Original Research

Let's play and talk! Early years teachers' professional learning to support children's language development

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Abstract: Let's Play and Talk aims to support early years teachers' (EYT) Professional Learning and Development (PLD) on the topic of children's language development through narrative and pretend play. The current PLD programme was delivered in five two-hour face-to-face sessions. During these sessions, the research team utilised PowerPoint presentations, video observations and role play between teachers to provide training on various applicable topics. The design of the study is a randomised wait-list controlled trial with 10 EYT. A focus group discussion was conducted with teachers, to determine teachers' understanding of dialogic reading, vocabulary, and narrative development, pretend play, and the role of the adult in children's play. Teachers' demographic characteristics were also collected prior to the first focus group discussion. Results indicated that by the end of the training, EYT had an enhanced knowledge of the components of the intervention, learned from the focused training and used evidence-based material to support children's language development. The model of PLD used, being explicit and hands-on, exceeded teachers' expectations.

Keywords: Early years teachers, Professional learning and development, Children's language development, Intervention

Introduction

According to the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019), the pedagogical approaches proposed for preschools leave plenty of room for learning through play. The key role of adults in encouraging children's thinking and storytelling during play is also emphasized (Avalos, 2011; Borg, 2018). Given the current recognition of the critical role of early years for learning and well-being and indeed later development, early childhood educators are challenged to have both a complex understanding of child development and to provide high quality, rich, sensitive, and meaningful experiences for all children (Sancar et al., 2021). Professional Learning and Development (PLD) can be an effective tool which supports EYT in achieving high quality teaching practices which are required of them in early childhood education. Continuous professional development, the acquisition of new skills, strong support and access to new opportunities should be considered in the context of maintaining this quality (Collinson et al., 2009; Desimone, 2011). The quality of early years provision depends upon the characteristics of the staff, the classroom and the facility (van der Werf et al., 2021). The current study aimed to enhance the staff level characteristics, especially after the Covid 19 context. One of the suggestions of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Evangelou et al., 2010) was to promote a skilled

workforce through professional training. The review emphasised the importance of effective practitioner staff development in recognising and responding to situations where all domains of children's development could be enhanced 'on the spot' (Evangelou et al., 2010).

Literature review

Historically, different terms have been used in literature to describe teacher learning, most notably Continuous Professional Development (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021), and more recently Professional Learning (Osman & Warner, 2020; Sancar et al., 2021). These two terms (learning /development) are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, the term Professional Learning and Development (PLD) is deliberately used to reflect the complexity of teacher learning and teacher involvement in their own learning process (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). While teachers may receive in-service training or participate in Professional Development experiences, programmes, or activities, this may or may not lead to Professional Learning and/or teacher Development (King et al., 2022). PLD is thus a result of engagement in Professional Development (Liou & Canrinus, 2020) and not something that is 'done' to teachers (King et al., 2023). Teacher engagement in Professional Learning and Development does not automatically lead to transformative practice (A. Kennedy, 2014). To bring about meaningful teacher change, PLD must challenge previous assumptions and create new meanings, as well as empower teachers to use agency to align their values and practice (Brennan & King, 2022; King, 2019). However, the lack of effective PLD opportunities for teachers has been cited as a challenge to inclusion (Florian, 2014). Notably, PLD is not a linear process (Keay et al., 2019), as much Professional Development is "delivered" through transmissive models which do not bring about significant changes in teacher learning (A. Kennedy, 2014). In contrast, PLD models that include "collaborative professional models of inquiry" that enable "increased capacity for teacher professional autonomy and agency" show promise for transforming teacher learning (Kennedy 2014, p. 693).

An underlying assumption of PLD is that it drives positive change in teachers and schools (Osman & Warner, 2020). Educational leaders who organize PLD opportunities for teachers do so on the premise that Professional Development experiences improve teachers' knowledge and skills and motivate teachers to translate new ideas into their classroom practice with the result of inducing positive changes in children's outcomes (Kennedy, 2016).

Professional Learning and Development (PLD) is widely acknowledged as a crucial strategy to improve EYT professional competencies, skills, and knowledge in Early Childhood Education and Care (Bove et al., 2018). Several studies have shown positive links between participation in PLD programmes and teacher's ability to create close,

warm, and stimulating interactions with children (Eadie et al., 2019; Jilink et al., 2018; Piasta et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2019). Meta-analytical research into the effects of PLD in ECEC confirms that ECEC practices can be improved through PLD (Egert et al., 2020; Lee & Sung, 2023).

