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# If you give them the chance, they will thrive: exploring literacy development through the arts in early childhood education

Evgenia Theodotou 

Early Childhood Studies, School of Education and Communities, University of East London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

Listening to young children's voice is important to access their learning meaningfully. This is challenging in early childhood education, where children don't always communicate their thoughts verbally, as they use multimodal means of communication. There is extensive research on empowering children in their learning journey in primary education, but there is a gap in the nursery. This project aims to bridge this gap by exploring the effects of a child-led methodology on literacy development. Building on previous research, this project focuses on three-year-old children and using a variety of art forms. The sample included 13 settings from London and Greece. The Play and Learn through the Arts programme (PLA), implemented as a child-led methodology over for four months, supported children to raise their own voice in literacy projects. Data were collected through weekly observations. The findings indicated significant improvements in children's confidence, reading and writing habits, participation in discussions, and overall enthusiasm.

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Child-led projects; literacy; play and learn through the arts; early childhood education; nursery

## Introduction

Children are regarded as individuals with rights, capable of making their own decisions about their life and learning. A child-centred approach can positively impact children's learning journey (Crain 2003). Malaguzzi (1993) highlighted that children possess a hundred languages to communicate and can construct their own theories. Influenced by his arguments, early years curricula worldwide (e.g. DfE 2023; MoE 2017) emphasize the importance of putting young children in the centre of their education and providing them the opportunity to raise their voice in their learning.

Considering these arguments, numerous researchers (see Charles and Boyle 2014; Soderman, Gregory, and McCarty 2005; Walker-Gleaves and Wauch 2017) have embraced a child-led methodology over the years to explore various aspects of literacy development in the early years settings. These researchers focused on different forms of literacy, such as

**CONTACT** Evgenia Theodotou  [e.theodotou@uel.ac.uk](mailto:e.theodotou@uel.ac.uk)  Early Childhood Studies, School of Education and Communities, University of East London, Stratford Campus, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ, UK

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emergent literacy and multimodal literacy, and most of the times they emphasize the importance of the arts in their methodology.

However, it is interesting to note that the majority of empirical research (such as Binder and Kotsopoulos 2011; Leonard, Hall, and Herro 2016) focuses on reception or the first levels of primary school, often overlooking nursery-aged children. Our research addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence in literacy achievements specifically for 3-year-old children. The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of child-led art activities on children's literacy journey. In total, 13 settings from London and Greece, with 14 practitioners and 247 three-year-old children, implemented the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) program for over a period of four months.

### **Literacy in early childhood education**

Literacy is a constantly evolving term which has developed significantly over the years. Whitehead (2010) and Baynham (1995) note the challenge in managing discussions around literacy, as definitions are frequently subject to debate. One main argument for this is that there are different school of thought, approaching literacy from different perspectives.

According to Whitehead (2010), literacy is the ability to read and write, verbal and non-verbal communication but it also includes critical thinking skills and people's need for communication. Reflecting critically on this definition, it can be argued that literacy includes fundamental skills for people's everyday lives, but also for the rest of school subjects, such as math and science, whereas students need to be able to read and write to understand the content. This means that focusing on literacy in preschool could help children to build and master necessary skills and create an important foundation for their learning. However, designing literacy activities in the nursery might be more challenging than in primary school as children are younger and have not mastered verbal communication successfully like older children.

The discussion around the pedagogy of multiliteracies began with the New London Group (1996), who highlighted the changing environment and its implications for our understanding of literacy. Their arguments on communication diversity have profoundly influenced contemporary literacy perspectives. Moreover, their insights into multimodal learning have revealed new dimensions of literacy.

Multimodality encompasses expressing ideas and thoughts through diverse modes beyond text, including images, sounds, gestures, gaze, and movement (Kress 2000; Larson and Marsh 2015). This perspective is crucial in early years settings, where young children predominantly communicate through multimodal means rather than traditional methods like talking, reading, and writing. Multimodal literacies involve the attitudes, skills, and knowledge developed across various literacy forms, including spoken, printed, and digital (Flewitt 2008). Mono-modal communication can pose challenges for some children, particularly in nursery settings, for those who may be bilingual or not yet verbal. At this stage, children primarily rely on non-verbal cues, such as gestures or drawings, for communication (Lightfoot, Cole, and Cole 2012).

