

ECEY4003

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Contents:

AI statement

Essay

References

Use of AI

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.

I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Section 1: Play, Construction and Creative

According to Rousseau (no date, cited in Play Scotland, 2023), the concept of play is often misunderstood by adults, who may see it as a trivial activity compared to work. Rousseau (no date, cited in Play Scotland, 2023) argues that play is crucial to the development of young minds, offering a unique way for children to interact with the world. Smith and Pellegrini (2023) add that, to children, play is just for fun, involving imagination to pretend or create things. They suggest that this lack of restriction helps children concentrate on the process rather than the end result, enhancing their enjoyment and engagement. Play Scotland (2023) describes how through play, children explore and make sense of their environment and world around them, enhancing their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. The fundamental importance of play is further supported by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 1989), which recognises play as a basic right of every child, and essential for their healthy holistic development.

Lockett (2024) defines constructive play as children using materials like blocks, sand, playdough, wood, or water to build and create. He argues that such activities significantly influence young minds by fostering imagination, problem-solving, teamwork, and resilience. Arnerich (2021) notes, when a child engages in construction play their play is often organised and focused on a goal and as the children navigate these tasks, they develop a sense of achievement and learn to overcome challenges. Piaget (no date, cited in Aubrey and Riley, 2019) supported this view, theorising that constructive play allows children to explore the interactions between their ideas and the external world, enhancing their cognitive development. Amin (2021) further explains that Piaget considered constructive play a critical phase for experiential learning, where children pose questions and experiment with ideas, thereby transitioning from functional to symbolic play. Furthermore, constructive play improves both motor skills and social abilities, teaching children to plan, collaborate, and solve problems effectively, skills crucial for schooling and beyond (Amin, 2021). Lockett (2024) summarises that by promoting constructive play, we enhance holistic

child development, setting the stage for creative play which further enriches their learning experience.

To support constructive play Arnerich (2021) suggests educators can provide a variety of building materials and tools that are suitable for different age groups. They further suggest that by ensuring a safe and spacious environment allows children the freedom to build and experiment without constraints. For instance, Hohmann and Weikart (2011) suggest that creating designated areas within the play space can cater to different styles of block play. They further highlight how some children prefer lively interaction, using extensive space for elaborate scenes, while others enjoy quiet, solitary engagement. Therefore, Hohmann and Weikart (2011) suggest that to accommodate both, the practitioner could section off a part of the area for those who prefer a quieter environment, consider extending the play space outdoors for more expansive activities, and identify secluded spots, such as under a table or inside a tent, for children who thrive in calm, undisturbed settings. These adaptations ensure all children can participate in block play according to their preferences (Hohmann and Weikart, 2011).

Ron (2023) emphasises that creative play is a fundamental aspect of human development, especially significant in early childhood education. This form of play goes beyond conventional artistic expressions, enabling children to think innovatively and solve problems creatively (Ron, 2023). According to the Department of Education (2024), creativity stems from a child's interaction with their sensory environment, inspiring them to respond uniquely to their experiences. Such individual responses to materials, experiences, and ideas not only fuels their creativity but also nurtures their imagination. Steiner (no date, cited in Brodie, 2025), places great importance on free, creative play in early years education, stressing its essential role in cognitive development and the cultivation of abstract thinking skills. He advocates for unstructured play, which enhances problem-solving skills and social abilities, highlighting the use of natural, open-ended toys that stimulate children's imagination Steiner (no date, cited in Brodie, 2025).

The Department of education (2022) suggest supporting creative play involves offering resources that spark children's imaginations without prescribing how to use them, providing materials like art supplies, costumes for dress-up, and open-ended toys can facilitate imaginative play and role-playing. They go on to say that educators, through observing children during self-initiated play, can deepen their knowledge and understanding of each child's interests and preferences. This insight is crucial as it includes familiar elements such as their favourite television characters, soft toys, or superheroes (Department of education, 2022). Eaton (2023) mentions by integrating these personal interests into the play environment, educators can enhance the provision for imaginative and creative play. This tailored approach not only supports individual engagement but also fosters a richer, more meaningful play experience that resonates with the children's own worlds (Eaton, 2023).