The role of vocabulary and narrative development in whole children's language development

Reading is vital to a child's ability to learn and succeed in school. The early literacy skills needed to be a good reader – such as language and vocabulary – begin to develop from birth (Nicholas & Rouse, 2021). Young children experience narrative stories by reading books together at home or at daycare, by watching television programs with a narrative structure, and by participating in conversations about daily events (Frausel et al., 2021). At the word and sentence level, children store phonological information in their short-term memory in order to derive the meaning of words and integrate individual meanings into semantically more complex meanings (Martin et al., 2024). Thus, children need to draw on their vocabulary knowledge and verbal memory. The rate at which meanings for words are learned increases rapidly during the second and third years of life, and the amount of productive vocabulary size during this time is developmentally related to grammatical and literacy skills (Guo et al., 2023). In fact, vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be one of the best predictors of narrative listening comprehension and reading comprehension

Components of effective professional learning and development and their links to the current project

Effective PLD shares a core set of characteristics: content, coherence, and sustained duration (Desimone 2011, p. 468).

Content: The construct of content aims to be flexible enough to allow for application in the complex system of teacher learning-practice and research (King et al., 2023). Recent research suggests detailed course content and materials, detailed professional learning plans and their potential for real-world application is central to any effective teacher learning (McKeown et al., 2019). Lets' Play and Talk PLD has clear learning outcomes, and coaches early years' teachers using manualised content on specific aspects of children's language and narrative.

Coherence: Research to date contends that EYT who experienced PLD that was connected to wider reform efforts and clearly aligned with curricular standards and research were more likely to change their practices compared to teachers whose PLD was less coherent in these areas (Garet et al., 2001; Lindvall & Ryve, 2019). Furthermore, research has identified a strong positive correlation between student achievement and their schools engaging

with coherent common curricular focused instructional PLD programmes for teachers (Newmann et al., 2001). In the current intervention, all elements of the PLD were informed by research on children's language development. This was further supported by ongoing interaction with the EYT during the intervention implementation. This allowed for coherence across PLD and delivery.

Prolonged engagement: Several influential reviews and two meta-analyses have converged on the position that EYT PLD is more effective when it is sustained, collaborative, subject specific, draws on external expertise, has buy-in from teachers, and is practice based (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Intensive and extensive programmes are necessary for the effectiveness of PLD (Merchie et al., 2018), as the total number of PLD hours is of great importance in preparing EYT for new programme protocols as it ensures that the teachers' get full immersion in the programme components. For the current intervention, there is sustained duration of the implementation as the research team has put in place an introduction to the programme, professional training, ongoing support, tracking of fidelity of implementation as well as focus groups to ensure that teachers' needs are considered.

Professional learning and development in the greek context

It is internationally accepted that the educator is considered central to decision-making when it comes to value systems and choice of pedagogical practices. In Greece, the model for offering continuing education and training is predominantly top-down, i.e. training is offered by regional agencies. While being top-down, professional development of teachers can take an informal as well as formal form (Tzotzou et al., 2021). It can be offered both within and outside of the teacher's work environment and can be optional but sometimes mandatory in certain jurisdictions (Maggopoulos & Svarna, 2023). Each preschool education jurisdiction operates on the basis of its own norms, its own "rights" and its own "wrongs". With the varying offerings available for PLD in Greece and the varying standards of quality within those offerings, it could be argued that a more coherent policy needs to be developed to ensure wider participation and better support for pre-service teachers, new entrants and in-service teachers within the Greek context.

The current study aimed to support early years teachers' Professional Learning and Development (PLD) on the topic of children's language development through narrative and pretend play in Greek preschool settings.

Research questions

Based on the aim of the current study, research questions were formulated as follows:

RQ 1: What is the initial and final level of understanding of participating EYTs on children's development?

RQ 2: What do EYTs think affects their personal knowledge and development in the areas of children's vocabulary and narrative development, pretend play and the role of the adult in children's play?

RQ 3: Did the participants feel supported from the current LPD intervention and in what areas would they like further Professional Learning and Development?

Methodology

This professional learning served as part of a larger randomised wait-list controlled trial of an intervention to support young children's language development and the paper that stemmed from it is under review. The main study worked with 160 children and 10 EYTs during a period of six months. However, the focus of this paper is on professional learning and it is the qualitative part of the main study. Embedded qualitative focus group discussions were conducted with 10 EYT (some demographic characteristic regarding them here), which allowed EYT participants to create a shared understanding of the benefits of the PLD on their professional development and the overall development of the children in their care (Merrins-Gallagher, 2023).