The advent of multimodal literacies offers a deeper insight into the literacy development process, encompassing the entirety of the learning journey from children's initial

attempts. Multiliteracies empower practitioners to incorporate alternative communication forms, such as fairy tales or technology, to enhance children's natural communicative abilities (Charles and Boyle 2014). Larson and Marsh (2015) note that this advancement has propelled researchers further in understanding language's role in daily life.

Multimodal approaches to literacy have broadened the scope for exploring or re-evaluating literacy concepts. Focusing on Literacy as a Social Practice (LSP) might be a good option for nursery children instead of the traditional teaching of literacy, which focused on skills, such as letter formation and identification (Flewitt 2008). LSP focuses on the aspects of literacy that take place in our everyday lives for different reasons in different cultural contexts. This concept was introduced by Street (1995), who challenged the autonomous model of literacy with compelling arguments that literacy should be viewed as a tool for use, not merely an object for analysis. In his discussion, Street emphasized the cultural dimensions of literacy practices, illustrating his points with diverse examples from both oral and written traditions. A couple of years later, Bloome and Katz (1997) recognized the social aspect of reading and writing habits. Embracing LSP enables teachers to focus on the meaningful literacy experiences that children experience in their learning journey. This is based on Flewitt's (2008) arguments that LSP takes place in real-life situations and therefore learning is meaningful and effective.

LSP includes two very important terms: literacy events and literacy practices. According to Barton (2007), literacy events focus on the different activities in real life around literacy, e.g. reading an announcement or writing a note. On the other hand, he argues that literacy practices focus on the way people use literacy, for example, the way we read or write. Worthington and van Oers (2017) link these terms with early years education demonstrating a variety of literacy practices from young children. However, according to Henning (2018), the existing provision in education is unsuccessful in considering the social aspects of literacy. Considering this argument, this research aims to address this gap by providing additional examples of literacy practices derived from early years settings.

## **Empowering children through the arts**

In preschool, there is an emphasis on children's experiences, interactions, and surroundings rather than direct teaching (Lightfoot, Cole, and Cole 2012). Children need the freedom to move and explore their surroundings, as their attention span is shorter than that of older children, so minimizing adult intervention could benefit their learning. Based on these arguments, researchers (such as Binder and Kotsopoulos 2011; Hvit 2015) are turning to the arts to support children to raise their own voice in their learning journey in literacy. However, a careful examination of these pieces of research reveals that most either overlook the nursery setting or, when they do address it, fail to focus on LSP through art activities. This omission leaves a significant gap in an essential level of education where children establish the foundation of their learning interactions.

Binder and Kotsopoulos (2011) demonstrated pioneering ways of using visual arts with kindergarten children to support communication and alternative thinking outside traditional literacy forms. Their research contributes to the discussion of the importance of art experiences to empower children in literacy activities which focus on the development of their identity. Their research showcases practical methods to empower children in literacy, with a specific emphasis on literacy itself. However, what is missing is the use of different

art forms. Previous research has shown that the arts in general contribute to children's learning, not just a specific art form, underscoring the importance of including a variety of art forms for a rich and meaningful learning experience (Theodotou 2019b). Although the researchers focus on children's narratives, which includes some aspects of LSP, they do not delve deeply into how the arts affect literacy events and practices, as this was not part of their methodology. Our study seeks to address these limitations by exploring a variety of art forms in LSP through a child-led methodology.

The LSP aspect absent in Binder's and Kostopoulos' research was later addressed by Leonard et al. (2016). Focusing on kindergarten, Leonard et al. employed dance as an art form to explore literacy practices. Their research also contributes significantly to the previous discussion showing the empowerment of the arts in children's ability to use complex forms of communication in a dynamic dialogue. They demonstrate a variety of different literacy practices as a result of dance activities. Critically analysing this research, we can see that it addresses the gap in the literature as mentioned above as they focused on LSP through art experiences giving children the leading role. However, the existing research still lacks empirical knowledge about three-year-old children using a variety of art forms, an area our project intends to explore.

