



“He will see my drawing and we will play blindman’s bluff together” Overcoming communication barriers in a multicultural kindergarten classroom

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ABSTRACT: Peer interactions and play have been highlighted as key factors for immigrant children’s smooth transition and participation in a new language and cultural context. Taking a sociocultural stance towards children’s participation in early childhood education (ECE) and considering that their communication acts are always multimodal, in this study, we sought to examine peer interactions during play in a Greek multicultural kindergarten with high concentrations of immigrant and refugee students. Data derived from systematic observation of free play activities, semi-structured interviews, and a drawing-telling activity aimed to figure out all children’s ways of acting and communicating. Findings provide further evidence on how material and embodied signs function as means that mediate play and contribute to sustained interactions between children with different linguistic backgrounds, while they reveal the potential of drawing to function as communicational means in multilingual settings.

Keywords: *Peer interaction and play, immigrant children’s participation, multimodal communication, early childhood education*

Introduction

As migration and refugee flows have significantly increased the last decades in Greece, the number of children with different cultural and language background is growing in early childhood classrooms, and teachers seem confused and uncertain of what to do with these children (Kontogianni & Oikonomidis, 2020). Although participation and participatory learning are key issues in today's early childhood pedagogical discourse (e.g., Correia et al., 2018; Hedges & Cullen, 2012), immigrant and refugee children's participation in a new educational and linguistic context remains a pivotal challenge not only for teachers, but primarily for children themselves (Björk-Willén, 2007; Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Kultti et al., 2017; Theobald et al., 2019).

Literature has well informed us that for enhancing participation what we first need is to listen and figure out children's ways of acting and communicating (Kultti, 2015; Sandseter & Seland, 2016), while some scholars foreground both teachers' practices and peer relations as equally important factors for children's participation in ECE (Kultti et al., 2017). However, the research on the inclusion of immigrant and refugee children in a new educational environment only partially focuses on listening to children's 'voices' (Theobald et al., 2019) and understanding their ways of participating in peer play (Björk-Willén, 2007; Theobald et al., 2017). More importantly, in the Greek context, there is no research evidence related either to immigrant children's participation in peer play or Greek speakers' views on their communication with the newcomers in preschool settings. Considering that this kind of knowledge could be proved pivotal for developing culturally responsive practices and providing meaningful entry channels in learning experience for all children, the present study sought to investigate peer communication in a multicultural kindergarten classroom in Greece.

Participation and communication through a sociocultural lens

Wenger (1998, p. 56) uses the term participation "to describe the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises". As he explains, participation is an active and quite complex process that involves "our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations", and thus, it is expressed through various combinations of "doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging".

Participation in various activities, either formal or informal, is the vehicle for children's learning and development. Rogoff (1995) uses the concept of *participatory appropriation* to describe how children develop their understanding of the world. Participatory

appropriation is described as a dynamic process through which young learners experience individual changes. Through this process, children transform the way they participate and learn in communities and sociocultural activities, while at the same time, they contribute to the transformation or creation of new cultural practices. In line with this view, Corsaro's (1992, p. 169) concept of *interpretative reproduction* explains how children co-create and participate in peer cultures. Integrating a sociocultural perspective with sociology of childhood, Corsaro argues that children do not simply imitate and reproduce cultural practices and routines, but they "creatively appropriate information of the adult world". Children elaborate and transform cultural information and through this process, they not only learn how to participate in adults' world but they "produce their own unique peer cultures". From this perspective, learning how to participate in social events, in adult's and particularly in peer cultures is for children an ongoing effort of constructing new meanings through sharing and elaborating their experiences.

Multimodal Communication in ECE

Any form of participation involves communication, which according to Allwood (2008, p. 4) can be defined

as sharing of information involving at least two human beings in interaction with each other and with the context (environment). 'Information' can then be further qualified as 'content', 'meaning' or 'understanding'.

In that sense, communication always involves an effort, more or less, by the participants to create a common ground of understanding (Rogoff, 1995). For achieving a joint understanding, participants often use a combination of modes (e.g., auditory, visual, and gestural), a process that flourish in early childhood settings and contribute to the creation of peer cultures.

Children's multimodal meaning-making activity unfolds during peer play, as it provides them with a variety of options for participating, sharing, and negotiating both meanings and communicational practices (Bengochea et al., 2020; Samuelson & Wohlwend, 2015). Moving around in the classroom, changing their body posture, including moments of closeness with their friends, gesturing, making facial expressions and nods, and using toys and objects, children create meanings that speech could not shape on its own. In this context, they manifest and cultivate their increasing communicational skills, namely a kind of social knowledge about the semiotic resources they use.

Although embodied communication is an inherent feature of peer interactions, it does not always gain attention as fundamental means of participation within ECE settings (Flewitt,

2005; Papandreou & Yiallourous, 2020). Providing a variety of opportunities for meaning making, all kinds of gestures (i.e., conventional, deictic, iconic, symbolic) support, complement, or clarify speech and enhance children's language development (Özyürek, 2017). Research shows that the information young children communicate with their hands often is quite different from what they convey through their words (Impedovo et al., 2017; Papandreou & Yiallourous, 2020). As Samuelson and Wohlwend (2015) point out, even very young children create complex embodied signs. By doing that, they not only counterbalance the limitations of oral language but also enrich their play with meanings that shape their roles in more detail (e.g., pretending a chef that stirs the soup in a large pot).

