

Engaging with literacy provision in the early years: language-use and emergent literacy in child-initiated play

Abstract

Pre-school children's engagement with activities in child-initiated play is taken to be an important mediating factor in their learning. The adult's role in supporting and enhancing children's play is an area of significant study. However, how children play when play is child-initiated, and how this maps to our assumptions and expectations about the potential of opportunities on offer, is less well understood. This study reports findings of detailed observation of young children's engagement in literacy provision during child-initiated play. The study showed that, despite rich provision, engagement was extremely limited. Equally significant are the findings from a functional analysis (Halliday, 1973) of the children's language-use during child-initiated play, which showed that the children made almost no use of Mathetic language - the language Halliday argues is necessary for learning, most notably the linguistic demands of formal schooling. These findings contribute to the nascent understanding of children's access to playful learning opportunities that are provided for them in pre-school settings. These initial findings are stark and thus warrant further study.

Keywords

Emergent literacy, Halliday, functional language-use, child-initiated play, ECE, literacy, early years, Mathetic, Pragmatic, formal schooling, engagement in play

Introduction

From Blair's 2001 declaration of, "Education, education education" as a government priority there has, in England, been a profound shift in provision for young children prior to statutory schooling. What used to be known in England as "playgroup", which provided informal group play opportunities for young children, has become the more formal, policy-led, early

childhood education (ECE), with all the attendant external regulation and defined outcomes. This is reflected in educational systems across the world in response to increasing evidence that ECE can have a positive impact on later learning, in particular, that it can influence later school-based learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (DFE/IOE, 2014; Dockett and Perry, 2013; Schweinhart et al., 2005; Simpson et al., 2017). For example, Burger's (2010) review of international evidence on the cognitive effects of ECE for children from different social backgrounds, found that participation had considerable positive short-term effects, and smaller, but notable, longer-term effects. Additionally, and importantly in the context of this study, children from socio-economically disadvantaged homes made as much, or slightly more progress than their peers. Pascal and Bertram (2013) concur, arguing that an analysis of current research and evaluative evidence leaves little doubt that early education that meets certain criteria, makes an important contribution to combating educational disadvantage for children growing up in families with low income.

However, despite investment in the sector and evidence of the positive impact of ECE there remains, in England as in many countries, a stubborn longer-term disparity in the school attainment of children from different socio-economic backgrounds (Law et al., 2017; Reardon and Waldfogel, 2016; Sammons et al., 2015; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). This is evidenced in England in the 2016 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile data (EYFSP) (a national, statutory profile which consists of ongoing, formative, observational assessment against age-related criteria, and, summative assessment against stated Early Learning Goals [outlined in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Early Education, 2012)]. Summative assessment is completed in the final term of reception year; the first year of compulsory schooling). This shows that whilst the difference in attainment between all children and the lowest 20% attaining children is smaller than previously, a notable disparity remains across all areas of learning (DFE, 2016b). As both Burger (2010) and Pascal and Bertram's (2013)

reviews of evidence note, despite the progress that children make in ECE, the compensatory effects are limited by earlier developmental disadvantage. This disparity is particularly significant in language and literacy as there is strong evidence of the impact of poor early language and poor early literacy skills on later school-based attainment (Buckingham et al., 2013; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1997; Duff et al., 2015; Freeman and Hartshorne, 2009; Law et al., 2013, 2017; Roulstone et al., 2010; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010).

Language and literacy in the early years

Early years pedagogy has historically been recognisably distinct from school-based pedagogy. It aligns with a Competence pedagogical model (Bernstein, 2000) that emphasises a range of experiences in which the child has considerable control of the selection, sequence, pace and timing of activity, and where learning spaces are used fluidly in response to children's interests and needs (Neaum, 2016). Within this pedagogical approach, continuous, child-initiated play is enhanced by adult teaching, mediation and interaction. This has been shown to lead to positive outcomes (Baroody and Diamond, 2016; Christie and Roskos, 2013; DFE/IOE, 2014; Roskos and Christie, 2001, 2011).

