

Supporting personal and social development through child-led art projects in the early year settings

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Personal and social development is an important area which influences children's learning journey in all levels of education. Examining the impact of the arts in children's development, there are several studies that adopt this focus. However, the majority of them focuses either in primary or secondary education or in specific personal and social skills through a structured intervention, which is not compatible with the liberal context of the arts. Considering the importance of this area and the statement above, this research project was designed. The purpose of this paper was to examine the effects of a child-led art intervention in children's personal and social development in the early years settings. The intervention used the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme for a full school year. The participants were from a case study of a Greek early years setting with 5-6-year-old children. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study. The findings revealed a positive influence of the arts, and more specifically of the PLA, in children's personal and social skills.

Keywords: personal skills; social skills; arts; early years education; preschool;
Play and Learn through the Arts

Introduction

Personal and social skills are two very important areas within child development. They are a significant factor in children's learning journey with a strong influence in their personal and professional lives later on. Personal and social skills include verbal and non-

verbal behaviours as a response to other people and are influenced by the environment (Merrell & Gimpel, 2014).

Considering the social construction of knowledge as suggested by Vygotsky (1978), a strong link can be identified between social and cognitive development. Great emphasis has been given to this argument, with researchers verifying the importance of social skills in the general children's school performance and wellbeing (Thomas et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2010). It is important to give emphasis in this area as an effort to support children's development.

The arts are a motivating approach to support children to develop personal and social skills. They provide an environment of freedom with no right or wrong answers, in which everyone is free to raise their own voice and express their ideas. Through this context, there are several opportunities for meaningful learning with no extra pressure (Vasudevan, 2014). Literature review shows that there is a link among personal and social skills and art activities, by providing multimodal ways of communication (Wright, 2007). However, the majority of the existing evidence uses a structured approach or focuses on a specific area of social development, without reviewing it holistically.

Having the above argument in mind, this research project was formed. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of a child-led art intervention in children's personal and social development in the early years settings. An art intervention was implemented using the programme 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) in a case study of a Greek preschool setting of 5-6-year-old children.

Teaching through the arts

It is not a new argument that the arts can offer substantial benefits if used as a teaching and learning practice. The arts in education was a topic of consideration since ancient Greece (Smith, 1987) and this affected the educational field later on as well. To be more

specific, examining the various philosophers of the previous century, Dewey (1934) highlighted the importance and uniqueness of the arts by stressing that through the arts we can overcome the boundaries of human communication.

It is very challenging to give a definition of the arts. This is attributed to the fact that the arts cannot be defined with conventional formats or meanings. They have a different rationale and their own communication system, which enables people to express their ideas and beliefs in a unique way (Vasudevan, 2014; Matthews, 2008). Considering the above, several researchers conducted empirical studies in order to examine the influence of the arts in children's learning journey.

Gerry et al. (2012) were some of the researchers that investigated this aspect in the early years settings. They focused on the contribution of the arts on infants' social development and more specifically on the effects of active participation in musical activities. Having a control and an experimental group, they categorized their participants in active and passive participation in music classes. Their findings revealed good results in both groups, but the group with active participation showed better performance in social development and pre-linguistic communicative gestures. Examining carefully the intervention, it is obvious that there was a meticulous design and implementation following the ethical procedures. Regarding the content of the intervention, there was a mixture of child-led and adult-led activities with more emphasis on the adult-led interaction, presumably because of the very young age of the participants.

One year later, Change & Cress (2013) contributed in this field by providing additional evidence of a different art form. They examined the ways children's drawing can contribute in children's social interactions and communication. They used drawings of 3-4-year-olds as a stimulus for conversations among themselves and their parents. The project lasted for a month and showed a good impact of this approach on children's

communication. This research project adapted a more flexible implementation of the arts by having children to guide the adults. However, it didn't examine children's social skills holistically as it focused only on the effects of children's communication.

