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Nine Years in Life: The Effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) Programme on Practitioners' Professional Development

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Abstract

PLA has been introduced as an innovative pedagogy in literacy since 2015 with the first publication about its effects on children's involvement. Since then, many more publications have derived from various research studies in the field of early years education. With a few exceptions, PLA has been tested with a specific focus on children's performance, leaving aside practitioners' perspectives. This piece of research seeks to address this gap and explore the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners' professional development. Early years practitioners who had implemented and participated in the previous research studies with the PLA were contacted to participate in this research project. A total of 17 practitioners from Greece and London agreed to participate. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews over a period of 3 months. Findings showed significant gains in their professional behaviour and teaching skills, more specifically in their confidence and understanding of their role, implementing child-led projects, reflective practice, quality of teaching, and increasing children's participation and imagination. The sustainability of the PLA was confirmed as practitioners took several initiatives to continue the project on their own.

Keywords: Play and Learn through the Arts; PLA; Early Childhood Education; Professional Development; Preschool; Sustainability in Education



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Introduction

Following a child-led curriculum is the suggested practice according to the constructivist approach. However, its roots trace back further to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his arguments about nature and an education free from intervention. Embedding these principles in the curriculum, as Cox (2014) highlights, presents challenges, especially given the structured format of the national curriculum. Practically, this approach faces numerous challenges as societal demands often prioritize results and the achievements of specific milestones. Soler and Miller (2010) support this argument by highlighting the growing pressure from external factors on the implementation of the early childhood curriculum, which adopts a child-friendly approach.

This pressure means that early years practitioners might need extra support in listening to young children and embedding their ideas in the curriculum, as there is the risk of straying from this due to the daily routines and demands of the sector. Wood and Attfield (2006) have highlighted concerns about the challenges between theory, policymakers and everyday practice in early childhood education. They contend that free play significantly enables children to express themselves, yet numerous issues arise in fully understanding its essence when embedding it in the early years pedagogy. Providing extra support to practitioners to adopt a play-based and child-led curriculum can foster developmentally appropriate practices for children's learning and enhance practitioner's confidence and knowledge (Walsh et al., 2010).

The Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme is a successful teaching approach in implementing a child-led curriculum in the early years settings. Recent research showed that it provided a very good opportunity for young children to express themselves and take ownership of their learning interactions (Theodotou, 2020). Further research on implementing the PLA enabled practitioners to listen to children through weekly meetings where they could discuss their progress, challenges and ideas (Theodotou, 2019b;d). Anecdotal evidence from these meetings suggested it was a valuable opportunity for their professional development and confidence. However, to date, there is no published research to support this argument. This paper aims to fill this gap by investigating the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners' professional development.

Background and Research Regarding the PLA

The Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme was initially introduced as a teaching approach in the early years settings for children's literacy development (Theodotou, 2017;2015). It is founded on the philosophy of interdisciplinarity, which, according to Alvargonzalez (2011), aims to harmonise links between disciplines into a coherent whole. Consequently, PLA employs various art forms to foster children's literacy development. The distinctive feature of the PLA compared to other art interventions is that it integrates rather than differentiates the disciplines, providing a unified space within the same activity (Theodotou, 2017).

PLA was developed after extensive research into previous art interventions focusing on literacy development. Efforts were made to identify the gaps in the field and introduce something innovative for the benefit of the children. It was discovered that previous research and art projects often focus on a single art form, typically music. Furthermore, the pedagogy of these projects placed distinctive emphasis on pre-designed activities and teacher-led interactions. In response to these findings, PLA offered a framework for interactions in which children play the leading role, with the practitioner acting as facilitator. Moreover, PLA didn't concentrate on any specific art form, allowing children and practitioners the freedom to utilize any art form or a combination of them. With these in mind, and after several informal consultation meetings with academics and early childhood practitioners, PLA structured into five steps, which could be implemented weekly based on the children's needs (see Table 1). The recommended duration of implementation was 20-30 minutes per session three times per week, but this was adaptable to suit each setting's needs.

