

Exploring play in school recess and physical education classes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore children's play during recess and in physical education (PE) classes from the perspective of Huizinga's theory of play. Specifically, this study investigated how primary school PE teachers used the concept of play, how it was understood by student participants, and how the participants engaged in the different phases of play during recess. Two groups of Year 3 children from two different schools participated in the study. Observations and unstructured group and individual interviews were used to collect data. The results reveal that PE teachers used the concept of play to propose activities, therefore employing play as a pedagogical tool. Participants engaged in some short breaks during the different parts of the PE class, during which they engaged in a ludic mode of play. Finally, the players communicated with each other in different ways while playing in a ludic mode during recess, using verbal and non-verbal communication and a combination of both. The results suggest that PE teachers need to determine which approaches to play are more appropriate to use in their classes.

Keywords

Play, Huizinga, ludic mode, physical education, recess, children

Introduction

This paper explores the phenomenon of play in both physical education (PE) classes in primary school, and during school recess. For the purpose of this paper, play is only explored from the players' point of view. Cole-Hamilton et al. (2002: 7) describe play as a 'freely chosen, personally directed, [and] intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child'. This definition depicts play as something that children do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Children usually consider

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'almost anything as an opportunity for play and would play almost anywhere with anyone' (Glenn et al., 2012: 185).

Play during school recess has mainly been investigated in relation to levels of physical activity (McKenzie et al., 1997; Ridgers et al., 2007) or in relation to children's behaviour (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Barros et al., 2009) in the field of physical education and sport pedagogy. Similarly, studies regarding play conducted in PE settings have focused primarily on the promotion of physical activity (see for example Fairclough and Stratton, 2005; McKenzie, 2001). Some research has also differentiated between play at home and play in educational settings (see for example Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2010). However, little is known regarding how children play during PE classes and in school recess, and what they consider to be play. Importantly, children do not always have much choice regarding when and where to play in school settings. If children are unable to decide when, where and with whom they play, this may also affect the games they play, and the movement and social skills they may develop.

It is important to further explore how children play given that past research has shown that recess provides opportunities for children to gain various social skills with their peers through play (Blatchford et al., 2003; Hart, 2002; Yantzi et al., 2010), suggesting that play may encourage children's social development. However, children's play can, in some contexts, be taken for granted, thus leading adults to ignore the importance of play for the sake of play and, potentially, to restrain play opportunities. As play should be spontaneous and unrestrained (Glenn et al., 2012), adult involvement at school may interfere with the very nature of play (Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002; Huizinga, 1955).

In order to explore children's play during school recess and PE classes, two groups of Year 3 students from two primary schools participated in the study. The research questions that guided this investigation are: (1) How do primary school PE teachers use the concept of play? (2) How do children understand play? (3) How do children engage in the different phases of play during recess? The phenomenon of play has been studied from different approaches¹ and classified under different categories.² For this paper, a Huizingian approach to play is used and is provided below. The concepts of *forms* and *modes*³ of play are also discussed in the following section. The research methods are then outlined. Finally, the main results are presented and discussed, followed by the conclusions and their implications.

A Huizingian approach to play

While play has been studied from many perspectives, a Huizingian approach to play is not frequently found in the literature. This perspective may allow us to investigate play from an unusual angle and make us think about play differently, particularly in PE classes. Huizinga (1955: 47) defined play as:

... a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'.

Based on the above definition, it can be noticed how Huizinga identifies five characteristics that play must have: (1) play is free; (2) play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life; (3) play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration; (4) play creates order; and (5) play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. Furthermore, Huizinga (1955: 8) states

that play ‘is never a task. It is done at leisure, during “free time”’. Thus, a relevant question is whether what is presented in PE classes may be considered as ‘play’ using a Huizingian theoretical approach, given that PE is not done during ‘free time’.

