primary school pupils' peer relations. This study used an experimental pre-post comparison group design in 120 public primary school classrooms, which included 60 experimental groups and 60 control groups. In total 2,428 children, ranging from 8 to 11 years of age, were asked to fill in a questionnaire based on Moreno's sociometric test in an experimental process of pre and post testing.

Participants

We chose to use the cluster sampling method where the total population is divided into a number of relatively small subdivisions which are themselves clusters of still smaller units and then some of these clusters are randomly selected for inclusion in the overall sample. Thirty public primary schools in Athens were randomly selected for the first level of sampling. In the second level of sampling, 60 classes in grades 3-6 were randomly selected as experimental teams and 60 classes as control teams out of a total of 360 classes. In order to eliminate the potential influence of confounding factors, a control group from each school was randomly selected and was comparable to the experimental group. Randomized assignment of pupils into the treatment and control groups was used to assure comparability in these groups. The above schools shared the same premises and the children of these classes were all middle to upper SES. The data collected were from 2428 children aged 8 through 11 years (1202 boys, 1226 girls). The total research sample was divided into two groups. The experimental groups included 1213 children and the control groups included 1215 children. For further details, Table 1 provides an analytical presentation of the total number of pupils in both the experimental and the control groups.

Table 1

Research Sample Composition

	Experimental Groups (N=15)			Control Groups (N=15)		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
3rd Grade	149	152	301	149	153	302
4th Grade	152	154	306	151	157	308
5th Grade	148	154	302	154	149	303
6th Grade	150	154	304	149	153	302
Total	599	614	1213	603	612	1215

The research treatment was designed to last approximately 16 weeks. Pupils of the experimental group participated in weekly one-hour dramatic play sessions that were designed to build sequentially on personal development of skills relating to knowing one's self and understanding relationships. The selection of this schedule was in accordance with the Greek primary school curriculum.

The framework of the experimental program included 16 dramatic play sessions. All dramatic activities involved pupil interaction and were structured so that every child participated. A large part of the activities consisted of warm-up exercises and imaginative play, with material objects as the 'props' in play scenarios, motivating pupils to express themselves orally and through their full-body movement (Sternberg & Garcia, 2000).

More specifically, a preliminary Program of Activities was scheduled to be followed during the 16 weeks, in sessions of one hour per week. Each session consisted of three phases:

Phase 1: An initial phase included games with rules, to establish rapport with pupils and to generate a feeling of confidence among them. In contrast to dramatic play, which is constructed by players, these games provided clearly articulated, explicit rules, which could be understood and accepted by all players.

Phase 2: Pupils were rapidly able to organize themselves into equal-sized teams of three to six members with and without a teacher being present whereby they were able to invent stories, first on free topics and then on topical themes like family, school, and the world around them. Pupils were given a set of realistic and even non-realistic materials (i.e., coloured vests, scarves, ribbons, pieces of fabric, sticks, hats) from which they were able to create imaginary characters, props, simple scenarios and situations. They were also given a set time period within which to plan and enact their own characters, situations, and sequence of events freely.

Phase 3: After finishing planning and enacting their play-stories, pupils sat in a circle, and they were guided and inspired by the teacher to engage in sharing their personal creations with each other.

Dramatic play activities were clearly related to real world scenarios because this is believed to be one of the major contributing factors in improving interaction, negotiation and collaboration among pupils (McMahon, 2002). These types of play activities have been indicated as appropriate for pupils' sensitization, self-growth, interpersonal interaction and the creation of a climate of confidence among them (Swale, 2009).

Type of Research

This experimental study can be characterized as field research, since it was conducted in the children's natural environment and without making them feel their participation in the experimental procedure (Babbie, 2014; Bailey, 2007). The concretization of the whole experimental plan was made by the teachers of the experimental classes (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000; Smithenry & Gallager-Bolos, 2009).

Means of Data Collection

The research hypothesis consisted of evaluating whether a concrete program, which included goal-oriented dramatic play activities, can positively affect elementary school children's peer relations. The research was carried out during the school year 2012-13.

