



## CHILDREN'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF CHILDHOOD IN RELATION TO PLAY ACTIVITIES

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### Abstract:

Children's play articulates the social ideologies and discourses of childhood and play. This study combined espousals from childhood studies, and play theories to analyze children's conceptualization of childhood play, and trace social influences of their conceptions. The research consisting of 112 fifth-grade students who live in an urban environment indicated that their conceptualization of childhood referred to many types of play. In contrast to the discourse of the competent child, they almost exclusively appropriated the romantic discourse of the innocent child who plays outdoors with other children or alone, unsupervised by adults, far from institutionalized learning, intellectual games, urban activities, and new technology toys. Their conceptualizations reflected gender stereotypes of play and the influence of a competitive social structure.

**Keywords:** social ideologies/discourses of childhood, play theories, children's concepts of childhood play, gender play

### 1. Introduction

Philosophy and literature have focused on the ways in which play has been conceptualized across time (Henricks, 2008). Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and educational theorists have developed many theories to define, according to various criteria, the nebulous, ambiguous concept of play (e.g. Burghardt, 2011; Sutton-Smith, 1997), to explain why play exists or to categorize types of play, to investigate the impact of play on children's development (for an overview see Henricks, 2014), and to define the benefits to children for health, education and socialization (Whitebread, Basilio, Kovalja, & Verma, 2012).

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes children's right to play. Play is claimed to be important to child development (Lillard et al., 2013), it is assumed to be a main characteristic of childhood (Brehony, 2004) and is considered, to be in the western world, the children's work.

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Play activities are embodied "*within a broader framework of customs and beliefs of a society*" (Sutton-Smith, 1989:21). Toys have "*meaning that is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or techniques of modern adult life*" (Barthes, 1972:53). Psychological research of children's games shows that the content, material and technology of objects the children use, are influenced by the community's values, (Klemenović, 2014) by cultural attitudes to childhood and to play (Whitebread, Basilio, Kvalja & Verma, 2012), as well as by developments in technology and in the economy (Bergen & Fromberg, 2006); play activities articulate the ideologies and social discourses a society accepts for various concepts, as the concept of childhood.

The concept of childhood according to the new sociology of childhood is considered a historic, social construction which is influenced by social-cultural contexts, the economy and politics (James & James, 2008); because these factors differ across cultures and time, they activate shifts in ideologies and discourses of childhood.

The sociology of childhood acknowledges the children's active role as agents in the context of social institutions and structures of their life (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998); thus, the researchers investigate children's conceptions and ask for their point of view (Corsaro, 1997), investigate how children see themselves, how, and in what extent they accept, negotiate or resist the social discourses of childhood (Duncum, 2002) and the ideologies which are embedded in the discourses of childhood play.

Even though there are studies of children's play activities across time (Chudacoff, 2007), their plays and toys in the family environment (for an overview see Klemenović, 2014), their participation in outdoor activities and nature (for an overview see Charles & Loge, 2012; Muñoz, 2009), the changes in children's play from spontaneous to adult-controlled or organized activities (for an overview see Skar, Gundersen, & O'Brien, 2016), the changes in terms of play and family life in the 21st century (Clarke, 2015), there is a deficit of research combining the field of children's play theories with the sociology of childhood to investigate children's conceptualization of childhood.

The aim of this research was the investigation of the children's conceptualization of childhood in relation to playing activities. The results concern scholars of either anthropological or cultural studies or educators and officials who offer care and education to children. The theoretical context consists of espousals of childhood studies concerning the different social discourses of childhood over time and plays theories.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Childhood studies

The concept of childhood is considered a historical and social construction which is influenced by social and cultural contexts, the economy and politics (James and James, 2008).

There are contrasting conceptualizations about childhood: the historical view of the willful, sinful child who must avoid play, was replaced by Rousseau's (1712-1778) idea of the naturally pure child who must leave and play outdoors in meekness and freedom, far from society's pernicious influence (romantic discourse) (Burke, 2003;

Higonnet, 1998). The romantic discourse of childhood ascribes to children's identity special characteristics such as innocence, and the child's proximity to nature (James & Prout 1990). These convictions are embedded in verbal and visual representations; images of every kind (films, cards, children's books) show smiling children who play happily in the countryside with other children, with domesticated small animals or with the technological toys of older generations (Higonnet, 1998; Holland, 2004). This social construction relates to agricultural landscapes which corresponded to past social conditions of the rural idyll, where children could play outdoors for hours unsupervised (Matthews, Taylor, Sherwood, Tucker, & Limb, 2000). The romantic conceptualization is a westernized, white, able-bodied construct which focuses on play and neglects notions of work or responsibility (Muñoz, 2009). Even so, the romantic discourse provides children with rights such as protection and provision however it does not provide them with social autonomy.

In contrast to the romantic idea of children's deficit in competences, there is the idea of competent children who are considered to be partners in the socialization process and entrepreneurial beings (Smith, 2014). This conceptualization considers them as active, responsible members of society from whom adults request opinions, provides autonomy, and thus considers them citizens of the present as well as the future. The visualization of the competent child can be traced to UNICEF's posters for children's rights (Holland, 2004), in comic strips such as Mafalda, Dennis the Menace, in advertisements or films where the children-characters comment upon the adults' world, resist the limitations imposed on children, claim their rights (Holland, 2004; Vergara-Leyton & Vergara-del Solar, 2012).