According to Marrero (1996), play appears to be widely used in today’s society (e.g. we can learn by playing, meet new people by playing). However, Huizinga (1955: 2) attests that people usually ‘start from the assumption that play must serve something which is *not* play . . . [which] only deal[s] incidentally with the question of what play is *in itself* and what it means for the player’ (emphasis in original). This sentiment inspired this paper, the purpose of which is to explore what play means for children who are playing. Play is frequently considered as a means to achieve an end, but the benefits (or detriments) of play itself are rarely examined. Children usually play to have fun and feel pleasure in a specific situation (Huizinga, 1955; Pavía, 2006). Accordingly, Huizinga (1955: 2–3) claims that the ‘intensity of, and absorption in, play finds no explanation in biological analysis. Yet in this intensity, this absorption . . . lies the very essence, the primordial quality of play’. For children, play has an aim in itself, ‘outside the sphere of necessity or material utility’ (Huizinga, 1955: 10). Players know that when play is over, everything remains exactly as it was before, because it was just a game (Pavía, 2010).

Adult-initiated activities are more closely related to the concept of activity and they have great motivational potential for students (Navarro Adelantado, 2002). However, it is important to reinforce the value of play itself. According to Kirk et al. (1990), the distinctions between play and work (work being serious, purposeful and legitimate; play being trivial and non-serious) reinforce the values of the Protestant work ethic which serves the interests of industrial capitalism. For many teachers, play is a tool used to achieve educational goals. In this way, play is instrumentalised to achieve other aims. When play has aims other than just playing, it is at risk of becoming routinised and, consequently, of losing its potential for excitement (Marrero, 1996). Therefore, play should be considered differently from an activity undertaken to achieve an ulterior aim. Rather, the parameters and objectives of play are determined and organised by players. This is frequently labelled *free play* (Huizinga, 1955). According to Pavía (2006, 2009, 2010), play has two main components: its form and its mode.

Forms of play

All play has a form. The form of play is the skeleton, the structure, the format and the visible shape of a game (Pavía, 2006, 2009, 2010). The form of play is what observers are able to perceive and it is used to determine if someone is playing or not. It is the external structure that allows us to compare or differentiate one game from another one and is comparable to the external appearance of objects (Pavía, 2010). Play may take the form of improvisation or pretence, interaction, performance, mimicry or thrill-seeking, among others.

The form of play includes specific characteristics that influence the tension of play (Pavía, 2010). These characteristics include purpose, rules, sources of emotion (e.g. competition) and character (Pavía, 2010). The establishment of certain forms of play may limit children’s potential to be autonomous and ludic, that is, to engage in spontaneous and undirected play. It may even restrain the construction and development of some movements, given that certain forms of play limit (or erase) some spontaneous expressions (Gómez, 2014). The forms of play presented by adults, with their clearly defined logic, do not typically contribute to the creation of a ludic culture. When rules and norms are established by those outside of play, the players are unable to create and to play according to their preferences. Therefore, if the form of play is not established by the

players themselves, the ludic mode of play is impossible (Gómez, 2014). The mode of play and its possible alternatives are explained in the next section.

Modes of play

While forms of play may be determined by outsiders, modes of play are determined exclusively by the players. Players may simulate play to conform with adults' expectations; however, this 'play' is not usually what players prefer. According to Huizinga (1955), play is self-organised by the players. Therefore, not every activity that adults present to children as 'play' constitutes 'real play' for the players. Modes of play relate to bodily language, behaviours and attitudes. There are two main modes of play: *ludic* and *non-ludic* (Pavía 2006, 2009, 2010).

Players take part in ludic play when it is considered exclusively as play, free from later implications (Huizinga, 1955). On the contrary, non-ludic play occurs when players are involved in an activity that has a play form but in which, paradoxically, players are restricted from playing freely in a ludic way. This latter mode of play is frequently facilitated by teachers. What teachers consider as 'serious play' is generally 'simulated play' for children and vice versa (Rivero, 2010; Varea, 2012). Similarly, Huizinga (1955: 21) claims that 'the *fun* of playing resists all analysis, all logical interpretations... it is precisely this fun-element that characterizes the essence of play' (emphasis in original).

