

Play – Theory and Practice

1. Understand Play and Practice

Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher along with one of his students, Aristotle, believed that learning was for life, and that through play and physical exercise children can learn at their own pace, as with constraints nothing is absorbed. During the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers started to see children as free-thinkers and should have freedom, be able to learn in the natural environment, they believed that this would enhance their independence and cognitive development according to Grigg (2016).

In 1992 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), came into effect. There are 54 articles all equally important and all stand for each individual child states Unicef (n.d.). However, article 31 states that all children have the right to play, rest and engage in cultural activities, which shows the importance of play. Play Wales (2017) suggests that play types can be categorised in many ways, play behaviour can look and sound differently. To gain knowledge and understanding of play, builds progression in practitioners' professional development therefore, providing the children with the environment required to enhance their development.

Creative Play

Play can be very visible however, not always about using the craft trolley or copying a ready-made example. Children need to be able to express themselves, have time and not worry about cleanliness. Complete control of play is with the child. Practitioners need to be aware, supportive, and non-judgmental of different ways of play, creative play can be unexpected and deviate from conventional play. Children need to feel accepted and not self-conscious, A wide range of opportunities and experiences available can enhance their cognitive development and give them options to explore sparking creativity. Psychologist Winnicott believes that creative play gives the sense of exhilaration, it helps to grasp feelings, start to understand your own body and explore new ideas without an end goal, Bruce (2011). In practice adding unfamiliar objects to the environment can enable this. Scott-Mckie and Casey (2017) also focuses on the development of fine motor skills in creative play. This can be a range of experiences but one suitable for all ages is mark making, usually to help develop writing skills is also a way to express holistic creativity. Pacey (n.d.) states that mark making does not have to be with pencils or pens on a sheet of paper, it can be a

physical and sensory experience where children can draw lines or shapes to express themselves. In the Outdoors children can mark make on the floor, walls or other surfaces using chalk or natural materials like soil to draw or mould, leaves or flowers to do some pattern prints. In practice this can all be accessed without cost and by giving the children time, space, acceptance of their play, they are free to allow their creativity to take over whether they play individually or share ideas with other children. Rudolf Steiner a philosopher of the nineteenth century opened schools as he believed that children developed knowledge and understanding by imitation according to Macblain (2014), changing later as children's needs were view differently. Physical, intellectual, and emotional needs were identified therefore, a focus was put on early years education to be more about creative play, However, Chamorro-Permuzic (2015) article states that creative people can be more deceitful, intolerance to boredom and an enriched imagination enables them to wisely create opportunities.

Social Play

Play Wales (2017) states that social play is a dominant play type and happens when interaction with others takes place. It is a noticeable play which starts from birth and learning during this play can develop on many levels. Vygotsky's theory states that humans are born with the functions of attention, perception, sensation and memory and its our social and cultural interactions that determine the development of these. It starts with what can be achieved independently and then builds to interaction with others and what we can do with support. This can be an adult, peer or technology. Vygotsky calls this the zone of proximal development and believes that a higher cognitive development can be achieved from positive social interactions suggests Mcleod (2020). In practice solitary play can move into parallel and then social play, practitioners can facilitate this in many ways. Understanding that play is guided by the child, and that the adult is there for support and guidance when asked for by the child, ensure social activities are available for example, board games can be suitable for children in the early years, helping to develop good social skills. Luliana and Juhasz (2020) study looks at the advantages and disadvantages of board games in the classroom and there were many advantages to the development process of the child. In practice the introduction of board games can be micro-managed by the adult therefore, this interferes with play, not all children enjoy board games and not all children are developmentally ready for them.

2. Why children should choose play

Froebel's theory was that children's highest form of development is through play, the freedom to express and explore their own experiences holistically which is inclusive for all children with or without disabilities. His theory has broadened across the world according to Early Education (n.d.).