In this Competence, playful learning pedagogical approach, literacy learning is regarded as emergent (Clay, 1967; Purcell-Gates, 1994, 1996; Teale and Sulzby, 1986). It is understood as a continuum, underpinned by spoken language, moving through an awareness of the forms and functions of print to the more formal aspects of learning to read and write. In this paradigm, literacy has a written-to-oral progression as children move from knowledge about print conventions to phonological and phonemic awareness and phonics (Edwards, 2014; Purcell Gates, 1994, 1996, 2001). Pedagogically, this emergent process requires adult input supported by opportunities for playful engagement in meaningful early literacy activities (Christie and Roskos, 2013; Roskos and Christie, 2011). As Kress (1997) notes, reading and writing are

fundamentally meaning-making activities which are, eventually, framed conventionally, but begin with an exploratory journey of not-yet-conventional representations of meaning in talk, mark-making and print (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Engagement in this context is therefore understood as an observable act of participation or involvement in the play-literacy nexus: ‘space where play, language and emerging literacy behaviours converge and interact’ (Roskos and Christie, 2011: 204) This requires the provision of a richly literate environment, (Christie and Roskos, 2013; Harms et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2011), and, whilst there is a debate about precisely *how* play enhances young children’s development (see Lillard et al., 2013; Wood 2014a, 2014b, 2015) there is evidence that supported, playful engagement in literacy activity enhances young children’s early literacy learning (Adams, 1990; Baroody and Diamond, 2016; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008; Roskos and Christie, 2011). For example, Christie and Roskos (2013: 3-4) conclude that credible evidence supports the claim that play serves literacy through provision that promotes literacy activity, skills and strategies, and they recommend that settings provide opportunities for children to engage in dramatic and literacy-enriched play. They also conclude that print-rich play should be provided alongside age-appropriate instruction in early literacy skills, such as shared reading and shared writing. This play/curriculum integration, they argue, increases the likelihood that play experiences are opportunities for children to practice early literacy skills and concepts. This approach characterises the current pedagogical approach to early literacy in ECE settings in England: young children’s engagement with play-based literacy provision is led and mediated through adult interaction, modelling and teaching, and explored, practised, and consolidated through child-initiated playful learning opportunities.

However, the disparity in early language and literacy attainment, as measured by the EYFSP, between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers remains (DFE, 2016b), despite extended ECE provision from two years of age for many children

growing up in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. As such, and with cognisance of the significant impact of other factors and thus potential limits of ECE (Pascal and Bertram, 2013), this raises questions about what more there is to know about children's early language and literacy learning in a Competence-based, playful pedagogical approach (Kalliala, 2014; Wood, 2014a). This seems important in light of strong policy imperatives to raise attainment in literacy, which challenges the current early years pedagogical approach and, potentially, leads to increased "schoolification" of ECE (Moss, 2013; Neaum, 2016; Whitebread and Bingham, nd).

Research evidence provides a good understanding of positive early language and literacy learning environments and the nature and significance of the adult's role in young children's learning (Adams, 1990; DFE/IOE, 2013; Jordan, 2009; Kendra et al., 2017; NELP, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Wild, 2011). However, a significant proportion of a children's time in ECE is in child-initiated play, beyond the immediate directional and relational influence of staff. Child-initiated play is therefore a significant part of children's experience in ECE, and is based on the, perhaps implicit, assumption that provision will, to some degree, determine engagement in ways intended by adults. An understanding of the play-pedagogy interface (Bodrova et al., 2013; Leong and Bodrova, 2012; Parten, 1933; Wood, 2014b) is thus significant in the context of provision that is intended to mediate learning. Thus, in light of the disparity in attainment in ECE in England (DFE, 2016a, 2016b), perhaps there is more to understand about child-initiated engagement with contextualised literacy provision that is intended to support early literacy knowledge and understanding. As Baroody and Diamond (2016) note, relatively little work has examined the role of young children's literacy interest and engagement in play in pre-school settings.

The study

This study emerged from collaborative work between a university and local school.

University staff and the nursery teacher, who had previous experience in early years but had moved within the school from upper Key Stage 2 (10-11 year-olds) to the nursery, worked together over a period of months to enhance the provision in the nursery. This work had a particular focus on early literacy, in support of the school development plan. The provision for early literacy was developed in line with the research evidence on literacy learning through play (Christie and Roskos, 2013), and met the ECERS-R (Sylva et al., 2011) and ECERS-3 (Harms et al., 2014) criteria for a high quality early literacy environment.

