

Literacy as a Social Practice in the Early Years and the Effects of the Arts: A Case Study

Evgenia Theodotou, Cass School of Education and Communities, University of East London, e.theodotou@uel.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the practitioner of the school who agreed to participate in this study and gave her time and effort to this intervention. I would like to thank the parents who gave their permission to include their children in this project. Special thanks to all the children who participated. It was a pleasure to work with you all.

Abstract

Literacy as a social practice has a fundamental role in children's lives especially in the early years context, in which social interactions are in the centre of knowledge achievement. Several pieces of research investigate the positive contribution of the arts in children's literacy development in the early years settings. However, most of them focus on the aspect of emergent literacy and phonological awareness, with some indirect arguments about literacy as a social practice. Having this in mind and the importance of literacy as a social practice, this project was designed. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. The intervention used the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme for a full school year in a case study with 5-6-year-old children in Greece. The outcomes were measured using authentic assessment techniques and a semi-structure interview. The findings showed the positive contribution of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years setting.

Key words

Literacy as a social practice, Play and Learn through the Arts, Literacy events, Literacy practices, Early Years education

Introduction

Literacy is a very important aspect in people's lives as it equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to interact effectively in the society. Great emphasis has been given to the social aspect of literacy, which derives from the socio-cultural theories (Harste et al., 2004; Heath, 1983). Literacy as a social practice is a fundamental part of literacy, as it exists naturally in people's everyday lives (Maybin, 2007).

The importance of the early years settings in children's school performance has been established, verifying their important contribution in formal schooling (Tymms et al., 2009; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008). Taking into consideration the important role of literacy as a social practice, it is crucial to find meaningful ways that can enable the early childhood practitioners to support young children in the development of social literacy.

The arts are a promising approach that can facilitate this process and evidence can be found in the literature (Maniaci and Olcotte, 2010). Literature review shows that there is a substantial link between the arts and children's social activities, in which several aspects of literacy can be found (McArdle and Wong, 2010; Wright, 2005). Empirical evidence shows that the arts can be used to support meaningful literacy development (Wright, 2007). The basis of these arguments derives from the fact that the arts offer an environment of free communication of ideas, in which every opinion is welcome and accepted (Fleming, 2008). It has to be acknowledged that most of this evidence focuses on the aspect of emergent literacy and phonological awareness and made indirect arguments about social literacy (Moritz et al., 2013; Chang and Cress, 2013). Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach, which uses the arts to support young students to develop social literacy skills, seems beneficial in the early years settings.

This paper is an effort to provide evidence with a direct focus on social literacy. The purpose of this research is to examine the effects of the arts on the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. Using the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme, there was a specific emphasis in the examination of literacy practices and literacy events during free play and art activities.

Literacy as a Social Practice

Literacy is a crucial aspect of people's lives, which contains the ability to read and write and the ability for verbal and non-verbal communication. Within this content, literacy as a social practice is an important parameter that contributes to people's effective interactions. It has its origins in the context of socio-cultural theories, as the main emphasis is on the way social interactions are used to support literacy development (Harste et al., 2004; Heath, 1983).

Literacy as a social practice highlights the use of literacy in the general social context of literacy and includes social literacy practices and events that can be observed and recorded (Barton, 2007; Maybin, 2007). These literacy practices and events can be found in the home, school or the general community environment (Heath, 1983). The Greek Early Years curriculum puts great emphasis on the communicative aspect of literacy and the importance of social literacy within the early years classroom (ΦΕΚ 304B/13-0302003). During social literacy, the communities of practice that exist within the team have a very important role as they include meaningful activities. According to Wenger (2004), the communities of practice are the relationships that exist in an organisation with the ultimate purpose of shared learning. During the existing communities of practice, there are major opportunities for the development of literacy as a social practice as this happens in a meaningful context.