Table 1 Steps in Play and Learn through the Arts program

Theodotou 2017

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. *This usually is the longest one.
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>

A series of pilot studies was conducted to assess the contribution and effectiveness of the PLA on children's performance in the early years settings. Initially, PLA's impact on literacy skills (Theodotou, 2019b) and literacy as a social practice (Theodotou, 2017) was explored. Both research projects took place for a full school year, offering very promising results that demonstrated significant benefits to children's performance and eagerness to participate in literacy activities. To further assess PLA's effectiveness from a holistic perspective, two additional pilot studies were carried out, focusing on children's social development (Theodotou, 2019c) and involvement (Theodotou, 2015). Once again, the findings were very positive, indicating an increase in children's personal and social skills during daily interactions and their levels of involvement during literacy activities.

The aforementioned research initiated a new cycle of research projects with bigger samples and both experimental and control groups. This series aimed to identify any advantages of the PLA over conventional teaching methods and to investigate whether outcomes varied across different art forms. These projects explored three different art forms (paintings, drama and puppetry) over a control group to assess PLA's impact on children's literacy as a social practice (Theodotou, 2020), social and personal skills (Theodotou, 2019a) and levels of involvement (Theodotou, 2019d). Findings revealed significant improvements in children's performance across all three areas compared to the control group, with no significant difference among the art forms. Consequently, it was concluded that arts in general, rather than any specific art form, significantly enhances children's learning and development.

Given that the previous projects focused on 5-6-year-old children, subsequent research explored PLA's efficacy with 3-4-year-old nursery children to determine if it was equally effective. Building on earlier findings, this phase employed a variety of art forms in each setting emphasizing literacy as a social practice (Theodotou, 2024). The evidence indicated significant improvements in children's confidence and engagement in literacy activities as well as in their performance in literacy practices.

However, with very few exceptions, the above pieces of research did not include the perspectives of practitioners on the entire process, omitting crucial data about the potential effects of the PLA on their professional development. Taking the arguments of Soler and Miller (2010) and Walsh et al. (2010) about the need for additional support to implement child-led practices seriously, it became clear that a new research project was necessary to explore the impact of the PLA on practitioners' professional development. Before presenting the research design, it is essential to discuss the importance of professional development, especially in the field of education.

Professional Development: Why it Matters?

Professional development is of paramount importance, especially in early childhood, where the responsibilities and challenges are high due to the age of the children. It should be a continuous practice throughout one's career to remain up to date with the sector advancements and emerging research. Investing in this aspect is crucial, as it is the only way to keep up with the developments and new insights within the field (Muijs & Reynolds, 2018).

It is important to note that this is not a new trend; researchers in the previous century, including Day (1999), have underscored its significance in education. He provided a definition of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that emphasizes the values of all learning experiences directly benefiting the individual. These experiences can be structured, such as training sessions or events, or arise from simple interactions during daily routines. In the early years sector, CPD represents an even more critical demand for practitioners.

Early childhood professionals should demonstrate a range of professional and personal attributes to effectively serve their profession and meet the sector's demands and standards. Willan (2017) identifies the essential qualities for becoming an early childhood professional, highlighting a range of social and personal skills, with empathy being paramount. The list includes critical thinking skills, organisation, knowledge, self-awareness, and creativity. Although these skills are initially developed during undergraduate or postgraduate studies, investing time and effort in reflective practice throughout one's career is crucial to remain updated in the field.

Reflective practice is a crucial component of CPD, offering opportunities to closely examine own behaviour, attitudes, and reactions. Willan (2017) underscores the significance of reflective practice by drawing indirect connections to the professional development of staff in the sector. Reflective practice aids in recognizing our emotions, actions, and the motivations behind them. It fosters increased self-awareness and, through this process, paves the way for personal and professional growth and development (Kilvington & Wood, 2018).

Considering the discussion above, it becomes clear that professional development is crucial in the early years sector, offering benefits for both practitioners and young children. Through this process, early years professionals gain the opportunity to enhance and refine their teaching skills, directly benefiting young children and leading to high-quality teaching. Considering these considerations, this research focuses on the professional development of early years practitioners to assess the outcomes of a child-friendly intervention.

