Section 1

“Play is the universal language of childhood. It is through play that children understand each other and make sense of the world around them.”

(Play Scotland, 2024)

The Welsh Government (2022) states that play is a vital component of the curriculum and helps children learn and develop. While children are amused, play promotes their emotional, physical, and cognitive development, suggesting that they may be more likely to learn. Additionally, Frued (1920) agreed with this viewpoint when he said that play is crucial to a child’s emotional development because it allows them to process and come to terms with unpleasant memories they may be ignoring. The value of play is illustrated by Frued’s (1920) hypothesis, which explains how play promotes a child’s overall development.

There are a variety of types of play available to meet children’s varied interests, learning preferences and socialization needs. Since every child is different in their interests, learning preferences and developmental needs, it is important to provide a variety of play alternatives so that every child can participate in activities that they find meaningful and thar support their overall growth and well-being according to Encourage play (2021).

One type of play is symbolic play. Symbolic play is a kind of play in which the child represents assorted items using objects or actions; an example of this would be utilizing a wooden spoon as a magic wand. A child can be creative and use their imagination without boundaries when they engage in symbolic play. Broadhead et al (2010) concurs that children’s cognitive skills are strengthened through symbolic play, which assists them with problem solving.

Supporting symbolic play entails establishing a setting that fosters pretend play and imaginative play in addition to offering chances for play experience to be extended and scaffolded. Symbolic play is considered an important part of cognitive development, according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, since it enables children to internalize and manipulate symbols, which are necessary for higher-order thinking abilities. Practitioners can encourage children to engage their imaginations through play opportunities that include open-ended items. They can also engage in cooperative pretend play with children, model symbolic play behaviors and give clues and suggestions to expand play narratives. Practitioners can support children's abilities, creativity, language, and social competence by supporting their play experiences. Moreover, establishing a welcoming and encouraging environment where children can freely express themselves and explore their ideas encourages them to feel independent and self-assured in their symbolic play activities.

Social interactions are frequently a part of symbolic play. Examples of this include pretend play with other children, role-playing within a group, and role-and action negotiation. Children can use symbolic play to act out things they have heard or experienced, or to develop scenarios with imaginary friends, even while they are playing by themselves.

An alternative type of play is creative play which includes engaging children in creative and imaginative activities that allow them to explore and express who they are. Children can participate in activities like storytelling, role-playing, building with blocks or other materials, painting, drawing, and creating new games or scenarios because it is frequently open-ended. Play that is creative encourages self-expression, creativity, and emotional growth. It inspires children to think creatively, try out innovated ideas, and grow a sense of self-assurance stated by Wilson (2018).

According to Red Monkey Play (2024) through fostering children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, creative play promotes children's holistic development. Children develop their critical thinking, spatial awareness, and problem solving. They also gain empathy, learn how to have control over their emotions, and strengthen their resilience. Playing creatively also encourages communication, teamwork, and social engagement with others, which develops critical social skills such as cooperation. Furthermore, Lai et al (2018) state that children's physical development and coordination are enhanced by the fine and gross motor abilities that are involved in many forms of creative play. Given the circumstances, creative play offers a rich and varied learning experience that promotes children's general growth and well-being. Also, in order to promote creative play in practice, settings and chances that promote investigation, imaginative thinking and experimenting must be established. Agreeing with Wilson (2018), PACEY (no date) states that offering free-form materials like building blocks, clay, paint, costumes, and organic objects is one method to achieve this. Children can use these items to show their creativity in a variety of ways. Creativity can also be stimulated by practitioners or parents encouraging youngsters to explore their environment, ask questions, and investigate their interests. Children can play freely when they are given unstructured time and no predetermined objectives or guidelines, which encourages impromptu creativity.

Section 2

Vygotsky (1978) states that play is essential to a child's growth since it builds social skills, physical maturation, and knowledge. It provides a natural, self-driven environment where children can experiment with solving problems, explore ideas, and learn about the world around them. Children learn important cognitive abilities through play such as imagination, creativity and decision making, all of which are essential for success in school and innovation in the future. Play physically encourages active engagement with the environment, which enhances motor skills, coordination, and general health. Children also learn to negotiate, work together, take turns, and empathize with others via play, which lays the groundwork for developing healthy relationships and emotional intelligence.

Unstructured play, or self-directed play is a type of play, when children autonomously start and lead their own play activities without adult supervision or guidance identified by Cutter-Mackenzie et al (2014). Children can have full control over what they want to play, how they play it, and how long they engage in the activity for when involved in self-directed play as claimed by The Montessori School (2020). Through this type of play, children can discover their hobbies, hone their creativity and imagination, learn how to solve problems, and become more independent with their time and activities. Playing independently is a crucial part of a child's growth since it fosters self-control, independence, and confidence. Frobel (1837) believed that children should be allowed the opportunity to play independently, following their own interests and interacting with objects and others in an unstructured setting. His "gifts" and "occupations" are instructional resources that he created with the intention of encouraging children's self-directed play and their overall development. Howard and McInnes (2012) strengthen this concept stating when children feel like they are

playing, they work well. The research paper shows that a child's standard of engagement is influenced by an adult's presence and participation in an activity, which helps children decide if it is play.

