Children's Play: Theory and Practice Portfolio

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AI Statement

I have not used AI in any way for this assignment.

Section 1

Small world play is a form of imaginative play which utilises small scale objects and environments as a framework for play (Arnerich, 2019). Common examples include farmyard sets, dolls houses and playhouses, all of which are designed to shrink the world to a child's size and allow them to manipulate the elements to suit their exploration. This allows children to explore complex scenarios and experiment with cause and effect in a safe, controllable environment. While small world play fosters creativity, it can also play a key role in the holistic development of the child. This means that small world play should be considered a valuable tool in the arsenal of anyone working with young children. However, it should be noted that this type of play is more prevalent in children during Piaget's preoperational stage, typically between the age of two and seven years old (Malik & Marwaha, 2023), when children engage in symbolic play. Prior to this stage children typically engage in solitary, sensorimotor play and typically show little interest in symbolic play, such as small world play.

By its nature, small world play requires the manipulation of small objects or props to achieve one's goals. For example, activities such as putting all of the barnyard animals into their barn require children to grasp and relocate figurines and open small doors, encouraging them to develop their fine motor skills, grip strength and dexterity. Additionally, a mismatch in proportions between figurines and receptacles is common as such children must navigate the challenge of an ill proportioned door or insufficient space, encouraging them to develop their spatial reasoning and problem-solving skills (Department for Education, 2024).

Small world play can also encourage a child's speech and language development. The narrative nature of most small world play encourages children to practice object identification and associations, communicating requests and storytelling. This low pressure, high opportunity environment approach to language acquisition is typically effective in both vocabulary expansion and developing early give-and-take conversational skills, enabling more effective communication (Creaghe, Quinn & Kidd, 2021). Socially, small world play provides an opportunity for children to develop their interpersonal skills. From sharing figurines and environments to building a scenario co-operatively, small world play provides a myriad of opportunities for children to develop skills such as sharing, empathy and cooperation (Reed, 2007). Integral to this is the process of shared learning. Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development places significant emphasis on the beneficial effect of collaborating with those whose skills exceed one's own, in order to take advantage of their superior knowledge (Chaiklin, 2003, pp.39-59). This type of learning is prevalent in co-operative and even parallel small world play, particularly amongst mixed age groups.

Whilst this piece is primarily focused on the benefits of play in an educational and developmental context, it is worth noting the healing benefits of play. As our understanding of mental health,

particularly in children and adolescents, has improved, it has become increasingly apparent that it is essential to promote mental wellbeing from as early an age as possible (Department for Education, 2025). It is this belief which has provided the foundation for increased awareness of play therapy and its benefits.

Play therapy is the term given to the therapeutic application of play and observation. The most common form being non-structured, child-directed play sessions, where the child is free to express whatever emotions or issues, they are dealing with either verbally or through play (O'Neill, 2024). However, some play therapists prefer to specialise in a particular form of play, typically these are still open-ended resources chosen with freedom of expression in mind such as sand or Lego therapy (LeGoff *et al,* 2014, pp. 93-99). Whatever play therapy looks like, it serves the purpose of increasing a child's emotional literacy and supporting the child to process issues and emotions in a healthy manner.

Effective play therapy requires that the child and therapist to form a relationship founded on respect and honesty. The child must be able to trust that the therapist is a safe person with whom to discuss personal or difficult problems, to trust that the adult will react in a reassuring or positive manner when trusted with the child's inner world (Landreth, 2023, pp. 65-85). For this relationship to be built, the adult must ensure that they are equipped with the skills necessary to support the child through these issues, while also ensuring they themselves stay regulated so as to avoid negatively impacting the child in their care. Moreover, a strong sense of respect towards the child from the therapist is of the utmost importance to the health of this type of relationship; this means that even in the face of difficult behaviours the therapist must respect the child enough to honour their communication attempts and to reign in their own emotional response, mirroring the expectations placed on caregivers and therapists in the adult sector.

Section 2

At its core, play is the natural expression of a child's curiosity, interest, and development, it is an essential, individual exploration of the world and the child themselves (Howard, 2020). Play is a powerful vehicle for learning, it takes many forms and with that offers many opportunities for learning which can support later academic learning (Crittendon & Gray, 2024). It can support mathematics skills by introducing concepts such as one-to-one correspondence, spatial reasoning, and early numeracy. Linguistically, play offers opportunities to discover new language, practice novel words and rehearse conversational turn taking. Play also provides significant health benefits to children, including lower blood pressure and heart rate, promoting a sense of physical well-being, and helps to improve a child's self-confidence and stress levels, promoting mental wellbeing. It is for these reasons, amongst others, that the right to play is enshrined within the United Nations Convention on Rights of a Child (United Nations, 2013) and Welsh government policy and legislation (Play Wales, 2024).

