

A comparative study of multimodal approaches to learning:

to support children’s learning in the early years

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ABSTRACT

Multimodal approaches to teaching and learning within early years education support children’s diverse experiences and competencies. Within a multimodal process, different modes can communicate meaning in several ways. The Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme and the Argyle project offer the opportunity to embrace the framework of a multimodal approach to children’s learning, though they have salient differences. This paper aims to explore the content of the PLA and the Argyle project as two practical examples which can be used to create a multimodal environment in early years settings. The discussion concludes with the significant contribution of the PLA programme to children’s learning using the arts as a teaching method through a child-led process within the multimodal framework; though the Argyle project presented the concept of multiliteracies which was also an important component for a multimodal environment. This paper can be useful to early years practitioners to explore different practical examples of children’s multimodal learning in everyday practice.

KEYWORDS

MULTIMODAL APPROACHES

PLAY AND LEARN THROUGH THE ARTS (PLA) PROGRAMME

ARGYLE PROJECT

ARTS

EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Multimodal approaches to learning in early years education are important for children’s learning as they can promote child-centred learning. They involve exploring different elements of expressions, which young children

are already inclined to. This can empower children’s learning journey as multimodality incorporates their diverse experiences (Kress et al., 2014). This is especially important for children in the early years as they have the ability to communicate their ideas and thoughts in several ways such as

talking, drawing, gestures, emotional facial expressions, etc. (Yelland et al., 2008). Therefore, when children start attending early years education their experiences of multimodality need to be supported without restricting them to limited modes of expression. Limiting their communication to

specific modes and not giving them the opportunity for multimodal expressions can be counterproductive for young children as they may be restricted within their learning, creating barriers to academic freedom (Yelland et al., 2008). Therefore, it is crucial to find effective multimodal approaches to learning that can facilitate children’s learning journey and empower them to progress further in meaningful ways.

This was the motivation for carrying out this non-empirical research to explore relevant practical approaches that can be implemented in early years education. This paper aims to explore the content of the Play and Learn through the Arts (PLA) programme and the Argyle project as two practical examples which can be used to create a multimodal environment in early years settings. In the following sections, the paper discusses the PLA and its benefit to children’s learning through arts interventions. Multimodal ways of communicating, and their importance to the meaning-making process and communication, are discussed to support the focus of this paper. The Argyle project is also discussed as a multimodal approach to children’s learning which can support their freedom of expression in creative ways. Comparison of the two approaches supports the purpose of the paper to analyse practical approaches that can be used in early years settings to create a multimodal environment.

THE PLAY AND LEARN THROUGH THE ARTS (PLA) PROGRAMME

The pioneering PLA programme is an interdisciplinary programme which uses the arts as a teaching method to support children’s literacy development within the early years. It was introduced as a teaching approach to the early years settings by Theodotou (2017b) in an effort to give young children the opportunity to raise their own voice in their learning journey in literacy. It is a non-commercial programme and can be used without third-party financial expenditure.

Literacy development is very important for early years education, as it creates a foundation for knowledge in all other areas of learning (Walker-Gleaves & Waugh, 2017). The aim of the PLA is to enable children to have an effective learning journey in relation to literacy (Theodotou, 2019a). It recognises literacy as an undivided area of learning and not as fragmented skills. It is obvious that the design of the PLA was triggered by the benefits of the interdisciplinary approach.

The interdisciplinary approach promotes knowledge production by synthesising different disciplines into a unified field (Moran, 2002). This supports children’s knowledge construction whereby their knowledge and experience of learning are combined while being transmitted through formal processes of education (Papatheodorou et al., 2013).

Reviewing critically the content and design of the PLA, we can argue that it

TABLE 1. STEPS IN PLAY AND LEARN THROUGH THE ARTS PROGRAMME (THEODOTOU 2017B)

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 decides 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	Children with the practitioner reflect on the activities and discuss the general process. Some indicative questions could be: <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? The practitioner reflects on the teaching and learning procedure. Some indicative questions could be: <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?
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.	

was also inspired by the importance of literacy as an essential area for children's learning. The PLA also recognises the crucial link between the arts and literacy development and the open-ended nature of the arts. Comparing the PLA with other arts interventions, we can see that it is different as it does not focus on any specific art form but gives freedom to the practitioners to use a variety of different art forms or any art form of their choice. A significant difference to other art interventions is that the PLA endorses a relaxed environment where there is no right or wrong answer and is fundamentally child-led (Theodotou, 2019b). Therefore, the PLA may be beneficial for an early years setting in that it empowers children's learning journey.

The philosophy of the PLA programme embraces the social construction of learning and collaborative learning (Theodotou, 2019b). The programme highlights the role of social interactions being fundamental in everyday situations and follows a Vygotskian approach to learning (Theodotou, 2017b). It endorses a variety of literacy skills such as emergent literacy skills, which are the knowledge and skills that students already have; social literacy skills, which focus on the use of literacy in real situations; and literacy as a means of communication skills such as listening, talking, discussing, ideas about writing, etc. (Theodotou, 2019a).