Continuing with a different art form, drama has also attracted researchers' attention but they mainly focused on primary school. These pieces of research give great emphasis on the examination of personal and cognitive skills and they also adapt a guided methodology with pre-decided art activities or structure.

Anderson & Barry (2014) focused on Year 3 students and their concentration and on-task engagement in school activities during a dramatic language art intervention. They included a control and an experimental group, over a period of four weeks, and they implemented the intervention, having offered some training to the teachers first. The results showed a positive influence of the intervention over the experimental group, making arguments about the effects of dramatic arts on students' concentration on the school activities. In this study, there was again a robust methodology, with a careful design and measurement. Although it is not focused on the early years settings, the findings can be used to provide evidence about the effects of the arts on students' personal development in general.

Moving one year up, Fleming et al. (2004) were interested in investigating the effects of drama play on students' cognitive and personal skills in Year 4 of primary school. Having a control and an experimental group they carried out drama workshops for a period of two years. The researchers concluded that drama play was associated with a better cognitive performance and progress in students' personal skills. It has to be acknowledged that this project focused on children's individual progress and ideas and embraced the argument about the social construction of learning. Reviewing the procedure of the drama play workshops, it is obvious that students had the freedom to

interact and their voice was heard in the design of the activities. However, there was a structured procedure that they needed to follow during these workshops, which most of the times revealed a teacher-led process.

Summarizing the above discussion, the arts have been used as a teaching approach since ancient times and supportive arguments can be found through the pedagogical theories. Several researchers focused their attention on such projects by using art intervention to support students' personal and social skills. All of them utilized a meticulous and strong methodology and concluded on the benefits of the arts, in this area of development. However, it is interesting to note that most of them focused on specific personal or social skills, without reviewing this area of development holistically. Furthermore, they used an art methodology, which most of the times reveals an emphasis on teacher-directed activities, and which seems opposite to the flexible environment that the arts can offer.

Purpose and research questions

Literature review regarding the effects of the arts on child development shows that there is a strong link among them, but there is an over emphasis on guided art projects and specific social skills. This was the inspiring idea for the development of this research project. The purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of a child-led art intervention in children's personal and social development in the early years settings. There is an emphasis on giving children the leading role in the design of the projects and on measuring personal and social skills holistically. The research questions were:

1. What are the effects of child-led art projects in their personal skills?
2. What are the effects of child-led art projects in their social skills?

Participants and procedures

There was a random selection for the participants of this study, using a list that captured all the early years schools of Attica. Using this list, 10 of them were selected and face-to-face meetings were organised to explain the purpose of this project. The school that agreed to participate was the case study of this project. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants of the study.

In total, there were 22 children from one early years setting that participated in the art project and none of them had been diagnosed with learning difficulties or disabilities. The 45% (n=10) were boys and the 55% (n=12) were girls, which shows a good balance in the numbers in gender (see table 1). The average mean age of the children at the beginning of the project was 58 months and the end of the project was 65 months (see table 2).

[Insert table 1]

[Insert table 2]

As an art intervention, the ‘Play and Learn through the Arts’ (PLA) programme was used, which is an interdisciplinary programme that utilised the arts to support children’s development. PLA was implemented for a full school year.

The ‘Play and Learn through the Arts’ (PLA) programme

PLA is an interdisciplinary programme, which aims to support children’s literacy development with child-led projects through the arts. It has been used so far in some small-scale projects (see Theodotou, 2017a, b; 2015) to examine its effects on children’s social literacy, literacy skills and levels of involvement. The results were positive and thus this project takes PLA one step further and examines its effects on children’s personal and social development.

The pedagogical framework of PLA is focused on the importance of social interactions as a vehicle of learning. The practitioner with the students participate in art projects that are driven by their desires. They select an art form of their choice and use it as a means to investigate the topics they want. There are some basic steps that are implemented weekly or monthly depending on the duration of each project (see table 3). During every step, students collaborate to make decisions about the content of the activities they will carry out. The basic difference with other art activities is that PLA does not provide ready-made lesson plans or activities, but gives the opportunity to children to design their own, according to their needs and desires. In this procedure, the practitioner acts as a facilitator to recognise the pedagogical learning goals of the activities.

