Supporting children’s language development through reflexive interaction during planned pretend play

Dr Gillian Lake
DCU Institute of Education, Ireland
gillian.lake@dcu.ie
Heterogenous group

- 94 participants
- Mean age: 47.60 months (sd 5.11)
- Mixed gender
- Mixed Early Years settings
- SES Low-High
- Majority had English as first language –
  - but 26.8% of treatment group and 10.8% of control group did not have English as their first language (N=78)
- Mixed gender in sample
- Normally distributed scores on BPVS, Bus Story Test MLU, TNR, RDVT at pre- and post-test
Language and Planned Pretend Play

- Allows for practice of decontextualised language (McKeown & Beck, 2009)
- Character-appropriate speech in different grammatical tenses (Harris, 2000)
- Emergence of pretense in play coincides with the development of language (Whitebread, 2012)
However…

- Work-play dichotomies exist with policy in UK advocating play but little guidance for practitioners (EU, 2014): children are left to play in non-interactive ways as play not seen as underpinning learning
- Adults approach play – they can receive unwelcome reaction from children (Baldock et al., 2013)
- But several studies (Howard, 2010, Whitebread & O’ Sullivan, 2012) found children have broad perception of play, which included the teacher
Reflexive Practice and the Role of the Adult

- Teacher-in-Role (Heathcote, 1980; Dickinson & Neelands, 2006)
- Smilansky’s Model (1968)
- Dramatic Devices (Heathcote, 1980)
- Motivation acted as signifiers of the learning opportunities taken by the children (Dweck, 2000)
## Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Treatment Group Mean (sd)</th>
<th>Control Group Mean (sd)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Effect Size partial $\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British Picture Vocabulary Scales</td>
<td>93.53 (10.20)</td>
<td>89.53 (12.87)</td>
<td>5.90*</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1, 89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher Designed Vocabulary Test</td>
<td>9.65 (2.76)</td>
<td>8.37 (2.71)</td>
<td>7.04*</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1, 89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean Length Utterance (Bus Story Test)</td>
<td>7.00 (2.59)</td>
<td>5.89 (2.40)</td>
<td>4.04*</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1, 89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05

- Scores on the non-verbal outcomes of *Block Building* and *Picture Similarities* at post-test were not different for the treatment and control groups.
Some Concluding Remarks

– A universal programme with small groups can have impact on individual children’s language development
– Children respond positively to adult involvement in their play
– Practitioners have a role to play in facilitating and partaking in pretend play with young children
– Modelling of language and reflexive interaction with young children can support heterogeneous groups’ language development
– Pretend Play should be a blending of child-initiated and adult-initiated (Weisberg et al., 2013)
References


Heathcote D (1980) *Drama as context*. Sheffield: National Association for Teaching English


Whitebread, D (2012) *The Importance of Play*, Brussels, Toy Industries Europe
Thank-you!

Any questions?