

Young children's agency: exploring children's interactions with practitioners and ancillary staff members in Greek early childhood education and care settings

KATSIADA, Eleni, ROUFIDOU, Irini, WAINWRIGHT, Jonathan
<<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4769-1147>> and ANGELI, Varvara

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with Practitioners and Ancillary Staff Members in Greek
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Settings**

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Young Children’s Agency: Exploring Children’s Interactions with Practitioners and Ancillary Staff Members in Greek Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Settings.

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Abstract

Most research in ECEC settings, in Greece and internationally, focuses on children’s relationships with their early years practitioners but evidence regarding young children’s role in the formation of these relationships is limited. This paper focuses on ten children, under the age of three, recognising children’s agency and their significant contribution to the formation of interpersonal relationships with practitioners and ancillary staff members. The paper draws on findings from an ethnographic case study, conducted in two Greek day-care settings over the course of six months, which used an adaptation of the Mosaic Approach. The analysis suggests that children’s relationships with significant adults beyond the home is paramount for children and influences and shapes the way they perceive and experience the settings.

Introduction

Childhood is identified as a social construction (James and Prout, 1997),

within the 'new sociology of childhood' (James and Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2011), and children as active agents who co-construct 'knowledge', 'culture' and their 'own identity' (Dahlberg, 2007 p.49). Consequently the new sociology of childhood recognises children as individuals who are not only shaped but also shape culture (Corsaro, 2011). Additionally children have the legal right to be heard about all matters affecting them and to participate in decision making processes (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). These factors do not only indicate that childhood and children need to be contextualized in time, place and culture but also that children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of being studied in their own right. Furthermore, that children should be seen as active participants rather than the subjects of a study. Researchers therefore need to acknowledge that children's relationships with adults involves the exercise of power and also to identify how children resist that power (Dahlberg et al., 2007). In recent years there has been a growing interest in children's agency (Clark and Moss, 2001; James, 2004; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; James and Prout, 1990) which in this paper is defined as children's capacity to make autonomous decisions and choices in all matters affecting them according to their dispositions. This paper focuses on children's agency in relation to building relationships, with adults, within their setting.

In the new sociology of childhood, listening to young children's perspectives is mainly achieved through the use of participatory methods. One example of a participatory approach is the Mosaic Approach (MA) developed by Moss and Clark (2001). Such participatory methods have been mainly used with children

over the age of five, whilst participatory research with younger children is limited (Clark, 2005). In fact, the younger the children are the more their experiences have been studied primarily through the use of observations; structured observations within the positivistic paradigm and unstructured or semi-structured within the interpretative one. Elfer (2007; 2008; Elfer et al., 2012), for instance, used interpretative observation and has been influential in researching under threes' experiences in the nursery.

Greek Research in ECEC: A Critique

Young children's perspectives in relation to the child care services provided to them is an under researched area both in Greece and internationally. It has been argued that, in order to inform child-care policy, one should take into account researchers', parents', practitioners' and children's views (Katz, 1992). A brief review of the research in Greek ECEC settings reaffirms other reviewers' conclusions (Ceglowski and Bacigalupa, 2002), that the perspectives of researchers/ professionals dominate in research, followed by those of parents, whilst child and practitioner perspectives have been paid minimal attention.

Issues relating to adult-child relationships are critical to discussions of quality in early childhood education and care. According to Ebrahim (2011), it was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 that primarily changed the research field in ECEC settings, placing children in the centre and establishing their right to be heard on all issues that concern them. Within the Greek context, the majority of projects on the quality of childcare

focus on the perspectives of researchers, parents or practitioners (Grammatikopoulos et al., 2012; Gregoriadis and Tsigilis, 2008; Rentzou, 2013) whilst children's views seem to remain at the margin, with only one project recognising their views (Bitou, 2010). This emphasis placed on adult rather than on child perspectives, is implied when researchers describe a focus on '*adult-child*' relationships and not on '*child-adult*' relationships.