Another language that preschoolers use extensively to talk and communicate with others is drawing. In the light of the sociocultural perspective on which this study is drawn, drawing is acknowledged as a social practice that emerges and develops through interpersonal exchanges (Papandreou, 2014; Wood & Hall, 2011). As a visual language, it transforms the experience into a material object (Hilppö et al., 2017; Papandreou, 2014), and therefore, it mediates children's participation in collective interchanges, where they share various experiences (Kukkonen et al., 2020). Multimodality is another feature of drawing activity. Either during or after drawing, children construct meanings through a complex arrangement of drawn, oral, and embodied signs (Wright, 2007). Being able to invent and choose appropriate graphic signs and intentionally use them for communicating, children very early become aware of the communicative potential of their drawings; a competence termed as meta-representational (Wood & Hall, 2011). Given that it is a non-conventional symbolic activity, drawing, like embodied representation, is not restricted by any rules. Taken together these features make drawing a highly flexible means of expression for preschoolers compared to the oral language that, along with body language, supports and enhances their participation in the classroom community.

Children's participation in a new community

From their birth, children begin to participate in groups and communities characterized by particular communicative practices. However, when it comes to becoming part of a new community, such as a preschool setting, they may face numerous challenges. Among others, newcomers "will most likely encounter existing friendship alliances which have, over time, created their own social and cultural routines" (Kalkman & Clark, 2017, p. 292). However, entry challenges are diversified among individual children. For example, children with mother tongue different from the majority language, for participating as full members in the new social context of a preschool classroom may have to cope with

different obstacles than their classmates that speak the majority language. To put it in another way, for participating effectively in educational activities and interact with peers, immigrant children should not only learn the majority language but also familiarize themselves with the communicational practices and routines of the existing peer culture of the classroom (Barley, 2016).

In such a context, the first attempts of a newcomer to be included in the classroom community could be characterized as *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP). Describing a process people follow to become members of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), this concept could be proved functional to study children's changing ways of participating in ECE classrooms and especially in multicultural ones. Various forms of peripherality (e.g., intense watching, tacit hands-on involvement) in peer-group play activities in ECE settings can be considered as expressing intentional engagement (Wenger, 1998), and therefore, as significant participation and learning modalities (Rogoff et al., 2003).

Immigrant children's participation in peer play activities

Although our knowledge of immigrant newcomers' transition into a preschool classroom is limited, the existing findings highlight that peer interaction is a key factor for their smooth transition in the new cultural context (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Theobald et al., 2017). According to prior research findings, children not speaking the majority language choose from various verbal and non-verbal resources and make multimodal communication efforts to participate in peer play and make friends (Bengochea et al., 2020; Ledin & Samuelsson, 2017). Through peripheral participation, immigrant newcomers have the chance to silently access and understand the classroom routines and especially the peer-group practices during play (Kultti, 2015). However, their efforts may be proved either successful or unsuccessful (Theobald et al., 2017). Research evidence revealed a variety of strategies children use to enter peer play in multicultural classrooms, such as *tailing* (i.e., following and watching closely a child or peer group, expecting or not an invitation to play, pretending as if understanding the play context and spoken language), *crossing* (i.e., code-switching between two languages), *shadowing* (i.e., replicating another player's actions or copying words from what is heard), asking exploratory questions (e.g., "what are you doing?" "can I play?"), making claims of friendship (e.g., "I'm your best friend"), and using play resources (Björk-Willén, 2007; Theobald et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, children's accounts on friendship and participation in peer play in multilingual settings are in accordance with some of the abovementioned strategies. Analyzing 72 preschoolers' responses, obtained through

semi-structured interviews held in small groups, Theobald et al. (2019) report that children referred to linguistic strategies such as teaching their peers the dominant language, speaking in another language, sharing each other's language, and using written language. Besides, they also included non-verbal strategies (e.g., sharing playthings and using gestures) and inclusive attitudes (e.g., making gestures of friendship).

The Greek Context

Until the 1980s, Greece was mainly a country that exported economic immigrants, whereas after the '80s it became a host country, especially for Balkan immigrants. That immigration influx brought fundamental changes in Greek schools (Skourtou et al., 2020). However, the lack of central and comprehensive educational policy towards cultural and language diversity (Kontogianni & Oikonomidis, 2020) keeps education until now trapped in "homogeneity" and "linear growth", convinced that it has to address "the ideal average student" (Androusou & Iakovou, 2020, p. 164). Thus, children's diverse cultural resources and identities are often considered obstacles instead of being valued as assets (Cana et al., 2020). Having different features and dynamics and following the ongoing financial crisis shaped in 2010, the second influx of immigrants started in 2015, created what Green (2018, p. 101) describes as "crisis within a crisis". Nowadays, wishing to move to the 'rich' countries of central and north Europe, thousands of refugees especially from Middle East 'wait in so-called frozen transience' since "the EU-Turkey deal of 2016 created a bottlenecked country" (Zsófia, 2018, p. 373).