The basic aim of our study was to use a reliable means of measuring pupils' peer relations. Among the methods of measuring social relationships, Moreno's sociometric test was adopted in this study due to its widespread use in measuring children's peer relationships and to its high validity and reliability (Rubin, Bukowski & Laursen, 2011). To examine the reliability of Moreno's sociometric test in this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated. The obtained reliability coefficient for Cronbach's Alpha was for Pre-test: .876 and for Post-test: .881. The sociometric test is a method for chartering relationships within a group based upon the stated preferences of the members. It is a self-report technique in which each group member responds to the same questions posed by the teacher in writing. Like all self-report techniques, it is based on the willingness and honesty of the respondents (Sherman & Fredman, 2013).

The research participants were first tested with Moreno's sociometric test in September. The retest was conducted after an interval of six months, between March and April of the same school year, immediately after the end of the intervention program.

Procedures

Particular emphasis was laid on the questionnaire completion process. Efforts were focused primarily on methodological rigor and meticulous concern for conducting research under nearly identical conditions in all experimental and control classes. The researcher specified a suitable scenario to achieve this goal. Accordingly, the pupils were told that the questionnaire was not a test, there were no right answers and their answers would be kept private in order to create a confidential atmosphere. The completion of the questionnaire was done by the pupils in silence after having the questions first read by the researcher. Questionnaire completion time was not predetermined; thus, the whole process lasted as long as the last pupil needed to answer the questions. Through the sociometric test each pupil was asked to choose the peers with whom they wanted to associate. More specifically, pupils were asked to name three classroom peers they liked most and three they liked least.

Data analysis

In this research study, the independent variables were the content of dramatic play activities, the pupils' physical activities, the frequency of social interaction among school team members through verbal and non-verbal means of communication, the age of children and the lack of control group pupils' engagement in similar dramatic play activities. In order to better test the impact of the independent variable, which was related to the specific content of dramatic play activities, the teachers applied the same dramatic play themes in all experimental classes.

The sociometric questionnaire used in the study was administered to the groups, in which each student was asked to name three group members who liked or disliked. The analysis of data derived from the sociometric test, based upon the procedures outlined by Moreno, resulted in a sociogram which represented the pattern of social relationships at a given time (Moreno, 1934). After the sociometric tests were given to each member of the class, the data were tabulated in a matrix table (Gronlund, 1971). The computerized analysis of sociometric data was carried out using a commercially available computer program entitled "Walsh's classroom sociometrics." Consequently, the dependent variable was the changes in pupils' peer relations, as these are expressed through the change in the values of the sociogram variables. The analysis of sociometric data has yielded eight primary dependent variables of measuring pupils' peer relationships. These are defined and described as follows:

- 1) The first variable is the mutual choices, which refers to the pupils who have chosen each other on the same sociometric criterion. The more mutual choices there are, the more congenial the group is and thus the greater the chances of a positive social climate in the classroom.
- 2) The second variable is the non-mutual choices, which refers to unreciprocated friendship choices among pupils on the same sociometric criterion.
- 3) The third variable is the mutual rejections, which refers to the pupils who have rejected each other on the same sociometric criterion
- 4) The fourth variable is the isolates, which refers to pupils who have not been positively nominated by anyone in the group.
- 5) The fifth variable is the rejectees, which refers to pupils who are identified as disliked by many members and so their choice status is low. They receive no positive choices and a number of negative choices which result when the sociometric questions request pupils to indicate those whom they do not prefer for a specified activity.
- 6) The sixth variable is the populars, which refers to pupils who receive a lot of liking nominations and are found at the top of the sociometric distribution in the classroom structure.
- 7) The seventh variable is the clusters, which refers to shapes in the group's sociogram. The clusters include pupils within the group who make up a subgroup, or clique. This is a situation in which a number of individuals choose each other on the same sociometric criterion, but give relatively few choices to individuals outside their group.