The nature of adult-child relationships within day-care settings for under threes is a contested subject which has been influenced by aspects of attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1979; 1989; Bowlby, 1958; 1969; 1988). Some professional texts and guidance argue that certain characteristics of the parent-child relationship should be replicated in day-care settings (Elfer et al., 2012), considering that 'young children need an additional attachment figure in nursery to promote positive self esteem and reduce anxiety in order to promote exploration' (Elfer, 2006, p.82). Others argue that home and institutional relationships should differ and that nursery children be given the opportunity to interact with a wider group of adults rather than be attached to one adult (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Penn, 1997). Furthermore, when attachment theory is applied to relationships within a nursery setting, the importance of peer interactions is ignored (Penn, 1997).

In the Greek context, practitioner-child relationships have mostly been discussed within projects which have studied the quality of settings through the use of ITERS and ECERS scales and Arnett's Caregiver Interaction Scale (Mantziou, 2001; Petrogiannis and Melguish, 1996; Rentzou and Sakellariou,

2010). However, practitioner-child relationships have not been researched in depth. Internationally there are examples of research projects that have used more interpretative approaches to identify practitioners' perspectives on their interactions with children (Colley, 2006) and children's perspectives on their interactions with practitioners (Elfer, 2007; 2008; Elfer et al. 2012) with Elfer's work being the most influential.

The Present Study

This paper presents findings about child-adult relationships and it is based on a larger study which investigated the relationships of children, under the age of three, with adults, their peers and their ECEC setting's environment. In contrast to previous Greek research, this study adopts a more sociological perspective and it is influenced by the new sociology of childhood and sociologists like Corsaro (2011), who researched mainly older children's peer cultures. The study's framework is an ethnographic case study which took place in two Greek settings over the course of six months. Ten children participated in the main study, (aged one year four months to two years eleven months old), in addition to ten parents. Two qualified early years practitioners, two early years assistants, two cleaners and one cook also participated to this study. Early years assistants training is between one and two years and early years practitioners receive a higher education degree after four years of training. Additional members of staff, 'ancillary staff', such as cleaners and cooks are usually graduates of compulsory education or have a relevant vocational school's certificate. In Greek settings, ancillary staff members have a significant role during children's initial transition by being

asked to assist practitioners with, for example, comforting children who are crying or assisting them with their meals. After that period, and as children seem to settle within the class, ancillary staff members return to their main duties. Thus they have limited interactions with children during meal times, in the outdoor area, during their short visits to the classrooms and just before children leave the settings in the afternoon.

The Mosaic Approach

In order to research child-adult relationships an adaptation of the MA was employed which allowed children's active participation in the project (Clark and Moss, 2001). The combination of observations, photographic data, and data from conversations with children, parents and nursery staff, assisted in drawing a holistic and detailed picture of children's experiences (Clark, 2001).

The range of photographic, verbal (informal discussions with children) and observational techniques (Clark, 2007) used, allowed verbal and non-verbal children to contribute actively to the project (Alderson, 2000). Conversational interviews (Shuy, 2003), were used to include parents', practitioners' and ancillary staff members interpretations of children's experiences in each child's mosaic. Ancillary members of staff were included in the project and interviewed after it was identified that they too had a significant role in children's daily life in the settings. The generated data was analysed and combined using data-driven thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

Conversational Interviews

As part of each child's mosaic ten parents, four practitioners, and three ancillary staff members were interviewed in a spare classroom at each setting

and the individual interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted approximately two months after the participants were initially approached with a main aim of providing their interpretations on children's experiences. The conversational type of interview was considered most appropriate for this study due to its flexibility and its similarity to everyday conversation making it a more natural process for the interviewees (Shuy, 2003). Daily informal interaction, for a prolonged period of time, between the researcher and the interviewees assisted in building a relationship of trust. Trust is considered the main element of conducting in-depth interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Generating Data from Children

The data collection methods of the MA were adapted in response to children's ages, abilities, needs, interests and the way they chose to communicate, either verbally (Clark and Moss, 2001) or non-verbally (Elfer, 2004; Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003). Observation was used for exploring younger children's actions when playing with other people and/or material (Elfer, 2004), and was used with toddlers to identify their needs and interests (Hobart and Frankel, 2004; Sharman et al., 1995). Even though the study was mainly influenced by an interpretative paradigm, the assistance of the literature deriving from developmental psychology was vital in accessing younger children's non-verbal communication. More specifically, Bruner (1983) and Trevarthen's (1977) categorisations of infants' and babies' communicative behaviours have informed the focus of the observations. Since the research sample comprised children aged sixteen months to three years and because