Purpose

The recognised benefits of professional development for early years practitioners, coupled with the scarcity of research on the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme, were the driving forces behind the formulation of the purpose of this study. More specifically, this research project aims to explore the impact of the PLA programme on practitioners' professional development.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners' professional behaviour?
2. What were the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners' teaching skills?

Participants

Given the study's specific focus, a non-probability sampling method was employed to select participants who had implemented the PLA, aiming to gather their perspectives on their experience. Early childhood practitioners previously involved in PLA research projects were invited to join this study. Their participation was emphasized as voluntary, with no obligation tied to their prior involvement. The purpose of the study was thoroughly explained, and participants had the opportunity to inquire further before giving their consent. Ultimately, 17 practitioners agreed to participate, all of whom were actively engaged with the PLA, working with children aged 3-4-year-old and 5-6-year-old children in Attica, Greece and London, UK.

Procedures and Measures

Data was collected with semi-structured interviews organised into 4 categories:

1. Academic and professional achievements
2. Implementation of the PLA
3. Children's reaction
4. Personal reflection/impact

The interview schedule was flexible to accommodate any new insights that weren't originally anticipated. It was initially piloted in a small number of early years practitioners to ensure clarity and prevent confusion regarding the questions. The interviews took place over a period of 3 months at the

end of the school year, in a quiet room within the setting where the practitioners worked, at a time that was convenient for them.

Data Analysis and Discussion

To analyse the data from the interviews, we used a thematic approach, focusing on the 4 categories outlined in the interview schedule. Within these categories, we identified commonalities in their responses and formed themes to further organise the data. Impressively the PLA significantly enhanced the quality of teaching and planning. Practitioners gained confidence in implementing child-led projects and meaningful literacy activities. They took great pride in their achievements and showed considerable motivation for ongoing professional development.

Most of the practitioners held a BA degree in early childhood and had substantial experience in working in this sector, approximately 10 years. However, many didn't have any further experience in the arts, aside from some exposure during their school years or seminars they attended after graduating, in their time.

To begin with, the success of professional development is closely linked to the level of support the practitioners receive. Vangrieken et al. (2017) identify this as a critical condition for effective professional development. Similarly, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasized that expert support is crucial for realizing professional development opportunities within an educational context. Positively, all the practitioners expressed satisfaction with the support received during the intervention, attributing it as a key factor to the programme's success. This support was vital for them, as it provided the confidence needed to implement this innovative teaching method. Below are some extracts from the data:

P1: Visits were really helping me to keep my momentum going because sometimes I was like... So, I was thinking that on Thursday is the next visit and kind of helping to keep going. I felt that I can actually do it.

P14: Support was tremendous and valuable. I believe that the success of this programme is due to this reason. We were provided with everything we needed to develop the skills to be independent when we were implementing the PLA steps.

To answer the first research question 'What were the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners' professional behaviour?' we focused on all categories of the interview schedule, looking for emerging themes that fit in this area.

One of the most important benefits of CPD is the development of confidence among participants. The Care Council of Wales (2016) presented a case study in the early years settings, where a participant aimed to boost her confidence at work. She reported that through CPD her goal was achieved. Our findings align with this outcome. Data shows that the intervention had significantly influenced their professional behaviour, particularly in areas related to personal and emotional development. It was inspiring to see that such a brief intervention positively affected their beliefs about their abilities and skills. Within a few weeks from the start of the intervention, practitioners felt more confident in their work, especially in addressing children's needs and respecting their voice. CPD benefits also extended to individuals' beliefs in their abilities. Yoo (2016) observed a notable increase in teacher efficacy after an online session. While her study encompassed a broad spectrum of professionals, primarily in schools, our research was exclusively focused on nurseries. Nonetheless, both studies concur on this point. Our participants felt more efficient in navigating challenges in implementing art activities, attributing this to the PLA. The

impact on their self-efficacy was remarkable, as they began to believe in their success. Below are some extracts from the data:

P1: How I feel it now is different with how I felt at the beginning. I was anxious because arts weren't my area of strength. I was a bit unsure if I am going to do it right. I was excited but I was more nervous. Now I LOVE IT. I really enjoy it and I see the benefit of it which I didn't before as I didn't have the understanding.