Clearly, for children to benefit from the enriched provision it was important that they engage with it, as Christie and Roskos (2013) argue, it is important that play experiences increase the likelihood of children practising adult-mediated early literacy skills and concepts. Baroody and Diamond (2016) concur, noting the relationship between engagement and attainment, which supports the assertion that, in early childhood education, the play environment acts as an important cueing system for learning (Roskos and Christie, 2001, 2011). Therefore, once the collaborative work was complete and embedded in practice, we wanted to know how children were engaging with the provision, in particular, how they were engaging with opportunities for child-initiated, playful, emergent literacy: what happened when adults were not involved in directing and supporting early literacy in the children's play, and in what ways did these young children engage with literacy provision during child-initiated play.

The school

The research took place in a nursery that is part of an average-sized primary school in the North-East of England. The school is situated in a ward that is in the 20% most deprived in the country (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015). The school has extended two-year-old ECE provision on-site alongside the main nursery, and staff in the two

settings work closely together. Almost all pupils are of White British heritage. A well above average proportion of pupils in the school are eligible for *pupil premium funding* (additional funding for publicly funded schools in England to support raising attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities). In 2016, the school's national Key Stage 2 results (children in the final year of primary school) showed that the number of children meeting the expected standard in reading writing and maths was 21%. This is compared to a local authority average of 60% and a national average in England of 58%. During their time in school the children made average progress with reading and maths, and good progress with writing (nursery teacher, 2017, personal communication).

Methods

Data collection

In accordance with the aim of investigating child-initiated engagement with provision in the nursery, ecological validity was important in consideration of method. Data was collected by one researcher; the academic who had worked with the nursery staff, and who had a professional background in early years and advisory teaching, and thus significant experience of observing and analysing young children's learning in ECE. Fourteen hours of unstructured, narrative observation of fourteen children's child-initiated play activity were completed. This form of naturalistic observation is a recognised qualitative research tool (Cohen et al., 2007), and enables strong ecological validity. It is also standard practice for both formative and summative assessment in ECE (Palaiologou, 2012; Papatheodorou et al., 2011) so is a frequent and familiar aspect of the children's experience; an important consideration in maintaining ecological validity.

The observations focused on activities and interactions initiated by the child in the free-play environment, indoors and outside. Written, verbatim recordings were made in fifteen to

twenty minute time-frames, depending on the flow of the nursery day. Observation notes included but were not limited to: verbatim spoken language (including some aspects of prosody when deemed significant to the nature of the interaction, for example, a command to “Give it me”); other vocalisations; facial expressions; non-verbal interactions; and actions. Researcher interpretations of children’s expressions and actions were made in-situ in the context of the observation, and noted as contextualised interpretation. The data was gathered over six weeks in the autumn/spring terms prior to the children starting statutory schooling in the following academic year. During these observations it was anticipated that, at times, adults would join the children’s play, or a child approach an adult. In these instances the observation would continue but with a distinction made in the notes and later in the analysis, between child-initiated play and interaction, and adult-initiated play and interaction. Methodologically, this distinction proved to be quite straightforward. As the data was collected by a single researcher a number of processes were incorporated into the study design to support trustworthiness in both method and analysis (Appendix 1).

Sample

The children selected for the study were fourteen children who, based on the nursery staff’s ongoing assessments were not meeting age-related expectations. They were all four years old, monolingual, English speaking children, and did not have identified special educational needs. Given this profile it was thought that these children had much to gain from literacy-enriched playful learning, and it would therefore be valuable to know the ways in which they were engaging with the provision on offer. Nursery staff, because they know the parents well, explained the study to the parents and sought consent for each child to be involved. Outcomes informed discussions across the nursery team, and were communicated to the headteacher and school governors by the researcher and head of nursery. The parents of the

children were informed of the outcomes via the usual channels of home-school communication, in ways that staff deemed appropriate.

Data analysis

Analysis of the observations was undertaken by the researcher who completed the observations and who had worked collaboratively with school staff to enhance provision in the nursery. Following familiarisation with the observations, they were annotated using taxonomies of emergent literacy and language-use, and coded for other aspects of children's use of language. The children's engagement with literacy provision in their child-initiated play was analysed using a taxonomy of emergent literacy. This was developed to enable articulation of the different ways in which the children engaged with the provision (Appendix 2). Spoken language used in the children's child-initiated play was analysed within a socio-linguistic framework using Halliday's (1973, 1976) functions of language. Halliday's taxonomy enables close analysis of language-use in play, including language-use that is anticipatory of school-based learning (Barclay, 2011). In the context of this research this taxonomy was pertinent as Halliday (1973), argues that the child who does not succeed in the education system may be one who is not using language in the ways in which it is required by the school. He argues that this is not necessarily a lack of words, a narrower range of syntactic options, or, in any sense an impoverishment of grammar, but, some restriction in the range of uses of language; a limitation 'on a child's control over the relevant functions of language in their adaptation to certain specific demands' (Halliday, 1973: 19). Halliday outlines a broadly hierarchical sequence of 7 functions of language-use which were used to analyse the data (Appendix 3).