A ludic mode of social play requires consent and trust among the players, and is based on the understanding that any possible negative occurrences which come about during play will be disregarded following the game's completion as everything will return to its pre-game state (Huizinga, 1955; Pavía, 2006). While playing in a ludic mode, players are free from any kind of threats or worries (Pavía, 2008, 2009). Players continuously communicate with each other (verbally and/or bodily) the ways in which they are playing (Díaz, 2006; Pavía, 2008; Rivero, 2008; Varea, 2012). To play in a ludic mode, players must share a ludic understanding (Pavía, 2006).

The dimensions of a ludic mode of play are related to the possibility of maintaining a certain degree of authenticity in a *show off* (apparent) situation, which is organised according to a script freely accepted by the players (Pavía, 2009). Permission is the authorisation from the players to act within a different reality and to enjoy the characteristics of play, even when the same players strictly observe the rules of a game (Huizinga, 1955). Players need to feel free to experience time, space and characters in a *different world* when playing in a ludic mode. Players ask for permission to explore, try and experiment without fear of being wrong. In this way, they are able to transparently, precisely and without doubt say, 'but I am playing!' (Pavía, 2010: 72).

Methods

This paper explores how children play in school recess and in PE classes. Specifically, it aims to investigate how PE teachers used the concept of play, how it was understood by student participants, and how the participants engaged in the different phases of play. This paper is concerned only with the players' point of view. Therefore, observations and interviews in this study were conducted only with children. There are a few instances that make reference to play presented by teachers; this is because during the observations teachers explicitly said that the children were going to 'play'.

In what follows, the participants and settings of this study are described, then the observations and interviews conducted are explained, followed by the account of the data analysis process undertaken.

Participants and setting

Participants for this study were a group of seven Year 3 students (three boys and four girls) from Gumtree Primary School and a group of six Year 3 students (three boys and three girls) from Bamboo Primary School. These children were selected to participate in the study given that most of them actively participated in play during observations prior to data collection. All names used in this paper to refer to children, teachers and schools are pseudonyms. Gumtree is a private primary school and Bamboo is a public primary school. The two schools were very similar in terms of facilities and time for recess and PE classes. All participants were between eight and nine years of age at the time of data collection.

Ethical approval was received from the university. Before commencing data collection, I met with the principals of both schools to explain the project to them and to seek permission to collect data at their schools. Consent forms were completed by participants' parents, and students assented to participate. Observations and interviews were conducted twice a week during four months at each school. The longer recess was observed in each school. This recess was 20 minutes long and allowed children more opportunities to play. Furthermore, the first or the third recess (10 minutes long each) and the weekly 45-minute PE class were observed at both schools.

Observations

Observation was the main method for data collection as it allows for noticing non-verbal information in a specific setting (Baker, 2006), thus facilitating the collection of 'live' data from social situations (Cohen et al., 2007). Through observation, I was able to capture the children's activity in the observed playground sites (including PE classes) rather than relying on their or others' reports of what occurred (Cohen et al., 2007; O'Leary, 2005). This is a particular strength of observations as they provide researchers with a reality check (Robinson, 1982). Furthermore, observations allowed the capture of daily play which may have been taken for granted by participants (Cooper and Schindler, 2001).

Written observation guidelines in the form of prompts and questions were prepared in advance to guide the observations in line with the objectives of the study (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). Only activities that included locomotor skills were observed, as these activities were comparable to the majority of the activities frequently used during PE classes. Data collected through observation were recorded manually for later analysis. Detailed field notes were organised according to the date on which they were made and each page was numbered. This allowed the assignment of retrieval codes to the data, allowing for the efficient location of notes during the data analysis process (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004).

Short, unstructured interviews were also conducted with some participants immediately following each observed recess or PE class. Questions related to observed playground or class occurrences. These interviews took no longer than 15 minutes and are described in the following section.

Unstructured interactive interviews

Short unstructured interviews were conducted with participants who showed a behaviour of interest, to seek clarification of events or to confirm observations. Cohen et al. (2007: 353) point out that in unstructured interactive interviews, 'questions emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of things; there is no predetermination of question topic or wording'.