The content of the PLA involves five steps that are implemented on a weekly basis (see Table 1). The first step involves the students and practitioner in selecting a topic which may be derived from children's interests. The next step involves investigation of the topic through the selected art forms. Thereafter, the selected art forms are used to decide the activities regarding the topic. During this step children take the lead, while the practitioner encourages recognition of the literacy aspects. The following step entails the allocation of roles and preparation of materials needed for implementation. The final step involves a reflection

process. Throughout the whole process the practitioner acts as a facilitator.

The evidence for the PLA being a beneficial contribution to children's learning has been presented in several small-scale research projects. The outcomes demonstrated a positive impact on children's social literacy and holistic literacy achievements. In the paper by Theodotou (2017b), the effects of the arts were examined in the development of literacy as a social practice in early years settings. The PLA programme was used in a school setting with five- to six-year-old children for a full year in Greece. Data was collected using authentic assessment techniques and a semi-structured interview. The findings showed a positive contribution of the arts in the development of literacy as a social practice in the early years setting. The outcomes of the programme highlighted meaningful literacy events and literacy practices in children's everyday interactions and free play. A couple of years later, Theodotou (2019a) further examined the effects of the arts on children's holistic literacy development in the early years settings using a child-led approach. In that piece of research, the PLA programme was used in the case study with five- to six-year-old children in Greece using a mixed method approach. Data was collected using a standardised test in a pre- and post-assessment at the beginning and end of the intervention. The findings showed that the interdisciplinary way in which the arts were used provided an open-ended environment for children to gain a sense of ownership of their activities. Therefore, the PLA programme made a positive contribution to children's holistic literacy achievements.

The outcomes of children's literacy development within the research in the PLA mirror the Department for Education's (2012) fundamental prime areas of communication and language, as well as supporting the advancement of literacy as a specific area of development. The existing research regarding the PLA

also highlights a positive contribution in practitioners' teaching practices, as arts interventions have significant advantages over other teaching methods (Theodotou, 2015b). This is not to suggest that the PLA will replace teaching methods, but it aims to enhance teaching practices. A significant benefit of an arts-based intervention is that it shows a link in supporting the cognitive development of at-risk children (Brown & Sax, 2013). Needless to say, the open-ended nature of the arts offers free communication and welcomes every opinion, which is one of the basic principles of the PLA (Theodotou, 2018). In addition, anecdotal evidence presented in an interview with a nursery manager who used the PLA suggests that the benefits included improvements in staff practices and children's active engagement. This can be due to an emphasis on child-centred learning, which is also the principle behind multimodal learning. Distinguishing features of the PLA include multimodal ways of communication (several ways of communicating); no pre-decided lesson plans; and follows children's interests. According to Ephgrave (2015), these features are some of the characteristics of an outstanding nursery setting.

The following section will analyse the content of multimodality and its contribution in the meaning-making process and communication. It will also create and explain the link between the content and philosophy of the PLA and multimodal learning in the early years' settings.

MULTIMODAL WAYS OF COMMUNICATING

Multimodality can be explained as a concept of communication that comprises/consists of different elements of expressing oneself beyond traditional methods of reading and writing (Yelland et al., 2008). This is important for young children as they are already predisposed to communicate in several ways. Multimodal learning in an early years

setting shows children's competence in many ways (Gornall et al., 2005). This is also supported by the PLA, as it promotes an open-ended environment of different ideas. Multimodality often incorporates, but is not limited to, sounds, speech, texts, animations and technology to articulate semiotic modes (Yelland et al., 2008). Modes are anything that communicate meaning and are organised through a semantic system (Kress et al., 2014). When a mode is unavailable, such as speech, the other available modes contribute to the meaning being made such as gesture, pictures, etc. Modes can be interpreted in different ways as they are highly influenced by cultural contexts (Kress et al., 2014). This is particularly important for an early years setting as children bring a rich world of meaning to their educational environment, which must be taken into account (Yelland et al., 2008).

The discussion will now explain some of the features of a multimodal environment and the links to the PLA. A multimodal environment gives practitioners an opportunity to explore children's unique knowledge and support their existing strengths by creating new pathways of viewing children with a more inclusive approach to the curriculum, which is also supported by the PLA. A multimodal environment can enhance the use of children's semiotic modes, which reflects a highly diverse experience beyond the school environment (Yelland et al., 2008). This contrasts with the monomodal environment with which children are often faced when they enter formal education, restricting literacy learning to reading and writing skills (Yelland et al., 2008). Therefore, a multimodal environment relates to the PLA as, according to Theodotou (2017b), it recognises literacy as an undivided learning area. The features of a multimodal environment include texts/objects, and the meaning can be expressed beyond time and space, which is referred to as a narrative environment (Mellgren & Gustafsson, 2011). The objects are significantly linked

to children's experiences and are used as part of their everyday interactions. These features reflect the importance of students having a leading role in activities, which is also linked to the PLA.