The verbal and visual representations of children which dominate in the culture of every era contribute to the discourses of childhood and operate as patterns of expectations that the members of society -adults and children- accept and reuse (Higonnet, 1998; Holland, 2004).

## **2.2 Play theories**

Play scientists link notions of biological development to ideas of personal, social and cultural development and they focus on the social and cultural factors which channel or are reflected by play activities (Henricks, 2014).

Children in different cultures pass through the same developmental stages in their play (Fog, 1999). Psychological research has established that there are five fundamental types of human play; physical play, fine-motor practice, play with objects, symbolic play, socio-dramatic play (pretended, fantasy narratives), games with rules (Whitebread, Basilio, Kvalja, & Verma, 2012). In Caillois' (2001) classification of play, there are four motifs in play and games: competition (e.g., football, chess), chance (e.g., roulette), imitation-simulation (e.g., playing at pirates), vertigo (play pursuing the element of speed such as cycling).

Huizinga (1955) argued that play -especially the socially competitive forms of play- is the vehicle to display not only the personality, skills and status of individuals but also of communities. Toys and games represent the cultural heritage of society and

*“contribute to its continuity by modeling a specific behavior and communication form”* (Sutton-Smith, 1989:21). Play activities, can be embodied *“within a broader framework of customs and beliefs of a society”* (Sutton-Smith, 1989:21); thus, play consists of behaviors which express social discourses and their implicit ideologies (Caillois, 2001; Klemenović, 2014; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997; Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvalja & Verma, 2012).

The play reflects culture's patterns and provides indications for the preferences and ideas of a given society (Caillois, 2001). There are similarities between children's themes or types of play in different cultures such as war games, child-care (dolls), and play with Pokémon figures and power characters (Kakana, Zafiropoulou & Bonoti, 2002), but also, there are important differences. The differences are influenced by: the requisite skills children need to develop as future professionals, the established period of education, the children's desire to imitate activities to which they have no access in reality (e.g., play with cars) or to avoid play which is necessarily part of their daily life (e.g., play related to the home such as cooking or field activities such as digging) (Fog, 1999). Also, the degree of society's complexity, its reproductive strategy (the number of offspring each family nurtures), society's values of flexibility, inventiveness versus values of hierarchy and control by fixed systems and rules (Fog, 1999), society as solidaric versus competitive (Calhoun, 1987). In addition, the stereotyped sex roles in a given society define the types and toys of children's play (Klemenović, 2014; Honig, 2006; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg 1971).

Although there has been much research on play theories concerning the developmental stages, the classification of play or the connection between playing and social structure, there is a lack of research on the intersection of the field of childhood studies and play theories. The new sociology of childhood enables us to understand that childhood is a product of historical circumstances; the way we conceptualize childhood, the characteristics and the activities we ascribe to it reflect social discourses. The impact of social discourses on children's conceptualization of childhood in relation to playing activities is an insufficiently investigated area.

### **3. Research methodology**

The aim of this research was the investigation of the children's conceptualization of childhood in relation to playing activities.

The research questions were: a) What are the children's conceptions of childhood play? b) Are there gender differences in children's notions of childhood play?

The sample consisted of 112 students (56 girls and 56 boys) who attended Grade 6 in five urban primary schools in the city of Volos in Greece. The research was conducted in their classrooms during the visual arts class session.

We investigated their conceptions using two modes of communication, namely verbal statements and painting. Each student filled in an anonymous questionnaire and created one painting on paper (21X15cm) having been supplied with 12 felt-tips pens.

The content of the questionnaire was as follows: a) What do you think when you hear the word "childhood"? b) What would you draw, if you had to paint a picture

depicting childhood? (Describe that picture briefly) c) Paint a picture depicting something characteristic of your own childhood.

We processed the data (verbal statements and paintings) by content analysis and triangulation. The choice of the qualitative methodological approach as the dominant method in this research was made taking into account the possibilities of the qualitative approach in order to highlight both the 'voices' and the 'feelings' of the research subjects (Magos, 2007). Given that the present study wanted to explore the deeper perceptions of young students about the concept of childhood and its relationship with play, the use of qualitative research techniques was considered the most appropriate process. In this context, the students were asked to answer two relevant open questions anonymously, as well as to present their views through a corresponding painting. The use of children's painting as an effective tool has been used by many researchers over time for two main reasons. The first focuses on the fact that it is a simple, easy-to-use and time-consuming tool whose analysis can provide important information to the researcher. The second is related to the fact that it is a pleasant process for the children themselves, in which they usually participate without suspensions, as they treat it more as play than as an obligation and therefore, they operate spontaneously. The latter is an important element for the collection of objective data by the researcher (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

In the present research, the collection of qualitative data and their categorization based on the content analysis process was followed by a quantitative presentation of the findings for each category so that it is possible to compare the findings between the different categories. This combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches was considered appropriate for a more effective analysis of the findings.