Unstructured interactive interviews allowed the participants to tell their stories with little interruption by the researcher. These types of interviews are most suited to studies where the researcher seeks participants' perspectives regarding the relative importance assigned to matters or occurrences (Richards and Morse, 2007). For this study, it was essential that I understood playground occurrences from the children's perspective with minimum influence or interruption of their thoughts.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to recall what they did during the observed recess or PE class. Some of the interviews were conducted in groups, particularly when numerous participants had been involved in the same activity together during the observed period. Other interviews were conducted individually, mainly in instances when a specific behaviour of interest from one of the participants was observed. All interviews were conducted immediately following the observed situation and were transcribed verbatim within 48 hours.

Data analysis

Data were analysed manually using a content analysis approach. The content was analysed at two levels – manifest and interpretative (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). Analysis at the manifest level entailed writing a descriptive account of the data, taking into consideration what was observed and what participants said. Analysis at the interpretive level mainly focused on the implications of what was observed and what was meant, inferred or implied by participant behaviours and responses.

Observation notes and interview transcripts were read and brief notes were made regarding any interesting or relevant information present in the data. The items excerpted from the text were read through carefully and each data item was coded according to its content. Emerging themes were identified, compared and contrasted in an iterative process in order to establish accurate groupings. As I continued reading through transcripts and identifying more themes, a point of saturation was reached at which all items were accommodated within the existing themes.

Finally, I returned to the original notes and transcripts. Some of the previously excluded data were found to contain useful information and so they were incorporated under the relevant themes (Lankshear and Knobel, 2004). The most representative excerpts of field notes and quotes for some of the main themes are presented in the following sections.

Findings and discussion

The majority of the participants for this study at both schools were involved in playground activities during recess on most of the days observed. The field notes revealed the exuberance with which the children emerged from the classrooms into a clearly different world of play. The energy shown by the children, their laughter and their breaking into a run as soon as they entered the play area all indicated how much the children enjoyed recess at both schools. In what follows, three of the main themes constructed from the data are presented and discussed: 'Play in PE classes', 'short ludic breaks' and 'communicating in play'.

Play in PE classes

When participants were asked about what they did in their PE classes, most of them affirmed that they played. For example, Zeila (Bamboo Primary School) said: 'After that . . . we had to play that each one of us had a ball . . .'. Even though Zeila stated that they played during the class, she said specifically that they 'had to play', indicating that this play was directed by the PE teacher rather

than freely chosen and organised by the players. Following Huizinga's description of play, it is no longer play if children are obligated to play. Therefore, the children were involved in an adult-led activity that took the form of play and was presented as play, but was more closely related to an activity. In consequence, children may have simulated play to conform to the teacher's expectation, which usually means playing in a non-ludic mode for the players (Pavía, 2008).

The participants seemed to be aware that activities could take the form of play. For example, the following excerpt is taken from an interview with Ana (Gumtree Primary School):

Valeria: Of all the activities that you did during the class, which ones did you like most?

Ana: The activities on the mats.

Valeria: Is that play?

Ana: Sometimes yes, and sometimes no... It's play when Miss Patricia puts a cone, the mat and another cone. So you need to run fast, run around the cone, go to the next cone and pass the ball to the next kid. And it's not play when she puts the mats one next to the other, and we have to do the forward roll, backwards roll and the cartwheel.

Ana stated that, although the teacher facilitated two very similar activities using almost the same equipment, one could be considered as an activity and the other as play. The PE teacher's presentation of the activity described by Ana as play was recorded in an observation, as follows:

The PE teacher says that they are going to play obstacle course. She forms the teams and indicates using her whistle when the first kids of each team need to leave, then the second, then the third, etc. (Observation notes, PE class, Gumtree Primary School)