8) The eighth variable is the open structure formations, which refers to shapes in the group's sociogram. The open structure formations include shapes such as chains, triangles and circles. A chain is a form in which one pupil nominates another who in turn nominates another child. When a chain comes back on itself, by having the last person nominate the first, it is called a triangle if it involves only three people. If there are more than three people, it is called a circle.

In order to check the multiple influences of other factors on the dependent variable in our research study, comparable treatment and control groups were created by random assignment that were statistically equivalent to one another. Essentially, this facilitated reliability of the conclusions drawn through the application of the experimental program. Statistical analysis used in the present investigation was performed with a commercially available statistical package (SPSS, version 22.0 for Windows). Data were subjected to statistical analysis, using student's t-test, comparing a specific difference between the average values of each research variable that has been measured on the same scale, at two different points of times (Kolaczyk, 2009; Landau & Everitt, 2004; Tarling, 2008).

Results

Statistical analysis of the survey data revealed that our research assumptions were partly confirmed. In all experimental classes that employed the dramatic play interventions the positive effect of the exploratory program is statistically confirmed in four of the eight dependent variables reported.

As shown in Tables 2 to 5, the student's t-test revealed a significant difference in favour of the experimental groups. More specifically, in Table 2 the experimental classes in grade 3, as measured by a student t-test, showed significant gains in scores for four dependent variables: mutual choices, non-mutual choices, isolates and open structure formations. On the contrary, no significant gains were observed in scores for four dependent variables: mutual, rejectees, populars, and clusters.

As presented in Table 3, the experimental classes in grade 4 as measured by a two-tailed Student t test, showed significant gains in scores for four dependent variables: mutual choices, non-mutual choices, isolates and open structure formations. On the contrary, no significant gains were observed in scores for four dependent variables: mutual rejections, rejectees, populars and clusters.

Table 2

T-test for the Control & Experimental Groups' Pre-Test & Post-Test Scores of the Grade 3 Pupils

Experimental Group (N=15)	Pre-test		Post-test		MD	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
	M	SD	M	SD				
Mutual Choices	13.20	1.56	14.20	1.97	- 1.00	1.13	- 3.416	.004**
Non-Mutual Choices	37.13	.83	36.33	.72	.80	.86	3.595	.003**
Mutual Rejections	5.00	.75	4.87	.83	.13	.99	.521	.610
Isolates	3.26	.70	2.33	.61	.93	.88	4.090	.001***
Rejectees	3.60	.50	3.40	.50	.20	.67	1.146	.271
Populars	4.93	.79	4.27	.59	.66	.89	2.870	.012
Clusters	1.46	.99	1.20	.77	.26	.88	1.169	.262
Open Structure Formations	1.46	.63	2.32	.61	- .86	.91	- 3.666	.003**
Control Group (N=15)	M	SD	M	SD	MD	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Mutual Choices	13.80	.67	14.06	.70	- .26	1.16	- .888	.389
Non-Mutual Choices	37.66	.97	38.06	.59	- .40	1.12	- 1.382	.189
Mutual Rejections	4.87	.63	4.93	.79	- .06	.88	- .292	.774
Isolates	3.13	.63	2.80	.41	.33	.72	1.784	.096
Rejectees	3.53	.51	3.47	.63	.06	.79	.323	.751
Populars	4.80	.67	4.47	.51	.33	.81	1.581	.136
Clusters	1.66	.81	1.46	.74	.20	.94	.823	.424
Open Structure Formations	2.26	.59	2.52	.51	.26	.96	- 1.075	.301

Note: ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

Table 3

T-test for the Control & Experimental Groups' Pre-Test & Post-Test Scores of the Grade 4 Pupils