Before proceeding with the presentation and analysis of the research findings, we consider it important to provide some information about the place of the research, as these can help in the interpretation of the findings. The research was carried out in a small Greek provincial town, where the element of neighborhood and children's free play in open community spaces is still strong. The city has several parks and open spaces which are usually full of middle school children, which is the age of the research subjects. Also, the weather in Greece facilitates the play of children in open spaces throughout the year. However, in contrast to the open community spaces, in most Greek schools the space is limited. The yards are paved with cement, and the children's opportunities for kinetic games are few, while during the school breaks the games with the ball are forbidden. Thus, children often make up for the lack of kinetic games in school with toys in the free space of the neighborhood.

## **5. Research findings**

Verbal statements and the content of the visual artwork shared three common conceptual categories: types of activities, spaces where the activities occur, and interpersonal relations to the described or depicted activities.

### 5.1. Types of activities

Students conceptualized childhood by focusing on various types of activities almost exclusively concerning leisure ones and occasionally learning ones.

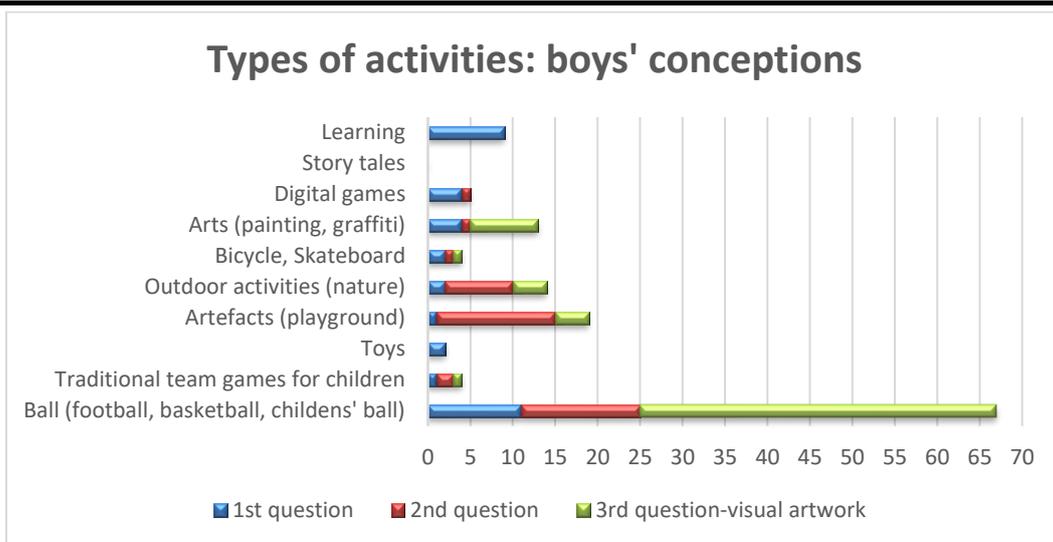
Most students plainly defined many types of playful actions. Their descriptions concerned: physical play (active exercise, outdoor activities in nature and playground), games with rules (traditional children's plays with rules, sports, digital games), symbolic play (drawing, singing, reading story tales), and play with objects-toys (dolls).

The leisure activities encompassed active physical outdoor play with a ball (throwing and catching a ball), and games with rules (mainly team sports with a ball such as a football, or basketball). Four references concerned physical outdoor play which corresponded to attraction to vertigo by means of short-distance transport (cycling, skateboarding). Some referred to children's traditional team games (hide-and-seek, hopscotch, chase, skipping rope). Many students referred to the equipment designed especially for playgrounds (swings, see-saw, slide), described outdoor activities in nature (excursions, climbing trees, gathering flowers, free play in the meadows or the seashore, swimming), and outdoor activities with domestic animals (walks in nature with dogs or cats). Fewer references concerned toys (dolls, teddy-bears, spade and pail for the seashore, balloons), symbolic play with arts (painting, songs, dance, graffiti) and reading fairy tales. References to new technologies were very limited; five references were to the computer and digital games (PlayStation), and one to animated films (cartoons). Just a few students referred to learning generally or mentioned school textbooks (Figure 1, Figure 2).

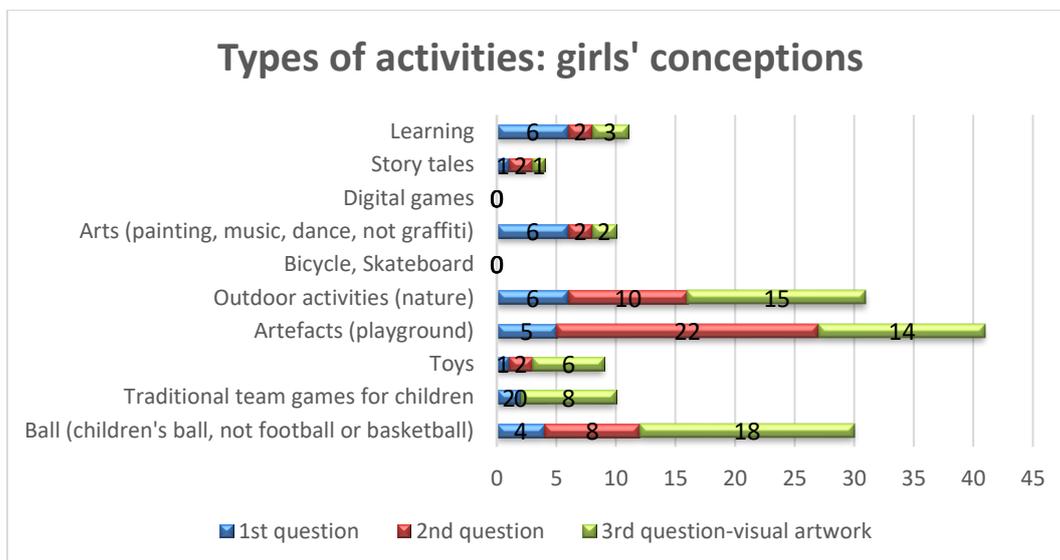
There were no references to educative play, intellectual games (board games such as puzzles, snakes and ladders, chess), play with ordinary objects (exploration of objects' properties and function), construction toys, dolls with characters from popular cartoons or TV series for children, mechanical toys (talking or moving models), symbolic play with language (nursery rhymes, joke telling, chants). There were no explicit descriptions of socio-dramatic play (role-play, pretend or fantasy identities, narrations based on toys or objects), even though there were three undefined references to fantasy and just a few to toys (dolls and teddy-bears) which could be related to socio-dramatic play.