Over the years there is some evidence to show that a child's emotional well-being can be caused through play. The idea of play can differ from those of an adult. A child will look at the activity and assess, the location of the activity, an adult participation and whether they have a choice to participate. In practice a 'play' activity could look like a sand tray with paint brushes in the outdoor area to help develop fine motor skills. A Practitioner can worry about the materials being used and if they are inviting enough, they may add too many pictures to follow or copy and assist children on holding the paint brush making the activity more structured. A study carried out by Howard & McInnes (2012) showed that children who participated in 'play' activities displayed more engagement, better behaviour and had a joyful facial expression than those participating in the 'not play' activities. These were the same activities however, the 'not play' activities were placed at a table and the child was asked to participate by an adult. Grindheim (2017) article about 'Children as playing citizens' agrees that the children in their study seemed to be more engaged, smiling and displaying good behaviour whilst taking part in 'play' activities. It also suggests that children involved in their own development, having their voice heard, giving them equal opportunities to participate in planning, and the lay out of their education can give them a sense of 'belonging'. In Practice following the Foundation Phase framework this is vital, along with children developing at their own pace, when ready to move to the next stage of development.

Children can be self-motivated. When they have the drive to take part or challenge themselves for no other reason other than self-satisfaction. To gain knowledge or to achieve something or the feeling of achievement are all ways an intrinsically motivated child works. In practice intrinsic motivation is when a child visits an activity of their choice and is fully engaged, trying their best to improve skills. An extrinsically motivated child can not only be motivated for their own self gain but also for reward or praise from others, some are only motivated by what they can receive for other parties.

In practice this child they would seek praise from an adult, or only complete a challenge if it was a competition or a reward at the end. A study carried out by Wilson (n.d) states that children who are intrinsically motivated have determination, self-worth, enjoyment and can be high achievers. The study then showed the negative effects outside rewards can have on intrinsic motivation. The offer of a reward can mis-communicate the knowledge or appear as controlling, therefore, considerably reducing intrinsic motivation, it can remove the focus from self-satisfaction to recognition from others. Practitioners need to identify intrinsic motivation, facilitate with the tools required, not to intervene unless directed by the child. However, that is not to say children who are driving forward with their own learning should not be rewarded, the delivery of the reward may need to be addressed.

According to Erikson's psychosocial stages, in early childhood and preschool ages children should start to develop autonomy and initiative. Autonomy is gained from self-control and independence, through 'play' activities with the ability to choose themselves. For some children when they are playing, it is the only time they have control of their world, they get to be in charge, this in time can help them develop self-awareness, physical and social skills. In practice its vital to remember that the experience they are having is rare, and practitioners should not try to control or intervene with the play. Working alongside or participating when asked by the child builds the relationship according to Macblain (2014) and Brown (2014).

3. Observation Method

Observations are integral to a child's development. Practitioners need to be aware of child development, how they can support it and enhance that next stage. Observations can give a lot of information about a child, their likes and dislikes, an insight to their character, their stage of development and by that, strengths and weaknesses can be identified. This information can then assist future planning and transition periods. Observations should not be planned with a set up area, they should be part of everyday tasks, therefore, giving the information of what is working or not working for an individual in the setting according to the Welsh Assembly Government (2008). An observation lesson for Montessori teachers is when they place themselves away from the children, not too far that they are unable to hear, but far enough as to not disturb them. They will then record everything, for example, from how long a child attends an activity, their level of engagement with activity and peers, movement, even down to

hand movement according to Macblain (2014). All this informs the practitioner about the child's stage of development, as well as giving them knowledge and understanding for future observations.

The Foundation Phase Profile, which is the educational framework followed in Wales for three- to seven-year-old children, gives clear guidance about assessment and observations and how the use of these support practitioners in providing a holistic curriculum suitable for the stage of development. Observation and assessment work together, an observation will take place, the findings are recorded, and information is gathered to identify needs. This is called the assessment according to Resources for Early learning (2014). A baseline assessment needs to be carried out on each individual child during the first six weeks for joining the setting. The advice by the Welsh Government (2017) suggests that observations should be carried out during play activities and not have specific areas of assessment. A true reflection of the child's ability without assistance is required for this observation. Information that needs to be collated at this point is from the Compact Profile, this profile looks at a select few from the 4 areas of learning which are easily observed and are suitable for developmental stages, the skills ladder starts from 6 months and children are around 4 years old when they have this assessment. The profile is passed on to the Welsh Government and is used by the practitioner to support the Foundation Phase pedagogy in providing a holistic curriculum centred around the child. Lindon (2012) suggests that links between New Zealand, Australia, Reggio Emilia region and the UK pedagogy approach have been made, the teaching and sociocultural experiences.