Within this context, literacy practices and literacy events are two of the most important aspects that contribute to the development of literacy as a social practice. Being more specific, literacy events are the different activities that have a strong link with literacy (Barton, 2007). For example, in practice this could be reading a utility bill or an

announcement, writing a note to remind someone something, writing nametags in the jars that contain different herbs, discussing about a challenging situation in someone's life and try to find to a solution. On the other hand, literacy practices show a more specific action of the way that people use literacy events and this is highly influenced by the social and cultural context (Papen, 2005; Heath, 1983). For example, in practice this could be children to practice writing their name by looking at the nametag, the billboard or writing by memory, reading carefully or skim read etc.

It has to be acknowledged that both literacy events and literacy practices reveal people's interactions with literacy but not necessarily their literacy knowledge. However, sometimes literacy knowledge can be noticeable while observing literacy events and literacy practices. Reviewing the importance of these two aspects, it is clear that they can be found as a natural part of people's everyday life which results in true learning. This by itself gathers considerable attention in respect of focusing on the important aspects of learning.

Linking these arguments in the early years settings, it is clear that they also hold a substantial ground in young children's development of literacy. This is based on the argument that children in the early years tend to utilise their social interactions to build their knowledge (Booth et al., 2007). Considering this, we need to include these aspects in the early years curriculum in order to have a positive impact on children's learning. Literacy as a social practice has been perceived as a fundamental part of the early years curriculum in the literature. According to Carter (2006), strong emphasis should be given to trigger students' attention in the aspects of literacy as a social practice in their everyday lives. Several researchers investigate children's literacy development and included social activities in their methodology, making indirect arguments about literacy as a social practice (McArdle and Wong, 2010; Wright, 2007; Wright, 2005). However, considering the importance of social literacy, a direct focus on literacy as a social practice is needed. Having this in mind, it can be argued that the arts seem a promising approach that can develop literacy as a social practice in children's school activities. In the next section, there will be an analysis of this aspect before presenting the research design and findings.

The Arts as an Interdisciplinary Approach

The arts as a teaching approach can offer substantial benefits in students' development and learning. It should be noted that the arts do not aim to educate people but to connect people in an exchange of different ideas (Fleming, 2008). Considerable attention has been given in an art-based methodology as a pioneering and effective research and teaching methodology. In contrast with the typical research and teaching methods, the arts provide rich-detailed information about the aspect that is under investigation (Leavy, 2015).

The arts have been used to support children's development in formal and informal schooling. Through the relevant empirical evidence, it was confirmed that they can

support at-risk children in their cognitive development (Brown and Sax, 2013; Brown et al., 2010). This was attributed to the fact that through the arts, students can have hands-on experiences and thus they gain a better understanding of the topic under investigation. Personal and social development has been also associated with the positive impact of the arts. In an investigation of the effects of different art forms in children's development, it was found that there is a positive impact on their wellbeing, social skills and self-regulation (Williams and Lewin, 2015; Hampshire and Matthijsee, 2010).

Having the above evidence in mind, an interdisciplinary research of the arts and literacy as a social practice was highly considered. Interdisciplinary research has been associated with effective results in terms of understanding and building knowledge (Simeonsdotter-Svensson, 2015). Several pieces of research can be found in the empirical literature that links the benefits of different art forms with literacy skills (McIntire, 2007; Hartse et al., 2004). However, on a specific investigation of literacy, it is obvious that most pieces of research focus on emergent literacy and phonological awareness or made indirect arguments about literacy as a social practice (Moritz et al., 2015; Runfola et al., 2012). Having this in mind, the following project was designed.

Purpose and Research Questions

A literature review of the content of literacy shows the importance of literacy as a social practice in people's lives and a need for an interdisciplinary research with the arts with a direct focus on social literacy. This was the motivating factor for this piece of research. The purpose of this paper was to examine the effects of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. An emphasis was given in literacy events and literacy practices, as they are key terms within the content of literacy as a social practice. Based on this, the research questions were:

1. What are the effects on literacy events when children interact with the arts?
2. What are the effects on literacy practices when children interact with the arts?

Participants and Procedures

The participants were from a case study of an early years setting in Attica in Greece. To select this case study, there was a simple random sampling technique by using a list with all the schools in Attica and selecting randomly 10 of them. After face-to-face meetings with the teaching staff of the schools, the setting that agreed to participate was the case study of this project.