Outcomes from the annotations and coding were charted, and a content analysis and interpretation completed. A number of moderating processes were included in the analysis to maintain trustworthiness in the study (Appendix 1).

Findings and interpretation

These findings are drawn from observations of the children's play when adults were not present. When adults were present, the play and interaction observably mapped to expectations of good early years practice which have been shown to anticipate school-based literacy learning (Baroody and Diamond, 2016; Harms et al., 2014; Sylva et al., 2011). However, without exception, in child-initiated play the children's play and language-use were observably different, and even when adults had been part of the play sequence and then left, there was a quick and significant shift in the nature of the children's play and language.

Two main findings emerged as consistent patterns in the children's engagement with literacy provision in playful learning that they initiated, and in the language that they used in this play.

Finding one – engagement with emergent literacy activity

- In child-initiated playful learning there was almost no engagement in emergent literacy activity. There were two – momentary - instances of engagement with mark-making, and one example of a child demonstrating print awareness.

In the period of observation two of the children momentarily engaged in mark-making:

- a girl momentarily picked up a marker pen as she passed a white board and made a quick, circular mark on the board, then moved on;
- a boy, as he walked past a computer screen, picked up a stylus, briefly tried and failed to drag and drop an image, then moved on.

Another child demonstrated print awareness by opening an envelope that she had found on the floor (from an office role play area) and commented (to no-one in particular), 'It's got proper writing on it', (the sheet of paper had limited, random marks on it), and moments later, 'read' it out loud (to no-one in particular) as, 'Swimming pool land'. This interaction suggested that she was aware that print carries meaning, and that meaning can be decoded by reading. It also indicates emerging meta-linguistic awareness.

The other children were not observed engaging with the many literacy artefacts and opportunities provided in the nursery. Other than the three examples above, and the children's use of spoken language, there was no observed child-initiated play that could be identified as early emergent literacy, or emergent literacy that reflects conventional literacy. The children played in-and-around the literacy artefacts and opportunities (Appendix 4), but appeared to ignore them. They physically moved them out of the way, or, very occasionally, used them in ways that were outside of their intended use - for example, a recipe clip board put into a shopping bag as an item of shopping alongside fruit and bread.

This is a stark finding. The children were able to play quietly and in a focused way with many activities in the nursery, but not yet initiate playful learning that involved emergent literacy activity. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) argue, that to play-to-learn the play needs to have personal meaning which can be induced in different situations, and, what was observable here was that the literacy artefacts/activities seemed not yet sufficiently meaningful for the children to incorporate into their play. For these children, the nursery environment, despite being rich with opportunities for engagement with emergent literacy activities, seemed to not yet mediate playful emergent literacy learning in the ways that staff intended, i.e. to explore, develop, consolidate and extend other, adult-led, early literacy activities. This observed lack of engagement is potentially significant for the

children's later school attainment, as these playful learning experiences have been shown to be anticipatory of later school-based literacy learning (Baroody and Diamond, 2016).

Whilst methodological considerations about capturing children's playful learning through written narrative observation advise caution about the strength of conclusions, these findings do demonstrate the need for a critical understanding of our pedagogical assumptions about children's access to learning in a playful pedagogy. Evidence of the appropriateness of a playful approach for young children's learning is undoubted (Christie and Roskos, 2013; Hirsh-Pasek, 2008) but, as Wood (2014a) and Kalliala (2014) argue, we need to understand how issues of competency, agency, interests and self-interest, relate to children's engagement in early childhood provision. Wood (2014a:16), looking at ECE through a sociocultural lens, concludes that to maintain spontaneous and responsive pedagogies we need to be aware of children's repertoire of choice, 'specifically, the ways in which the freedom to choose may advantage some, but disadvantage others'. She argues that children don't always have the skills and knowledge to solve socially complex contextual and relational problems involved in free-play, which means that they can make, but not consistently manage, choices. Kalliala (2014) argues similarly, that the image of the child as a competent social actor with agency in their life is overgeneralised in ECE, and close observation reveals a more nuanced picture of children who are eager to learn, competent and strong, but also vulnerable, immature and needy in different respects.