A few years ago, we sought to address these arguments through a focus on LSP in arts activities (Theodotou 2017). The research conducted was a case study focusing on empowering five-six-year-old children through the integration of the arts in literacy activities. The findings revealed numerous instances where children employed literacy as a meaningful tool in their everyday interactions, incorporating various elements of LSP. However, this research centred on kindergarten, overlooking nursery-aged children, a gap we aim to address in this paper.

One might argue that such research would be very challenging due to the age of the children, as their interactions are often limited to modes of communication other than the verbal one. However, Hvit (2015) highlighted in her empirical findings that toddlers are capable of being literate individuals with their own rights and voice in the educational process. Her research revealed various literacy events at this educational level and advocated for further study in this field. This insight strongly motivated further exploration of this aspect through art activities in the nursery setting.

Summarizing the above discussion, child-led activities are unquestionably beneficial for children's empowerment in learning. Art activities provide a practical means of implementing such an approach in early years education, significantly impacting literacy achievements. Considering the importance of LSP, existing research has demonstrated numerous instances where kindergarten children thrive in their literacy journey through art methodologies, and that children under three exhibit meaningful literacy events. However, these arguments collectively reveal a gap in empirical evidence regarding three-year-old children, a gap our research project aims to address.

## **Purpose**

Considering the existing empirical evidence, alongside identified gaps and limitations, the purpose of this research project was established. A fundamental motivation for this project stemmed from Hvit's (2015) research, which posited that children under three years old can exhibit LSP skills. This premise provided a promising avenue to further

investigate through child-led art activities. The purpose of this research project is to explore the impact of child-led art activities in children's literacy learning journey, with a specific focus on LSP at the nursery level for three-year-old children. The project focused specifically on practitioners' interpretations of literacy while implementing the activities with children.

## Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) According to practitioners' interpretations, what literacy practices can emerge from child-led art activities?
- (2) According to practitioners' interpretations, what effects do child-led art activities have on children's responses towards literacy?

## Participants

The participants of this project were selected using a non-probability sampling technique. It was a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. At the beginning, we approached nurseries from our professional circle and their managers suggested more nurseries willing to participate. In total, there were 13 settings that consented to participate and implemented the PLA. Of these, 11 settings were from London, including 12 early childhood practitioners and 217 three-year-old children, while the remaining 2 settings were from Greece, including 2 practitioners and 30 three-year-old children. All practitioners had a degree in Early Childhood and several years of experience in the field. We obtained consent from the manager of each nursery, the practitioners, and the parents of the children. Face-to-face meetings were scheduled to explain the project and procedure and offer them the opportunity to ask questions. It was stressed that their participation was optional, and that the data will be kept anonymous and confidential. In line with children's rights, participation was voluntary, with children choosing whether to engage in the activities.

## Procedures

Our number one priority was to implement an intervention that fully considers the previous arguments about children's empowerment in the learning process. Keeping in mind previous research about the PLA, we concluded that it is an ideal solution. It empowers children to be protagonists of their learning journey, allowing them to take a leading role. During PLA, the practitioner participates as an equal member of the team and acts as a facilitator when needed. Hence, we chose the PLA as our art-based intervention for this study.

Theodotou (2017) suggested PLA as a teaching intervention for literacy in early years education in Greece. It is a non-commercial programme, free of financial cost. PLA allows the use of diverse art forms in education to develop literacy projects, structured through a five-step process (see Theodotou 2017). Children, together with the practitioner, decide the topic under investigation, for example, butterflies. They examine relevant paintings

that depict this topic and discuss their content. The practitioner acts as a scribe. They imagine being inside the painting and engage in a drama play led by the children. Following this, they discuss their experiences, and the children propose activities. The practitioner serves both as a scribe and a facilitator of this conversation, ensuring the activities encompass both art and literacy aspects. The children are tasked with gathering the resources needed to carry out the activities. After implementing the activities, the children reflect on their experiences and suggest ways to progress.