Let's Play and Talk: a brief description of the intervention

The PLD programme was offered through 5 face-to-face meetings that took place once a week and lasted at least 2 hours. Each session was held at a preschool centre that all EYT could access easily at the end of their school day. The research team used pre-readings of recent scientific articles, PowerPoint presentations, videofootage, group discussions, story narration, a puppet and role play between the teachers. During these sessions, EYT were introduced to the theory that supports the contribution of each of the pillars of the intervention to children's development. Each PLD session was structured as follows:

Step 1: Prior to each session, EYT were given carefully selected and most recently published articles on each of the pillars of the intervention. They read these in preparation for the PLD session with the research team.

Step 2: During the meeting, the research team gave a presentation on the topic, e.g. dialogic reading. Early years' teachers had the opportunity to ask questions on both the presentation and the articles. The presentations were supplemented by videos of good practice and detailed discussion followed this. Factors that support or hinder children's development on each topic were especially highlighted.

Step 3: In each session, EYT were given practical tips on how the various pedagogical practices could be planned for and used daily. The importance of planning, executing and reviewing pretend play themes was also reiterated.

They practiced dialogic reading and using the persona doll through role play in sessions.

Step 4: EYT were presented with a detailed training manual for the intervention. This was explained and exemplar lessons were practiced. The manual could also be used for future reference after the delivery of the intervention.

Participants

In the current study, an early year's teacher, or educator or professional was defined as any member of staff with a bachelor's degree in early years.

Participants were recruited from early childhood settings in east Thessaloniki, North Greece. The research team contacted the Early Childhood Administrator of the municipality in the community, informed him about the intervention and asked to give initial permission to the EYT to participate in the study. With the permission of the administrator, the 10 EYT were informed by the research team about the intervention, gave their consent and the meetings were set.

The demographic characteristics of the early years' teachers were also collected through questionnaires. Early years participants had a mean age of 44 years and a mean of 19 years of Early Childhood Education and Care experience. Most participants (n = 9) had a bachelor's degree in early childhood education and 1 of them had a master's degree in early childhood. Further sociodemographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers demographic characteristics.

Variables	ECEC teachers (N= 10)		
Educational level			
Bachelor degree	9 (90%)		
Master degree	1 (10%)		
Doctoral degree	-		
	M (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Teaching experience	19.30 (4.90)	12	26
Classroom size of attendant children	17.50 (4.64)	12	28

Procedure

At two timepoints, before and after the PLD, early years teachers participated in a focus group discussion. These FGDs explored the following themes:

Their observations of children's and parents' attitudes post-covid with regard to children's development

Educators' understanding of the pillars of the intervention

How they supported narrative and vocabulary development in the settings,

How they might use some of the pedagogical practices such as play and dialogic readings in their everyday practice, and

What they needed in order to enhance their educational practice more generally

The questions addressed to the EYT during the focus group discussion are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Questions schedule for focus group discussion with early years' teachers

	Questions
1	Do you notice any differences in parents' attitudes and behaviours in the post-Covid era regarding children's development?
2	How do you see children in terms of vocabulary and behaviour, especially in the post-Covid era?
3	What do you think is the role of symbolic play in child development?
4	What is the adult's role in children's play?
5	How does children's vocabulary develop and how do you think you can support it?
6	What is emergent literacy? How is it developed?
7	How do you think dialogical reading and storytelling is done in practice?
8	What factors do you think affect children's ability to learn?
9	In what area do you feel you need more training?
10	How many children do you work with in your team at a time?

Focus groups were conducted using a protocol developed by the research team that followed the guidelines outlined by Frantz et al. (2022). The protocol included open-ended questions to be asked of the participants and a moderator script. The moderator's script consisted of a greeting, overview of the purpose of the study, guidelines for participation, and questions (Frantz et al., 2022). One member of the research team, the same each time, facilitated the discussion and kept field notes during all focus groups. Focus groups lasted on average 40 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher described the purpose of the focus group, provided guidelines for participation, and detailed procedures for ensuring confidentiality. Participants were then asked to introduce themselves and provide their details about their work setting and professional experiences. The researcher then posed questions to gain further information as indicated in Table 2. At the end of the focus group discussion, the researcher asked participants whether they had any additional comments to share with the research team. After the pre-focus group the researchers proceeded to the introduction about the intervention, its objectives and the expected results.