In this broader context, the access of all immigrant children to the Greek educational system within public schools has been settled (Scientific Committee for the Support of Refugee Children, 2017). However, the attendance of preschoolers is often transitory (e.g., when the will of their family to move to another country is attained). Either permanent or transitory, their attendance in public kindergartens cannot address their needs until fragmentary adjustments of educational policy and regulations to be replaced by comprehensive approaches dealing with the multifaceted challenges that arise in everyday practice (Park et al., 2018). Unfortunately, Greek public schools remain monolingual without provision for home-language facilitators within classrooms, while a thorough state plan for teachers' professional development does not exist until now. Among others, ECE staff should learn how to support these children's participation. To achieve that, teachers need to be aware of how newcomers express their efforts to participate and how their peers respond to, an issue that this study sought to investigate.

Aim of the study

Considering that peer interaction in ECE is fundamental for children's participation, especially in multilingual classrooms, this study sought to investigate the features of communication among children in a Greek kindergarten. Aligned with this perspective and considering bodily movements and drawing, which are open-ended personal modes of expression (Wright, 2007), as essential as speech for making meaning, we were interested in examining their contribution to peer communication in a multilingual preschool context.

Research questions were formulated as follows:

- a. How do peer exchanges among children not sharing the same language unfold during play?
- b. How do Greek speakers view their communication during play with peers speaking another language?
- c. How do Greek speakers respond after inviting them to use drawing to communicate with non-Greek speakers?

Methodology

In this study, aiming to develop a deep understanding of the central phenomenon, we adopted a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2012). Since we consider children as experts of their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2001), we drew on participatory methods, which seek the active participation of children when researching issues that concern their lived experience. Therefore, trying to meet the need of triangulation, gain all children's standpoint, and allow them to express their thoughts and views on the issues under investigation (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019; Tudge & Hogan, 2005; Wright, 2007) through different modalities, we implemented a multimethod approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), which included naturalistic observation, one-to-one interviews, and a drawing-telling activity.

Participants

The research was conducted in a multicultural kindergarten in Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Aiming to collect rich information, we chose this classroom as a case study (Stake, 2005), since the teacher welcomes immigrant children in her classroom and tries to build respectful relations with each family. She was also willing to mediate our communication

with parents, while she expected the potential implications of the study to allow her to improve immigrant children's participation in her classroom. A total of 15 children aged from four to six years participated in the study, with only five of them being Greeks, while the rest were from Albania, China, Russia, and Iraq. Nine children were fluent Greek speakers (i.e., since they were born in Greece), while six children were newcomers and experienced difficulties speaking and understanding Greek language at that time. Yet, conceptualizing these children as a homogenous group with common experience and background could not only be "reductionist but has the potential to create unequal power relationships within the research process" (Gaywood et al., 2020, p. 155). To our knowledge, apart from their linguistic and cultural background, newcomers were also diversified regarding the reasons (e.g., political, economic) and conditions of their family settlement in Greece (e.g., long stay in immigrant-camps before their removal in apartments, support by relatives or friends' networks who already lived in Greece, working conditions etc.).

Ethics considerations

Upon receipt of the teacher's permission, parents were informed about the study (i.e., research purpose, process, and confidentiality, their right to withdraw), and their consent was requested. Children were informed about the role of the researcher in their classroom by the teacher and were invited to express their opinion choosing either a smiling or a sad face, depicted in a card, while their consent periodically renewed. When it was required, immigrant parents acted as mediators for informing their children. However, including immigrant children in research, adds extra ethical challenges to researchers, who have to continuously interrogate themselves in terms of power issues (Clark-Kazak, 2019). Therefore, to lessen asymmetric power relations and achieve an approach of respect, acceptance, openness and alongsidedness (Gaywood et al., 2020), before data collection, the second researcher had spent two weeks contributing to the classroom as a teacher assistant. This choice allowed her to be familiarized with the classroom culture and the children to get acquainted with her presence (Garvis et al., 2015). However, acknowledging children's right to privacy, when a child expressed annoyance (verbally or non-verbally) or the teacher identified any other concern during observation, the researcher withdrew from the particular play area. During the data collection period, the two researchers were often met to discuss and reflect on issues arising, "to maintain on-going scrutiny and rigour" and make modifications if needed to ensure an ethical approach (Gaywood et al., 2020, p. 158). For example, the necessity arose for the second researcher to balance her interactions with Greek speakers and newcomers. To ensure confidentiality during data analysis, children's names were replaced by pseudonyms.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through a. systematic observation of children's free play (i.e., choice time) focusing on the six newcomers for two weeks and keeping field-notes (12 hours in total), b. semi-structured individual interviews with the nine Greek speakers aiming to reveal their perspectives on their communication with the newcomers and c. a drawing-telling activity that took part after the interview. Each Greek speaker was asked to create a drawing for inviting one of the newcomers to play together. During the interviews, questions investigating possible obstacles children may face during playing with the newcomers were asked (e.g., When you want to play with your classmates who do not speak Greek, is there anything that impedes you? What is this; What do you do, or what could you do to play with X?). After drawing, children were invited to describe their picture and explain how they intended to use it. In cases that the invited child was in the classroom that day, they were asked if they wanted to use it for inviting the target child to play together.