Self-directed play is play which follows the direction of the child or children engaged in the play, critically it functions with minimal input from the adult. Psychologist, Irene Palaiologou (2017) states that self-directed play occurs naturally, without outside impetus, and is intrinsically motivated, motivated by an internal desire not in pursuit of a particular achievement or external reward. During periods of self-directed children have access to a variety of resources, the Reggio Emilia approach (Smith-Gilman, 2018) endorses open-ended natural objects, or 'loose parts', which enable children to experiment with a variety of play types as well as enabling them to flow through different types in a single session. They must also have sufficient space to incorporate physical play such as dancing, running and rough play, this is essential to encourage the physical development of the children at play and honours the more physical language which precedes verbal communication (Grunseit *et al.,* 2020). It is in this context that the benefits of self-directed play, such as increased engagement and independent exploration, are most evident as children are able to express themselves and explore in whatever manner appeals in the moment, removing outside interference which may limit a child's experiment and explore. When one considers the role of the adult in self-directed play, the Montessori methos argues that this was the one of the most valuable contributions an adult can make, to appropriately prepare the environment to enable independence and creativity whilst ensuring the child's safety (Okuo, 2014).

In order that an environment may encourage and allow for self-directed play, it must be safe for the children it intends to offer the provision to (Welsh Government, 2023). This will look different depending on the intended children, most typically varying between age groups. This may take the form of padding sharp corners and edges in an environment intended for children in the first few years of life or providing rubberised paving to break a fall in an older child's outdoor play environment. However regardless of age, proper supervision must be maintained during play

sessions to enable the adult to respond appropriately to any situation which the children are unable to navigate independently.

This response is another key contribution adults can provide during self-directed play. Whilst adults supervising self-directed play sessions are not encouraged to actively participate in the children's play, due to the risk of adulteration, where the adult becomes the leader of the play, corrupting it with adult influence, they can still provide much to the children in their care. Adults can serve four potential purposes during self-directed play: a passive observer, a resource in play led by the child, an encouraging playmate, and a tool for conflict resolution. Being a resource may look like serving as a customer in a child's play restaurant, where the adult plays a limited and well-defined role, or serving as a shield during a game of tag between children, where the adult stands in for an inanimate object. Adults being an active, encouraging playmate should be short-lived, limited, and occur only as a result of being invited in by the child or when assisting a child who is unable to play unaided. When participating in this manner, the adult must take care to avoid taking over the play; this requires a careful balance of assistance and deference. Adults providing effective conflict resolution assistance may look like enabling the children to develop their own skills by modelling calm, clear communication and resolution strategies or physically intervening when rough play gets out of hand and encouraging emotional regulation through mindfulness (Perry, 2024, pp. 50-52).

Section 3

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2025) defines observation as 'the act of watching somebody/something carefully for a period of time, especially to learn something'; this, when combined with one or more forms of evidencing, reflects the meaning of 'observation' in the context of childcare. Observations are conducted regularly in all regulated settings in Wales, in line with guidance from the Welsh government (Welsh Government, 2023). The structure and frequency of the observations varies between settings, within the boundaries of minimum standards as, in order to be an effective tool for improving practise and provision, they must be suited for the purposes, environment and individuals they are intended to serve (Gould, 2024). Given the multitude of approaches and foci in the childcare sectors, it follows that there are an equal number of variations to observational policies and formats.

When correctly handled, observations can provide valuable insight into the personality, interests, and development under one's care. This enables practitioners to tailor their approach to the children in their care and what would best serve their needs, which is in line with the child-centred approach presently favoured in Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). Additionally, they offer practitioners the ability to look reflectively upon them and spot patterns which may not be immediately apparent in the moment, thereby enabling practitioners to offer support or tailor existing support to enable the children in their care to thrive.

Observations, particularly those conducted during adult-led activities, can also prove valuable when planning future activities. Observations taken during adult-led sessions, when considered reflectively, allow one to consider the range of factors that may have influenced the reception and outcome of a particular activity. This enables refinements to be made to the provision of adult-led sessions, potentially improving educational outcomes and student engagement levels (Hallet, 2013, p.24-28).

Whilst we have acknowledged that there are a significant number of approaches to observing, one popular type, particularly in the early years, is narrative observations (Bruce, Louis & McCall, 2015, pp. 5-19). Narrative observations are written documents detailing a child's actions, speech and interactions in during the observational period. There are several forms a narrative observation may take, most commonly diaries, typically kept daily and intended to facilitate easy communication between interested parties, and specimen records, detailed accounts filled in after-the-fact and often aided by quick in-the-moment notes and observations.

Diaries are typically populated by preformulated, fill-in-the-blank style pages which enable providers to document anecdotal observations, record milestones and communicate the child's care provision during the day. This is intended to facilitate easy communication, typically between childcare providers and parents or other childcare providers, providing a brief view of key

developments and acting sentimental keepsakes. Traditional written diaries have largely fallen out of fashion, being replaced by technology platforms such as Famly, which serve a similar purpose while enabling instantaneous information-sharing about the child's care throughout the day (Woodlands Nursery, 2025). This type of information sharing makes it easier for parents and childcare providers to work together to spot patterns in a child's behaviour.