During these steps, children discuss, collaborate, and design literacy activities with an artistic aspect. For example, a drama play featuring butterflies, with tags of butterfly's name, street signs or menus of butterfly food. The practitioner acts as a facilitator and makes sure that every child has an opportunity to raise their own voice. In this process, there is no right or wrong, and the practitioner refrains from intervening to dictate a single correct solution.

Based on previous research (see Theodotou 2017), this paper focuses on three-year-old children examining the effects of the PLA in LSP while using different art forms in one group. All settings implemented the PLA's five-step process weekly, using paintings and drama to explore topics chosen by the children. As part of these interactions, children designed their own literacy activities. For example, a price list for the dentist. The project lasted for four months, from January to May. There was an intensive one-day training for the practitioners to introduce the content of the PLA. This was followed by weekly hour-long meetings to discuss the activities and children's ideas. These meetings also provided opportunities to discuss challenges the practitioners had during the implementation of the PLA and suggest solutions.

The PLA was new to the practitioners, and they faced some challenges at the beginning. They lacked confidence in correctly following the steps and were concerned about failing to implement art activities. To address these issues, we utilized weekly meetings to suggest strategies and solutions. Regular check-ins and follow-ups were established to monitor progress and resolve these problems.

## Measures

Using an interpretivist paradigm, we focused on qualitative methods to measure the outcome of the PLA. Data collection was selective and filtered through practitioners' individual interpretation. More specifically, it was collected through weekly practitioner observation logs in which practitioners described the arts and literacy activity that children designed and implemented, children's reactions and literacy practices. Practitioners recorded their conversations with children in real-time and later reflected on these notes to compile the logs. This method was deemed suitable for data collection in this project because it was minimally invasive for the children and allowed practitioners' flexibility to work at their convenience. Practitioners had the opportunity to discuss the content of these logs during the weekly meetings. Therefore, the observation logs included the benefits of reflection as they could revisit them with the new insights they gained after their meeting. A video or audio recording could have been a better way to collect data, but it was extremely difficult to gain the ethical approval and the consent of the settings and parents.

We asked the practitioners to write one log per week, focusing on analysing one chosen art intervention activity. The criteria for activity selection included the inclusion of both literacy and arts aspects, and the ideas had to originate from the children. In total there were 106 logs collected. Data was collected in English and Greek, and the researchers translated the Greek logs into English. The researcher was responsible for collecting the logs at the end of each week and analyse them.

## Findings and discussion

To analyse the observation logs, we used a thematic analysis approach and looked at common emerging themes from the data. Data are presented using codes (P) for the practitioners when presenting their observations and (C) for the children when presenting their words as observed by the practitioners. In total, we identified 28 emerging themes, into which the data were organized after 10 reviews. Due to word limitations and in adherence to the purpose and research questions, data analysis focuses on literacy practices and children's response to literacy.

To provide an overview of the following data, it was fascinating to see that three-year-old children took ownership of their own learning and suggested several different meaningful activities each week. The flexibility of the PLA empowered them to raise their own voice in their learning process. Each activity they suggested and organised had a meaningful literacy aspect, demonstrating advanced literacy practices in reading, writing and discussion. Children were also very enthusiastic about the whole process and extended this practice at home with their parents or during their free play.

To answer the first research question, we analysed the observation logs focusing on the literacy practices that children demonstrated as part of the art intervention.

Children took ownership of their learning and showed advanced literacy and language skills, using a variety of different techniques and practices. Children showed skilful communications with each other and adults, explaining their ideas in depth and providing a satisfactory analysis.

C3'My dragon sculpture has a red tail and white and yellow wings. There is yellow fire because I love yellow. It has 4 googly eyes. My dragon can actually breathe magic fire. If you wanted more legs or wings you could pick what you want. I rubbed my hand on the playdough to make my dragon have rough skin'

This finding aligns with previous research on the PLA (see Theodotou 2017) involving older children using paintings. Both pieces of research showed that children could analyse their ideas, providing reasons for their choice and justification. Drawing on previous research, they present several arguments about the general importance of this art form in children's communication. They argue that it offers a transformation element which supports children in their expression. However, a key distinction in our research is that it provides empirical data to back these arguments, specifically focusing on various art forms and children in the nursery.