A written letter of consent was given to the parents of the children to sign off, with a total number of 25 parents agreed. One of the children changed school in the middle of the school year. There were two children with special educational needs in the group that participated in the intervention but were not included in the assessment. In total there were 22 5-6-year-old children with 45.5% (n=10) boys and 54% (n=12) girls, maintaining a balance in the numbers according to gender (see table 1).

Gender			
Boys		Girls	
Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
10	45.5%	12	54%

This project is focusing on the pedagogical outcomes of an interdisciplinary intervention that uses the arts to support literacy development. For the intervention, the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme was used for a full school year in the students' school setting as part of their everyday activities. By implementing the PLA in the students' school setting, any factors that might influence the outcomes in the case of unfamiliarity of the setting were eliminated.

The 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) Programme

PLA is an interdisciplinary programme which uses the arts as a means to support children's development of literacy in early years settings. The difference with other structured art activities is that students during PLA use the arts to emerge literacy activities and this takes place in a liberal environment. In addition, there are no ready pre-decided activities by the practitioner as the activities are decided in collaboration with the students during their interaction with the arts. Previous research shows the positive outcomes of PLA in children's involvement during literacy activities in the early years settings (Theodotou, 2015). Based on these findings, this study takes PLA one-step further and examines its contribution in literacy as a social practice in the early years settings.

The pedagogical framework of the PLA acknowledges that emergent literacy is a fundamental aspect of children's development of literacy. It also highlights the social aspect of learning and that literacy is considered as an undivided learning area instead of separated skills that gather up together. It is not linked directly to a specific art form and thus, children and the practitioner can select an art form of their choice. PLA provides some basic steps but no ready-made solutions (see table 2). The principle behind this is that it aims to empower children to be independent learners and have an active role in the whole process. Collaboration and discussion are basic elements in every step of the PLA and the practitioner acts as a facilitator of the whole process. The following five steps are suggested on a weekly or monthly basis:

Table 2. Steps in Play and Learn through the Arts programme

Steps in the PLA	
Step	Description
1.Let's start	The students with the practitioner select the topic they want to investigate. This might come from children's interests during their play, practitioners' observations, an unexpected event or a daily announcement that triggered the attention of the team.

2.The arts	The students and the practitioner investigate the topic through the selected kind of the arts. For example, discuss relevant paintings, discuss and play puppetry or drama. The practitioner acts as a facilitator of the process and encourages children to express their ideas and discuss.
3.Decide/Emerge literacy	Considering the selected kind of the arts, the students with the practitioner decide the activities they want to do regarding this topic. Children have a leading role and they collaborate to develop their thinking. The practitioner facilitates students' discussion and encourages them to include and recognise the literacy aspects of their activities. The practitioner is an active listener to their needs and makes sure that all children's voices are being heard.
4.Prepare/Implement	They allocate roles in order to prepare the necessary materials for the activities and then they implement the decided activities. <i>*This usually is the longest one.</i>
5.Reflect & move on	<p>Children with the practitioner reflect on the activities and discuss the general process. Some indicative questions could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much did I like them? • How much did I help my friends or did they help me? • What did I learn? • What did I like most? • What could I do better? • What else could we do? <p>The practitioner reflects on the teaching and learning procedure. Some indicative questions could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much did I intervene in their learning? • How much did I support them to use their emergent literacy skills? • Were the activities appropriate for their age and abilities? • What could I do better? • What else could I do? <p>Following this reflection, the team decides if there are more things they want to do with this topic or if they want to move on to another topic.</p>

The case study practiced the five steps of the PLA as part of their everyday activities with a suggested time schedule of three times per week for 20-30 minutes per time. However, the group had the opportunity to adapt this time schedule according to their needs and interests. The art form that was selected by the participants was paintings. In an effort to support the practitioner in implementing the PLA, there was an initial period of training in order to provide the opportunity to familiarise herself with the programme. Several meetings took place during the intervention in order to discuss the progress and any matters arising.