Both constructive and creative play are vital for holistic child development. Constructive play enhances physical and cognitive skills through structured tasks, whereas creative play supports emotional and imaginative growth with less structured, free-form activities. Together, they offer a balanced approach to early childhood education, providing essential skills for both academic and personal development. Integrating these play types into educational practices supports comprehensive child development, preparing them for the demands of the modern world (Amin, 2021; Lockett, 2024).

Section 2: Self – Directed play

Self-directed play is a form of play that is initiated and controlled by children themselves, without adult direction (Sukenik, 2019). According to Grey (no date),

self-directed play occurs when children choose their own activities, rather than participating in structured, adult-led tasks such as organised sports or classroom assignments. The Steiner Connection (2022) supports this theory, defining self-directed play as 'free play' and highlighting its crucial role in the Waldorf Kindergarten curriculum. Furthermore, Play Wales (2023) underscores the significant impact of self-directed play on children's immediate and long-term wellbeing, enhancing their physical and mental health, and fostering resilience.

According to Eeboo (2024) Self-directed play is crucial for a child's development as it fosters a sense of freedom and creativity without the confines of strict rules, Eeboo (2024) suggests that this type of play nurtures various developmental aspects such as creativity and imagination, problem solving skills, social skills and sensory and motor development. They also go on to explain when children make their own choices in play, they develop autonomy, therefore boosting their self-confidence and preparing them for future decision-making scenarios additionally children are motivated to engage in play for the sheer joy and interest it brings, rather than external rewards (Eeboo, 2024). Eeboo argues this intrinsic motivation fosters a lifelong love of learning and deepens the engagement in activities. This self-directed play process allows children to follow their interests accordingly making learning a more personalised and meaningful experience (Eeboo, 2024). Froebel (no date, cited in Monroe University, 2024, p. 1), affirmed that "Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul." He viewed play as essential for learning, particularly in early childhood, summarising the deepest expressions of a child's inner world. In a study conducted by (Whitebread et al., 2017) they explain how much of the research within developmental psychology on play has been influenced by Vygotsky's theories. Vygotsky (cited in Whitebread et al., 2017) argued that during spontaneous, child-initiated play, children manage their activities, set their own challenges, and therefore establish their own 'zone of proximal development'—a space where learning is exceptionally effective. Karpov (cited in (Whitebread et al., 2017) further examined the findings of neo-Vygotskians, which support the idea that self-directed play is crucial for children as they learn to regulate their behaviour, significantly

impacting their ability to develop self-regulation skills. This underscores how self-directed play not only enhances cognitive development but also vital social skills, enriching the overall learning and adaptation processes in children (Whitebread et al., 2017).

According to Education Development Trust, (2023) children benefit from a blend of adult-led and child-initiated play, each supporting different aspects of development, they mention this dual approach is crucial for holistic growth, impacting early years settings and practices significantly.

The Education Development Trust (2023), explain how early years practitioners should observe and evaluate their environments to ensure they cater to the developmental needs of the child. Tovey, (2017) describes how in Froebel's kindergartens, the children enjoyed the freedom to move, explore, play and learn at their own pace she goes on to argue that Froebel emphasised that the child is free to decide his own actions according to the laws and demands of the play the child is involved in. Tovey (2017) mentions how this approach underscores the importance of allowing children autonomy in their activities, enabling them to engage deeply and meaningfully with their play while following its intrinsic rules and requirements. Porter, (2022) discusses how a Montessori's classroom design can play a crucial role in enabling self-directed play, embodying the core principles of her educational philosophy. Porter (2022) elaborates on this by explaining how Montessori environments are meticulously structured to foster independent learning, with classrooms featuring child-sized furniture and easily accessible resources to facilitate exploration. This accessibility promotes autonomy and confidence as children choose their activities without needing assistance to reach or manipulate materials (Porter, 2022).

Section 3 Observations and Leuven Scale Method

According to Drake, (2006) Observation is fundamentally about gaining insights into young children's learning styles and individual characteristics. Drake continues to explain how observations serve as a crucial component of the assessment and planning cycle in early childhood education, providing a solid foundation for reflective practice. Additionally, through observation, educators can capture detailed information on children's interactions, behaviours, and developmental progress, which is essential for tailoring educational approaches to meet each child's unique needs and promoting their overall development (Drake, 2006). Webster (2023) emphasises the crucial role that observational practices play in early childhood education, highlighting their importance for identifying children's specific learning needs and developmental progress. Webster continues to explain, through such observations, educators can tailor educational strategies that align precisely with the unique interests and developmental stages of each child. Webster claims that this process not only enables the creation of engaging activities that resonate with individual interests but also fosters a child's self-direction and self-confidence. Continuing this line of thought, Webster emphasises that this approach supports children in becoming active participants in their own learning, adapting dynamically to their changing needs and preferences.