Even though this activity was presented as 'play' by the teacher, its organisation was non-ludic as it restricted the children from engaging in free play. As Sarlé (2006) argues, although instructors may suggest to students in such instances that they will play, the term is simply a name added to the activity. Therefore, such activities may be considered didactic activities that the teachers present under the name of play (Rivero, 2008). Following Huizinga (1955: 7), '[p]lay to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it'. Therefore, a relevant question for this paper is that of whether participants were able to play from a Huizingian point of view during PE classes. Additionally, in the example presented above, the preparatory phase of play (Pavía, 2005) was eliminated, as children knew in advance who their team members would be. According to Pavía (2005), all play requires a preparatory phase. During this initial phase of social play, the players may show interest in becoming involved in the game, which requires a certain amount of trust and permission (Pavía, 2009, 2010). However, the PE teacher directly commenced the game (read 'activity') and decided who was going to be in each team. The teacher also eliminated a source of emotion (i.e. competition) from play. Deciding when the second, third and subsequent groups needed to run meant that all the effort from the previous team members to return quickly to their original positions were needless, as the teacher ensured that all students from all teams began running in organised stages. Competition is frequently the main source of emotion in play (Pavía, 2009), but when play is used by teachers, competition is usually eliminated (Rivero, 2008). The result is that the activity may become less interesting for the children.

Participants did not always agree with what the teacher presented as play. For instance, in the previous observation note, the PE teacher stated that they were 'going to play obstacle course'

(Gumtree Primary School). However, in an interview with one of the participants, following that specific PE class, she said: ‘In the class we did *the activity* in which you needed to jump, and then run . . .’ (Laura, Bamboo Primary School, my emphasis). Participants also expressed confusion between how something could be considered as an activity or as play in the PE class:

Valeria: What did you do in the PE class today?

Vanina: We warmed up.

Valeria: How did you warm up?

Vanina: Hmm . . . running.

Rosa: When we started the class.

Ian: Playing tag.

Valeria: So, were you playing or warming up there?

Ian: Warm . . . [self-interrupted . . . whispering among all].

Vanina: Both, playing and warming up. (Gumtree Primary School)

Therefore, participants showed some confusion as to whether they played during the PE class or not. Even though the participants identified that play was used in this case as a warm up, this amplifies the ambiguity of the concept of play (Pavía, 2009), as the participants were not sure if what they did during the class was play or not. Therefore, this can be considered as a paradoxical statement (Pavía, 2010), as participants seemed to know that they had participated in a social, historical and cultural activity known as play, but they were not supposed to consider it exactly as play (in its ludic mode). In this case, the form of the activity (i.e. play) and the mode (i.e. non-ludic) did not match. Furthermore, Huizinga (1955) claims that play needs to be done during ‘free time’, and PE classes are probably not classified as ‘free time’. Another possibility may be that the children did not consider playing and warming up in binary terms, as indicated in Vanina’s quote above.

Some participants also made the distinction between different kinds of play used in PE classes and in recess. For example, Clara (Bamboo Primary School) commented that they sometimes played during PE classes, ‘but in a different way than in recess’. Similarly, when asked what she usually did during recess, Zeila (Bamboo Primary School) stated:

Zeila: I play tag, and we also play with the boys, that they have to catch us, and if they catch us, we need to catch them.

Valeria: And have you ever played those games during PE classes?

Zeila: No, because we have to do gym, not to play.

Valeria: So, you don’t play in PE classes?

Zeila: Hmm . . . yes, we play, but we are not allowed to do that stuff.

Even when the PE teacher presented activities in the classes rather than play, participants frequently tried to add emotion in order to convert the activities into short instances of ludic play, as demonstrated in the following section.

Short ludic breaks

When the PE teachers presented some activities in the classes, participants usually tried to engage in short ludic breaks, particularly when the teacher was not observing them. This commonly occurred while the teacher was explaining the activity. Some field notes from observations revealed the following:

While the teacher is explaining the next activity, Laura pretends that she is riding a horse . . . (Observation notes, PE class, Bamboo Primary School)

The teacher has brought the material that students will use for the next activity. While she is still explaining the activity some of the children start using the material, particularly the ropes and the hoops. (Observation notes, PE class, Gumtree Primary School)

Immediately after the conclusion of the above-mentioned PE class at Bamboo Primary School, an interview with Laura revealed the following:

Valeria: Why were you pretending that you were riding a horse while Miss Sandra was explaining the activity?