Thematic analysis was implemented for examining the interview transcripts, observational data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and children's drawings along with their corresponding oral descriptions (Rose, 2012). First, we examined observational data (i.e., transcription of the audio-recordings and field notes) to identify newcomers' play behaviors, focusing on incidents of sustained communication with Greek speakers. Second, we analyzed the transcribed interviews for uncovering within children's accounts, themes related to peer communication with the newcomers. Finally, we examined children's drawings, side by side with verbal and gestural explanations, in terms of their visual content and their communicational purpose. Specifically, for each drawing, we recorded its purpose (e.g., a play invitation or a friendship gesture), all the drawn elements (e.g., human figures, play objects), any relation, drawn or described (e.g., connecting lines), between these elements, and the follow-up exchange between the two peers through the drawing.

Findings

Newcomers' play practices

The analysis of the observational data revealed four main behaviors expressed by the children that were not Greek speakers during free-play time: a. *playing in proximity with peers in the same area (e.g., in the painting area) without visible communicational acts among them*, b. *communicating only with peers talking the same language (e.g., Albanian*

language), c. *observing or shadowing peer's playing acts* and d. *co-playing with others using a combination of semiotic resources*.

The episodes that follow, except for the first one, exemplify the last behavior (d), which is more complex and included either short or sustained interactions.

Episode 1

Understanding but not speaking Greek at that time, Ah Lam from China expressed behaviors a and c during the observation period. Mostly, she used to play next to other children without making visible communicational efforts (e.g., drawing in proximity with peers). However, a day she was observed to imitate other children's play actions (e.g., carrying playthings to a table), trying to participate in their pretend play (behavior c), but without any response from their classmates. Later, after leaving the playhouse area and going to the painting area, she continued, while painting, to carefully observe the same children's evolving pretended play (behavior a).

Episode 2

Sonia from Albania, who, at that time, encountered difficulties in speaking and understanding Greek, played at the art center with Maya from Russia, who spoke Greek fluently. During their play with playdough, the following dialogue was documented.

Sonia: *Let's make a (she continues with an Albanian word)*

Maya: *Make what?*

Sonia: *Let's make a (she repeats the same word)*

Maya: *What? I can't hear you (she turns her head towards Sonia)*

Sonia: *Let's make a (she repeats the same word)*

Maya: *What?*

Sonia: *(Finally she takes a piece of playdough and molds it into a sphere).*

Maya: *Oh no, we will make an ice cream.*

Sonia: *(She responds with a smile and continues to mold another piece of playdough).*

Combining Greek and Albanian words, Sonia initiated the interaction. Not being able to grasp the meaning, Maya asked clarifying questions. Thus, Sonia responded by using playdough to make visible the desired meaning and share it with Maya. Through this short exchange, mediated by hand movements and play materials, the two girls achieved to co-construct a common purpose, which allowed them to continue playing together.

Episode 3

Playthings and gestures seemed to act as key mediators during various play encounters between children speaking different languages. Maya, the same girl from Russia, and Rouan (i.e., a six-year-old girl from Iraq that did not understand Greek), carried different toys from the playhouse to a table without visible signs of communication. The interaction was initiated by Rouan when she tapped Maya on her shoulder and put a toy plate at another one, nodding like questioning. Like answering positively, Maya nodded as well. A few seconds later, Rouan tapped Maya again on her shoulder. When Maya gazed at her, holding another plate, Rouan extended her hand and pointed at the table. Maya responded with the same nod (i.e., showing confirmation), and thus, Rouan left the plate on the table, talking in her language. After moving some objects to the table, the girls attempted to co-construct the play scenario. At that time, Maya started trying to communicate verbally, while Rouan strived to communicate using toys, gesturing, repeating some of Maya's Greek words, and talking in the Iraqi language.

Maya: *You should eat. If you want to eat, take this (she shows something on the table)*

Rouan: *(Manipulating some play objects, she responded using her language).*

Maya: *If you want to eat, if you want, and then you should feed the baby.*

Rouan: *(She attempted to take a spoon being in front of Maya).*

Maya: *This is mine!*

Rouan: *(She tried one more time to take the spoon).*

Maya: *You can take this (she gave to her a plastic fork).*

Rouan: *This? (Holding the fork but staring at the Maya's spoon).*

Maya: *Yes, this!*

Rouan: *(Finally, taking Maya's spoon, she extended her hand that pointed at the doll Maya held, and then she spoke in her language again).*

Maya: *What?*

Rouan: *(Pointing at Maya's doll, she repeated the same phrase as questioning).*

Maya: *I don't understand what she says (raising her hands at her shoulder height).*

Rouan: *(Pointing at Maya's doll, she repeated the same phrase like questioning).*

Maya: *I don't understand what she says.*

Rouan: *(Smiling at Maya, she raised her shoulders, and continued feeding her doll).*

Maya: *(She left the table and focused on two other girls who came into the area).*

Although this play episode was interrupted because the girls spoke different languages, it constitutes a sustained interaction carried forward for some time. This interaction was built on a combination of semiotic modes, through which the girls accomplished to share

the central idea of their pretended play (i.e., to feed the baby). However, at some point, though Rouan looked like enjoying their interaction, linguistic barriers seemed to constrain Maya from further developing her idea. As a result, she withdrew from this play encounter.