The gender differences concerned all conceptual categories which were stated either verbally and/or visually stated. Team sports with a ball (mainly football), skateboard, cycling, fishing, graffiti painting, and digital games were boys' conceptions only (Figure 1). Even though a few girls referred generally to sports, none referred to football. Also, a quadruple number of girls who depicted ball games showed physical, spontaneous play with a children's ball (throwing and catching the ball) relative to the boys who depicted almost exclusively football (play with rules).

More girls than boys referred to outdoor activities in nature, playing with playground equipment, traditional physical team games for children, playing with toys (dolls, teddy-bears), activities with domestic animals, occupation with arts (music, dance, painting -except graffiti), reading books and learning. Only girls referred to dolls, story tales or flowers gathering (Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Types of childhood play activities: Boys' references from three questions



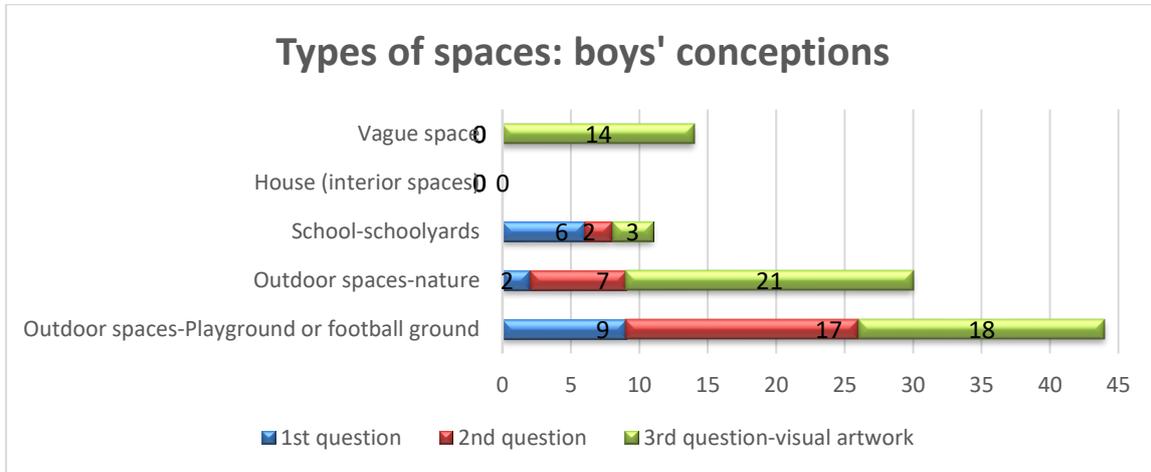
**Figure 2:** Types of childhood play activities: Girls' references from three questions

## 5.2. Types of spaces

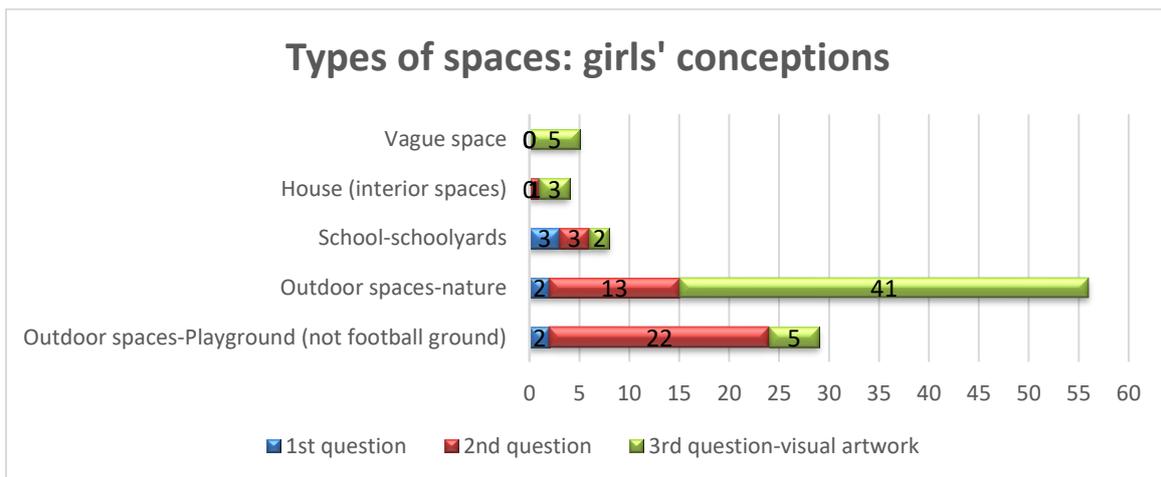
The types of spaces where the activities occurred, concerned almost exclusively open-air spaces in nature (meadows, seashore), in constructions specially built for children's amusement (playground, fairground) or football grounds in contrast to home-interior spaces (living room, child's bedroom) and school. Even when the school was mentioned, they did not refer to the classrooms but to schoolyards and the games (sports, playground games) which could be played there (Figure 3, Figure 4).