Experimental Group (N=15)	Pre-test		Post-test		MD	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
	M	SD	M	SD				
Mutual Choices	12.67	1.29	14.00	1.96	- 1.33	1.49	- 3.452	.004**
Non-Mutual Choices	27.06	.70	26.26	.88	.80	.86	3.595	.003**
Mutual Rejections	5.20	.86	4.87	.63	.33	1.17	1.099	.290
Isolates	3.20	.56	2.60	.50	.60	.73	3.154	.007**
Rejectees	3.34	.48	3.60	.63	- .26	.79	- 1.293	.217
Populars	3.86	.74	3.60	.63	- .26	.70	1.468	.164
Clusters	1.40	.91	1.20	.56	.20	.86	.899	.384

Open Structure Formations	1.06	.59	2.06	.79	- 1.00	.84	- 4.583	.000***
Control Group (N=15)	M	SD	M	SD	MD	SD	t -value	p- value
Mutual Choices	12.73	.45	12.86	.51	- .13	.51	-1.000	.334
Non-Mutual Choices	26.93	.79	27.26	.70	- .33	1.17	-1.099	.290
Mutual Rejections	5.13	.63	4.93	.59	.20	.67	1.146	.271
Isolates	3.13	.63	2.80	.56	.33	.81	1.581	.136
Rejectees	3.46	.51	3.33	.61	.13	.83	.619	.546
Populars	3.40	.50	3.34	.48	.06	.59	.435	.670
Clusters	1.60	.73	1.34	.48	.26	.79	1.293	.217
Open Structure Formations	1.86	.51	2.06	.25	- .20	.56	- 1.382	.189

Note: ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

As shown in Table 4, the experimental classes in grade 5 as measured by a two-tailed Student t test, revealed significant gains in scores for four dependent variables: mutual choices, non-mutual choices, isolates and open structure formations. On the contrary, no significant gains were observed in scores for four dependent variables: mutual rejections, rejectees, populars and clusters.

Table 4

T-test for the Control & Experimental Groups' Pre-Test & Post-Test Scores of the Grade 5 Pupils

Experimental Group (N=15)	Pre-test		Post-test		MD	SD	t -value	p- value
	M	SD	M	SD				
Mutual Choices	13.67	.89	14.80	1.32	- 1.13	1.06	- 4.141	.001***
Non-Mutual Choices	31.60	.91	30.80	.67	.80	.24	3.292	.005**
Mutual Rejections	5.06	.79	4.93	.59	.13	.99	.521	.610
Isolates	3.60	.63	2.80	.67	.80	.86	3.595	.003**
Rejectees	3.33	.48	3.66	.61	- .33	.81	- 1.581	.136
Populars	4.80	.67	4.54	.51	.26	.70	1.468	.164
Clusters	2.20	.41	1.73	.70	.46	.74	2.432	.029
Open Structure Formations	1.53	.83	2.33	.61	- .80	.86	- 3.595	.003**
Control Group (N=15)	M	SD	M	SD	MD	SD	t -value	p- value
Mutual Choices	13.40	.50	13.14	.63	.26	.88	1.169	.262
Non-Mutual Choices	30.93	1.03	31.46	.51	- .53	.91	- 2.256	.041
Mutual Rejections	5.26	.59	5.00	.65	.26	.88	1.169	.262
Isolates	3.20	.67	3.33	.61	- .13	.83	- .619	.546
Rejectees	3.53	.63	3.66	.61	- .13	.91	- .564	.582
Populars	4.73	.59	4.60	.50	.13	.63	.807	.433

Clusters	2.13	.63	2.46	.51	- .33	.89	- 1.435	.173
Open Structure Formations	2.14	.35	2.40	.63	- .26	.70	- 1.468	.164

Note: ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

As presented in Table 5, the experimental classes in grade 6 as measured by a two-tailed Student *t* test, showed significant gains in scores for four dependent variables: mutual choices, non-mutual choices, isolates and open structure formations. On the contrary, no significant gains were observed in scores for four dependent variables: mutual rejections, rejectees, populars and clusters.