Episode 4

Another boy, Chang from China, seemed to use gestures more consciously for communicating. From the overall observation in that classroom, it was found that Chang systematically used gestures to enhance his interactions and share common meanings with his peers. The following play episode started when Fanis, a Greek boy, invited Chang to build a construction together in the block-building area.

Fanis: *Do you want to make a robot?*

Chang: *Bobot?*

Fanis: *Yes!*

Chang: *Put all this (he confirmed with a nod and pointed at a box containing blocs, as he meant, let's use all these), Bobot, very very up (he raised his right hand and stretched it upward).*

Fanis: *We will put all these (having his hands inside the box).*

They started to build two different robots without communicating with each other. When they finished, Fanis started playing alone with his robot.

Chang: *Fanis, friends? (He put his robot next to Fanis' construction).*

Fanis: *Mine is bigger.*

They continued playing separately for a while, and then they started to break down their robots.

Fanis: *Do you want to do it again tomorrow?*

Chang: *Yes, to play this (he pointed at the blocks inside the box and then he started stacking the blocks up). Fanis, look! (Looking at the stacked blocks).*

Fanis: *(He continued making his construction without responding).*

Chang: *Look! (Tapping Fanis' shoulder).*

Fanis: *(He gazed at him).*

Chang: *Look! (Extending his index finger, he brought his hand in front of Fanis' eyes and moved it slowly towards his tower for showing it to Fanis).*

Fanis: *(Looked at Chang's tower and focused again on his construction).*

Although the two boys acted independently in many instances during this episode, they seemed to share both the will and the building idea (i.e., to make a robot), which was co-

constructed using verbal and non-verbal signs. More importantly, however, the documentation of this exchange demonstrates the sustained efforts made by Chang, expressed through gesturing and fragmentary wording, to communicate and establish his friendship with Fanis, by drawing his attention to his construction and obtaining signs of response.

Greek speakers' perspectives on their communication with children having a different linguistic background

The analysis of the interviews conducted with Greek speakers revealed two main themes a. *the obstacles children acknowledge for playing with peers speaking different language*, and b. *the strategies they use to communicate with them*.

Surprisingly, the children focused on various barriers, with only some of them being linguistic (e.g., "*Since she talks; she's from another country*"; "*I asked her to make something together, but I could not speak. Rouan has this language, and she could not understand*"). Non-linguistic obstacles included peer interpersonal disputes (e.g., "*I have difficulties because they keep saying no, no, no, no, no*"), and peers' gender and age (e.g., "*I play only with boys!*"; "*Yes, she is still young, so she does not understand.*"). However, age was also related to linguistic obstacles by two children. Here is included an expressed view that some children cannot understand Greek because of their young age.

In cases that children focused on linguistic obstacles, the discussion sought to allow children to describe the communicative strategies they used to play with their peers. These children referred to linguistic and non-linguistic strategies. The linguistic strategies include oral and written language, that is, a. *helping their peers to learn Greek* (e.g., "*We teach her to speak Greek*"), b. *using other languages such as French and English* (e.g., "*I could speak in French*"; "*If she speaks English I will tell her to come on.*"), and c. *writing messages* (e.g., "*If he does not understand, I would write to play this game and we would play*"). Some of these children maintained that there is no other way to convey a message, except language, though they had been observed the previous days to use gestures and play objects for communicating with peers not speaking Greek.

Non-linguistic strategies included a. *gesturing* and b. *using play objects*. Children referred mainly to deictic gestures. For example, a boy explained how he used to facilitate newcomers during play through gesturing. Specifically, stretching his left hand towards the corner of the block building material, he pointed with his index finger at it, while he was telling "*we can point at something he does not understand in order to play; thus, we show him what to play*". However, other children suggested using a combination of gesturing and manipulating objects, as the next exemplar demonstrates.

Anna: *I could either speak the same language or show.*

Researcher: *You could show! Yes, this is very smart. So how could you show?*

Anna: *I can take her by the hand and show her.*

Researcher: *How? Do you want to give me an example how you would do that?*

Anna: *I would show you this, like that (she grabbed a paper clock with her left hand) and show you how it really turns (she turned the clock hands with her right hand).*

Drawing as a communicational device among children with different linguistic background

The analysis of the drawn invitations for play revealed four categories of drawings: a. *Images including only the involved children* (Figure 1); b. *Images including only the proposed play objects*; c. *Images including both children and toys* (Figure 2); and d. *Images made as gestures of friendship* (Figure 3).