Specimen records are typically more in depth than diaries, being kept for the providers records or for evidencing in the case of an outside referral being required. Specimen records involve detailing the child's actions, interactions and speech and the context in which the observation occurred (Irwin & Bushnell, 1980, pp.102-106). This typically means recording the time, location, and cause of the observation. This information will be followed by a detailed description of the events and the child's participation in them, it is considered best practice to differentiate between observations made in the moment and those made reflectively. This allows for an in-depth analysis of observations as it provides contextual information and a detailed account, which the anecdotal diary lacks. Specimen records may also utilise multiple media types, including diagrams and videos or photographs, to allow for additional detail or context (Brodie, no date given). Introducing these visual elements can provide richer insight as, when re-examined, they may allow the observer to spot things that they missed in the moment, potentially recontextualising the moment for the observer.

Narrative observations are not without their limitations however, observers wishing to assess multiple children in a short period of time may benefit from using a more streamlined, prepopulated form. This predetermined observation format may also be more effective if one is assessing when one has a list of specific skills, for example entry requirements for a school or diagnosis criteria (Inclusive Teaching and Learning, 2024). Another potential limitation of a narrative observation, particularly those occurring after the fact, is the possibility of forgetting details between observing and documenting. This lapse of memory can significantly alter the context noted for an observation, which will in turn alter the outcome of any analysis of the observation (Donaldson, 1978, pp. 87-98). An alteration which may impact the provision of support, the efficacy of future planning and perception of the child being observed.

Section 4

When one considers observation of children, particularly in the early years, special consideration must be given to observation of the child during self-directed play sessions. Self-directed play observation, occurring in environments the child is familiar with, or 'naturalistic' environments, allows for a clear view of the typical behaviour of the child, a downfall of structured observation in a controlled environment (Kurt, 2020). When children feel confident in an environment, their home or usual childcare setting for example, they are able perform to a higher standard, in all areas. This allows for a more accurate view of their aptitude and development, enabling practitioners to plan future activities to best suit their needs or to tailor support provision to address any points of difficulty.

Additionally, observing self-directed play enables practitioners to further their understanding of the child's individual interests and motivations. When children are offered the freedom of choice, they become able to inform and expand one's understanding of who the child is at their core. It is a foundational belief of all child-centred approaches that each child is an individual, unique and multifaceted. It is only through observing children when they have the freedom to express themselves that adults become aware of who that child truly is and how to engage them in efforts to expand their learning and understanding (Sinha, 2018, pp. 64-70)

Not only does observing play offer an accurate view of a child, but it also offers a holistic one. Play, due to its fluid, difficult-to-define nature, enables children to run the gambit in terms of exercising skills. For example, physical play allows observers to note and assess a child's physical development, such as their strength and co-ordination, in addition to their risk assessment and management skills (Play Wales, 2025). While imaginative play provides an opportunity to assess various aspects of a child's social development, including their linguistic ability, storytelling, and collaborative skills (Whitehead, Whitebread & Jameson, 2010, pp. 81-108). It also provides an insight into the wellbeing of the child in question, as many children will express through playthings they struggle to express directly (Cooper & Sutton, 1999). For example, a child suffering from an abusive home life may well express this during imaginative play at their childcare setting. As such, observing play is not only a tool for assessment in terms of developmental milestones and stages, but a valuable tool in the safeguarding of children.

Observation is not without its pitfalls and limitations however, by its very nature humanity is imperfect and often unpredictable, it is from this that issues occur when observing children. As mentioned previously, context is essential when analysing observations, one cannot divorce an observation from the environment and circumstances in which it was made (Research Design Review, 2017).

One key aspect of the context of any observation made in person is that the child is aware that they are being observed. Leading to another pitfall of observing children, a phenomenon known as the 'Hawthorne affect,' the change in behaviour observed when the subject becomes aware that they are being observed (Elston, 2021). In children this typically takes the form of one of two distinct responses, performing and disengaging. Confident children, upon noticing an observer or camera, will often begin to 'play up to' the camera, turning their attention away from play towards the source of the attention on them. Whereas more withdrawn or introverted children will often completely disengage from both the observer and the play upon realisation, this may look like simply stopping or completely removing themselves from the situation. Both responses taint the observation of play, as the child is no longer engaged in play but has instead become focused on avoiding or enjoying the observation.

While steps can be taken to mitigate this such as making observations based on video rather than in the moment active observation, observing while seemingly engaged in another activity and avoiding making notations in front of the child being observed, these open the door to a different issue. Details may be lost between the event and the documentation. Delayed notation can lead to a child being misquoted, misremembered, or misconstrued in the documentation of the observation, significantly reducing the value of the document and a video can only ever show what is in frame at the time of recording. This means that things that may have been occurring behind the camera rely on recall in order to be considered. Additionally, particular care would have to be carefully placed to avoid attracting attention and disrupting play.

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