As stated by the National Occupational Standards (2016) to facilitate self-directed play, an atmosphere that values independence, discovery, and creativity must be established. Children can follow their interests and participate in a variety of play experiences when flexible play areas and a range of open-ended resources are available. Teachers, practitioners, and other adults should refrain from interfering too much and let the children choose what they want to play. Throughout the day, allowing time for unstructured time promotes curiosity, freedom, and self-directed learning.

UNICEF (2018) discusses the importance of children selecting their own play takes place in the unique developmental advantages it provides, fostering their independence, interest, and mental capacities. Play autonomy is not only a matter of taste; it is an essential part of a child's growth and development that promotes independence and self-determination. Children are more likely to fully participate and persistently in play when they have a say in it which leads to more meaningful experiences. They can explore their interests and passions through this kind of involvement, which boosts motivation and helps them feel more connected to their activities. It is important to allow children to choose what they want to do and how they go about playing. However, adult involvement is vital in diverse ways.

The first step in properly supporting self-directed play is for the adults to create an enriched atmosphere that encourages both imagination and discovery. This entails offering a wide range of adaptable and open-ended resources to promote

imagination play without a set result. Stated by Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery (2020) both indoor and outdoor spaces should be calm but engaging, providing a variety of chances for movement, artistic expression, and quiet contemplation. Crucially, the surroundings need to change in accordance with the children's interest and developmental phases, inspiring them to take on novel tasks and concepts.

Cutter-Mackenzie et al. (2014) claimed that beyond just laying the groundwork, adults are essential play facilitators. This entails watching and reacting to children's cues, aiding when needed without taking charge of the game. This type of support could take the form of recommending a fresh source, posing thought-provoking, open ended questions, or just offering encouragement. The intention is to enable kids to take charge of their play, make choices, and follow their intertest rather than to control them. This method necessitates tolerance and an acceptance of the erratic character of self-direct play.

Promoting independence and the ability to make decisions is essential to this process in play. Agreeing with Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery (2020), Pentagon Play (No date) also believe that the atmosphere is most important and the environment the children are brought into affects the way they play. They state that by giving children the autonomy to select their own games, playmates and play activities, they develop a sense of security and feel appreciated. Critical life skills such as problem solving, negotiating, and situational adaptation are developed because of empowerment. Respecting children's decisions, offering gentle direction when needed, and resisting the need to correct or influence play outcomes are all ways that adults can help children develop in this way.

Additionally playing an important part is the adults setting an example of constructive interactions and behaviors. Adults can show that they know how to handle a situation, settle disputes, and play together. Play is a worthwhile and pleasurable activity that deserves respect and attention. Adults can demonstrate this by engaging in play at the child's invitation or by modeling creative play on their own.

Furthermore, Verywellfamily (2020) believe it is critical to include unstructured playtime as a top priority in a child's daily routine as encouraging plenty of free, unstructured play is essential for children's development in a society when screen time and planned activities frequently rule. Dankiw, K.A. *et al (*2020) agree with Verywellfamily (2020) and state that children can experiment with social roles, process events, and advance cognitive and motor skills at their own speed throughout this time. By cherishing and safeguarding this period, adults provide children the freedom to explore, dream, and develop in a safe, encouraging atmosphere while sending a strong message able the value of play.

Section 3

In order to carefully observe, record and evaluate young children's behavior, Howard and McInnes (2013) believe interactions, play, educational activities, and general development, observations are essential in early childhood settings. Brown and Perkins (2019) agree with Howard and McInnes (2013) and claim that understanding each child's individual growth trajectory, interest, abilities, and areas where support might be needed requires a rigorous approach. In early years settings, observations serve several crucial functions, such as assessment and planning, relationship-building, early detection of additional needs and documentation and reflection. Due to the emphasis on child-centered learning and development in the educational frameworks of the Welsh Government (2022) observations play a crucial role. For children and young people, the Welsh Government's Foundation Phase curriculum promotes play-based, experiential learning, with observations serving as a crucial component in comprehending and assisting each child's developmental path. Practitioners can adapt the learning environment and activities to each child's unique requirements, interests, and developmental stage by making systematic observations that match with the Foundation Phase concepts. In addition to making learning more interesting and productive, this individualized method promotes the child's whole development, which includes their intellectual, emotional, social, and physical maturation. Through early identification of any additional requirements, observations enable timely interventions – which are essential to guarantee that every child has the assistance they require to thrive. Educators can also help parents and other carers by keeping a record of their children's development and looking back on it regularly. They believe this allows for a cooperative approach to assisting each child's growth. Observations thus serve as a foundation for the effective

execution of the educational goals set forth by the Welsh Government. Highlighting their centrality to the provision of excellent, child-centered early childhood education.