The gender differences concerned all conceptual categories. Only the boys referred to or depicted football grounds. More boys referred to or depicted playing activities (sports) in schoolyards. More girls referred to or depicted various activities in natural environments and playgrounds. Only the girls referred to interior-house spaces. Initially, even though more boys' verbal references concerned learning, when they had to specify

a singular childhood scene, they avoided the school-related environment, or they chose the schoolyard's playground. Thus, the references to learning were from the girls, even though they were in a very limited number.



**Figure 3:** Types of childhood spaces for play activities: Boys' references from three questions



**Figure 4:** Types of childhood spaces for play activities: Girls' references from three questions

### 5.3 Interpersonal relations

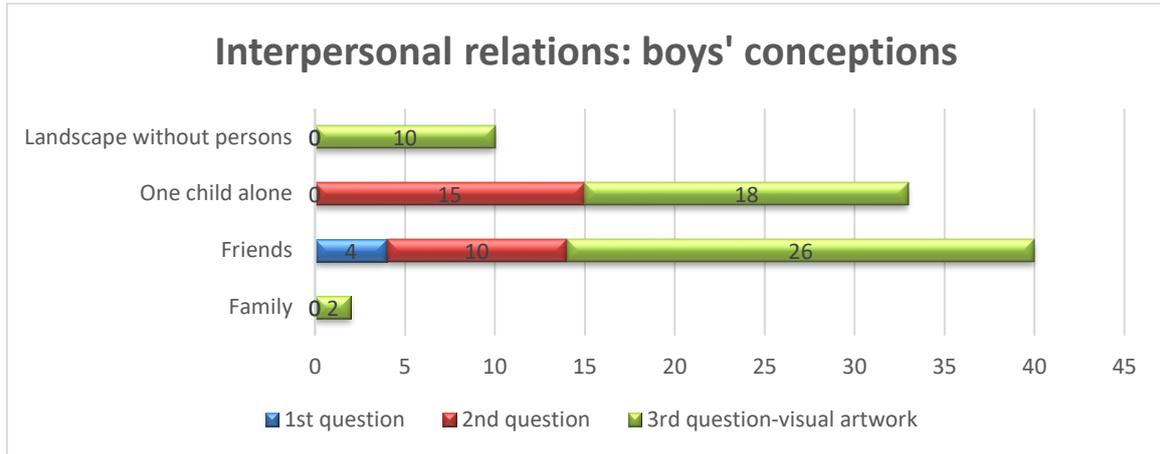
Interpersonal relations mainly concerned friendships among children. Even though the majority depicted more than one child (46.42%), many students depicted one child alone (34.82%) and/or referred verbally to one child or to himself/herself.

Almost all the students chose activities which took place far away from adult supervision or interference. Just a few (7.14%) depicted family members (parents, grandparents, siblings). No student referred to other adults (relatives, teachers, professionals). Some students depicted uninhabited landscapes (with no people, children or adults) (11.60%) (Figure 5, Figure 6).

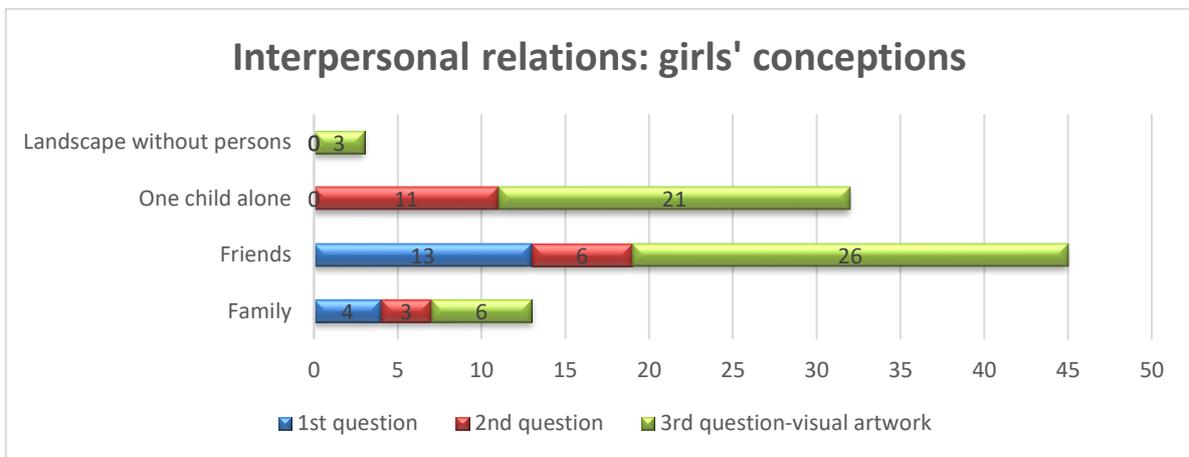
The gender differences concerned the presence/absence of references to the family and the gender synthesis of the friendships. Only the girls referred verbally to parents,

and more girls than boys depicted children and parents - while the frequency of students' references to the family and parents was few in all the questions for both sexes.