A practical example of a multimodal environment is demonstrated by Kress et al. (2014) by using a case study, where a science teacher used gestures, speech, writing and images to articulate blood circulation. This shows us that everyday practices can be used to support multimodal learning, which is also endorsed through the implementation of the PLA. A significant link to multimodality and the PLA is that they both advocate the importance of using a variety of modes in the centre of communication such as music, art or movement. Therefore, multimodal learning shows significant links to the PLA where they both challenge the traditional pedagogies of learning through limited dynamics of communication and embrace a more contemporary methodology of the interplay between modes or skills.

MULTIMODALITY AS A CREATIVE CONCEPT

The aspect of communicating in different ways is fundamentally a creative concept. According to Mohammed (2018), creativity is imaginative activity to produce unique ideas that can solve a problem. This is also the foundation of multimodal learning, which allows people to articulate in different ways using available modes to create meaning (Kress et al., 2014). Research conducted by Ferrari et al. (2009) suggests that learning involves creativity, which is the former process of innovation and plays its part in transforming ideas into practice. Similarly, Nelson & Johnson (2014) suggest that creativity is a mandatory component in learning that relies on multimodal representations, which can be detected in communication. This is also associated with the PLA as it uses the arts as a component in supporting literacy in a creative way. Furthermore, influential pedagogical theorists state

that creativity is present in the formation of expression through the mental process of imagination, which is the ability to combine elements (Vygotsky, 2004). Therefore, this supports the discussion of creativity being highly linked to multimodal learning and being invaluable in children's learning, which is also a motivating factor of the PLA.

THE ARGYLE PROJECT

The Argyle project, the other approach that is discussed in this paper, was carried out in a diverse and multicultural school in Melbourne, and strong links can be found with the multimodal methodology. The central theme of the project was based on values, which were communicated by children expressing their emotions using different modes. The project placed strong emphasis on the Reggio Emilia philosophy and it also recognises the concept of multiliteracies that requires attention to be paid to technology (Yelland et al., 2008). Technology demands new reading paths, in which children are exposed to new symbols, machines and multiple sign systems. This shows a significant link to multimodal ways of communication in which modes, including technological modes, are organised through a semantic system to communicate meaning. The Argyle project focused on building trust and relationships that were developed towards a public performance with the focus on body awareness and self-expression through movement (Yelland et al., 2008). The project valued alternative measures to literacy which also supports the concept of multimodality in which there are different elements of expressing oneself beyond traditional methods of reading and writing. The outcomes of the Argyle project showed that children developed skills to understand and implement more complex forms of communication, as a foundation for literacy practice (Yelland et al., 2008). This shows a significant link of this project to multimodality as it highlights the importance of expressing oneself using different modes.

A COMPARISON OF THE PLA PROGRAMME AND THE ARGYLE PROJECT

Comparing the PLA programme with the Argyle project, it is obvious that there are a lot of similarities but also important differences in their content and methodology. The similarities between the two approaches include the emphasis on assessing children's competencies in different ways and supporting multimodal learning. They both encourage an open-ended environment where every voice can be heard using different art forms to express oneself. In addition, both of them support creative ways of communicating and are implemented through children's ideas.

A significant contrast between the PLA and the Argyle project is highlighted in the involvement of the practitioners. Within the Argyle project, practitioners adopted various roles such as intervening, leading and supporting, whereas practitioners within the PLA adopt a facilitator role throughout the process. In addition, the practitioners on the Argyle project involved staff with a strong expertise in the arts, more specifically staff who were a dancer/choreographer and an opera singer/actor (Yelland et al., 2008). In contrast, the practitioners implementing the PLA do not require any specific skills to deliver the programme. However, an initial training session for the programme is offered (Theodotou, 2017b). The teaching style used by the practitioners on the Argyle project is perceived to adopt a Personal Model in which, according to Grasha (2002), there is a need to guide learners in developing skills. In contrast, the practitioners within the PLA programme adopt the Facilitator style, which, according to Grasha (2002), is a student-centred approach. A barrier of the Argyle project was the space restrictions necessary to enable a group of 12 children to participate in the activities, whereas the PLA does not require any specific measures and is implemented as part of children's everyday activities.

Although both approaches enable positive outcomes in literacy achievements, the significant differences show that the PLA programme is child-led, whereas the Argyle project has some aspects of a teacher-led methodology. Therefore, it can be argued that the PLA could be beneficial for early years settings as it enables children's active involvement in their learning through child-led approaches. This is important for a multimodal environment in the early years settings where children can enhance and broaden their repertoires of modes to create meaning within their unique contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed multimodal approaches to learning to support children's diverse experiences which should be celebrated in early years education. Early years settings should embrace child-led approaches to learning as they empower children's learning journey. Thus, the interdisciplinary nature of the PLA takes a holistic approach to children's learning, where children take the lead. The evidence from the PLA programme as a multimodal approach to learning has shown that it has the ability to support children's literacy progress holistically, using the arts as a creative teaching method. On the other hand, an important element in contemporary learning demonstrated by the Argyle project was the concept of multiliteracies of new reading paths. This is an important component for learning in the current technological environment. Therefore, a combination of the PLA programme with the multiliteracy element of the Argyle project can be beneficial for early years settings, and can create an effective learning environment for learners in our era. ■

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