children do not always follow developmental 'norms', the following behavioural cues were recorded: young children's smiles, cries, vocalizations, pre-speech, gesticulations and the use of everyday objects or playthings to initiate communication. These communicative behaviours were also recorded when observed with older non-verbal children. Practitioners' responsiveness or non-responsiveness, and any spontaneous comments and interpretations made by them, during the observation, about the acts of the children and their purpose, were also noted down. This approach was considered essential because the practitioners could provide alternative or more accurate interpretations due to their familiarity with the child, whilst practitioners' adaptive capacity was also noted down since adults' adaptive capacity is considered important for sustaining communication with the child (Silverster-Bradley and Trevarthen, 1978).

An average of ten narrative unstructured observations were undertaken, in written form, for every target child. Narrative unstructured observation has the advantage of recording 'anything and everything that happens (such as dialogues, movements, emotions), and this offers rich evidence of the children's behaviour' (Palaiologou, 2008, p.61). A form of short hand and codes was used to describe children's actions in order to overcome, to some degree, the drawback of recording events which unfold quickly, making it unfeasible to note everything down (Hobart and Frankel, 2004). Each observation lasted for approximately twenty minutes and were conducted indoors and, in the second setting, outdoors. Children were also observed during routine times, structured and unstructured adult-led activities and free

play.

In this study, flexibility was the main component employed when conducting either participant or non-participant observations. The non-participant observations related to situations where observations were undertaken by the researcher being close enough to the children to see and hear what was happening but without interrupting the activity (Palaiologou, 2008). Participant observation was employed when the researcher organised and led the MA activities with toddlers and when children decided to include the researcher in their play.

Rather than interviews or child conferences (Clark, 2001; Clark and Moss, 2001), informal discussions took place with verbal children during free play, structured activities, and role play. Photographs taken by children, or by the researcher, were used to stimulate discussion with children, parents, and practitioners. All children, even the younger, non-verbal, children aged one year four months and one year six months old, used the camera freely, in order to photograph whatever they wished. This was thought to provide truthful indications of how they experience the environment, as well as what attracts their attention, without them having to speak (Walker, 1993; Lancaster, 2003), since ‘photographs can offer a powerful new language for young children’ (Clark and Moss, 2001, p.24). Considering photographs as a new language, does not necessarily mean that children also need to explain their photographs through spoken language, as also argued by Lancaster (2003), even though there were times when the older children in this study

verbally stated their intentions when taking photographs.

In this study, three children assented to participate in the map-making activity and were invited to use the photographs to make a map of their favourite activities and areas in the setting as suggested by Clark and Moss (2001). However, this was not as successful as expected because children decided to express their agency instead of following the research agenda. For example, two children decided to undertake the activity together but they experimented with glueing layers with the 30 photographs provided to them. Also, a selection of photographs, taken by the children or the researcher, was placed in personal photo albums for each child. Parents were asked to look through the albums with their children at home. Some of the photographs were a subject of discussion during the interviews with parents, practitioners and ancillary staff, and were used to identify their interpretations of children's intentions.

Ethics

The value position of this study was that research about children should be with and for children and not on them (Alderson, 2000; Hood et al., 1996; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). Therefore, children were approached as individuals capable of giving their assent, as also suggested by Christensen and Prout (2002) irrespective of their age (Alderson, 2000). Since parents act as 'gatekeepers' for children (Dockett and Perry, 2011), parents' consent was requested prior to children's assent. Much emphasis was given to the power relations because, especially in the case of conducting research with children,

unconstrained adult power could lead to abuse (Greig and Taylor 1999). Children were, however, able to express their agency by deciding not to follow the research agenda or by refusing to participate.

Presenting and Discussing the Findings

The study was conducted in two Greek day care settings managed by the same local authority. The first setting was a family type and the second setting was more educationally oriented. Five children from the first setting participated in the study: Georgios (aged one year four months, henceforth known as 1.4), Litsa (1.5), Filio (2.4), Christos (2.4) Aspa (2.4), with their practitioners Nadia and Fofo and the ancillary members of staff Loukia the cook and Koula the cleaner for that class. Similarly, five children participated from the second setting: Dimitris (2.5), Kostas (2.9), Stathoula (2.10), Manolis (2.11) and Yiannis (2.11) with their practitioners Katerina and Antigoni and Fotini, the cleaner. All children attended full time sessions as this is the norm in Greek ECEC settings.