Laura: Because I was bored!

While it is not possible to know why Laura was bored, or if listening to the teacher's instructions was laborious for her, many participants demonstrated how they usually engaged in short ludic breaks during the activities in the PE classes. Accordingly, Huizinga (1995: 8) argues that children know perfectly when they are 'only pretending, or that it was only for fun'. This was also observed in different instances, such as while they were waiting for their turn during an activity, or when they were asked to assist in carrying the PE equipment:

Benjamin is waiting for his turn in the activity . . . he starts bouncing the ball with his head. (Observation notes, PE class, Bamboo Primary School)

Students were asked to bring the mats from the storeroom. They put the mats above their heads, there are three students approx. per mat, and they are carrying a total of five mats one after the other, in some sort of train. When they arrive to the gym they drop the mats onto the floor, jump on them and land on their tummies. (Observation notes, PE class, Gumtree Primary School)

Observations revealed that children were frequently making play out of work. They were engaging in short ludic breaks during PE classes. In some other instances, participants modified some components of the activities proposed by the teacher. For example, the following was recorded during the observations:

Hernan is in the station where they need to do some target practice. They need to try to hit the wall throwing a ball, and the ball needs to go inside a hoop that is hanging next to the wall. Hernan starts moving the hoop, so that no ball passes inside the hoop. (Observation notes, PE class, Gumtree Primary School)

An interview with a group of participants following this particular class revealed that they 'played target practice' (Hernan, Gumtree Primary School) and the participants explained all the

components of the activity. When they were explaining the target practice station, they reported the following:

Hernan: We needed to hit the wall with the ball, and the ball needed to pass through the hoop. I liked it!

Valeria: And were you allowed to move the hoop?

Hernan: *[Laughs]* No. It needed to be next to the wall, but I grabbed it.

Valeria: Why did you grab it?

Hernan: To cheat . . .

Vanina: He is a cheater!

In this way, Hernan expressed which station he enjoyed most in the activity, and he classified it as play. He also recognised that he cheated and, at the same time, it was his preferred station. Therefore, in this case, cheating was an added component to the activity which allowed Hernan to transform the activity into ludic play. As Pavía (2006) states, when the mode of play is ludic, there is always room to modify and break the rules to maintain the emotion of play for longer. Hernan decided to grab the hoop to maintain the element of tension in play. Accordingly, Huizinga (1955: 10–11) states that this element of tension is particularly important for play, as ‘[p]lay casts a spell over us; it is “enchanting”, “captivating” . . . play is “tense”’. Therefore, the players are more lenient to the cheater than to the spoil-sport to maintain the tension of play, as the spoil-sport breaks the magic world (Huizinga, 1955). Laughs, exclamations and screams are indications of a ludic mode of play (Díaz, 2011) and they were also used by the participants as a means of communication while playing.

Communicating in play

When children play with others, they need to be in constant communication with the other players. They need to invite each other to play, to determine if they are actually playing, and to communicate the mode used for playing. Laughs, gestures and looks demonstrated when the participants were playing. For instance, laughter was commonly noted during observations:

Camila comes running and she slides onto one end of the bench. Three other girls are sitting very close to each other on the other end of the bench. The girl who is sitting at the very end falls to the floor. They look at each other and start laughing. (Observation notes, recess, Gumtree Primary School)

Similarly, in Bamboo Primary School, the following was recorded:

Some children seem to be playing soccer. Benjamin scores a goal. All the players from Ben’s team get together and they celebrate the goal, hugging each other and screaming ‘Gooooaal’. (Observation notes, recess, Bamboo Primary School)

Members of Benjamin’s team knew in advance how to celebrate the goal. They looked at each other, came running from different parts of the playground and began celebrating. Participants manifested the enjoyment of playing with others. Therefore, others (i.e. players) give meaning to play. Accordingly, Huizinga (1955) claims that we should consider play as a social construction and that play has social manifestations. Children tie important bonds while playing and ‘[a] play community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over’ (Huizinga, 1955: 12).