[Insert table 3]

The participants of this study used the PLA for a school year for approximately 30 minutes, three times per week. They chose to use paintings as an art form. Before the beginning of the school year, there was an induction period for the practitioner to get introduced to the steps of PLA. During PLA, there were monthly consultation meetings arranged, to discuss any matters arising and to fully support the practitioner.

Data collections measures

To answer the research questions quantitative and qualitative methods were used. For this purpose, the Personal and Social Development (PSD) measure was used. This tool is provided by the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM) of Durham University in UK and is used across the schools of UK to assess young children's social performance in the early years settings.

PSD aims to evaluate children's social development, focusing on adjustment, personal and social skills. It examines all three areas holistically, including different parts

in each area. More specifically at the adjustment part it examines areas such as comfortable levels and independence. At the personal part it investigates areas such as confidence, action, concentration on teacher-directed and self-directed activities. Last but not least, in the social part it examines areas such as rules, communication, cultural awareness and relationship with adults and peers. The data is collected through practitioner observation logs during the daily routines and activities.

A significant factor of selecting PSD measure as a data collection tool for this project was the fact that it provides data after a holistic examination of children's personal and social development using different areas of development. It has also proven its value as it is widely used in UK school for more than 10 years. This tool uses qualitative data and produces quantitative results and it is suggested to use it more than one times to measure children's progress in the relevant areas.

For this research project, PSD was used in a pre-test at the beginning of the project and a post-test at the end of the project in each child individually. The practitioner kept weekly observation logs for each child and used these notes to make judgements about the different areas of social and personal skills of the PSD. A relevant rubric was provided to the practitioner, which was clarifying the content of each area.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The collected quantitative and qualitative data from the PSD was analyzed in an effort to identify any changes in children's levels of performance between the pre-and the post-test. There was also an effort to link and explain the arguments with the relevant literature.

Before the implementation of any quantitative test, students' demographics were collected in order to test them against the items of PSD measure. The purpose of this was to examine if they were acting as an influencing factor. A mix model analysis (split-plot ANOVA) was used. Data analysis shows that students' demographics did not serve as an

influencing factor in their performance in PSD in total, as there was no statistical significance difference in the numbers in the majority of the cases. There was a marginal acceptance in the item Comfortable at the factor Family Status ($p=.047$) and in Independence in the factor Place of Birth ($p=.046$). There were some limited cases in which there was a statistical significant difference such as in Independence in the factor Nationality ($p=.004$) and Multilingual ($p=.016$), in Relationships with peers in the factor Place of Birth ($p=.034$), Nationality ($p=.002$), Multilingual ($p=.010$) and in Cultural Awareness in the factor Place of Birth ($p=.041$) and Nationality ($p=.010$) (see table 4). This means that there might be a small influence in these items, which can be explained with the arguments from the empirical literature about the important influence of the home environment (see Hayes, 2016; Giallo et al., 2013; Rapp & Duncan, 2012) and the impact of cultural differences (see Major et al., 2014) in children's social behaviour. However, looking closely the data from the descriptive statistics (see table 7), it is obvious that there was a good progression in each item of the measure in the post test. Therefore, taking into consideration the positive progression and the fact that the majority of the items of PSD did not show a statistical significant difference, it can be argued that in total children's demographics were not a major influence in children's social performance.

[Insert table 4]

Proceeding to the data analysis of the quantitative data of PSD, one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was implemented to check if there was a normal distribution in the items of PSD measure. The data analysis showed that there was a normal distribution in all items of the measure in the pre-and post-test as the p-value was above 0.05 in all items (see table 5). Therefore, since there was a normal distribution in the data, the Paired Sample T-Test was used to compare the outcomes of the intervention and the data of the pre- and post-test. The aim of using this test was to investigate if the means

of children's social performance were equal before and after the intervention. Data analysis shows that there was a significant mean difference between the pre-and post-test in all 11 times of PDS ($p=.000$), which shows the impact of the intervention (see table 6).