Child and Ancillary Members of Staff Interactions

It has previously been recognised that ancillary members of staff came into direct contact with children in Greek settings during routine and care times (Sidiropoulou and Tsaoula, 2008), but no evidence is available regarding this contact, or the relationships that children formed with these members of staff. This study, suggests that ancillary staff members have a much more active and substantial role in children’s education and care than has been previously recognised.

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5 In this study, interview data with parents and nursery staff indicate that
6
7 ancillary staff members helped by offering emotional and physical closeness
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9 to children during the initial transition period (vertical transition¹). In this study,
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11 Manolis (2.11) was one of the three children from the second setting who
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13 chose to photograph Fotini, the cleaner in this class. The interviews with both
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15 Manolis' parent and Fotini revealed that Manolis was distressed and anxious
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17 during his vertical transition and Fotini was the person who comforted and
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19 assisted him to settle within the setting.
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25 Observational data shows that ancillary staff also assisted during routine
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27 tasks by offering to feed the children. Some children, especially in the first
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29 setting, which was more family oriented, appeared very interested in these
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31 staff members, evidenced by their repeated attempts to interact with and
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33 photograph them. For several of these children, daily interactions with
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35 ancillary staff seemed to have assisted them during every day (horizontal),
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37 transitions. This is probably because the ancillary staff members' role of
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39 cleaning, serving and offering assistance with meals resembles the children's
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41 experiences of carers from their home and family lives. Furthermore, the
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43 incorporations of play related to feeding into their imaginary and pretend play
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45 indicated that children saw this as an important interaction in their daily lives.
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51 Christos (2.4), who was less competent in speech, photographed the nursery
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53 cook Loukia and also Koula, who was the class cleaner. Both members of
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56 ¹ Kagan and Neuma (1998) identify the vertical transition as the initial transition from home to nursery
57 and the horizontal, everyday transition, as children move from home to nursery.
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staff interacted with children for short periods throughout the day. Loukia was also observed spending time in the class before her working day was over and during meal times she offered to assist the children with their meals.

Maria, Christos' mum, highlighted that Christos got 'very excited' when he saw Loukia's photograph and said: 'Loukia mam, us lentil' [Loukia brings us food, brings us lentil soup].

Indeed Christos observed Loukia closely every time she brought food into the class and when she also offered to assist him and the other children with their meals. However, most children, including Christos, who had recently gained autonomy in this area, would express their agency by refusing such offers but, at other times children wanted to return to being cared for by adults, during meal times. Children used ancillary staff to replicate familial relationships within the setting, as well as using the qualified practitioners in this respect. It seems likely that the distinctive role of ancillary staff, in terms of serving the food, cleaning, offering to assist children with their meals and choosing to spend their spare time with children, led to children identifying them as people who cared about them, in addition to caring for them. It has been identified before, in Greek kindergartens, that children value caring and supportive teachers (Gregoriadis, 2015), but there was no evidence that this could also extend to ancillary members of staff.

In the first setting, Koula, the class cleaner, was identified by children as the 'Yiayia' (grandma) of the setting. Koula stated that she found the role fulfilling

and may even have encouraged the children to refer to her in this way. Certainly children seemed happy to take advantage of the opportunities the setting environment offered, to replicate the emotionally close and nurturing relationship of the familiar figure of 'Yiayia'. Christos was observed incorporating the 'Yiayia' figure into his imaginary play whilst, Aspa (2.4) and Litsa (1.5) explicitly recognised Koula as the grandma of the setting.

Svensson-Dianellou et al.'s, (2010) research findings showed that Greek grandmothers offer to help their working adult children by preparing meals for their grandchildren, or for the whole family. This helps to explain why children identified with the person who both encouraged this kind of relationship and offered to help children during meal times as the 'Yiayia' of the setting. The children were able to do this due to the distinctive aspect of the Greek setting's staffing structure, which provided opportunities for the ancillary staff to spend time with children throughout the day.