Data Collection Measures

Authentic assessment was considered as the most appropriate one in order to answer the research questions. This form of assessment includes the examination of real abilities and knowledge that can be found and used in real situations (Woolfolk, 2007).

Considering the fact that literacy as a social practice is a key element in people's lives, authentic assessment was the most effective form of assessment for this situation.

Data for authentic assessment was gathered through children's portfolio. This was built on evidence from practitioner's logs and observations regarding children's daily interactions and activities. The practitioner recorded activities and interactions that were related with literacy practices and literacy events that emerged from children's free play and art activities. These activities were during free art activities and general free play activities on an individual and group level. Every month there were recorded at least five different literacy activities in which children were engaging in their free time play individually or in groups. These entries were categorised in literacy events and literacy activities and analysed according to their content afterwards.

Several consultation meetings took place to support the practitioner in this procedure and some suggested guidelines and examples were given to support her in collecting the evidence. At the end of the school year, this data was analysed using thematic analysis to provide evidence for the two research questions.

An additional data collection method was used to verify the effectiveness of the intervention. At the end of the project, a semi-structured interview took place with the practitioner about her experience and thoughts about the benefits of the intervention. One main argument for this practice was the importance of practitioner's thoughts in the outcome of the teaching intervention and children's performance.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data from children's portfolio was used to analyse the impact of the intervention in literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. There was a focus on literacy events and literacy practices as they are considered as key elements within literacy as a social practice. As it was mentioned previously, there are several evidence about the benefits of the arts in literacy development (Maniaci and Olcotte, 2010; Wright, 2007; Wright, 2005), but most of it provides indirect arguments about social literacy. Therefore, the data analysis links the findings with the specific features of literacy as a social practice and the existing pieces of research.

Literacy as a social practice focuses on how people use literacy in their everyday lives. The Greek Early year curriculum recognises the importance of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings as a basic aspect of literacy development (ΦΕΚ 304B/13-0302003). There is a strong link with social activities that are obvious during daily interactions (Maybin, 2007). Literacy events and literacy practices are two very important elements within this context. Literacy events are the general activities that people do in which there is a strong literacy aspect (Barton, 2007). Several examples, can be found in everyday life in people's actions like reading an announcement about severe delays in the metro station, writing a shopping list, discussing with a friend etc. Literacy events have a strong impact on people's development of literacy as they are a basic component of their social interactions (Harste et al., 2004).

To answer the 1st research question ‘*What are the effects on literacy events when children interact with the arts?*’ the evidence from children’s portfolio were analysed with the focus on finding literacy events. Data analysis from authentic assessment shows that a lot of literacy events were emerged during children’s activities as a stimulus from the art activities. When children implemented the different steps of the PLA, they initiated naturally and spontaneously a lot of literacy events that were related with analysis and justification of their ideas, skilful negotiations, reading and writing. It is important to note that these activities were also continued by children during their free play in which they could choose whichever activity they wanted. This shows that the arts, which were a basic means of the PLA, can contribute positively to the development of literacy as a social practice as these actions were not forced or obligated to children but they came naturally from their innate desires.

Several examples revealed skillful communications and explanations among groups of children regarding the procedure they want to follow in order to reach the desired outcome. In these incidents, children explained thoroughly their ideas in using the art resources and they decided collaboratively what they are going to do. It is interesting to note that these activities resulted in meaningful writing events that were derived from their free will.

Incident 1: A group of children is in the arts and crafts area and is discussing the materials they will use in order to draw a picture for their mums. They are expressing their ideas and support their arguments e.g.:

-I think we should use markers as they have vivid colors. The other crayons are very pale.

-So, in this case it is better to use finger paints. They are more vivid.

They decide to use markers and they start their drawing. When they finished their drawing, they write their names and they decide what else they could write. ‘I love you mummy’ and ‘To my mum with love’ was the most popular quotes and thus they decided to write them.

Literacy events that were related with reading and resulted in writing were also obvious during the data analysis. As an outcome of the PLA, children showed high levels of involvement in reading habits during their free time activities. Art activities were the motivating factor in creating their own book and invitations in which they combined paintings and writing.