For example, when participants stated that they had played in PE classes, they frequently affirmed that the game was more fun during the class because there were more children. Two participants commented in this regard: ‘During PE is more fun because we are all there’ (Mauricio, Bamboo Primary School), and ‘when we play in PE it is really fun . . . we can play all together’ (Fabian, Gumtree Primary School).

Participants also negotiated how they engaged in the different stages of play. For instance, different strategies used to begin play were revealed during observations and interviews:

The recess starts. Children emerge from the classrooms into the playground, most of them running. Clara touches a classmate on her back, she turns around and starts chasing Clara. It seems they have started to play ‘tag’. (Observation notes, recess, Bamboo Primary School)

Valeria: When you play during recess with your friends, how do you start playing?

Fabian: We are all together next to the canteen and we say ‘let’s play’, and we say ‘let’s go’.

Ian: Because we say ‘run’ and we form two lines. (Gumtree Primary School)

As a consequence, this initial phase of play may be non-verbal (i.e. Clara), verbal (i.e. Fabian) or a combination of both (i.e. Ian). In the non-verbal case, children did not need to say anything to start playing, as they knew in advance which game they were going to play and its rules. Although there was the possibility that they had organised what they were going to play inside the classroom before recess, an interview conducted following one recess revealed that this was not necessarily the case:

Valeria: When you play during recess with your friends, how do you start playing?

Clara: Hmm . . . we just start playing. I don’t say anything to my friends, I just touch them like this [*sign*] so they start chasing me and we know that we are playing tag.

Therefore, there was no previous agreement or verbal communication between Clara and her friends. One single bodily gesture was enough for them to realise that they were going to play. In just a few seconds and using no words, the players invited each other to play, and established the rules and the mode of play. Potential players communicated that the game had started and that others were invited to play. However, understanding whether an invitation is accepted or rejected depends on the attitudes of the potential players (Varea, 2012). In this initial phase of play, the potential players showed an interest in play, which requires permission and trust (Pavía, 2009, 2010). However, Fabian and his friends used verbal communication to initiate play. They also used a kind of ritual behaviour together with verbal communication, in that they all gathered together next to the canteen. Ian and his friends used a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication. In their case, the word ‘run’ was used with the action of forming two lines. In so doing, there was profound communication between words and bodily actions while playing (Rivero, 2010).

The peak phase of play (Díaz, 2006; Pavía, 2006, 2009) was expressed in many opportunities. For instance, the following was recorded during observations:

Fabian’s team seems to be winning. Ian, who is in the same team, starts shouting to encourage other team members. (Observation notes, recess, Gumtree Primary School)

Now it’s Laura’s turn. She starts running with the ball in her hands. Benjamin starts screaming, ‘Laura, Laura!’ All the team members join Benjamin. (Observation notes, PE class, Bamboo Primary School)

Hernan is waiting for his team member, who is running, to arrive so he can start running. Ian is behind Hernan. Now it's Hernan's turn to start running, Ian pushes him a bit from behind. (Observation notes, PE class, Gumtree Primary School)

Laughs and screams were signs that players were involved in the peak phase of play. In this phase, many emotions are expressed and the mode of play is transparent (Díaz, 2011). The gestures described above – shouts and pushing a team member from behind – indicated that the main source of emotion in this play was competition, and that the players wanted to win. Precisely what the players were shouting did not seem overly relevant; rather, what was very important for the players was that they were very loud and that all the team members shouted together. According to Huizinga (1955: 7), '[i]n play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith . . . it is saturated with rhythm and harmony'.

During the interviews, participants were asked about their feelings and emotions while playing. For example, when asked what she felt when playing hide and seek during one recess, Camila commented: 'That we were having fun! That we were having a good time with my friends . . . we played, hugged and told each other our secrets' (Gumtree Primary School).