Some children, including Aspa (2.4) and Christos (2.4), also seemed to want to replicate the familiar experience of helping with household chores, such as washing dishes and sweeping, within the setting. In fact, Christos always seemed eager to assist with chores in the setting as highlighted in the following observational extract.

Loukia, the cook, comes into the classroom and jokingly asks the children:

Loukia: Who will come into the kitchen to help me wash the dishes?

Christos runs fast from the carpet area towards the changing area, where Loukia stands, shouting:
Christos: Ego! [Me].

Observations of Christos showed that he preferred to observe from a distance rather than participate in adult-led activities in the class. His mum noted that one of his favourite activities at home was taking part in household chores such as putting clothes in the laundry.

Opportunities to replicate household chores were not explicitly planned in the setting. However, the adults that children had the opportunity to interact with, and especially ancillary staff who were mainly engaged with such activities, encouraged children to express their agency and highlighted the significance of such opportunities in replicating familiar actions and relationships within their setting. Previous research suggests that the opportunities offered by specific areas of the setting to replicate favourite domestic activities, assisted children during vertical transitions (Brooker, 2000). For Thyssen (2000, p.41) the replication of such actions were signs that children in the setting ‘carry on the life that they see other children and adults live around them’. This study suggests that the replication of domestic activities and nurturing relationships within the ECEC setting could be explicitly incorporated in the settings program structure to assist some children during horizontal transitions.

This study highlights that children exercise agency to form close relationships with emotionally available adults, regardless of their role and status in the setting, suggesting that the significance of the adult-child interaction for children is not affected by staff’s educational level. Limited research in Greece

(Rentzou and Sakellariou, 2010) and internationally (Mathers et al., 2011) supports the interpretation that staff qualifications do not affect the quality of adult-child interactions, especially for children under the age of three, in contrast to much international research suggesting that qualified staff are more effective in their interactions with children (Sylva et al., 2004; Mathers et al., 2007; Hadfield et al., 2012). The previous research focuses on identifying adult-child interactions instead of child-adult interactions. As this study suggests, it seems likely that, from a child's perspective, staff qualifications do not matter even though one would expect that qualified staff would respond to children seeking interaction in a more informed and responsive manner.

Child-Adult Affectionate and Playful Interactions

In this research, there was evidence indicating that children seek to be comforted and to be physically close to adults throughout the day. This is also the case when they are not in distress (Thyssen, 2000). In particular, children exercised agency to initiate and accept or reject warm, sensitive, affectionate and playful interactions with adults, or even to challenge adults' authority. Practitioners' physically remote² and supervisory style, observed in both settings, and their positioning in space, seemed to encourage both younger and older children to exercise agency and decide whether to accept or reject such interactions. More specifically, there were indications that even young

² The practitioners from the first setting would usually sit, during free play, at the settee which was placed on one side of the classroom where they could supervise the whole room without having to move around. In the second setting the practitioners usually adopted this supervisory and physically remote style during free play, both indoors and outdoors. The physically remote style, in this study, was determined as being approximately two meters between an adult and the scene where children's actions were taking place.

children including Litsa (1.5), perceived such interactions as being on offer, whilst being aware that they had the power to accept or reject them by approaching or ignoring adults' invitations.

In one occasion Nadia, asks Litsa to go near her on the settee. As Litsa approaches her, Nadia picks her up and starts tickling her. On another occasion Alice, a practitioner from another classroom who also is seated on the settee, asks Litsa where she is going as Litsa starts walking around the class. Litsa looks back at Alice who indicates, with a hand gesture, that she wants to take Litsa onto her lap. Litsa ignores her and looks around the classroom.

Litsa did not invite any of these interactions or shows of affection but she seemed to recognise that she could autonomously accept or reject them. Other observations of Litsa indicate that she was positive in her interactions with adults other than her own practitioners. Thus, Litsa used the power she had to reject Alice's invitation for affection. It is noteworthy that both adults invited Litsa to go near them instead of them approaching Litsa. This style of behaviour, which was adopted in similar situations by the adults in both settings, seemed to reinforce children's autonomous decisions on whether to accept or reject such invitations.-