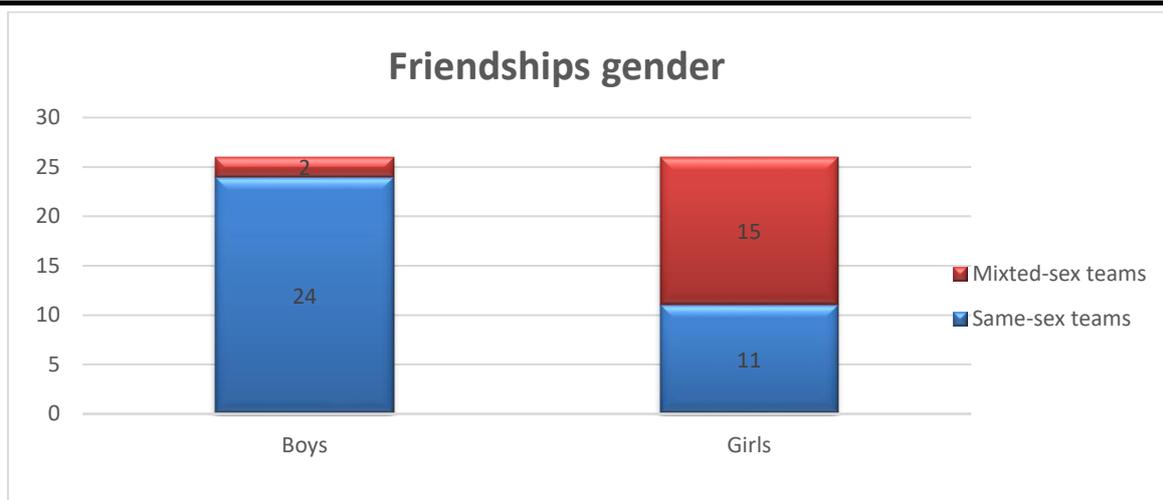
It was noticeable that more boys (24/56) than girls (11/56) depicted play in same-sex team games, and further, they depicted teams with their own sex. More girls (15/56) than boys (2/56) depicted play in mixed-sex teams i.e., boys and girls playing together (Figure 7).



**Figure 5:** Childhood interpersonal relations regarding play activities: Boys' references from three questions



**Figure 6:** Childhood interpersonal relations regarding play activities: Girls' references from three questions



**Figure 7:** Childhood's interpersonal relations regarding the gender of friendships: Boys' and girls' references

## 6. Discussion

Generally, the results concerning the students' conceptions of childhood in relation to various types of children's play affirmed the proposed classifications of play theorists.

The interpretation of the main findings was based on binary opposites: play/work-school, children with friends/with adults, children with other children/child alone, outdoor/indoor activities, traditional/computer games, fine arts/street art, boyish/girlish play, children with friends in same-sex/mixed-sex teams.

The results which showed almost exclusive references to various types of leisure activities rather than to school or learning suggest that the students espoused the general cultural (Euro-American) conception of play as children's work (Brehony, 2004; Gaskins, Haigh & Lancy, 2007). This conception correlates to the modernist notion of childhood as a period of unceasing enjoyment and absence of work in contrast to adulthood's hardships and work obligations. Our results confirmed some research in the U.K. regarding students' notions of childhood (Adams, 2014; Mayall, 2002).

Additionally, the results showing that school activities were limited to the schoolyard, furthermore to the schoolyards covered with grass, indicates childhood identification with play and leisure activities in contrast to institutionalized learning, theoretical conceptions of reality, and the supervisory functions of the structured school environment (Holland, 2004). Schools are one of the specialized and highly inspected institutions established by adults during modernity (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Nevertheless, children apply various strategies to resist or transcend the limits and the adults' power in a school environment (Fielding, 2000; Thomson, 2005) and the schoolyard is the only school setting where the children interact on their own terms (Meire, 2007).

Moreover, we found very limited references to reading books and story tales. It seems the children had connected them with parents' participation or with school work, both of which did not correspond to their conceptions of a playful childhood. This result

confirms specific research with preschool children aged five to seven on their low preference for children's books (Glebuviene & Tarasoniene, 2007).

Therefore, the aforementioned results could be interpreted as the students' reaction to disciplined contexts and an attempt to escape from adults' supervision and institutionalized learning; they conceptualized childhood based on the romantic ideal.