Table 5

T-test for the Control & Experimental Groups' Pre-Test & Post-Test Scores of the Grade 6 Pupils

	Pre-test		Post-test		MD	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
	M	SD	M	SD				
Experimental Group (N=15)								
Mutual Choices	13.60	.91	14.60	1.59	- 1.00	1.13	- 3.416	.004**
Non-Mutual Choices	31.60	.63	30.94	.70	.66	.72	3.568	.003**
Mutual Rejections	4.40	.50	4.73	.70	- .33	.97	- 1.323	.207
Isolates	2.86	.35	1.86	.74	- 1.00	.92	4.183	.001***
Rejectees	3.33	.48	3.73	.70	- .40	.91	- 1.702	.111
Populars	3.66	.48	3.33	.48	.33	.89	1.435	.173
Clusters	1.93	.96	1.60	.98	.33	.97	1.323	.207
Open Structure Formations	1.00	.65	2.06	1.03	- 1.06	.96	- 4.298	.001***
Control Group (N=15)								
Mutual Choices	13.46	.51	13.66	.48	- .20	.77	- 1.000	.334
Non-Mutual Choices	31.53	.91	31.73	.70	- .20	.86	- .899	.384
Mutual Rejections	4.20	.56	4.40	.63	- .20	.94	- .823	.424
Isolates	2.73	.45	2.47	.51	.26	.70	1.468	.164
Rejectees	3.46	.51	3.26	.45	.20	.77	- 1.000	.334
Populars	3.53	.51	3.40	.50	.13	.63	.807	.433
Clusters	1.86	.51	1.60	.63	.26	.79	1.293	.217
Open Structure Formations	1.66	.48	2.12	.83	- .46	1.12	- 1.606	.131

Note: ** indicates $p < .01$; *** indicates $p < .001$

As shown in Tables 2 to 5, no significant gain was observed in scores of any dependent variables, at the 1% level of significance, in any of these control classes.

The main research findings show that the answer to the first research question is affirmative.

These findings support the conclusion that dramatic play is one of the most important contexts for the development of primary school pupils' peer relationships. Furthermore, the positive effect dramatic play can have in children's peer relations is not related to the age of pupils, since the research outcome expectations were confirmed in all research samples.

Consequently, the independent variable 'age of pupils' does not seem to suspend the positive effect of the independent variable 'dramatic play activities' on the development of children's peer relationships.

Conclusions

The main research hypothesis has been confirmed by the results of our research study since the application of specific intervention strategies in the experimental classes, based on dramatic play activities, facilitated the development of pupils' peer relationships. The affirmation of the main research questions is attributed to the dramatic play activities' positive influence on each pupil individually but also on the school team as a whole; a fact that mediated the pupils' experience of effective peer relationships. The products of our research investigations raise one additional consideration. The rejected and neglected children, who have participated in dramatic play, received further external assistance to improve their social skills. It is likely, however, that these children can continue to develop specific patterns of behaviour, which are suitable for improving their social status in the classroom setting.

In addition, our data suggests that dramatic play gave the children the opportunity to develop important inter- and intra-personal skills and competencies. It helped them to discover a number of positive qualities about themselves and their classmates and gain self-confidence. Pupils learned how to use metacommunicative strategies to suggest and negotiate ideas, how to lead and follow, how to be patient when waiting for a turn, and most importantly, how to acknowledge and respect someone else's creative ideas, suggestions and perspectives. Consequently, through interaction with their peers in the dramatic play area, each child may be more sensitized to the needs, the wishes and attitudes of their classmates.

Dramatic play significantly enhances the development of the social dimension within the children as they are developing valuable skills for them in their future life. Dramatic play activities play a pivotal role in building connections, and they contribute to children's physical progress as well. Furthermore, by acting out what they have seen others do, children learn to comprehend types of social behavior as well as coping with their own fears and fantasies. Thus, children's participation in dramatic play has created a window of opportunity both for their physical and for their socio-emotional development.

Dramatic play also provides opportunities for children to consider the demands of their peers and respond in a variety of ways. Specific adult intervention supports the children in their

efforts to build relationships and be accepted in the group. Therefore, pupils have opportunities to initiate interactions with others, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and create elaborate, meaningful, pretend play themes with others. Moreover, they are able to communicate verbally and nonverbally, negotiate and reconcile differences of opinions, develop social skills and as a result maintain relationships and develop new friendships.