Previous researchers have also identified Greek practitioners' predominantly supervisory style (Petrogiannis, 1994; Petrogiannis and Melguish, 1996; Mantziou, 2001) and one would expect that it has a negative effect on adult-child relationships. However, findings in studies of Greek settings were

consistent in that adult-child interaction was rated higher than other measurable aspects of the setting environment including group size, child-staff ratios and programme structure (Petrogiannis and Melguish, 1996; Mantziou, 2001; Rentzou 2010; Grammatikopoulos et al., 2012). In other countries, the above aspects were rated higher than interaction aspects (Hadfield et al., 2012). This probably suggests that Greek settings emphasize staff-child relationships more than is usual in settings in other countries. Some attribute this emphasis to practitioners' efforts to compensate for the lack of quality in relation to other structural aspects of Greek settings (Gregoriadis and Tsigilis, 2008). However, this emphasis on staff-child relationships could be attributed to historical and cultural reasons: Greek settings have prioritized aspects of socialization, alongside aspects of care, since their establishment (Katsiada, 2015).

In this study, the adults' style was probably inhibiting less confident children with more limited verbal skills like Christos (2.4). Christos was observed being physically close to adults only during the days that two students, who were undertaking their school placement, were in the setting. The students usually sat on the floor when playing with children, and Christos was observed approaching them and sitting on their lap. This indicated that practitioners must acknowledge the varying nature of children's dispositions and try to overcome this by adopting, for example, a more accessible positioning in space.

Adult's physically remote style, was not, however, an obstacle for confident

children like Stathoula (2.10) or Filio (2.4). Both girls were generally keen to interact with adults and would approach the practitioners seeking to engage them in either playful or verbal interaction, using a variety of strategies: including being near or physically close to adults, talking to them, giving them toys and commenting on their own or adults' clothes and on their own actions or play-things. Stathoula (2.10), one of the most competent in speech children, was proactive in communicating her desire for verbal and affectionate interaction with adults.

Stathoula goes near Antigoni and talks to her. Antigoni kisses her and says:

Antigoni: You don't wear a diaper anymore?

Statoula nods.

Antigoni: Seriously? You don't use a diaper at night? Bravo!

Stathoula lies down a couple of times on Antigoni's lap, then she takes the feather she had previously found and waves it near Antigoni's face.

Stathoula: Look, a feather!

Antigoni asserts: Oh, come on! Please, don't put in on my face!

Stathoula takes the feather down and moves between Antigoni's legs.

From there, she hugs and kisses Katerina who sits next to Antigoni.

Katerina turns to show the other cheek and Stathoula kisses her again.

She now moves onto Katerina's lap and hugs and kisses her again.

Katerina kisses her back.

Stathoula was proactive in communicating her desire for affection. She wanted to engage in a playful and affectionate relationship and she indicated it by lying on the practitioner's lap and by using the feather. When the first adult indicated she did not want to continue with this kind of interaction, Stathoula was not discouraged and she was persistent in seeking an

alternative adult, seemingly aware that she could seek this support from different adults.

Findings of this study validate earlier evidence, from laboratory contexts (Bruner 1983) and day-care contexts (Thyssen, 2000), which show that even very young children have an active role in starting, extending or redirecting play with their caregivers. Adults' adaptive capacity and their responsiveness to these invitations, is considered crucial for sustaining and extending communication (Thyssen, 2000; Trevarthen, 1977).

Challenging Adult Authority

In contrast with other studies in Greek settings (Bitou, 2010), the practitioners of both settings in this study prompted but did not insist on all of the children's participation in group activities. During one of Aspa's (2.4) observations Fofo, the practitioner, invited children to a group singing activity. One of the children in the class rejected her invitation explaining that he was occupied with 'washing' a toy. As the observation unfolds Aspa, who is already participating in the singing activity, also rejects Fofo's suggestion for moving on to a dancing activity.

The adults' style seemed to assist children in building their confidence through empowering them to accept or reject participation in activities. This supports the work of Dunphy and Farrell (2011), that the opportunity to choose activities provides a context in which children can exercise their autonomy, and it extends this finding to the under the three age group.

Furthermore, both younger and older children of this study, including Georgios (1.4) and Dimitris (2.5), were observed using strategies such as: ignoring, avoiding, verbally resisting adult rules and challenging adult authority, actions that had mainly been reported for older age groups (Corsaro, 2011). In the following observation Dimitris puts some playdough in a plastic cup he had taken from the home corner. He takes a spoon too and heads towards the child-sized living room. The practitioner who sits nearby says to him:

Katerina: Don't put the play-dough in there.