Data analysis

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was used for the inductive analysis of the FGD data. Emergent themes were developed. A systematic process was followed when coding that allowed the constant comparison of themes, patter identification and the formation of concepts (Rowley, 2012; Saldana, 2021). The study explored challenges in conducting focus groups and applied grounded theory for analyzing qualitative data. Grounded theory begins with data collection and gradually identifies recurring themes through an iterative process of open and selective coding, ultimately forming a theoretical narrative based on participants' experiences. This inductive method allows theories to emerge directly from the data, uncovering unexpected patterns and providing deep insights into subjective experiences (Price, Jhangiani, & Chiang, 2015). Ethical approval

The study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the University and the Municipality, where the preschool settings belong. All the participants signed a consent form, and they were assured that all the information would be used only for research purposes.

Results

The results are presented under three main areas that reflect the research questions. Firstly, EYTs' understanding of key topics such as dialogic reading, vocabulary development, pretend play and the role of adults in children's play is addressed. Secondly, EYTs' thoughts about what affects the development of those areas in young children is presented.

Finally, teachers' training needs in these critical subjects are identified.

Results that emerged from research question 1

Research question 1 addressed the initial and final level of understanding of participating EYTs on children's development. The following theme emerged:

Lack of continuing professional development in early years pedagogy

The most important result that emerged from the focus group at pre-intervention time was that all the EYT agreed that they had never received any additional training beyond the basic training they had when they started their job through their degrees. Some seminars that were provided to them over the years on various subjects were not enough to deepen their knowledge of issues that concerned them nor to solve problems that arose in their classroom. They had not received any further training on the pillars of Lets' Play and Talk before the current study.

Results that emerged from research question 2

Research question 2 addressed EYTs perceptions on what affects their personal knowledge and development in the areas of children's vocabulary and narrative development, pretend play and the role of the adult in children's play. Three themes emerged:

Small-group pedagogy

Early years educators in the study reported that they did not engage in small-group instruction. This was due, they said, to having responsibility for a larger whole class. They reported not having any other adult assistance in the classroom for many years, which they said had hindered their use of, or even inclination to use, small-group pedagogy. Once they had assistants in post, the habit of whole-class teaching was already formed, so this was not broken. They also stated that they were not aware of the pedagogical benefits of young children working in small groups. They felt that the whole-class teaching was as effective on children's development as small-groups. Once the PLD was completed, education staff realized the importance of small-group instruction with young children. They offered as advantageous the possibilities for all children to be 'heard' and participate more in smaller groups. However, they were concerned about the occupation of the rest of the class while educators were engaged with smaller groups:

"*The application of the programme to a group of 5 children certainly worried us. At the end of the intervention, although sometimes the daily program did not help the group work, I realized how important it was for the children, I heard the voices of children who rarely spoke in an organized activity, and I think that children's participation increased*

in general." (Sofia)

Lack of knowledge on dialogic reading

Pre-focus group data revealed that none of the EYT had before heard of dialogic reading. Although story reading was an everyday feature of their practice, EYT had not engaged in the small group interactive sharing of a book as detailed in the dialogic reading training offered in the current study. The participants reported their apprehension about pausing the story for questioning due to it interrupting the flow and hindering the completion of that story. When the persona doll was introduced, educators admitted not having used it previously in story reading sessions. At the end of the PLD, EYT stated that they would use the persona doll going forward in story reading and commented that it enabled them to voice emotion and express themselves in a novel way:

"*We certainly didn't do dialogic reading this way. Stories were only read to the whole class. Now that we have tested it in practice, we will apply for it. It was so easy… why did nobody show us this way?*" (Katerina added)

"*Practicing with the persona doll was very helpful. The way you would handle it, the way you would interact first as a teacher, even the way you would turn the pages or set the book up needed practice.*" (Athina added)

Children's language development was something that the respondents highlighted also. They stated that is something that they have been worried about for some considerable time. This concern was intensified in the period of post-Covid 19 confinement. All EYT participants gave examples of children experiencing significant vocabulary and speech problems. Coupled with this, staff highlighted their respective lack of confidence in addressing those problems. Participants were enthusiastic about the opportunities to discuss these various difficulties with an expert member of the research team and the possibility that solutions could be explored. After the PLD sessions, EYT reported changes in how they dealt with any language problems exhibited by the children in their care.