[insert table 5]

[insert table 6]

Examining the means in descriptive statistics (see table 7) and trying to define the impact on children's social and personal performance, it is obvious that there was a positive outcome after the intervention. Looking carefully the numbers, it can be argued that students had approximately the same progress in all items of PSD with no major differences. This shows that there was a good progression in all areas under investigation regarding children's social skills.

[insert table 7]

Proceeding to the qualitative analysis and debriefing the comments of teacher observation logs at the qualitative part of PSD, it is obvious that there was a very positive impact in the post-test, in comparison to the pre-test. During the intervention, there was a very collaborative environment in which students and practitioner had to decide collectively their actions and activities. There was constant team decision making and group work and therefore, it can be argued that this contributed to the positive results.

Social skills are a fundamental area of development in children's journey, especially when we consider the social construction of learning and building knowledge. Adjustment in the setting is considered to be the first and basic skill in children's social development as it sets the ground of feeling comfortable and independent, which is crucial in social interaction (Schultz et al, 2011). In the early years settings, children who cope well in the daily routines reveal high level of independence in their interactions (Jone & Harcourt, 2013). The evidence from the data analysis is highly linked with the above

arguments considering the positive results in children's progress in the post-test. Data reveals that children were more comfortable and independent during routines, expected and unexpected transitions and personal activities. This could be attributed to the expected children's progress over time but also to the collaborative and flexible character of the art intervention that established an environment in which everyone could act according to their will. This could be illuminated with the following extract from the data:

Child 2: Pre-test: During the whole day in the school, he insists to wear this jacket all the time. He is very reluctant to take it off although the heater is on and it is really warm inside the classroom. Most of time he seems independent but he needs extra help with his clothing.

Post-test: There is great progress in this area! He wears his jacket only at the beginning of the day and after a couple of minutes he takes it off without anyone to encourage him to act so. He looks very eager to try new things as long as they look familiar with something else he already knows. He is totally independent especially with clothing and personal activities, and he will ask for extra help when something is extremely complicated.

When adjusted successfully to the school setting, there are more opportunities for the effective development of personal skills. Personal skills such as self-confidence and concentration are a basic parameter for the development of social skills. One main argument for this is the fact that when people feel confident to try new things, they experiment and interact successfully and this will result in effective social skills (Durlak et al., 2010; Pahl & Barrelet, 2007).

Confidence is a basic skill for successful interactions (Parry, 2015). When people feel confident they are able to share their ideas and thoughts without feeling uncomfortable. This can be considered as the first step to start developing social skills, as

people can use this as a stepping stone to develop social skills. The data analysis shows evidence of the above argument as children had a positive progress in this area. Children were more confident to participate in group discussions and most of the times this was initiated by themselves. Although this could be attributed to other factors, such as the expected progress over time, links can be found to the art intervention as well. Being more specific, during the PLA, there were unlimited opportunities for self-expression with no right or wrong answers. It can be argued that this constant flexible environment empowered young children to be themselves and felt confident in their interactions. An extract from the data to illuminate the argument is as follows:

Child 10: Pre-test: She does not seem very comfortable to interact with other children. It seems that she wants to approach other children to play with but when she does, she feels that she is not wanted or feels unwelcome and steps back.

Post-test: Great progress is obvious! She seems bold and courageous and she is not afraid to express and support her ideas. She has self-confidence in almost every activity and approaches children with confidence.