Dimitris: Why?

Katerina: Because it sticks onto the cup and then you put the cup in your mouth.

Also, I think it's time to tidy up and go to Mrs Rosie's class.

Dimitris: Why?

Katerina: Because I'll need to leave in a few minutes.

[...] Dimitris and the other children go towards the door.

Katerina says to Dimitris who steps outside the class:

Katerina: Come here, don't leave, we're queuing.

Dimitris asserts: The other children left!

Dimitris questioned the adult's authority and was persistent in seeking answers but he also challenged Katerina's decision on queuing which provides further evidence that some children did not take for granted, or passively accept, adult rules.

The younger children including Georgios, demonstrated their resistance to adult rules mainly through the use of body language. In one of Georgios'

observations, during pick-up time, Georgios verbally indicated that he was waiting for his father and he stood in the corridor outside the class. The two practitioners were seated at the settee across from Georgios and repeatedly asked him to re-enter the class. Georgios periodically followed their instructions, indicating his awareness of their authority in the class. However he also tried out different ways to challenge adult rules throughout the observation by continuing to step outside the class and by ignoring them, having his back turned from them. As the observation unfolds he probably felt practitioners' persistence as being irritating and stamped 'his right foot peevishly on the floor' in response to practitioners prompting him once again to re-enter the classroom.

Adults' position in space and the style they adopted, by inviting Georgios back into the class and to be near them, seemed to encourage Georgios to make autonomous decisions and give him the freedom to try out ways to challenge their rules and question their authority.

Children's Awareness of Limits in their Agency

In this study too, as with other studies (Langsted, 1994), children seemed to identify practitioners as people with power who would assist them in peer conflicts. Conflicts between children was limited in both settings which could be partly attributed to adults' supervisory style, which seemed to enable children to solve peer conflicts independently, something also found by Singer (2002). However, less powerful children in this study, such as Yiannis (2.11), also seemed to expect adults' help in joining the group or single play. Corsaro

(2011) had similar findings with older age groups. This finding indicates that even younger children recognise the limits of their agency; they are aware of adults' relative power and they recognise adults' ability to enforce ways of behaving within the peer group. For these children, observations revealed that enforcement involved assisting them to enter their peers play, protecting them from physical aggression and resolving disputes over toys in their favour, as indicated in Aspa's observational extract below.

Aspa walks towards the practitioner who is sat at the table chatting with Christos.

Practitioner: What is it Aspa?

Aspa points at the pan that Nicole [1.4] is playing with at the table and says:

Aspa: It's mine.

Practitioner: No, it's Nicole's.

Aspa: No, it's mine!

Practitioner: No, it's Nicole's!

Aspa takes a chair and comes and sits next to the researcher. She points at the pan again and says to her:

Aspa: I want it!

Aspa approached adults as people who could use adult power to intervene on her behalf. She also tried to override the practitioner's interpretation of events but backed down when the adult reasserted her position. Nonetheless, Aspa was persistent and she did not seem to lack confidence in making her desire explicit and in seeking for alternative adults who could use their authority to get her the toy.

Seeking out Emotionally and Physically Close Interactions

Research evidence in international day-care indicates that young children identified staff as being there to help and comfort them (Langsted, 1994; Thyssen, 2000). Gregoriadis (2015) found that Greek kindergarten children hold positive views about teachers who are physically and emotionally close to them and provide them with care and attention. This study also support previous limited research with under threes, which highlighted that children were proactive in seeking such interactions from adults (Thyssen, 2000). In particular in this study, when upset, all children appeared to use proximity to adults as a common strategy to signal their desire for emotionally and physically close interactions. This included the older children. Kostas (2.9), for example, sought comfort when hurt by approaching, talking to and staying physically close to adults.

Kostas puts his palm under the toy box on which Yiannis is sitting. Kostas' finger is caught under the box and he starts crying. The practitioner walks towards them and takes Yiannis off the box, she then asks children to start tidying up. Kostas approaches her and by pointing at the toy box he says:

Kostas: This one!

Practitioner: I know.

When the other children finish tidying up, the practitioner demonstrates how the [researcher's] camera works and gives it to Kostas who, during tidying up, stands next to her. Kostas photographs Dimitris [2.5] and says:

Kostas: I photographed you!