Previous research conducted by Neaum (2018) showed that children at this age are not able to form a dialogue and that they use language sporadically. In her research, although children were aware of some print-related skills, they hardly participated in any spoken interactions during child-initiated play. It is important to note that in her research, there



was no art intervention and this could be the reason for a contradiction with our findings. In our research project, children initiated several discussions through the art intervention, either to find solutions to upcoming problems or to develop their ideas while observing paintings or doing drama play. They took turns and respected each other's opinions which is impressive for their age, as they had the patience to wait for the other to finish before they start talking. Listening to each other, they considered deeply the ideas, reflected on them, and built on them, trying, for example, to understand what was happening in the paintings. In several instances, it appeared as an emerging dialogue where children were responding to each other and building upon their ideas. For example,

C1'It looks like the dragon is in slime'.

C4'Hey look, the dragon is not green, that's funny'.

C11'Maybe the dragon is sleeping'.

C5'I think that the boy who is looking at him wanted to kill him'.

C11'There is something slimy and gooey rising up from his nose'.

C3'Maybe its smoke coming out his nose'.

When problems occurred, children tried to find acceptable solutions for everyone, ensuring no one was left behind. In these discussions, they practiced their reasoning skills to explain their ideas and to convince the team that this was the best solution. It is important to note that they did this as a team, not as individuals, which again differs from Neaum's (2018) findings.

P3Children wanted to make a passport to facilitate their drama play and visit Greece with the Fruit man and meet in person their friends. They decided on their own that they need to make a passport to get on the plane as they didn't want to leave fruit man behind on his own at the airport. They also decided to make one individual passport for themselves and one for the fruit man collectively. Children discussed that there are no paper shops at the airport and one child suggested that they can go to a WHSmith to get the resources they need.

Moving to another aspect of literacy, print-related skills are an important element in children's literacy journey. Norling et al. (2015) highlight the importance of children's engagement in preschool in this journey. They state that art activities can benefit children's emergent literacy skills as they create a positive environment. This aligns with the findings of this study, as children showed advanced print-related skills during the PLA. They developed an in-depth understanding of basic print features, such as print awareness, on various occasions. In their writing, they used symbols, not having yet mastered the writing system of language, and provided explanations for these symbols, akin to adult writing habits. This suggests that the research approach allowed them to meaningfully apply experiences they likely had in their home environment to their play. For example,

C4'My mummy and daddy got married when I was a baby. They love each other very much. Love means kisses' said while he was drawing (xxxx) in his work.

Focusing on the benefits of a rich literacy environment Neaum (2018) found that, despite substantial literacy provision in child-initiated play, engagement with print awareness and mark making was limited. However, it must be noted that Neaum did not investigate whether the literacy environment was motivating for young children, which could account for this finding. Hawken et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of a motivating environment for literacy, detailing a variety of strategies to enhance print awareness skills and investing significantly in creating the optimal environment for these activities. However, both studies of the above studies did not include an art intervention, which was included in our project. PLA had an impact on children's print awareness as they showed an understanding of writing techniques, numbers, and letters. In their efforts to mark their ideas, they used different sources of writing, for example, computer, pencil according to the resources they had each time of the type of activity they wanted to do. Considering that there is no formal teaching of reading and writing in this age, it was exciting to see that the PLA helped them to develop these skills in meaningful interactions. The relaxed environment of the PLA and the absence of formal adult intervention helped to raise their own voice and practice their print-related skills with no fear of failure.

P1We discussed different things that we could teach the monsters and how we could teach them, I asked them how will we remember? And they said write it down!

P3Children wanted to book an appointment for the fruit man as he will come back in 3 minutes. A child pretended that was looking at the computer using the mouse to find the fruit man's number. He typed his name using the keyboard and said 'I am writing the fruit man's name.

Finally, children showed reading and writing habits during their play in the PLA steps. They got involved in activities, such as pretend reading and writing during the PLA activities they had designed. They also used writing for social and functional purposes during their play using a variety of different writing techniques, such as environmental print, phonological awareness, using their names, group writing, and so on. They understood basic writing principles, such as writing from left to right and using upper- and lower-case letters. It is important to remember that there was no formal teaching of these practices before or during the PLA. So these techniques came naturally from children, empowering them to use the literacy experiences they had so far in their lives.