Stelios' drawing (Figure 1) is a representative example of the first category. His drawn invitation aimed to ask Chang, who is from China, to play hide-and-seek. Chang, at that time, had just begun to understand and use some Greek words, and as the observation demonstrated, the two boys liked playing together. As Stelios explained, this was an invitation to play hide-and-seek with Chang, and the curved line on the drawing, connecting two human figures (i.e., Stelios and Chang), indicated the path that Stelios would take to discover Chang (e.g., *"he is hiding, and I am looking for him"*). Afterwards, trying to interact through the drawn invitation, the two children developed a multimodal exchange pointing the focal points on the drawing and expressing fragmentary questions and answers (e.g., Chang: *is this me? My home here?* Stelios: *Yes, you hid here, I'm looking for you*).

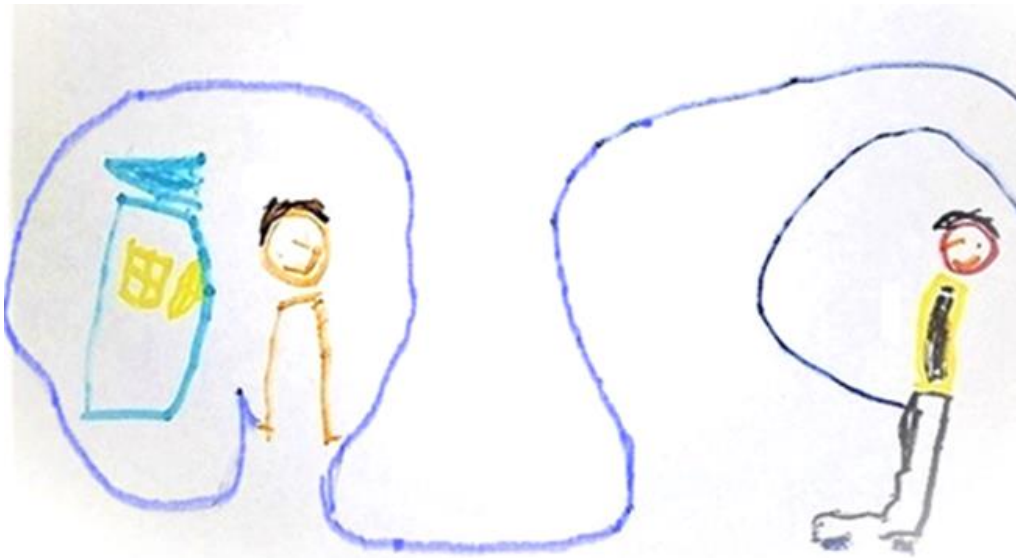


FIGURE 1 Stelios' drawing

Maya's drawing (Figure 2) was addressed to Rouan, asking her to play together at the playhouse. She drew a quite detailed image that included the two girls (points 1 & 2), the playhouse, (point 3), and numerous objects, been at the area that day. During drawing, Maya described her signs in detail to the researcher and continued narrating the scenario of the pretended play that she wished to play with Rouan.

I show her what we will take for the trip. [...] We will take that and that and that and that (she points at various objects she drew at area 4), and the basket, anyway. [...] to take the clothes (she points at 5) and go on a trip. And now I will make a ball. [...] We will get food, we will get a bag, and we will play with Eleni (another peer).

Being asked by the researcher how she would use her drawing for inviting Rouan to play (since she was not at school that day), Maya gave a detailed answer. She also fingered in several points on her drawing, which she intended to use to allow Rouan to grasp the meaning of the drawing (e.g., "I'll point, we will take this and this and this... next I'll point here and here").



FIGURE 2 Maya's drawing



FIGURE 3 Georgia's drawing for Chang

Two drawings of the last category were made not only as invitations to play but also as a gift or a gesture of friendship. For example, Georgia (Figure 3) initially announced that she would draw a play invitation addressed to Chang (i.e., to make a train with blocs

Although she drew a train, she also added flowers, hearts and smiling figures. She explained that it was made for Chang since he was keen on her creations (e.g., *“Because one day I had made a very nice painting and Chang liked it very much”*), while she argued that for playing together, pointing at block area could be enough (i.e., *“for making a train with blocks, I would show him the blocks”*).

Discussion

In this article, we sought to illustrate how peer interaction evolved during playtime in a Greek multicultural kindergarten and how children viewed peer communication within their classroom. As we show, newcomers’ play practices depicted different degrees of participation in play activities. This finding can be described by a continuum (Figure 4) that starts at a point of no visible communication signs and ends at full participation, while indications of peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998) are found in the middle (i.e., observing, or shadowing peers’ play, playing only with peers sharing the same language), as the behaviors described in episode 1.