P9: I am happier now. I am more confident. I feel more experienced. I feel that I am a better professional now. PLA boosted my confidence, my self-esteem. I think the most important thing is that something happened immediately... not immediately actually. I was working on how to unlock myself and suddenly when we got into the practice, I felt it. I think the fact that I saw my children being so happy, made me to feel twice confident. I just realized that I am doing something that is quite beneficial for them.

Professional image is an important target in CPD courses. High-quality CPD should include actions aimed at enhancing participants; professional image (ECDA, 2020). When individuals take pride in their achievements, they tend to showcase them, positively affecting the development of their professional image. Our study corroborates this viewpoint. Data showed that the intervention had a positive impact on their self-esteem. Participants proudly acknowledged their achievements and improvements in professional behaviour both during and after the intervention. In some cases, they went above and beyond, actively seeking to publish their efforts and accomplishments within the local community. This effort resulted in a significant boost in the prestige of both the nurseries and the practitioners involved in this project. Below are some extracts from the data:

P1: When we were doing something amazing, I was like 'Let's go and show everybody this work because it is so good! And it was improvement on their own work. So, we would go and show off!

P1: I am proud of myself of knowing my children inside out. Their strengths, their weaknesses... so I think for me being able to see subtle changes in their behaviour was how I was able to track their progress.

P11: It was a really good experience, and they want to write something in the newspaper about us. My manager is really happy, the parents are happy with their children, their writing has improved.

A vast amount of literature highlights the importance of reflection on our professional behaviour. Benchmarking performance is crucial in any CPD course (ECDA, 2020). For this purpose, self-reflection is a key component, offering insights into numerous areas for improvement. Care Council of Wales (2016) identifies self-assessment and reflective practice as fundamental aspects of professional behaviour. Subsequently, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) concurred, emphasizing that effective professional development should incorporate reflection opportunities. Our study supports these views and provides additional empirical arguments. The intervention enabled practitioners to engage in self-reflection, thereby gaining significant insights into their professional behaviour. Echoing Bailey's et al. (2001) case studies, our participants became more self-aware of their personal and professional development and gained a deeper understanding of their practice. This was a critical discovery, as it presents practitioners with the chance to enhance longstanding practices, making a significant contribution to their ongoing

professional development. Important, while not the initial aim of the intervention, this outcome demonstrates the programme's success in enriching not only children's skills but also practitioners' professionalism. Below are some extracts from the data:

P1: Now I understand why it is so beneficially to get a high-quality literacy event. There has been a lot of development in myself during this project. I was able to give an explanation to the parents of what we were doing and explain the benefits. They were amazed as I was by the end of it to be honest.

P14: I have never thought that children in this age would have such skills. That they would be able to write, copy and make any type of marks in an activity with no intervention from the adult. I was under the impression that they were very young to follow such an open-ended process in literacy. I was afraid that if I do something like this, it will result in a disaster. I was really surprised to see that it was a piece of cake, and I don't know why I was so intimidated before. PLA opened my eyes of children's potentials in this age.

Self-reflection offers significant opportunities for identifying improvement areas. It aids in making informed decisions and is recommended not only for personal growth but also for enhancing school performance (Barnett & O'Mahony, 2006). Our data supports this by showing that PLA enabled practitioners to better understand their roles and areas needing improvement. They recognized the intervention's impact on their professional practice and identified areas for further enhancement. This recognition is a key aspect of professional development, as it allows them to pinpoint improvement opportunities and act on them. Below are some extracts from the data:

P5: Going back thinking my own role, it was a very nice reminder what I was really doing with the little ones. Going back to that learning about allowing them to lead, to think and make mistakes without having an adult presence, helped me understand... It should be like a typical conversation you have with an adult. It also helped me when I am mentoring staff. The project made me think of them as their own independent learners.

P7: I think for me as a reflection is not to force children that they actually had to write letters. So, when I found this, I took a step back and started praising their marks and they actually started progressing more without pressure.

P11: I pay more attention to children now. I didn't pay attention to their first efforts of writing. Now, when children scribble, I have a discussion with them. I am different. I recognize motives. I pay more attention to their work now. I can see something there and give them praise for it. I have a better understanding of literacy now.