Concentration in self-directed or adult-directed activities is another important personal skill that plays an important role in children's social development. According to Ashdown & Bernard (2012), concentration is a basic element in school and social activities. When young children manage to concentrate effectively in an activity, they are more likely to participate in the discussions that take place during the activity. The qualitative data from the PSD measure, shows evidence that supports the above arguments. There was a good progress in children's performance in this area in both self-led and teacher-led activities during the post-test. The data shows that children were very concentrated and nothing could distract their attention. A good explanation for this

progress could be attributed to the content of the PLA. Children during the art intervention, had a leading role by deciding and designing the activities they wanted to carry out. This means that they had developed ownership of the activities and they considered them as something that they do for their pleasure. This by itself results in great levels of concentration as the activities derive from their inborn desires. An extract from the data to illuminate the argument above is as follows:

Child 4: Pre-test: In teacher-directed activities, usually he is distracted continuously from his final goal. For example, he constantly asks irrelevant questions to the children who sit next to him or gazes the surroundings. This makes him rushing to finish his activities in the end. In self-directed activities, he is a little better but still is very distracted with other children's actions. He tries to finish quickly if something else seems more interesting.

Post-test: The level of his concentration has been increased dramatically! He is very concentrated in teacher-directed activities and always meets his goals. There are times that he might stop to discuss with his friends, but he will utilize the information he will gain from this discussion in finalizing his activity. The same applies in self-directed activities. He is very concentrated and nothing can distract him from his final goal.

Another important personal skill that can have a significant contribution in the social development is to be self-aware of other people's wellbeing (Segrin et al., 2007; Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Effective social interaction has its roots in understanding and respecting other people's feelings (Choi & Kim, 2003). When we focus in the early years settings, it is important to realize that children's actions have a strong impact on their inclusion or exclusion of the group activities. Evidence of these arguments can be found in the data analysis of PSD. In the post-test, children show evidence of self-awareness

and understanding of other children's wellbeing and needs comparing to the pre-test. This can be attributed to the course of time but also to the content of the intervention. During the PLA, every voice mattered and could be heard, giving everyone the opportunity for self-expression. This sharing of ideas was taking place in an environment of respect and understanding, in which all ideas and thoughts were valued. There was a supportive context in which everyone was receiving and providing constructive feedback. Therefore, it can be argued that children, throughout this constant experience of respect and understanding, developed the necessary skills of raising awareness and empathy towards the other members of the group. An extract from the data to illuminate the above arguments is as follows:

Child 5: Pre-test: Most of the time she has the appropriate behaviour and attitude towards other children and shows that she respects the well-being of the other children. However, this is not always the case as very often she will exclude a child from a team activity just because they are not doing as she says.

Post-test: There is a great progress in this area. She always considers the well-being of the other children and try not to exclude anyone from the team. When a child is not performing well, she tries to help and support them. She reacts very well to the daily routines.

Having analysed the importance of adjustment and personal skills in children's social development, it is important to have a discussion about the basic elements of social behaviour. According to Ashdown & Bernard (2012), relationship and communication with others are crucial competencies that play an important role in effective interactions. Positive relationships with peers and adults can have an effect in children's school performance as this shows their eagerness to interact and build new knowledge (Durlak,

2010). Positive relationships develop a positive foundation during the interaction with other people. Data from the PSD shows evidence from the above arguments. Children improved their relationships with their peers and the adults during the post test, revealing evidence of forming positive relationships without being triggered. Although other factors might be responsible for this improvement, some links should be recognized with the art intervention. One main argument was the highly collaborative environment during every step of the PLA. Children had to make team decisions about the content and the way of implementation of the activities they suggested. They were constantly involved in team work in which everyone was an equal member of the team. It can be argued that this continuous collaboration contributed in the development in this area, as children had more opportunities to develop such skills. An extract from the data to illuminate the above arguments is as follows:

Child 11: Pre-test: Her relationship with the other children is mediocre. She interacts with them but not always in the appropriate way. She is not always aware of their feelings. There are times that she might prefer to play on her own because the other children don't want to follow her lead. The same is obvious with the adults. She is reluctant to interact with them and she needs to be triggered very much to do so.