Incident 2: A group of children sits on a table. They read books and discuss about the paintings they saw today in during PLA. They decide that they don’t like the books they are reading and that they want to make their own book. They decide the theme of this new book and then the plot. They draw pictures that are inspired by this week’s paintings but they seem more fascinated that they will write the story as well.

Accepted 1st February 2017

Incident 3: A child tells a story to her friends about a party she went yesterday and she is commenting on the invitation she received. She said that she would like the invitation to include the little Picasso they are working on this week during PLA. They all look excited and they start preparing invitations in order to use them afterwards in their play. They write the content of the invitations, decorate them with stamps and stickers, and do a collage with Picasso's paintings.

Events that were linked with reasoning and writing were also obvious during the data analysis. Children participated in meaningful skillful discussions while using their critical thinking in combination with the art project they were working on. These activities originated from their free play, in which there is evidence that they wanted to include the arts in combination with writing events.

Incident 4: A group of children plays in the grocery shop corner. They pretend they are selling and buying products and they negotiate the prices. Some of them pretend they need to check the catalogue with the products to decide what they want to buy but they cannot find it. All of them decide to pause their game in order to create a catalogue that will include the products of the grocery shop. They allocate roles and decide the materials they will use. They draw the pictures and try to write the names of the products. For the prices of the products they decide to put paintings so they can pay with paintings instead of money.

Proceeding to the next key element of literacy as a social practice, literacy practices have a specific focus in the content of the literacy events and include the different ways people use the literacy resources instead of describing a mere literacy activity (Barton, 2007). Literacy practices reveal the content of people's actions regarding literacy and not the literacy knowledge they might have, although this might be obvious as well.

To answer the 2nd research question 'What are the effects on literacy practices when children interact with the arts?' the evidence from children's portfolio were analysed with the focus on finding literacy practices. Data analysis from authentic assessment reveals a variety of literacy practices during the implementation of the PLA and during independent activities in children's free time play that was influenced by the art activities. The majority of these practices reveal in-depth thinking about literacy principles, which is facilitated by the art activities that took place during the PLA. It has to be acknowledged that most of the time children involved in these practices during their free play time in which they had the freedom to choose an activity of their own choice. This leads us to suggest that when interacting with the arts there are great opportunities for the development of literacy as a social practice.

Examples of practicing different literacy principles were obvious during the data analysis in children's activities. Children showed curiosity in experimenting with the

different directions of writing and the different letter sizes in their effort to produce the desired outcome. Detailed conversations took place during these practices and it is interesting to note that these activities took place during their free time but straight after the PLA activities.

Incident 1: Some children are in the arts and crafts area and are trying to make a picture for their mums. They are experimenting with writing their names and they try to write with different ways. For example, they try only capital letters, only lower case letters, big size letters, small size letters, vertical, horizontally, upside down etc. They discuss with each other which one seems better.

Evidence with different writing techniques were also obvious during the data analysis with strong links with the PLA and the whole experimental procedure. Children experimented with different writing practices in a collaborative procedure by using the strengths of each one in the team. It was also obvious that PLA influenced these activities as children referenced continuously the art activities they did during the PLA.

Incident 2: Some children are trying to create a book while they are discussing about the PLA. They decide collaboratively the story and take turns to say their ideas. When they agree about each scene of their story, which is inspired by the paintings they are working on this week, they write it straight away instead of finalising the story and then write it. The way they write is different every time. Sometimes, there is one child who acts as a scribe and the other children tell the next letter that needs to be written. The scribe pretends he/she is Picasso who is writing his ideas for this next painting. Some other times, they discuss what they need to write and whoever says that he/she knows to write it becomes the Picasso and writes it.

Incident 3: A group of children is trying to create a catalogue with the grocery's products. They check the products they want to include in the catalogue and they make first their pictures. Children take turns in this and decide who will draw each product. Afterwards, they want to write the name of the products. They think and discuss what little Picasso would do in their place. They pronounce each word out loud and they decide which one is the next phoneme. They look for it in their name tags and the alphabet boards. When they find it they take turns to write it.