In practice a weekly focused observation is planned, where Foundation Phase practitioners have an information sheet with key areas of the skills ladder which are being targeted are listed. This observation will take place during a focused task with a group of children, an involvement scale is used;

1. Child achieve target independently.
2. Practitioner modelled alongside child for them to achieve target.
3. Practitioner modelled and asked high-level questioning to achieve target.

This is a task lead by the practitioner and children can not always reach their target in front of an adult or during a group activity. This observation may not give an accurate account of a child's ability.

Incidental and significant observations can take place by practitioners at any time. This is when a practitioner notices something a child has accomplished or was unable to.

These are recorded on post-it notes and collected in the relevant box. Information gained from both methods of observations are then used for summative assessment and future planning, (this information is a policy the Foundation Phase staff at Penygaer School follow, however, the policy is only available as a paper copy at the school). Summative assessments are a national method of recording progress and outcome information set in the Welsh Government (2017) handbook. Incidental and significant observations can give a true reflection on the child, however, this observation could be missed and the knowledge of that child's ability will be missed. Lindon (2012) states that practitioners have their own theories, which can be based on their own experiences, knowledge, and understanding. The acceptance of own theory and being aware of it can open the mind when observing. The only information that should be noted is the information seen or heard.

When practitioners observe they do it through their own outlook, sometimes subconsciously they bring in their own feelings and experiences, therefore, giving them a different perspective to another practitioner. By working as a team, observing and collating information together can give better knowledge and understanding of a child Andrews (2012).

4. Role of play during observations

Children develop at different stages of their life, Piaget believes that there are 4 stages of development and that children gain knowledge from their experiences, the adults around them and by being intrinsically motivated. Sensorimotor is the early stages of development, which occurs with objects. In practice this can be observed by playing with the baby hide and seek, if baby is looking for the object, then they are aware of it. Secondly, is preoperational. In practice observing a child using a block as a telephone, they are aware of how to use a telephone, and then can imagine the block as a telephone. Thirdly, is Concrete operational. In practice this can be observed when a child understands that the same amount of milk can be in a short stumpy bottle or a tall thin bottle. The fourth stage is Formal operational. In practice this can be observed when a child can think quickly how to solve a problem and come up with many solutions. Piaget theory is in line with play-based activities, where children can learn and develop through their own experience in an environment enhanced by the enabling adults around. Piaget's theory was constructed from middle class children,

therefore, children from other back grounds may not fit into his theory according to Healthline (2018).

McInnes, *et al* (2013) carried out a study around children's perception of play and how adult-child interaction may affect that. Setting A's adults asked children open questions and discussed in a way which empowered the children to choose and control their play. Setting B used closed question and discussed with children about their choices and play in a way that control remained with the adults. Children in setting B used the adult as a play cue, when the adult was present the children did not see the activity or area as play. In setting A, the children did not see the adult as a play cue, more as a playful adult. Studies show that children are engaged and conduct themselves in ways which is more successful for their development through play. If the child is performing to their potential whilst playing, surely that is the best time to observe?

Practitioners need to support and encourage play, by making the environment inviting and intriguing so that children have lots of opportunities, therefore, providing adults the opportunity to observe. Firstly, the need to identify play is critical. King and Sturrock (2020) suggests that the knowledge of the play cycle can give a better understanding of play. There are six strands to the play cycle, it starts with the metalude, an inner thought or feeling about play, this is not visible, so there are no obvious signs of this happening. With the metalude the child will send a signal out to the area around, which is referred to as a play cue, this can be a look, movement or even words. The play return does not need to come from another child, it can be from the environment, which will then start the play frame, the area, and the context of the play. This can be observed by the expression on the child's face or by the movement. This can move around and change context however, it has to be at the decision of the child. The response is picked up and children then become absorbed in the play, this is called the loop and flow and can last for seconds right through to days or weeks. Annihilation is when the children decide to end the play. If an adult ends the play, at any time, this is called adulteration. In practice it can not be avoided, ringing the bell at the end of play time, calling children to do a task, there are many ways which are unavoidable, however, trying to improve the play, include something, help someone without their request for it, are also forms of adulteration. With the understanding of the play cycle practitioners can be more aware of their role as observes, and with knowledge gained from observations, facilitating the environment with things the children can explore and things they enjoy are all elements of working within the foundation phase framework.

The core value of this framework is that the development of children's self-worth, self-esteem and self-image are paramount. The curriculum is co-constructed between practitioner and child, so observations are necessary to identify the needs of the child according to the Welsh Government (2015).

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