Post-test: Her relationship with the other children has improved very much. She is very aware of their feelings and interacts appropriately every time. She likes to participate in team activities and she is happy to discuss and make plans in collaboration with the other children. A great improvement is obvious during her interaction with the adults. Now, she is very confident to approach them and she always makes them laugh.

Last but not least, the way people communicate is another important social skill. Effective social skills always rely on successful communication of ideas and thoughts among the group (Segrin et al., 2007). In other words, people's ability to transfer their ideas or to listen to other people's ideas effectively establish a two-way interaction. In the early years settings, this is even more important as children build new knowledge through their social interactions and communication with others (Pahl & Barrett, 2007). Data analysis reveals evidence that can be linked with the above arguments. Children's performance in this area was substantially improved in the post-test and links can be identified with the arts intervention. As mentioned previously this development might be attributed to the expected progress of children over time as children gain more experience as they grow older. However, looking at the content of the PLA closely, there are some substantial links that should be acknowledged. To be more specific, during every step of the PLA students had to contribute in meaningful discussions about the content of the activities and the way they can proceed. These discussions and activities derived from their interests and the paintings they were working on, thus children were participated fully and explained thoroughly their views. It can be argued that this resulted in them having more opportunities to practice their social communication skills, which could be a good reason for this progress. An extract from the data to illuminate the above arguments is as follows:

Child 8: Pre-test: Her verbal communication is very simplistic and she will not try to make herself understood when her peers are not so sure of what she is saying. She is more concerned to understand what other people are saying rather than the others to understand her.

Post-test: There is a progress in this area! Her speech is correct and she is very talkative. She always conveys the message she wants and transfers effectively her ideas to others.

Summarizing the above discussion, the findings of this project contribute to the discussion about the positive effects of the arts on child development and provide further evidence through child-led projects. Quantitative and qualitative evidence in the post-tests shows the positive effects of the arts on children's personal and social skills over time. To answer the research questions, when children are interacting with art activities and have a leading role, there is a beneficial outcome in their personal and social development. This seems very promising for continuing this study in an extended project with experimental and control groups.

Conclusions

This project focused in the investigation of the effects of child-led art intervention in their personal and social skills. Examining the existing literature, it is obvious that there is a strong link among the arts and the social development of a child. However, most pieces of research focus on specific social skills and adapt a structured methodology with pre-decided art activities and lesson plans, which contradicts with the flexible character of the arts. Having this in mind this research project has been formed. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of a child-led art intervention in children's personal and social development in the early years settings.

The participants were 5-6-year-old children from a Greek preschool setting. For the child-led art intervention, the 'Play and Learn through the Arts' (PLA) programme was used for a full school year. PLA has been used so far in small-scale studies to examine children's social literacy, literacy skills and levels of involvement (see Theodotou, 2017a,

b; 2015). In this study, the participants used the PLA, and more specifically paintings, to design art projects based on their desires. Examining personal and social skills holistically with a pre-and post-test there was a positive effect on children's personal and social skills by the end of the art intervention. Thus, to answer the research questions, child-led art projects and more specifically PLA, can have a positive influence on child development in their personal and social skills. This leads us to suggest, that the interdisciplinary way we utilized the arts had a positive contribution on child development as children were interacting in an environment of freedom which resulted in empowering them to raise their own voice and maintain ownership of the activities.

Before drawing any conclusions, there are some limitations that should be mentioned. There was a random and ethical sampling selection but a bigger sample would be preferable. Considering that the sample was from a case study, there was an effort to provide direct arguments about the effects of the arts through child-led art projects in the early years settings. Thus, it can be argued that this is a positive start in providing empirical evidence with this focus. These findings are advantageous to preschool practitioners for applying innovative practices to enhance children's personal and social skills. They are also useful to researchers in continuing this research project in a bigger sample with control and experimental groups in an international level.

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