Findings from this study ask similar questions about the ways in which some children are disadvantaged by the assumption that provision determines engagement in ways that lead into school-based learning. Simpson (2015) and Simpson et al. (2017) offer an insight into this in their exploration of poverty sensitivity. Their international study found that, despite acknowledging the barriers to learning that children living in poverty may have, practitioners indicated a preference for working with these children in an identical way to other children

(Simpson, 2015). This, Simpson et al. (2017:10) argue, leads to a ‘discernable poverty blindness, with limited focus on inequality as pedagogical space’.

Findings cited above are borne out in this study. The children in this study appeared to not yet be able to engage with the provision on offer in the ways intended by the adults - ways that have been shown to anticipate school-based literacy (Burger, 2010; Christie and Roskos, 2013; Kalliala, 2014; King and Dockrell, 2016; Roskos and Christie, 2001, 2011; Wood, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). This seems particularly pertinent in the current education context in England in which pre-school education is positioned as a direct read through to school-based learning (Neaum, 2016).

Finding two – children’s language-use

- Children’s child-initiated engagement in the context of early literacy was almost entirely in the form of spoken language. Analysis of the children’s spoken language revealed that all the children used Private Speech, and, in their interactions their language-use was predominantly Instrumental and Regulatory (Pragmatic). There was very limited observable evidence of the children using Personal or Heuristic language (Mathetic), and no use of the Imaginative or Representational functions (Halliday, 1973).

Overall, the children’s language-use in child-initiated play was limited in quantity as there were significant observed periods, in all the children’s play, of sustained, non-verbal parallel play. All the children used some self-talk during activities. This was interpreted as the use of Private Speech (Vygotsky, 1962): speech addressed to the self, rather than for communication (Davis et al., 2013). All the children’s Private Speech consisted of brief comments, labelling equipment or actions.

Functional analysis of the language that the children used in their child-initiated play showed that interaction between the children was almost entirely at the level of the Pragmatic: Instrumental and Regulatory functions (Halliday, 1973, 1976). All Pragmatic interactions were brief. The majority of the interactions were Regulatory - language to control the behaviour of others - for example: 'Stir it'; 'I go in front'; 'No'; 'Mine'; 'Get on'; 'No, that's my chair'; 'Come on'. Instrumental language - to meet the children's material needs - was also evident but used less frequently. For example: 'I want train'; 'Can my do' (meaning 'Can I have' and accompanied by pointing). In child-initiated play, non-linguistic interaction and action was often used in place of verbal requests, for example, pointing, pointing and vocalising, pointing and wailing (especially when equipment had been taken by another child and they wanted it to be returned), snatching, and silently going to fetch/find what was wanted. It was notable that the children would often walk around a table or water/sand tray, or across a role play or construction area etc. to fetch equipment that they needed, rather than make a verbal request for things to be passed to them.

During the periods of observation the children's use of Mathetic language, Personal and Heuristic functions (Halliday, 1973, 1976), was limited. Halliday (1981) describes three aspects of children's language development: learning language; learning through language; and learning about language. The Mathetic function of language is *learning through language*: the ability to use language to learn how to mean, and in the construction of reality. This function of language, Halliday (1981) argues, appears at about 19-20 months, and he offers examples of this function in child speech: use of statements to demonstrate understanding, "You can't see in your sleep", and meaning seeking questions, "How do you see what happened long ago, before you were born?" (Halliday, 1981: 18). Three short examples, involving two children, were observed in this study. One girl used two instances of the Heuristic function of language: asking 'Why are you doing that?' and later commenting,

‘To make it melt’. The Personal function was evident in another girl’s language: when playing in an igloo, she commented out loud (rather than to anyone in particular), “I like penguins - got a cough” (as one sentence) and a moment later repeated, “Got a cough”, which was interpreted as an expression of self in the environment, evident in her language-use.

The language observed, leads to the conclusion that in the context of ECE, these children are in the early stages of language-use: able to use the Pragmatic functions of language to meet their needs and manage the behaviour of others, but not yet fluent in using language to express identity and self, and to explore, question and learn (Mathetic function).