FIGURE 4 The newcomers’ participation in play activities

The idea of the continuum does not imply any developmental process for newcomers’ participation. Instead, it depicts possible pathways of the transformation of their participation. Besides, we should keep in mind that the continuum phases can be observed at the same period (e.g., Ah Lam’s play behaviors). As Kultti (2015, p. 211) underlines, *“full participation should, however, not be seen as something achieved once and for all. Peripheral and full participation are both based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning”*, which however enhance peer friendship as well (Theobald et al., 2017). It is also noteworthy to stress that silence should not be considered exclusively as indication of peripheral participation (Rogoff et al., 2003). Instead, as we demonstrated, silent periods could occur during full participation in play. The sustained interactions presented in episodes 3 and 4 corroborate Kultti’s argument (2015, p. 210) according to which *“children’s ‘silent period should [...] be regarded as a non-verbal period, expressing an additional means for participation in a new language environment”*. Bringing to the fore exemplars in which the involved children tried to make possible the transformation of a play encounter into a sustained interaction and revealing the semiotic

resources they drew upon for making meanings, we had the opportunity to clarify further the idea of *additional means for participation*. As the selected episodes demonstrated, the use of language was generally rare but varied among newcomers. The linguistic behaviors of our participants confirmed similar findings of previous studies (Björk-Willén, 2007). For example, Sonia (episode 2) code-switched (i.e., crossing) between Greek and Albanian, Chang (episode 4) replicated some of Fanis' phrases (i.e., shadowing) and used autonomously some Greek words, whereas Rouan spoke only in Iraqi (episode 3).

Compared to verbal signs, objects and gestures were widely used by newcomers for initiating and sustaining interaction. To borrow Rogoff's words (1995, p. 153), newcomers and Greek speakers continuously made adjustments "to stretch their common understanding to fit with new perspectives in the shared endeavor". These purposes were attained by exemplifying a play-action (e.g., molding play dough), co-constructing play scenarios (e.g., staking the dishes up and taking the spoon), clarifying ideas (e.g., Chang used iconic gestures to show the height of his future construction), drawing a peer's attention (e.g., Chang tapped Fanis' at the shoulder), demonstrating acceptance (e.g., Rouan smiled and raised her shoulders when Maya ended their play), and agreement (e.g., Chang nodded and pointed at the blocks to confirm the robot construction). Although Greek speakers used oral language more than newcomers, the evolved interactions showed that they also responded mainly using both objects and gestures (e.g., following Rouan's actions, Maya moved the plates or raised her hands at her shoulder height to express misunderstanding). Such a reaction may demonstrate an effort by these children to select meaning-making modes attuned to the demands of the communication context of playing with non-Greek speakers. This view is in line with the argument expressed by Cromdal (2004) and Björk-Willén (2007), which interprets immigrant children's involvement in peer play as a collaborative rather than an individual effort of a newcomer to initiate or join in a play event.

In other words, Greek speakers seemed to attune their communicational strategies to newcomers' resources (i.e., the use of toys and bodily signs) during their play encounters. However, when it comes to talking about mediational strategies, they did not necessarily acknowledge non-verbal modes as means to overcome linguistic obstacles. Instead, speaking or writing in a language other than Greek was among the prioritized strategies, while body language was mentioned less during the interviews. This finding is not quite similar to the results of Theobald et al. (2019), where the strategies suggested by the participants were both linguistic and non-linguistic. However, the prioritization of linguistic strategies may demonstrate the importance some children, when being asked, ascribe to the linguistic resources, even though body language is the dominant means of

communication they use during everyday interactions with peers having different linguistic backgrounds. This contradiction may be due to the implied value adults attribute to oral language and the corresponding social learning of children. However, this evidence may impact newcomers' participation. We could suppose that not acknowledging gestures as a communication means, Greek-speakers may be impeded from making focused efforts to overcome communicational barriers with newcomers through gesturing.

On the other side, the linguistic differences documented in the present classroom did not seem to be the major concern of children. They prioritized interpersonal disputes and gender as barriers to play with someone, which was also confirmed by the observation. Generally, peers' linguistic background was not revealed as a criterion for children to choose their playmates; evidence showing a rather inclusive classroom climate.

The third central issue we explored in this study was how Greek speakers constructed meanings through drawing after inviting them to communicate with newcomers through their visual artefacts. Although most drawings were quite unfussy, depicting two or three playthings or two human figures, the embedded meanings were elaborated and represented insightfully by the children, always following the researcher's prompt (i.e., to make a play invitation). For instance, the curved line surrounding the two figures in Stelios' minimal drawing (Figure 1) constitutes a pertinent representation for conveying the request to play hide-and-seek with Chang, which, moreover, attained to convey the implied meaning, as his response demonstrated. On the other side, quite detailed images such as Maya's drawing (Figure 2) showed the children's effort to thoroughly portray the demands of a more complex play. Maya carefully depicted the play area and the involved objects, expressing her intense concern to make clear her graphic invitation for play to Rouan. Therefore, we can argue that the drawing activity in this context, either detailed or minimal, uncovered aspects of the children's meta-communicational competence. (Wood & Hall, 2011). This argument is further confirmed by their efforts to use their drawings and the clarifications made by some children such as the Nikos' one. After describing his drawing, Nikos pointed out that "*he will see my drawing, and we will play blindman's bluff together*". Besides that, the two children's unexpected reactions to using their drawings as gestures of friendship (e.g., Figure 3) imply that young learners can spontaneously acknowledge various communication functions of their drawings, which are worth ECE teachers observing and extending in their classrooms.

Greek speakers' ease of responding to the researcher's prompt suggests that they understood drawing as an alternative means of communication with their peers. Therefore, we can suppose that by intentionally introducing this alternative as a communication tool in multicultural classrooms, teachers could gradually enhance peer

interaction and newcomers' participation in collective interchanges. This perspective is in line with existing views that consider drawing as a powerful communicational means, which, although underestimated, contributes to peer interaction (Kukkonen et al., 2020; Papandreou, 2014).