"*We felt that we did do enough to strengthen children's vocabulary. There is still a lot to be done. Children are not given enough opportunities to converse. Personally, coming out of this PLD, I am considering that I can contribute enough, and I am looking forward to implementing all these.*" (Aggeliki)

Pretend play

When asked about their knowledge and use of pretend play, the participants reported that they were familiar with the practice and had had some professional development on the topic previously. They were comfortable using it and regularly engaged with seminars on it. They saw the value in using pretend play with young children due to the active nature of it. They thought of it as a fun activity for young children. However, after the PLD, these professionals expressed favourable views about the way play could be used in this intervention, e.g., using visual prompts and the addition of storybook reading. They mentioned that they intended to interrogate their use of the practice and perhaps engage new stimuli.

"*We have never used pretend play in the way we tried now…. for us it was a class game and not a team game. We probably made our lives difficult. A lot of things I thought I knew about pretend play have been turned upside down. I need some time to look at it from another perspective….I think the PLD and the programme will help me a lot.*" (Maria)

When the teacher's role in play was discussed, the respondents had mixed views. Some participants believed the adult should not intervene in the children's play, as it can stilt the children's leadership of the play session. Other participants thought that EYT could use a playful approach when teaching cognitive skills or knowledge, but should not intervene in child-led play sessions. However, when the professionals tried engaging in play by way of the intervention, this proved novel for them. They became open to entering 'role' as a way of participating in children's play and could see the benefit in doing so, as it also allowed children to lead the play once the play had been established.

"*While we consider ourselves to be actively and sufficiently participating in children's play, in the end we may not be. The way you've shown us now, we certainly didn't participate. We tried it in practice among us and now we can share our impressions.*" (Evi)

Results that emerged from research question 3

Research question 3 addressed if the participants felt supported from the current LPD intervention and in what areas they would have liked further Professional Learning and Development. One theme emerged from their responses.

Young children's language development

EYT' perspectives on what affects the development of young children's language development, varied depending on their experience.

Some professionals highlighted the lack of mandatory online education during Covid-19 as having a negative influence on children's language development. They purported that vocabulary was affected, due to a lower knowledge of how to support this domain of development among parents.

"*Children behave below their age. I notice that some of them speak like cartoons, imitating TV heroes. The words they use are unknown to me.*" (Georgia)

"*Parents are more indifferent than before. They get tired of chasing work and money and consider their children's needs as of minor importance.*" (Eleni added that)

A second aspect that may affect children's language development is lower motivation for professional

development in language development. They said that there were lower motivation levels among professionals when they must seek out their own professional learning and identified that there was no additional reward or value placed on such training by their employers. This rendered it a much less attractive prospect. Professionals could, however, clearly identify the training that they needed to improve in this area. They placed importance on a holistic approach to language development in the setting. They suggested that all staff including assistants, cleaners and cooks should be supported in their knowledge of children's development and particularly language development. They also placed an emphasis on the pre-service training they received on children as language development being of a high standard and a priority for them, it was not a topic they have revisited since they were students.

"*If the professional environment is not interested in the professional growth and development of the teachers, it makes sense that teachers also do not take a great interest. Personally, I would like my Administration to provide me with professional development and stimulate my interest, even once in a while.*" (Cleopatra)t

Table 3 contains how EYTs ranked their training needs. The most important area is how they can support children's language and narrative development, and their last reported priority is collaboration between staff. In between they reported areas relevant to their own work, the children and the families.

Table 3. Early years teachers' training needs

Training needs	Teachers' rank order
Practices for supporting language development	1
Specific strategies for promoting narrative	2
Strategies for supporting the role of the adult in children's play	3
Collaboration with the families	4
Practices for supporting home learning environment	5
Teaching in small groups	6
Pretend play strategies	7
Socio emotional learning	8
Behaviour management practices	9
Collaboration with other staff and professionals	10

In summary, this study found that EYT identified a need for continuing professional development in language development and early years best practice. Secondly, professionals' understanding of best practice is dependent on their experience levels. Lastly, we conclude that all staff in the setting need training and professional development to be able to support children in their care.

Discussion

Effects of lack of professional learning for EY professionals
The data collected in this study from the EYT focus group discussions confirm the evidence from previous research that current professional development practices for teachers in Greece are inadequate. This is particularly pertinent considering that the needs of families and children have changed due to the unforeseen events of the past few years. The results of the current study show that it is very important that that participating teachers first understand the gap in their knowledge and then figure out how to close it. Similar to Nehez's study (2023), the professionals believe that they can better develop their teaching once they understand what they can improve through professional learning. The EYT in the current study stated that they have never received professional training in language development or in another topic. This is quite concerning, as we know that professional learning allows staff to acquire additional knowledge, while also enhancing their own professional identity (Maggopoulos & Svarna, 2023). With the rapid change in early childhood education, professionals are justified in their desire to maintain continuous upskilling.