Last but not least, evidence from the data analysis shows deeper involvement in literacy practices and more specifically in the basic features of print and written communication. Children investigated the basic elements of poetry and tried to find text that rhymes and matches the content of their drawing. These activities were located mostly in their free playtime, in which they included the arts.

Incident 4: A group of children tries to make invitations in order to use them afterwards in their play. They discuss the materials and the decoration of the

Accepted 1st February 2017

invitations and they decide to put the paintings they have worked with so far to make the invitations attractive. They decide that each invitation would be different according to whom they want to give. They also decide the same for the content of the invitation. They try to find clever poems or rhymes for the writing part of each invitation. In their writing, they use the name tags to write the name of the recipient and for the content of the invitation they decided to copy some rhymes from a book.

To briefly summarise, the above data analysis from children's portfolio shows the positive impact of the arts in children's use of literacy as a social practice. During the implementation of the PLA, there were several situations that students initiated literacy events and in-depth literacy practices mostly during their free time play. This is very encouraging as it shows the beneficial contribution of the arts in children's literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. This is very positive and provides direct arguments about the benefits of the arts on children's social literacy.

Reviewing the existing literature, it is clear that the arts offer a liberal environment of a continuous exchange of different ideas with different modes of communication. Wright (2007) supported this argument and highlighted that children's drawing is an important mode of communication. She further argued that it can be considered as a first form of writing. Some years later, Maniaci and Olcotte (2010) agreed with this by giving emphasis on the fact that children are trying to reveal important messages and ideas through their drawings. The findings of this study are in agreement with the above theoretical arguments and they further provide empirical evidence with a direct focus on social literacy. There were several circumstances in which students used arts and craft activities or simply a drawing to communicate a message to their beloved ones. They further enriched their outcome with some writing and they experimented with different literacy practices and events. Considering the fact that literacy events and literacy practices are two basic elements of literacy as a social practice, it can be argued that this piece of research provides direct empirical evidence in this area.

The benefits of the intervention were further investigated with an interview to the practitioner to gather her views about the whole process and impact. During the data analysis it is obvious that the above findings are also confirmed through the practitioner's perspectives, as she stressed the positive impact that the PLA had in children's development of literacy as a social practice but also in her teaching techniques in literacy.

Regarding the practitioner's qualifications, she is a graduate of an Early Childhood Education undergraduate programme and she also has a postgraduate degree in special education. She has eight years of professional experience in the early years settings and one year as a mentor to undergraduate students. Regarding her experience with the arts, she is a volunteer actor in a theatrical team for some years.

The data analysis of the interview shows that the intervention had a very positive impact on her teaching techniques, as she made very good comments regarding her experience and the general outcomes. The positive impact was also obvious by her willingness to continue using PLA, although the intervention was over.

P: At the beginning, I found very difficult to realise how this will work in practice. How I can use the arts with the goal to develop social literacy. I could not image that they are so closely related. I was thinking that we could do an art project and in a parallel mode we could do a literacy project. As the time went by, I saw this with my own eyes. I realised that learning is not a straightforward process. PLA enabled me to teach arts and literacy together and to realise the different paths we can use to learn something. It was amazing!! I could not think of any part that made the procedure difficult. On the contrary, there was an amazing freedom, in which everyone was benefited. I could see that my students had made a great progress in terms of literacy and I saw many social literacy aspects during the project and on their free time as well. Now that I know, I am using it all the time.

Through the interview, evidence of children's progress in literacy as a social practice was also provided. The practitioner stated that she witnessed children to use the PLA activities in an effort to enrich their free play activities with literacy events and practices. She stressed the importance of this observation, as these activities derived from children's free will and thus resulted in true learning experiences. Her arguments are in line with the findings of this study and the literature regarding the contribution of the arts in social literacy according to Maniani and Olcott (2010) and Hopperstad (2008).

P: I would say that their progress was very impressive! I could see that they were developing cognitively and socially throughout PLA. What I found most exciting was that they had a purpose to write and they decided it themselves. I didn't intervene at all! They didn't just do it for the shake of doing it and I saw loads of times that they were embedding literacy events and different literacy practices in their free time. I remember a couple of months ago that they were trying to create a poster with the paintings we have used so far and put some writing as well!! This lasted for approximately a couple of days.