Conclusions and looking forward

In the present study, exploring peer interaction during play in a multicultural classroom through the lens of participation, allowed us to analyze and interpret both the newcomers' practices to situate themselves in the classroom community and the Greek-speakers' responses. Therefore, we argued on the possible forms of the transformation of immigrant children's participation in peer play. Although carrying out a small case study, we cannot draw any hard conclusions, the present results broaden our knowledge in this field in two keyways.

First, the findings provide evidence that corroborates existing research on newcomers' play practices in multilingual settings (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Theobald et al., 2017), including the way objects and embodied signs function as entry channels to peer play and contribute to sustained interactions (Bengochea et al., 2020; Björk-Willén, 2007). Although the existence of different linguistic backgrounds in a classroom may create barriers to communication among peers, these are not insurmountable. In line with Ledin and Samuelsson (2017, p. 21), we argue that multimodal communication during play “*provides scaffoldings for participation*” and may foster the learning of a new language. The meaning embedded in toys and gestures allows even children not speaking the same language to build a shared understanding of the activity in the scene, prerequisite of communication, and participation in sociocultural terms (Rogoff, 1995).

Second, this study extends our understanding in peer communication among children not sharing the same language by (a) uncovering the perspectives of children speaking the dominant language on their communication with peers speaking another language, and (b) offering some initial hints that children can easily realize the potential of the drawing to function as communicational means in multilingual contexts for inviting newcomers to play together, provided that it is intentionally introduced and cultivated by the teacher.

Exploring young children's experiences related to peer play in a multilingual classroom is a challenging task that calls upon critical reflections on both the ethical issues and the limitations of the study, including our position as researchers.

First, although we made reflective efforts to keep balanced interactions with both groups of children, this balance was not always easy to be attained by the second researcher for two reasons. First, the Greek speakers used to address her more often and second, due to the research design, she had more individual interaction with them (e.g., during the interviews). On the other side, we can suppose that the interview and drawing-telling activity had positive effects in empowering peer interaction. It is likely that these processes helped Greek speakers to acknowledge alternative modes of communication for enhancing their relationships with peers not speaking the Greek language.

Second, the choices of not using video recording during the observation and interviewing only the Greek speakers raise questions of what was lost in terms of body language used and newcomers' perspectives. The research that explores children's embodied communication generally applies video recording for detailed documentation. However, we decided to keep only field notes, considering video recording as an intrusion in peer play (Degotardi, 2011) and especially for newcomers, who have limited opportunities to express their annoyance. For scrutinizing newcomers' views, it would be an asset to use professional interpreters (Theobald et al., 2019). Newcomers' voices on classroom communication should be listened by the researchers and educators. However, in Greece, except for individual researchers and student-teachers other professionals' access to the classroom is not allowed. In future, to overcome institutional barriers, we could obtain the partial participation of children's family members (i.e., parents, older siblings) who might speak better than younger children the majority language. Such a choice could mitigate powers relations, although it constitutes an unknown territory.

Last but not least, future long-term research should focus on the role of drawing as a material object (Hilppö et al., 2017) and mediational means (Papandreou, 2014; Wood & Hall, 2011) for participation in multilingual classrooms, investigating a) the ways children spontaneously use it in multicultural classrooms to communicate (e.g., the incidence described by Georgia who made Figure 3) and b) interventions introducing drawing for communication as a classroom routine.

Taken together, the findings of the present study, and combined with what we already know from prior research, have profound implications for everyday practice in ECE. Specifically, this study provides us with a basis to suggest that drawing activity along with bodily movements could enhance immigrant learners' participation in a new classroom community. To achieve that, teachers should allow children to acknowledge drawing, gesturing, manipulating, and exchanging playthings as significant participation and learning modalities (Rogoff et al., 2003) that afford negotiation and co-construction of meaning. First, considering that children creatively acquire and transform adults' practices and routines (Corsaro, 1992; Rogoff, 1995), teachers in multilingual settings

could explicitly use both embodied and drawn signs for communicating with children in their everyday practice. Second, we already know that open collaborative drawing activities among children and/or exchanges of their creations allow them to co-construct symbols and meanings (Kukkonen et al., 2020; Papandreou, 2014). By introducing such activities, teachers could enrich peer interactions and enhance newcomers' communicational abilities and participation. Third, recognizing the pivotal role of material objects in communication among peers, teachers, in line with Kirova's suggestions (2010), could employ a more ethical practice by equipping the classroom play areas with cultural artifacts reflecting children's routines and practices. Thereby, through familiar objects newcomers could enact participatory roles and share individual experiences with peers. Finally, documentation, as a key tool for participation (Kultti, 2015; Sandseter & Seland, 2016), can be used by teachers to acknowledge and support children's diversified drawing and gesturing behaviors and skills.

To sum up, using the above strategies and assigning the role of the facilitator to the children speaking the dominant language, teachers may open various entries for participation, empowering newcomers to transform peripherality to a growing involvement (Wenger, 1998).

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Papandreou & Dragouni.

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