The area of dialogic reading in our study both impressed and concerned the teachers. It was a practice the EYT had not tried before. In principle, the EYT welcomed the knowledge input on the effects of dialogic reading on children's vocabulary. They also saw the value in the experiencing firsthand how dialogic reading could be implemented in their settings and were enthused to take this knowledge back to their settings. This is an important shift in potential practice of the professionals. As we know that shared picture book storytelling enhances children's vocabulary development, oral language complexity and narrative skills (Grolig, 2020; Pillinger & Vardy, 2022; Zevenbergen & Whitehurst, 2003; Zhang et al., 2022), the potential for increased support and indeed active involvement of young children in their care is promising.

Furthermore, the use of the persona doll was a new and welcome practice during the dialogic reading. While EYT in the study had used persona dolls in their practice, they had not used them for shared storybook reading sessions.

This new teaching tool has the potential to promote talk and open discussions about the thoughts, feelings and life experiences of the children (Tympa et al., 2021; Ylikörkkö et al., 2023).

EYT in the current study cited using play in their daily routine. However, even though the research on the power of play to increase children's decontextualized thinking and general interactions among children (Evangelou et al. 2010, p. 75), EYT in the current study were not initially convinced of its merit. They were reticent about the role of the adult in the play session. This could be due to the lack of knowledge and experience of the potential transactional nature of play. They were not aware of the ability of the adult to extend the children's language and participation by engaging with them in role, by introducing new vocabulary to them and by modelling the pragmatics of language (Lake, 2015; Tympa et al., 2021).

This lack of knowledge also extended to the links between pretend play and narrative development. When a child narrates a story, they need to think and change any actions into words to express themselves. In pretend play children move from one action to the next. MacPherson (2002) in her study of young children's narrative development argues that pretend play emerges first, and it is followed by narrative.

Analysis revealed that knowledge of the value of small-group work in early years was also lacking. The professionals were hesitant about the use of small-group work. The work of children in small groups rather than in whole class brought a lot of discussion to the group. The analysis revealed that group work and its importance was unknown but also in the teachers' view was impossible to implement. Both the child/adult ratio and the group size is recognized by experts as a productive model of establishing a preschool education quality management system in transition into new guidelines. Early years teachers often stress that they prefer a group with fewer children if they are going to help children develop better (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2016; Shiyan et al., 2022).

The impact of Covid-19

Scholars have posited that the Covid-19 lockdown has affected the social behaviour and cognitive development of children. Their vocabulary development was affected by exclusion from early years education and social isolation during this period (Bhamani et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2021). This was particularly evident in children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Research has shown that parents from lower socio-economic groups give their children fewer language lessons than better-off families (Ellwood-Lowe et al., 2022). Lack of access to high quality facilities can result in poorer cognitive and social outcomes for children at age 5 (Berry et al., 2016; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017; Romijn et al., 2021). This underscores the grave need to further educate EY through interventions such as the one described in the current study (Frantz et al., 2022).

Finally, those in professional practice not only benefit, but enjoy professional learning opportunities. The EYT in this study expressed a desire for more PLD opportunities for a longer duration in collaboration with other EYT, where they could practice their skills while being supported by experts (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

Our findings agree with the findings of other studies (Frantz et al., 2022), and also highlight training needs for all early childhood, revealing shared perspectives among early childhood staff in relation to roles, responsibilities and educational practices.

Conclusion and recommendations for further practice

The results of this small qualitative study corroborate previous research on teacher Professional Learning and Development. This study showed that training is a key factor in achieving the visions and needs of EYT and meeting the demands of a rapidly changing society. To ensure quality in the sector, specialised and systematic training programmes are needed that are based on the specific needs of EYT, identify the key competencies needed to work successfully in the field of education and focus on quality. They should also reflect the scientific advancement on how young children learn.

Providing professional development with opportunities for experiencing hands-on application of the work would support teachers' overall knowledge of play-centred education and their understanding of the roles they can assume during classroom play episodes which can elicit positive experiences and maximize the benefits of interactions.

The manuscript was prepared with the cooperation of all authors. All authors contributed to the study's research design. ET, and MET contributed to the data collection procedure. All authors worked together for the writing and completion of the manuscript.

Authors' contributions

The manuscript was prepared with the cooperation of all authors. All authors contributed to the study's research design. ET and ME contributed to the data collection procedure and writing. GL contributed to the reviewing and rewriting.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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