P8They wanted to write invitations and the most popular one was 'Please come to my party' or 'Alien come to my party' and 'Alien go to my party at home'. They took the writing materials and the paper invitation. Some children wrote their names or borrow/use letters from their names to write their message and other just used scribbles that followed the basic conventions of writing e.g., left to write and writing between the lines in a straight line.

To answer the second research question, there was an analysis of the observation logs with the focus on children's reaction during and outside the art intervention as it was recorded by the practitioners.

The data showed a variety of personal, social, and emotional aspects in children's responses during the PLA activities. Overall, children were very excited about the whole process and demonstrated it in every possible way. Having

a leading role in the literacy activities empowered them to take ownership of the entire process.

P5Every morning they were coming to the Nursery they anticipated to start the activities with the London Tube and look at the paintings. Children were inquisitive about the different Oyster cards as well as how and why we need and use them.

It is important to create an enjoyable environment in literacy for nursery children. Hvit (2015), in her study about literacy events in toddler groups, raised critical questions about the pedagogy practitioners should use at this age to facilitate different forms of art expression. Our findings contribute to this, as children engaged in the art intervention were eagerly anticipating the PLA activities throughout the day. This means that the PLA created a pleasant environment for them in which they wanted to participate and learn.

Previous research with older children (Theodotou 2019b) had also shown the positive impact of the PLA and the sustainability of literacy activities. Children from our study were also very enthusiastic and keen to engage in literacy activities although they were significantly younger and did not have any previous experience of organised literacy activities. Signs of enjoyment and satisfaction were obvious during the art projects. In agreement with previous research, children were very eager to prolong the literacy activities, trying to add new aspects and goals every time. It was surprising to see that they even forgot to ask for garden time, and they almost missed lunch on several occasions. Signs of verbal and non-verbal expression were constant during the PLA activities. Children either stated it, talked passionately, or jumped up and down out of happiness. As they had no prior experience in literacy activities, there was no baseline for comparison. Therefore, this promising start is positive, potentially laying the groundwork for a positive attitude towards literacy in their upcoming years of education.

P12Children were so excited, and they wanted to continue their drama play using the literacy resources they made. They were really expressing and there were 100% in the role and the drama play and didn't want to leave Greece. It was lunch time, and they were finding excuses to continue the drama play.

P9Children were so excited that they forgot that was time for free play in the garden. They were literally jumping around the room, and they were talking over each other to share their ideas.

Children's reaction to the literacy activities showed several socio-emotional outcomes that were impressive for their age. Although this was not one of the goals of this piece of research, it is positive to see that children showed signs of empathy, developing an awareness of other people's feelings. This is also supported by previous research on classroom practices with Bracken and Fischel (2006) showing that practitioners prefer to support children in working out conflicts with others and understand emotions. Similarly, our findings revealed signs of collaboration as an outcome of the intervention that was facilitated by the practitioners. Children showed elements of working in groups during their free play after the intervention. This finding is particularly surprising, as the PLA project yielded far more benefits in their learning than we initially expected.

P2 This was the first time I noticed an impact on their actions. They were really into the story, and they were frowning their faces and looking very worried. They started suggesting ideas of how we can make the dentist feel less lonely.

P8 I was amazed today after we played our drama game again at London Bridge how the children began playing so well together in the home corner, they had decided they were having dinner in a toy shop. Some were cooking while others waited patiently, and they fed dinosaurs. I was thrilled at how the PLA had managed to form such a calm and focused, yet imaginative playing state in the children for nearly a whole hour afterwards.

Children who participated in this research project were shy at the beginning and it was difficult for the practitioner to find ways to involve them in the nursery's activities. It was surprising to see that with the PLA project, this obstacle was lifted in a very short time and all the practitioners reported that they saw a significant development in this area as children become more confident and vocal. A similar finding was observed in the previous research on the PLA with older children (Theodotou 2020), in which children showed clear elements of confidence in doing simple tasks in their daily routines. Our research adds to this, as shy children developed confidence in their actions and took pride in their decisions during literacy activities. They led the PLA activities and raised their voice in every possible situation. They were also very proud to show their achievement to every adult in the room, explaining what they had done and how they did it.