To briefly summarise, the data revealed significant improvements in practitioners' professional behaviour as an outcome of the art intervention. They became much more confident and developed a profound understanding of their professional behaviour, which facilitated their professional improvement. Practitioners' ability to self-reflect on their practices emerged as a key driver in altering their professional attitudes, ultimately enhancing children's learning. This shows the intervention's success as a teaching approach, yielding benefits across multiple areas of continuous professional development.

To answer the second research question ‘What were the effects of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme on practitioners’ teaching skills?’ we focused on all categories of the interview schedule, looking for emerging themes that fit in this area.

Improving teaching is a primary goal of professional development courses. Kennedy (2016) argues that these programmes should concentrate on teaching strategies and help teachers to better understand their practices. However, Markussen-Brown et al. (2017), in a meta-analysis of professional development courses in literacy and language, discovered no significant improvements in educators’ knowledge. Notably, although PLA was not specifically designed as a professional development course, it has proven supportive in this domain. Data indicate that the intervention significantly enhanced practitioners’ knowledge within their work field. Practitioners reported acquiring new knowledge and skills related to child development and learning. Encouragingly, the PLA inspired them to pursue further learning in these areas and explore ways to enhance their teaching methods to support children’s development and learning. They sought deeper understanding and insights into their teaching practices and better grasped the principles of child-friendly and child-led teaching. Below are some extracts from the data:

P6: We had our own systems that we use, and this was a new method. PLA is a more open kind of way doing it. It is quite effective. It was definitely added in my practice personally as a practitioner. I learned something here that I will continue to use. I think the nursery is going to benefit from it. We were doing the more structure format before and this a more child-friendly way of doing things.

P10: PLA opened my eyes in different ways on how children learn and different ways and methods we can use to teach them. It was very beneficial. I found the deeper meaning; I reached the deeper goal that we were trying to achieve. It made me go even further in-depth. To observe even further of what the children do. To look more at different activities and more open learning rather than just closed.

P11: I have seen a huge improvement in their writing, they come to me, they want to write their thoughts, they draw, they are using the sounds now and write things which they didn’t before. I have a better knowledge now in emergent writing, paying more attention to details like not saying this is scribble but actually it is a letter.

The quality of teaching is often a key indicator of successful teaching, yet it requires verification through credible outcomes. Markussen-Brown et al. (2017) discovered that literacy professional development courses overall enhance teaching quality. Our study agrees with this finding and provides additional evidence of verification by the monitoring body in the field, an element missing from their research. Our intervention positively impacted practitioners’ teaching skills, specifically enhancing teaching quality and creativity. Practitioners reported significant improvements in teaching quality, verified by a recent OFSTED inspection at their nursery. They succeeded in integrating creative elements into their teaching, which was a previously challenging task. This significant outcome demonstrates that the PLA philosophy is acknowledged by the statutory board governing early years teaching.

P10: When we had an OFSTED inspection one of the young children was able to share what she is being doing the PLA. They are small but significant. They were able to remember. It was not like I asked her, and she remembered. She was able to say to him and what we do. The inspector was impressed!

P10: Ensure that your teaching is of high standards, and you get the higher results. You need to work in your teaching skills. I cannot stress enough the high-quality teaching PLA helped me in this. Not taking a big group but taking a smaller group. It is the quality and not the quantity.

P7: PLA was one of the most important things I have worked with since I started working with children. There is lack of creative and taking the arts seriously particularly in early years in any setting of schooling or education. It is seen as a hobby or a second thing. Any direction they are going in life has come from them and not being put them by their subjects at school or various learning environments.

Planning emerged as another significant theme from the interviews. The data shows significant improvements in teaching skills, particularly in organizing thoughts about the week's teaching materials and activities in the nursery. The impact on classroom practices is regarded as a critical influence of any intervention within the field. Fisher et al. (2018) emphasize that participation in professional development is contingent upon this aspect. They argue for the necessity of research to pinpoint effective teaching practices in professional development. Our findings contribute to this area, as the PLA influenced practitioners' daily routines, encouraging innovative thinking. Notably, their routines and the overall nursery life have evolved. Practitioners expressed increased satisfaction with PLA being integrated into their lives. This remarkable outcome underscores the PLA's positive effects on their teaching skills. Below are some extracts from the data:

P2: Planning was always an issue and very time consuming. I found ways to use PLA to link observations to planning. It sorts of synced the more than what we did it.