The result of a preference for activities with many children corresponds to Sutton-Smith's (1997) conceptualization of play as progress, indicating the children's attempt at socialization through friendships in the context of social micro-teams (Corsaro, 1997). It confirms an international research from 24 countries in which 81% of 7-12 years old prefer to play with friends (Clarke, 2015). Nevertheless, the many references we found, even though they were not a majority, for one-child play could indicate a shift from team activities with friends to solitary play. It could confirm the influence of highly individualized modern societies in Howard's Chudakoff (2007) study about the decline in children's free play with other children in the Western world in the modern era.

The result concerning of high frequency of free play outdoors versus almost no references to indoor spaces indicates that the students embrace the romantic conceptions of childhood identification with nature (Burke, 2003). The romanticization of childhood is attributed to pursuits such as outdoor play and play with non-commercial toys (Marsh, 2010), and corresponds to pre-industrial societies in which long-lasting, free play with other children unsupervised by adults was acceptable (Gaskins, Haight & Lancy, 2007). Furthermore, the preference for natural environments indicates notions about nature's correspondence to a spiritual, divine space, where children belong (Philo, 2000). These conceptions dispersed through various cultural artifacts feed into parents' notions of the appropriate space to raise children (Holland, 2004) in contrast to the inappropriate and dangerous urban spaces (Jones, 2002). Therefore, it seems as if the students were influenced by the parents' beliefs and popular images of their social milieu and articulated the romantic discourse of childhood.

The results confirm surveys in the U.K. which indicate children's (7 to 11 years old) preference to play outside, mainly in nature (Burke, 2005; Groves & McNish, 2008; Natural England, 2009) and also, that their outdoors play resembles of play activities of past generations (Meire, 2007).

Our results do not confirm evidence from international research, which claims that children nowadays play more in a structured commercialized indoor space than outdoors (Bassett, John, Conger, Fitzhugh & Coe, 2014; Karsten & van Vliet, 2006; Skar & Krogh, 2009) because of adults' concerns about social and traffic safety (Meire, 2007). We believe that the students of our sample expressed their preference for outdoor play or responded, based on their life experiences of the Mediterranean climatic conditions in Greece and the research district's geomorphological context (a coastal town at a mountain's base). Nevertheless, they chose to depict meadows which are not characteristic of the district's environment, and schoolyards covered with lawns, which do not correspond either to their own schools or to the reality of Greek schoolyards. Thus, we could infer that they embraced and reproduced the romantic discourse of the pre-industrial era.

The extremely limited references to socio-dramatic play do not affirm Rimmert's van der Kooij (2007) research for the number of time children of 3 to 9 years old and especially girls spend on imitation (fiction or dramatic play). But it affirmed McClure-Vollrath's (2006) research where fifth-grade students dismissed fantasy play with their favorite toys. Our result may be the effect of the communication context of the research. The students may have censored their references because (a) schools consist of institutions highly regulated by adults (Spyrou, 2011), and the students' avoidance of imaginative play could have resulted from adults' suspicions of pretending play due to a close relation to lying (Klemenović, 2014) or daydreaming (McClure-Vollrath, 2006), (b) fantasy games correspond to cultural contexts valuing inventiveness and flexibility and not to institutions such as schools where time and content are controlled by the system and follow strict rules (Fog, 1999). Also, the students may associate socio-dramatic play with small children and omit it because they focus on their age group's current playful activities (McClure-Vollrath, 2006).

The research result that students favor athletic games or traditional outdoor activities rather than computer games affirms McClure-Vollrath's (2006) research in USA with fifth-grade students. But it does not confirm either Mintz's (2004) concerns of the nowadays toys' displacement by commercialized or digital games, and the shift in children's action space from outdoor to indoor activities or Klemenović's view (2014) that contemporary society's focus has shifted from playing with others to playing with objects and machines. This dismissal of digital games did not confirm research with children in Balkan countries (Klemenović, 2014), in the UK (Marsh et al., 2005; Plowman, McPake & Stephen, 2010) or with parents and families in the USA (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003).

The different cultural contexts of the research may influence the results. The parents' attitudes towards new technologies are a basic agent which influences the children's interaction (Plowman, McPake, & Stephen, 2010). Their attitudes are shaped by educational or pediatric advice on the negative influence of electronic devices (Sosa, 2016). Therefore, when the research was conducted, Greek parents' attitudes or interactions with computers may have influenced the results.

Also, the results may be interpreted based on the binary opposites of nature/culture; they indicate that the students' conceptions of childhood correspond to ideas of unstructured, free play in nature, far from culture's technological progress. These notions are based on the romantic discourse for the preservation of the child's inherent innocence from the negative influence of the urban culture (Burke, 2003).

The finding of gender differences confirms Sutton-Smith (1989) study that boys' and girls' play preferences are strongly determined by gender. In particular, the girls' higher frequency of references to parents or to parental nurture or indoor activities than the boys indicates the adoption of the romantic discourse for the females' need for protection (Ruble, Martin, Berenbaum, 2006) and affirms research on the differing parental restrictions for boys and girls outdoor activities (Muñoz, 2009).