He comments as he looks at his finger:

Kostas: It doesn't hurt anymore!

Kostas seemed to see the practitioner as someone who would give him comfort when he was hurt. He seemed to maintain this view even though the practitioner appeared more focused on health and safety issues. Kostas actively sought comfort by approaching, talking, and staying next to the practitioner. This episode provided further evidence that some children, when in distress, sought comfort and physically close interactions with adults.

Children varied in the extent to which they viewed adults as potential comforters in situations of distress. For example Dimitris (2.5) was observed crying a few times because other children had hit him but he was rarely observed seeking adults to either intervene or comfort him.

Some of the younger children indicated their diapers needed changing, or they were observed crying for no apparent reason to show their desire for physically close and exclusive contacts with adults. Most of the time, the adults from both settings stepped in, making themselves available to comfort and cuddle children in situations of distress. These were probably perceived by the less verbal children as successful strategies for meeting their needs. The strategy of the diaper changing suggests that some children may identify practitioners as adults who prioritized aspects of physical care over other requests for attention. It seems likely that some children, rather than directly requesting attention, use a strategy they view as more likely to be successful in this particular context.

As with the emphasis on warmth, enthusiasm and the quality of communication (Petrogiannis and Melguish, 1996; Rentzou and Sakellariou,

2010), practitioners' emphasis on care rather than on education is a consistent finding across Greek studies (Petrogiannis, 1994; Rentzou, 2012; 2013). Internationally, Ceglowski and Bacigalupa (2002) argue that adults' responsiveness to children is amongst the main characteristics measured in order to identify the quality of the adult-child interactions. Perhaps a limitation of these previous studies is that they discuss adults' actions rather than explicitly recognising that young children also participate in this reciprocal interaction.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This paper has identified that individual children placed importance on aspects of relationships with practitioners and ancillary staff. Thus it is essential, for policies and guidance to facilitate the incorporation of the key-worker concept into the pedagogy of ECEC settings, particularly for children under three, so that all children have access to emotionally available and responsive adults who will listen, care for and form emotionally close relationships with them. If we are to recognize children's agency they could also, if possible, be allowed to choose their key-worker. Additionally, specific emphasis should be given to the ways in which adults position themselves in space. Even though some children may find adults' physically remote style as encouraging autonomous decisions other, less confident children or those with limited language skills, may find this hinders the formation of emotionally close relationships with adults. Children's relationships with ancillary staff could be promoted in a more proactive way because, as seen in this study, they have a significant role in children's lives in the setting.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

A limitation of the study is the small number of participants which does not allow generalizations in the Greek or international context. A possible replication of the study in a wider context could provide further evidence regarding young children's agency to initiate interactions with adults within their setting. In this study, it was identified that children used various strategies to interact with adults but the degree to which children valued aspects of child-adult relationships varied according to their dispositions. It would be interesting to identify if young children from other settings or cultural contexts use similar strategies and if they value similar aspects of child-adult relationships and if so, to what extent.

Another potential limitation of this study is that it focuses on children's perspectives. This is an interesting area because young children's perspectives are less frequently researched in relation to those of other groups particularly in the Greek context. Future researchers could focus on identifying how multiple individuals' perspectives, including those of children, parents, practitioners and ancillary staff might relate and interrelate in relation to child-adult relationships.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted young children's active role in the formation of reciprocal interactions with adults within two Greek ECEC settings. It has been previously identified that Greek parents and practitioners valued

interpersonal relationships and aspects of care (Petrogiannis, 1994; Rentzou and Sakellariou, 2012). This study identified that young children also value these aspects and they are proactive in seeking out comforting, playful and caring relationships with adults. The paper also suggests that during horizontal transitions, children seek to replicate emotionally close and nurturing relationships and familiar domestic activities from their family and community lives. The paper extends the literature about the significant adults in children's settings by recognising that, in Greek settings, ancillary staff plays an important role in children's education and care. Practitioners' physically remote style inhibited the formation of emotionally close relationships with less confident or less verbally skilled children. However, this style appeared to enable even very young children to challenge adults' authority and to exercise their agency and ability to make autonomous decisions regarding group participation and interaction with adults.

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