The impact of a research intervention can be identified in the practitioner's routines. This will show if the intervention was indeed successful and influence their practices. According to Jones and Grant (2013), in an educational intervention it is very important to seek the impact in the life of the school ethos and the people that are involved. The data analysis from the interview verifies the effectiveness of the intervention as the practitioner mentioned the positive impact in her teaching techniques and routines.

P: It was amazing how we could mix arts and literacy! For me there were 2 completely different things and it was very impressive to see we could teach

them together. The intervention respected the individual progress and needs of every child and everyone could contribute in the level they wanted and felt comfortable. Once you go one step forward there is no need to go one step back again! Now that I saw the beneficial outcomes and the things that I can achieve with PLA, I will continue definitely with this in the future. Perhaps next year I will use another art form like puppetry that I have never used it before and see the outcomes of this as well.

Summarising the above data analysis, the findings of this piece of research contribute to the discussion about the importance of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings and the effects of the arts, providing direct arguments. Both evidence from the authentic assessment and practitioner's interview support the effectiveness of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice. Therefore, to answer the research questions of this study, it is obvious that the arts had a beneficial impact on children's use of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings and more specifically in literacy events and literacy practices. This was also verified by the practitioner. This seems to be promising for further investigation with a bigger sample with control and experimental groups.

Conclusions

This research project focused in the examination of the effects of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years settings. In reviewing the literature, it was obvious that most of the pieces of research focus on emergent literacy and phonological awareness, providing indirect arguments about social literacy in early years settings. Considering this and the importance of literacy as a social practice, the purpose of this research was formed.

More specifically, a case study with 5-6-year-old children was used to examine this aspect. The 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme was used as an art intervention to test the effects of the arts in children's skills in literacy as a social practice. The programme was implemented for a full school year and authentic assessment techniques and an interview were used to collect the data. The findings showed the beneficial contribution of the arts intervention to literacy as a social practice from both data collection measures. A lot of literacy events and literacy practices were emerged as an outcome of the PLA. Therefore, to answer the research questions the arts have a very positive effect on children's development of social literacy by creating the ground for meaningful literacy events and literacy practices in their everyday interactions and free play.

Some limitations have to be considered before drawing any kind of conclusions. Although there was a random sampling technique, following the ethical guidelines, a bigger sample size would have been preferable. It has to be acknowledged that this project was a case study with an effort to provide direct arguments in this area. Therefore, it can be considered as a positive beginning in building empirical knowledge in the

beneficial effects of the arts in literacy as a social practice. These findings are valuable to early childhood practitioners in practicing pioneering ways to develop literacy in the early years and to researchers in continuing this research internationally.