P7: It is a massive overhaul of my view and how to work with children. I know what I was doing dull and uninteresting, but PLA helped in planning more exciting activities. It became an integral part of their life rather than a teaching situation.

P9: Now we are doing drama all the time. It has changed our routine.

P6: It is in our practice now, in our everyday practice. We are using it. We recognize that even the simple lines across the page. Now we know literacy.

Collaborative learning and open discussion are focal points of many professional development courses in secondary education. Sedova et al. (2016) describe the effects of an intervention wherein teachers facilitated open discussions for collective learning. However, applying these methods in early years settings poses challenges due to children's ages. It was encouraging to observe that the PLA positively influenced practitioners' teaching skills in this domain. Data analysis revealed the PLA's significant impact on practitioners' abilities to enhance children's literacy progress. Practitioners reported instances where children exceeded their previous capabilities and demonstrated new skills. Notably, enhanced participation and collaborative learning were evident in their feedback. They noted changes in their teaching strategies, leading to increased child engagement in learning activities. Moreover, they discovered strategies for fostering meaningful collaborative learning, addressing a notable challenge for this age group.

P13: It was a process that helped team and collaborative work. In this age it is difficult to achieve this but through the PLA it was easy to do it. It seems that they were motivated to do so.

P1: I always put it out who wants to go first. Now the children who respond are the ones who didn't before. I honestly wasn't expecting this and from certain children. My very first drama play was with 5 children, now I am having all 11! And the reactions! They were excited! On the spot I had all 11 of them shouting ideas all at once. My teaching was improved! I had children that they were not interested in whatsoever in literacy that now they are making marks and telling me 'Oh that is my name' which have never have done before.

P14: Children enjoyed every part of this program. It was surprising to see that they were keep asking to do PLA activities. We didn't and couldn't do the PLA on a daily basis as there are other things happening at our nursery and we need to keep up. They were very disappointed when we didn't do the PLA on those days.

P11: I could see a difference in my teaching. Children who couldn't write their names before are doing so well and everyone is so excited. It was only 4 months, but it made a huge difference in the classroom.

Meaningful literacy was another area of improvement in their teaching skills. Kidd and Rowland (2021), focusing on verbal communication in the early years, found that practitioners could respond to children meaningfully. Our study builds on this and by providing insights into the broader application of literacy in everyday life.

Practitioners reported that PLA enabled them to develop meaningful literacy activities with their children. Their teaching approach evolved, leading to an understanding that literacy extends beyond paper and can be integrated into various settings. They understood the deeper meaning of literacy in daily practice, which was crucial as it allowed them to demonstrate their work with significant results. Below are some extracts from the data:

P1: With the drama play we were able to see that literacy is taking place everywhere and not at a table with just pens. We were in the garden; we were leaning against the walls to do a literacy at times we were on the floor... it was just everywhere. I was able to open up their eyes to see! Being a practitioner, you stuck in certain ways but PLA helped to go further.

P5: Children tried to make pencils and mark making in the construction area. This is impressive as formal literacy activities do not take place in construction area. PLA helped me to see that social literacy activities can take place everywhere even in the most bizarre places. This has affected my teaching!

Their teaching skills improved not only in supporting children's cognitive development but also their emotional growth. The data show that practitioners became more adept at supporting children's confidence throughout the learning process and helping them take pride in their accomplishments. They succeeded in fostering a relaxed learning environment where children felt inclined to participate of their own will. This aligns with Butler et al. (2004), who documented various instances where collaborative

projects enabled practitioners to provide emotional support to students on their learning journey. Observing the PLA's influence on teachers' abilities to support children's holistic development, rather than concentrating solely on one developmental aspect, was encouraging.

P1: I really enjoyed children's confidence, the growth in their confidence in a variety of aspects. In the drama play, children that were so shy were sit in the back and wouldn't participate. Now I am able to support them to put themselves in front of everyone.