The absence of Personal and Heuristic language-use in many of the children’s spoken language in child-initiated play seems particularly relevant, as it is this Mathetic function of language that Halliday (1973, 1976) and Painter (1999) argue is necessary for school-based learning across all areas, including becoming literate. Halliday (1973) argues that in order to be taught successfully it is necessary to know how to use language to learn (mean), and how to participate as an individual in the learning situation. This, he argues, depends upon the ability to learn *through* language: a combination of the Personal and Heuristic functions of language.

Additionally, and importantly, Halliday (1973) also argues that the ability to operate institutionally in the Personal and Heuristic (Mathetic) modes is something that has to be learned - ‘it does not follow automatically from the acquisition of the grammar and vocabulary of the mother tongue’ (Halliday, 1973:19). Similarly, Alexander (2012) argues that the function of talk is cognitive and cultural, and that the teacher’s role is not merely to support, and where necessary, remediate a natural process, but to intervene and accelerate development. Education, he argues, is a cultural process, not a biological one. Painter (2009) agrees, concluding that language development cannot be regarded as some sort of flowering

within the child, or as something that develops through autonomous exploration: language learning is a profoundly social process that needs tracking and guiding from its inception, and this tracking and guidance has a clear socio-cultural dimension, enabling both construal of the situation, and construal of the culture.

This suggests that a focus on supporting the development of children's general language use is important but only part of the story. There is ample evidence of the relationship between children's early language and school attainment (Alexander, 2012; Education Endowment Foundation, 2016; King and Dockrell, 2016; Law et al., 2013), and Painter (1999: vi) concurs, explaining that, 'cognitive readiness for learning can be explained in terms of crucial linguistic developments and experiences, particularly in the years between the ages of 3 and 5'. However, learning language is one aspect, learning *how to use language in ways that anticipate the demands of school-based learning* is another. This argument is not new and finds resonance in contemporary work that recognises that children have different repertoires of language-use, and, importantly, that some repertoires are clearly, and increasingly explicitly, more highly valued than others in the educational domain (Snell, 2013).

The profile of the children in this study means that they are a strong policy-led focus for the ameliorating influence of pre-school education. However, what these findings suggest is a gap between the provision of an early language and literacy learning environment that has been shown to lead into more formal school-based literacy, and the ways in which these children currently engage with the provision on offer. In itself the children's pattern of engagement and language-use is not problematic. This analysis of child-initiated play reveals young children engaging in play, and using language in ways that they are able to do so - within their current developmental parameters. As Hammersley (2017) argues, children's play is socially situated; their play flows from who they are, and their experiences and opportunities. What makes this pattern of engagement and language-use problematic is that

the current English education system requires these children to move into statutory school and begin more formal literacy learning approximately seven months on from this study.

Therefore, based on these findings, it is not unreasonable to anticipate that these children will be required to begin more formal school-based learning with limited language repertoires that, it has been argued, are necessary for school-based learning, and with limited learning that comes from meaningful engagement with playful emergent literacy experiences.

Implications

The findings in this study are stark, and potentially extra-ordinary, and thus clearly warrant further investigation. However, this small scale study does reveal children with this profile in ECE in England, and, as Roskos and Christie (2001:81) argue, although extreme cases are rarely used methodologically they do ‘provide opportunities for a different perspective on issues’. Therefore, whilst it is not currently possible to draw firm conclusions from this study, these exceptional findings do highlight issues for consideration. Pedagogically, it encourages critical engagement with established discourses (Wood, 2014a) and challenges us to reflect on our espoused theories and theories-in-use (Kalliala, 2014). It focuses our attention on the nuances of play-as-pedagogy recognising that, alongside all other areas of development, children’s play has developmental trajectories (Bodrova et.al, 2013; Leong and Bodrova, 2012; Parten, 1932; 1933) which need to be a fulsomely considered when thinking about the play-pedagogy interface (Wood, 2014b). Thus, within the commitment to a Competence pedagogical model in ECE, we remain critically aware of what is actually happening in the pedagogical space.

The study also informs the debate about the relationship between children’s early use of language and the language demands of school-based learning, beyond general language use. It raises the question of whether there are particular elements of language development that

will enable children to begin statutory schooling with a good chance of success, and considers what these may be. This area of research seems particularly pertinent in the context of evidence of the strong link between language and educational attainment, and is thus, potentially, a significant area of professional understanding for practitioners working in early childhood education.

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