References

- Barton, D. 2007. *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Booth, K., Croll, J.H., Davis, M., Lewis, G.F. and Stock, L. 2007. "Early Language and Literacy as Social Practice: Engaging Families, Children and Preschool Staff in a Low Income Australian Community." *Proceedings of Redesigning Pedagogy: Culture, Knowledge and Understanding Conference*, Singapore, May 2007, URL <http://conference.nie.edu.sg/2007/paper/html/LAN086.html>
- Brown, E.D. and Sax, K.L. 2013. "Arts Enrichment and Preschool Emotions for Low-Income Children at Risk." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28:337-346.
- Brown, E.D., Benedett, B. and Armistead, M.E. 2010. "Arts Enrichment and School Readiness for Children at Risk." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 25:112-124.
- Carter, S. 2006. "Redefining Literacy as a Social Practice." *Journal of Basic Writing*, 25(2): 94-125.
- Chang, N. and Cress, S. 2014. "Conversations about visual arts: Facilitating oral language." *Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 42:415-422.
- Fleming, M. 2008. "Teaching Drama: Lessons from its Recent Development in the UK." *Education and Theatre*, 9:53-58.
- Hampshire, K.R. and Matthijsse, M. 2010. "Can Arts Projects Improve Young People's Wellbeing? A Social Capital Approach." *Social Science and Medicine*, 71:708-716.
- Harste, J.C., Vasquez, V., Egawa, K.A. and Thompson, R.D. 2004. *Literacy as Social Practice: Primary Voices K-6*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Heath, S.B. 1983. *Ways with Words, Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge.
- Hopperstad, M.H. 2008. "Relationships Between Children's Drawing and Accompanying Peer Interaction in Teacher-Initiated Drawing Sessions." *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 16(2):133-150.
- Jones, M.M. and Grant, J. 2013. "Making the Grade: Methodologies for Assessing and Evidencing Research Impact." In: Dear, A., Wykes, M. and Stevens, H. *7 Essays on Impact: Describe Project Report for Jisc*. 25-44. Exeter: University of Exeter.
- Leavy, P. 2015. *Method Meets Art: Arts-based Research Practice*. 2nd ed. London: The Guilford Press.
- Maniaci, K., and Olcott, K.C. 2010. "Still Building That Idea: Preservice Art Educators' Perspectives on Integrating Literacy across the Curriculum." *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 11(4):1-42. URL <http://www.ijea.org/v11n4/>
- Maybin, J. 2007. "Literacy under and over the Desk: Oppositions and Heterogeneity." *Language and Education*, 21(6):515-530.

- McArdle, F.A. and Wong, K.B. 2010. "What young children say about art: a comparative study." *International Art in Early Childhood Research Journal*, 2(1):1-17.
- McIntire, J.M. 2007. "Developing Literacy through Music." *Teaching Music*, 15(1):44-49.
- Moritz, C., Yampolsky, S., Papadelis, G. & Thomson, J. 2013. "Links between early rhythm skills, musical training and phonological awareness." *Reading and Writing*, 26:739-769.
- Papen, U. 2005. *Adult Literacy as a Social Practice: More than Skills*. London: Routledge.
- Runfola, M., Etopio, E., Hamlen, K. and Rozendal, M. 2012. "Effect of music instruction on preschoolers' music achievement and emergent literacy achievement." *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 192:7-27.
- Simeonsdotter-Svensson, A. 2015. "Interdisciplinary Science: A Way to Broaden and Deepen Knowledge in Research and Education." *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 68:4-5.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Sammons, P. and Melhuish, E. 2008. "Towards the Transformation of Practice in Early Childhood Education: The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project." *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38(1):23-36.
- Theodotou, E. 2015. "Can we Play again with Picasso Miss? The Effects of the Arts in Children's Involvement during Literacy Activities in the Early Years Settings: A Case Study in the Greek Context." *The 3rd International Academic Conference on Social Sciences*. 16-27. URL <http://www.socscienceconf.com/admin/editor/uploads/files/IACSS%202015%20Proceedings.pdf>
- Tymms, P., Jones, P., Albone, S. and Henderson, B. 2009. "The First Seven Years at School." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1):67-80.
- Wenger, E. 2004. "Knowledge Management as a Doughnut: Shaping your Knowledge Strategy through Communities of Practice." *Ivey Business Journal*, January/February. URL <http://www.ewenger.com/pub/pubpapers.htm>
- Williams, K.E. and Lewin, S. 2015. "Self-Regulation Support through Music." *Reflections, Autumn*: 7-9.
- Woolfolk, A. 2007. *Educational Psychology*. 10th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Wright, S. 2005. "Children's multimodal meaning-making through drawing and storytelling". *Teachers College Record: A professional Journal of ideas, research and informed opinion*, 15:1-9.
- Wright, S. 2007. "Graphic-Narrative Play: Young Children's Authoring through Drawing and Telling." *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 8(8). URL <http://ijea.asu.edu/v8n8/>
- ΦΕΚ 304B/13-03-2003. *Diathematiko Eniaio Plaisio Programmaton Spoudon kai Analytika Programmata Spoudon (Διαθεματικό ενιαίο πλαίσιο προγραμμάτων σπουδών και αναλυτικά προγράμματα σπουδών υποχρεωτικής εκπαίδευσης)*. Athens: Ministry of Education (in Greek).