P17: I saw children that were very shy and not eager to participate in anything or children that were 'bullied' by other children and through this procedure I could helped them to gain self-confidence. I was getting better to deal with situations like this. I also saw that they found the courage to step away from this situation and talk to the other child who was aggressive towards them.

P3: Now I see a lot of differences. What I do with them is working. They come to me and say, 'Look what I did'. They are so proud of their writing. I have never seen them so happy!

Independence is another goal that practitioners strive to achieve for their students. Butler et al. (2004) address this issue, confirming that a collaborative approach in professional development can significantly shift teaching practices and support students in becoming autonomous. Empowering children is a crucial component of their emotional development, especially in a society where children often lack a voice. Teaching them to speak for themselves and express their ideas is of utmost importance. Data analysis reveals that practitioners enhanced their teaching skills in encouraging children to voice their opinions through the intervention. It was inspiring to witness a dramatic improvement in their teaching approaches, granting children the freedom to act independently and make their own decisions. Below are some extracts from the data:

P8: They seemed they really really enjoyed it because they started to realize that we are actually doing the thing they say they want to do. I think they liked that. We were doing what they want, how can you not love that? I loved it! I finally understand how to do this in practice.

P16: I was able to give children the freedom to suggest something. For example, I had prepared something regarding a topic, but children might asked something different so the whole lesson plan turned up to have a completely different focus. There were times that children's questions were irrelevant to the topic, and this was challenging. However, I tried to reply to them and not to ignore them. This was massive for me, but I did it!

Last but not least, sustainability is a crucial aspect of any teaching intervention. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identify sustained duration as a key component of effective professional development. It was remarkable to observe that, within such a short period, the PLA significantly influenced practitioners' teaching skills, and they were all eager to continue its application even after the intervention concluded. They went above and beyond, offering numerous recommendations to their colleagues. It was particularly inspiring to note that they took the initiative to analyse and adapt the ways they utilized the PLA post-research. Below are some extracts from the data:

P11: They should all do PLA. I believe that a lot of practitioners haven't really looked at literacy in depth like this. I have and will continue to recommend to my colleagues and friends.

P16: We have used the PLA to see different painting techniques to try something new and different.

P5: I like that the PLA was introducing it through a piece of art. So, we used a song, which is an art form that we didn't use the first-time round.

P7: So next year I will have the 2-year-olds, but I think I going to still try. I am going to see how it goes and just see... because I was thinking if it is not about the outcomes but it is about learning, writing for the social purposes I don't see why 2-year-olds cannot do it.

To briefly summarize, the data shows that the PLA significantly influenced practitioners' teaching skills across various domains, with teaching quality being the foremost. It facilitated the development of practices that support children's cognitive development in literacy, as well as crucial aspects of emotional growth. The PLA positively impacted their planning and daily routines, demonstrating a lasting effect on their skills while ensuring high sustainability rates.

Conclusions

This paper focused on the effectiveness of the PLA in enhancing practitioners' professional development. Following years of implementation and recognized benefits for children's development and learning, we aimed to fill the research gap by investigating the PLA's impact on practitioners' professional behaviour and teaching skills. Practitioners who participated in earlier studies were interviewed to gather their insights on this topic.

The findings revealed that the support received during their participation in previous PLA research projects was pivotal to their success. This significantly influenced the programme's sustained usage, with all practitioners continuing to employ the PLA methods after the project concluded, initiating various applications of the PLA. Consistent with prior studies on the impact of CPD courses, our participants reported a notable transformation in their professional behaviour post-PLA implementation, experiencing considerable improvements in confidence and self-esteem. The PLA facilitated a deeper comprehension of their roles as practitioners. Furthermore, it significantly enhanced their teaching abilities, particularly in the areas of teaching quality, planning, and fostering children's cognitive and emotional development.

Observing such positive outcomes was encouraging, especially considering the PLA wasn't initially conceived as a CPD course. Yet, its benefits extend beyond its original objectives, notably impacting professional development. A likely contributing factor is the relaxed and supportive atmosphere fostered by the PLA, allowing practitioners to engage in their work without fear of judgment. This environment likely encouraged them to fully express and realize their potential.

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