Responses related to emotions and enjoyment were common for this question. A ludic mode of play allows players to have a more open attitude, as they need a setting of trust to reveal their emotions. Hugs amongst the participants were observed in many circumstances and can be considered a display of affection. Therefore, participants received the required permission and trust from other team members trying to find the peak of the emotion of play. In this phase, players already understood the form of play, which enabled them to play in a ludic mode.

Participants also recognised when play was over. For example, Rosa commented the following:

Valeria: How do you realise when your friends are not playing anymore?

Rosa: Because they tell me.

Valeria: What do they tell you?

Rosa: They tell me: 'Rosa, I don't want to play anymore . . . I'm too tired!', or something like that. (Gumtree Primary School)

In this case, Rosa and her friends were using verbal communication to express that play has finished. However, Laura stated: 'One day we were playing hide and seek, and I tagged Nair, but she wasn't coming out of her hiding place, so we realised that she was not playing anymore' (Bamboo Primary School). In this way, Laura and her friends used non-verbal communication to communicate to each other that play was over. One of them, Nair, acted as spoil-sport, which resulted in a decrease of the peak of emotion during play, and consequently, they finished playing. Therefore, and following Huizinga (1955), one of the characteristics of play is its seclusion and its limitedness. 'It is "played out" within certain limits of time and place . . . [p]lay begins, and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays itself to an end' (Huizinga, 1955: 9).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore children's play during recess and in PE classes from Huizinga's (1955) theory of play perspective. The results of this study for research question number one suggest that when PE teachers use the term 'play' during classes, this could increase

the ambiguity of the concept, given that students did not always know with certainty the mode of play they should use. In some instances, teachers said 'let's play' just to refer to an activity, in which students pretended to be playing, and therefore, they played in a non-ludic mode. However, and to answer research question number two, participants were able to identify when these adult-led activities had the form of play. Teachers frequently used play as a pedagogical tool (e.g. to warm up), but not as play itself. When the teacher proposed 'play', some components of the ludic mode were excluded, such as the source of emotion (e.g. competition) and the initial phase of play. When rules are established by an outsider of the game, players lose the ability to create and to play as they prefer. Therefore, if the form of play is not established by the players themselves, the ludic mode of play is usually not possible.

Importantly, participants tried to engage in some short ludic breaks during the PE activities. These breaks took place when the teacher was explaining some activities, while participants were waiting for their turn in the activity or when they were bringing the PE equipment from the storeroom. Finally, and answering research question number three, participants demonstrated different ways of communicating while playing. They used verbal communication, non-verbal communication and a combination of both. This was evident in the different phases of play, particularly during the initial phase and during the peak phase.

Of critical importance is the question of who has the ability to decide what play is and what play is not, as children and adults may hold different understandings of what constitutes play and this needs further investigation. PE teachers also need to determine which approaches to play are more appropriate to use in their classes, and students should be allowed to play in a ludic mode during recess. Results of this paper suggest, aligning with Pavía's (2006) work, that PE teachers and adults in general need to focus less on games and they need to investigate more what it means to play, particularly in a ludic mode. Furthermore, results from this study concur with previous research (i.e. Blatchford et al., 2003; Hart, 2002; Yantzi et al., 2010), suggesting that play provides opportunities for children to gain social skills and interact with their peers. Huizinga's framework has been successfully used in this paper to increase understanding about how children play in school settings. However, more research is needed to determine which approaches to play are more appropriate to use in PE classes and in school settings.

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Notes

1. See for example Bunker and Thorpe's (1982) *Teaching Games for Understanding*, Siedentop's (1994) *Sport Education*, den Duy's (1997) *Games Sense*, and Launder's (2001) *Play Practice*.
2. See for example Caillois' (1961) classification of games as *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx*; Piaget's (1951) classification into *practice games*, *symbolic games* and *games with rules*; and Faulkner's (1996) classification into *functional* and *thematic play*.
3. The concepts of *forms* and *modes* of playing were elaborated by Victor Pavía (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010), who is one of the few authors to have researched play using Huizinga's (1955) approach to play. Therefore, the work of Pavía is used extensively in this paper.

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