Building on Webster's insights, Spreeuwenberg (2022) describes observation as the systematic tracking of children's behaviours over time, which through detailed documentation, enables educators to detect behavioural patterns and gain a deeper understand of how children perceive their world. Spreeuwenberg notes that these insights allow for the planning of age-appropriate activities and modifications to the learning environment that encourage developmental growth, thereby enhancing the educational practices highlighted by Webster and Drake. Spreeuwenberg (2022) also highlights the significant advantages of observational practices in early childhood education. He explains that by stepping back and observing, educators can gain deeper insights into the strengths and weaknesses of each child within their care. According to Spreeuwenberg, this enhanced understanding enables educators

to adapt their teaching strategies and environment effectively, which in result causes better learning outcomes. Specifically, Spreeuwenberg notes that observation helps educators comprehend the underlying reasons for a child's challenging behaviours, identify potential special needs, and appreciate the unique ways in which a child communicates and interacts with peers. Furthermore, he emphasises that such observations are crucial for documenting developmental milestones and tailoring educational approaches to address any identified gaps in a child's development. This comprehensive approach not only supports individual learning but also fosters a holistic approach to the child's overall development and growth, contributing to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

According to Azilo Training (2021), There are several effective observation methods used in early childhood education that help enable practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of children's behaviours and learning styles. These methods include:

1. **Informal Observations:** Noting spontaneous behaviours and contemplating their causes.
2. **Tuning in to the Child:** This focuses on understanding children's preferences and motivations.
3. **Schema Spotting:** Recognising patterns in children's play which indicates their cognitive frameworks.
4. **Participant Observation:** Engaging with children during their activities to observe them closely, although this method may be influenced by the observer's participation.
5. **Non-participant Observation:** Watching children interact in their natural play settings without adult interference to ensure behaviours observed are genuine.

Azilo Training highlights the necessity of using these diverse observation methods to capture a well-rounded understanding of each child's learning and developmental needs in various settings.

Arnerich (2021) and Brodie (no date) introduce the Leuven Scale, a method developed by Ferre Laevers and his team, which focuses on assessing the emotional well-being and involvement of young learners through a five -point scale for each aspect. This tool, as Brodie notes, enables systematic evaluation of a child's emotional comfort and the depth of their engagement, which Brodie mentions are vital for enhancing educational practice. According to Main, (2021), The Leuven Scale is an essential tool for early years educators, supporting the promotion of emotional well-being and active involvement. They believe this tool aids in implementing effective educational and developmental practices for young children. The benefits of the Leuven scale, as Arnerich details, lie in its ability to provide qualitative insights into a child's learning experience, fostering environments that support emotional and cognitive development. However, Learning Journals (2021) highlights the strengths of the Leuven Scale in providing a comprehensive method for observing children's well-being and involvement, yet they point out it has limitations for children with special needs or disabilities. They note that this is due to the behaviours the scale describes may not be as evident or present in children with SEND, particularly those who are non-verbal. Learning Journal explain, while the general principles of observational teaching are still applicable, the specific observations may be too generalised or limited in scope to accurately assess these children. Additionally, Learning Journals criticises the scale for similar reasons as critiques of John Bowlby's attachment theory, noting that it may not fully account for cultural variations in children's behaviour.

Despite these criticisms, Learning Journals acknowledges the major benefit of the Leuven Scale: it offers a standardised, practical method that enables childcare professionals and parents to measure children's engagement and learning effectively. While not flawless, the scale's foundation in scientific principles combined with its practical applicability makes it an invaluable tool for assessing children's learning and engagement (Learning Journal, 2021).