P7 I have noticed since the beginning of the project the children's confidence in having a go at writing has really improved. One child, who was extremely anxious about mark making has thrived in the last week and she has been often seen writing letters on paper for cards, lists, registers and letters and making marks in her free play and bringing them to me to show me them proudly. She has also been saying 'I'm getting good at letters' and 'look I was writing something'. She is also regularly approaching me saying 'I know what sound this begins with' by picking up objects or pointing to something and this is a new literacy skill for her as she used to find this very difficult.

Finally, data showed that children were concentrated during the PLA activities for longer time than expected. This is also in agreement with previous research (Theodotou 2019a), which demonstrated the effects of PLA on 5-year-old children's concentration on self-led and teacher-led activities. Our research is adding to this, providing evidence from younger children. Children, who could not concentrate on simple tasks before, were focused and engaged with the literacy activities for a very long time. They did not want to be interrupted as if they would lose their line of thought. This appeared to be a significant milestone for them, given their age, and an excellent teaching strategy for practitioners to help children reach related milestones.

P1 Children were actively engaged in the activities of making tickets and money by paying attention to detail and staying focused for a long period of time. When I was asking them questions, they gave very short answers as if they didn't want to be interrupted.

To summarize, findings from this study showed positive outcomes in children's performance in literacy in a variety of areas. Children in the nursery are not expected to engage in formal literacy activities as they only reach literacy milestones in reception and Year 1. However, our findings showed that children are far more capable than we think of showing advanced literacy activities for their age. PLA contributed to children's positive attitude toward literacy activities, which is a very promising start in their school years to

follow. The findings underscore the need to pay greater attention to children's informal literacy achievements at this educational level, emphasizing that the teaching approach plays a crucial role in this process.

## Conclusions

This paper aimed to find ways in which children feel confident to raise their own voice during literacy activities. Using an art intervention, it strove to empower children in the nursery during literacy activities. While reviewing previous research in the field, it was obvious that there was a gap in this level of education, especially when literacy is combined with a variety of art forms, and this was the motivating factor for this piece of research.

Our findings showed several examples in which children initiated and carried out advanced literacy practices for their age. Children showed elements of skilful communication and print-related skills, such as print awareness. Surprising evidence was that such young children could form emerging dialogues, justify their thoughts, and provide in-depth analysis. They developed an understanding of writing for social and functional reasons and basic principles of print. These findings agreed with previous research when general arguments were made about a motivating environment in using the arts. It can be argued that the PLA gave children the opportunity to feel important as their voice was heard and taken into serious consideration. Children had the leading role in the activities and were able to influence their own learning journey by designing literacy activities. Children continued doing so during their free play, which shows the success of the intervention.

It is important to discuss some limitations of the current study before drawing any conclusions. First, it must be acknowledged that this study only included participants from two countries, so cultural aspects need to be taken into consideration as they might have affected the findings. However, it was a good sample size with a lot of participants considering the qualitative nature of this study, hence a lot of in-depth data was provided. Second, there were no direct observations from the researcher, but data was collected through the practitioners with observation logs. This might have resulted in differences in the observation skills of each practitioner. However, they were all experienced practitioners, who were using observation as part of their teaching and assessment. Also, there was an intensive training and weekly consultation meetings which might have minimized this limitation. Last but not least, this project lasted for 4 months and not a full academic year. A longer implementation might have resulted in a better understanding of the impact of the study. However, a counterargument for this could be that children were already settled in the nursery environment and could focus on their learning. Considering these limitations, further research is suggested to provide a deeper understanding of the intervention and its impact on children's social literacy skills.

Our research can be useful to early childhood practitioners who are passionate about improving the literacy performance of young children through a motivating environment in which children have the leading role. Our study provided a pleasant artistic environment for children to participate in literacy activities, and signs of pride and enjoyment were obvious throughout the whole process. Seeing such positive results in very young children is encouraging, as it can lay a strong foundation for their subsequent years of schooling.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Evgenia Theodotou  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4133-8609>

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