Despite the importance of play and its critical role in children's development, some psychologists have argued that dramatic play declines "naturally" as children mature. Such arguments seem upon careful reflection to be invalid as our research showed that the positive effect that dramatic play-tutoring has on pupils' friendships is not related to the age of children. Dramatic play declines because of adults' lack of understanding and social acceptance of playful activities and their social prejudices and misapprehensions of play as mere entertainment rather than as serious learning. Unfortunately, this trend accelerated dramatically during the two decades and dramatic play has lost much of its footing in elementary classrooms due to an increased focus on academics and standardization.

In the process of dramatic play, children have an opportunity to re-enact their own life experiences and to acquire a different perception of themselves. They also communicate through a different code. They blunt their comprehension of the world, they learn through doing in a productive way and they are provided with suitable experiences, which will help them, face their future life. Dramatic play allows children to exercise their imagination and creativity while at the same time requiring them to be mindful of the broader rules of membership in a group. Researchers identify that children become deliberate players as they adhere to the rules of dramatic play and through this gain knowledge of their own identity, expand their ability to self-monitoring function, and are able to explore this throughout playful interactions (Bolton, 1998; Walker, 2007).

Several recent studies show that if children are encouraged to strengthen their self-image, they feel responsible for their actions and they believe in their own abilities (Marion, 2011; Rosengren, 2005). More specifically, according to research findings, children's participation in dramatic play enables them to realize their abilities and to develop their potential by building their self-respect (Bridgeman, 1981; Hayes, 2012). Children with positive self-perception are encouraged to develop healthy interpersonal relations and maintain the quality of their faculty for successful professional and social incorporation (Nicotera, 1993, Rosenberg, 1986; Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991).

A future area for exploration would be examining the gender differences in the formation of peer relationships through dramatic play. Since the children's relationships change over time, research studies should probably include children from different SES backgrounds and

different age ranges.

In conclusion, this study presents evidence to reaffirm the importance of play activities in programs for primary children and validates the use of dramatic play as a child-centered and appropriate method for enhancing positive peer relations of primary aged children. One of the best ways for children to express themselves is through creative dramatic play. Children become more successful when they are allowed to socialize positively and freely during their school-age years. Dramatic play has a great value in developing the social tendencies of children because it allows them to adopt a variety of simultaneous roles such as that of the actor, observer and participator to the fullest extent of their abilities in a shared enterprise. In addition to time, children need physical and social environments where they feel safe to forge connections with peers. This allows them to develop and practice the skills necessary to establish and maintain friendships. Dramatic play provides opportunities for children to practice the skills and strategies of successful friendships such as empathy, helpfulness and interest in others.

The Greek educational system still continues to focus on the cognitive rather than the interpersonal and aesthetic dimension of children's lives rendering them passive recipients of wisdom. Teachers should take action to support children who are struggling in their peer relationships by using suitable methods such as dramatic play for improving their access to time and space for social interaction with peers. This study makes a clear argument to include opportunities for enriched dramatic play in the Primary Curriculum. Consequently, the need for a dramatic play-based curriculum is considered to be the most urgent in the Greek educational system and all over the world.

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About the Author

Asterios Tsiaras is Associate Professor in the department of Theatrical Studies at University of Peloponnese. He has written about many different aspects of drama education and dramatic play. His publications include the Contribution of Dramatic Play to Classroom Psychosociology in Primary Education, Dramatic Play in Primary School, Drama and Theatre in Education, Dramatic Play as a Means of Self-concept Improvement in Primary School Age Children, Theatrical Education in Primary School: A Psycosociological Approach and the Developmental Dimension of Teaching Drama-in-education. Current research projects are focusing on the teaching of poetry through drama and the contribution drama may make in increasing the emotional intelligence of young people.

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