Section 4 Importance of Play in Observations

According to Azilo Training (2021), observations during play are essential, as they provide real-time insights into children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Observing children as they engage in play reveals their ability to negotiate, solve problems, and adapt to new situations, which are critical aspects of their development (Azilo Training, 2021). McDonald (2018) supports this view, emphasising that play allows children to express themselves in a natural and uninhibited manner. This expression provides educators and practitioners with genuine and valuable data about children's skills and behaviours, which might not be as evident in more structured settings (McDonald, 2018).

The benefits of play extend significantly beyond immediate observations. Parker, Thomsen, and Berry (2022) have discovered that teaching methods that incorporate play are notably more effective in developing children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and creative skills than traditional methods employed in primary schools. Their comprehensive review of research comparing playful teaching to more conventional methods demonstrates that play not only facilitates immediate learning but also enhances long-term learning outcomes such as problem-solving abilities, memory retention, understanding of complex concepts, and the ability to interconnect different concepts (Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022). These findings advocate for a playful approach to education, suggesting that play more accurately reveals children's genuine skills and growth trajectories compared to the more rigid structured assessments (Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022).

Further supporting this perspective, Devlin (2020) highlights that when children are engaged in play, they are more likely to exhibit behaviours and skills that reflect their true developmental level. He explains that play removes the pressures typically found in formal testing environments, allowing children to demonstrate their abilities in a setting that is comfortable and familiar to them. Additionally, Devlin notes that play-based assessments are recognised for their effectiveness in providing valid developmental feedback. This is particularly important in cases where standardised

tests may fail to accommodate individual variances in child development (Devlin, 2020).

Rosa (2021) emphasises the critical nature of observation in understanding each child's individual preferences, dislikes, and reactions to various situations such as care routines or new introductions. By observing these interactions, practitioners can discern which experiences, routines, or activities a child finds enjoyable, which they find challenging, and what might cause them anxiety (Rosa, 2021). This level of insight is invaluable for assessing children's progress and understanding their specific care and learning needs, thereby enabling the planning of further developmental steps (Rosa, 2021).

Moreover, Rosa highlights the importance of focusing on what the individual child is doing during the observation period—where they spend their time and how they interact with their environment. Having a solid understanding of child development, supplemented by specific insights gathered from parents, can enhance the effectiveness of these observations (Rosa, 2021).

Additionally, Rosa stresses the necessity of listening and paying close attention to the interactions of the child with different adults and peers. It is crucial to record important features of the child's responses, behaviours, learning, and development as soon and as accurately as possible after observing them (Rosa, 2021). While not all observations will be documented, it is beneficial to record significant experiences and milestones that children achieve (Rosa, 2021).

Rosa also mentions observational practices require objectivity, avoiding the influence of preconceptions on the observer's interpretations. For instance, a concern that a child does not communicate often should be approached with an open mind, which may reveal that the child uses body language effectively or communicates well with peers but not adults, or that certain activities or interactions facilitate easier communication for them (Rosa, 2021). These observations can also assist in more accurately recognising the child's needs and identifying any potential concerns (Rosa, 2021).

After completing observations, Rosa (2021) recommends reflecting on the observations to assess what they reveal about the child. This reflection should lead into further assessment and planning. Engaging in discussions with the child's parents and other practitioners can help clarify thoughts and assumptions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the observed behaviours (Rosa, 2021). However, According to Williams (2018), the mere presence of an observer can significantly impact the behaviour of children within an educational setting. Williams explains, this phenomenon, commonly referred to as the 'Hawthorne effect', suggests that children may alter their behaviour if they are aware, or even suspect, that they are being observed. Furthermore, this can particularly affect young children in a group setting, who might change their natural behaviour in response to an adult present who does not engage with them as they typically would. Meighan (cited in Williams 2018), further expands on the complexities of observer-induced bias, arguing that it is impossible for anyone to approach the analysis of educational processes without preconceptions. Additionally, he points out that observer expectancy can also play a significant role, where the observer's conscious or subconscious expectations may influence the children to behave in ways that align with these expectations, thereby confirming the observer's initial predictions. In summary, while the observer effect, as noted by Williams (2018), can pose challenges by potentially altering children's natural behaviours, awareness and thoughtful implementation of observation strategies can mitigate these effects. Observations in play settings provide a rich, detailed, and nuanced understanding of children's developmental stages and needs, underscoring the critical role of play in educational settings (Azilo Training 2021).

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