The results on the types of activities by gender which the students correlate with childhood indicate the adoption of gender stereotypes. They confirm research on the

strong influence of gender stereotypes in the selection of toys (Cugmas, 2010 in Klemenović, 2014), boys' rather than girls' preference for computer games (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998) as well as for football, cycling and for organized rather than spontaneous play (Klemenović, 2014; O'Connor, McCormack, Robinson & O'Rourke, 2017), the schoolyard's appeal for boys' rather than girls (Meire, 2007) and the longer time girls spend in reading children's books (Glebuviene & Tarasoniene, 2007).

The higher frequency of girls' depictions of various activities in natural environments rather than activities with dolls may indicate their need for gender-neutral activities or for fantasy play. According to Eva Änggård (2011), natural play environments are more gender-neutral and offer opportunities to promote gender equality.

The results of some boys' occupations with street art-graffiti indicate an attempt at active engagement in public social space to communicate an oppositional position to the romantic discourse of childhood. Graffiti is a means of expression and resistance to control and power (Phillips, 1999). Nancy's Macdonald (2001) ethnographic research indicates that graffiti reveals the youth's attempt for self-presentation in the public space in order to claim independence and power from such institutions as the family or the school. However, because the results were limited to a few boys from only one classroom and furthermore those boys sat at desks in close proximity, it may indicate the social context and peers' cultural influence. It seems that those boys shared an interest in graffiti, or they complied with the designing activity of their peers (Hughes, 2003) because compliance offers social value and strengthens a sense of belonging. No girl chose graffiti to conceptualize childhood, which indicates that they internalize the roles and regulatory standards of the dominant culture; they accept gender segregation between male and female activities, between private and public spaces they accept withdrawal from the social spaces or such ways of claiming independence.

The interpretation of gender differences based on theories of the connection between playing and social structure (Calhoun, 1987) indicates that the boys' choice for rule-governed athletic sports (football) corresponds to competitive societies, where complex rules are prevalent. According to the theory of cultural learning, competitive sports implicate the rhetoric of power and serve as a model for conflict and a model for economic competition (Fog, 1999; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Therefore, the boys through sports internalize social values relevant to competition and they interconnect them with the discourse of childhood's play. In contrast, the girls' choices of spontaneous and improvised play indicate that they embrace values relevant to flexibility which promotes creative and communication-based activities and skills in a community (O'Connor, McCormack, Robinson & O'Rourke, 2017).

We found that the students conceptualize childhood based on gender-segregated friendships; they depict play in same-sex teams rather than mixed-sex teams. The results confirm the assertion that recently American boys and girls have stopped playing together in mixed-sex teams at a much younger age (Day and Kugler, 2014), Baumgartner's report (2010 in Whitebread, Basilio, Kuvajla & Verma, 2012:31) that Irish children spend 80% of their playtime in gender-segregated groups as well as a research

in British school playgrounds (Blatchford, Baines, and Pellegrini, 2003) relating to the gender choices of children in team play.

We found that more girls than boys depict play in mixed-sex teams. It seems that girls conceptualize childhood in less gender-segregated groups; they embrace more flexible social relationships and were uninterested in their playmates' gender. This result confirms research on same-sex activities in middle childhood, particularly with boys (Honig, 1998) and girls' easiness in participating in boys' games (Meire, 2007), especially in contemporary societies (Chudakoff, 2007).

## 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the students conceptualized childhood under the influence of social ideologies and discourses concerning childhood and play. They appropriated and reproduced the romantic discourse of the past and not the contemporary discourse of the competent child; they referred to physical, free play and traditional play outdoors in contrast to indoor activities, intellectual or digital games and play in public urban spaces. Also, their conceptions focused exclusively on play activities rather than on institutional or non-formal learning or on educational play and reading books, which correspond to learning or work. Moreover, their conceptualizations indicate that they strove for independence from adult protection and intervention by choosing to play mainly with friends or alone, in the countryside away from the adults' presence. In addition, they conceptualized childhood as a socialization process based on playing with children and not with objects or machines. Nevertheless, there was evidence that the highly individualized modern society influenced many children's relations with other children and led them to solitary play.

An oppositional stance to romanticized childhood was displayed by a few boys who asserted their presence and power in public urban spaces and gained social value from their peer's culture through their preference for graffiti art.

The socio-cultural or institutional (school) context which promotes structured, regulated activities may influence their conceptualization of childhood in relation to the presence of socio-dramatic play.

Their conceptions of play are determined by social ideologies of gender activities. Boys appropriated models of competitive societies with complex rules through their almost exclusive preference for ball sports, especially football. Additionally, they indicated an orientation towards boy-men's gender activities by focusing on play in same-sex groups or in graffiti art. In contrast, the girls adopted social values such as spontaneity, neutrality and community by focusing on spontaneous plays with balls (but not with ball sports), with traditional outdoor or playground play and not playing with dolls. Also, the girls are inclined to play in mixed-sex not only in same-sex teams. Furthermore, they appropriated the discourse of girls' distancing from the public domain by placing their leisure activities not in urban areas but either in nature or indoors (even though the later activities were in very limited frequency).

The limitations of the present research include the research's geographical range of reference (one single town), methodology choices concerning the research's instruments (questionnaire and one painting), and the location of data collection (classrooms).

As well as the research of children's preferences on what, where and with whom they play, there is an insufficiently investigated area on the social influences of their preferences according to their conceptualization of themselves as children, and the ideas and practices they appropriate from their social environment to conceptualize childhood.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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