Bradbury (2014) claimed that in early childhood settings, such as nurseries, they use a variety of observation techniques to track the children's development. An interaction tracker is one of the methods used to systemically watch and document interactions between children and their careers, peers, or the environment. To analyze and assist children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, an interaction tracker collects data on the type, frequency, and quality of the interactions that take place inside the learning environment.

Digital recording systems, rating scales and observation checklists are a few examples of interaction trackers. Typically, they concentrate on documenting interactions that occur in several domains including observational cues and between the child and peers.

Barber and Paul-Smith (2010) state that in early childhood settings, interaction monitors are useful tools for researchers, educators, and carers. They support young children's general development and well-being, offer insights into the dynamics of social relationships, assist in identifying areas for intervention or improvement, and inform curriculum preparation and teaching practices. Positive outcomes in early years settings can be promoted by practitioners gaining a deeper understanding of children's social competence, communication skills, and relationships through systematic interaction tracking across time.

They believe that early year practitioners, carers, and researchers can gain a better knowledge of support for children's learning and development by using this tracker. Following on from this, Bruce, Louis, and McCall (2014) conclude that these

resources offer insightful information about the type, quantity, and caliber of interactions taking place in the learning environment. Interaction trackers may assist in identifying areas of strength and areas for progress in a child's social, emotional, and cognitive development by methodically observing and documenting interactions between the child, peers, carers, and the environment. They provide guidance which can support the child's healthy socialization, communication, and bonding. Interactions make it easier to continuously analyze and monitor the development of the children, which allows practitioners to modify their methods to suit each child's unique needs and establish safe, natural learning environments.

Nevertheless, Barber and Paul-Smith (2012) later stated the limits of interaction trackers. As different witnesses may view interactions differently, one drawback is the possibility of subjectivity or observer bias. Furthermore, interaction trackers might only record visible behaviors; they might miss more complicated social interactions, such as non-verbal indications or subtle cues. Practitioners and carers with limited time and experience may find it difficult to employ interaction trackers since they demand time and resources for training, implementation, and data analysis. Overall, although interaction trackers offer significant insights, it is advisable to combine them with additional assessment methods and techniques to achieve a thorough comprehension of young children's growth and education in the early year's settings.

Section 4

When children are happy and focused when they are playing, it is important to watch and evaluate them while they are playing since they will be more actively involved in an activity, they are finding interesting. Earlyyearscareers (2016) acknowledged that children who are in better health and wellbeing are likely to perform better academically, which is consistent with observations that children perform better when they are happy.

It is the practitioner's responsibility to discreetly observe children when they are involved in play to prevent the Hawthorne effect. Bruner (1961) concurs that children learn best from direct experiences because they are active learners, which is why he endorses the idea of watching children play. This suggests that it is worthwhile to watch children play since they pick up valuable skills from these experiences.

Bradbury (2014) children play in ways that reflect their interests, skills, and social relationships. This allows observers to see important aspects of the children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Children learn problem-solving techniques, creativity, and communication skills during play, all of which are crucial for their continued growth. Additionally, Barber and Smith (2010) believe that by watching children as they play, practitioners may spot areas where children need to approve, design customized interventions, and offer the right kind of support to help them learn more successfully. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of children's development is made possible by acknowledging the importance of play in observation and assessment, which also informs focused methods for fostering holistic growth and well-being of children.

Howard and McInnes (2012) research paper recognized children's emotional well-being increases when they feel like they are playing. This finding acknowledges how children feel when they are playing. However, children tend to be less interested and have lower focus levels when they see an activity as being led by the teacher.

Children must perceive that situation as a game to reach their maximum potential. According to Howard and McInnes (2012), adults must adhere to three primary play cues. When a child observes play cues such as facial expression and the action's location, they can determine if it is play. According to the report, a child is more likely to interpret an activity as play if it is occurring on the floor. Furthermore, when a child plays with their peers and is not grouped into a game, they will perceive this as play.

By including the play cues in their preparation, practitioners can facilitate the creation of a playful environment during observations. For instance, putting a child to work on a task on the floor will make it feel more like play, which will have a better impact on everyone involves mental health and well-being. According to Howard and McInnes (2012), educators could also establish a lively atmosphere by including the interests of the child into the curriculum, suggesting that by accomplishing this, adults can validate observations.