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Play: Theory and Practice

Section 1 – Types of play

Numerous theorists identified types of play; however, it is important to differentiate stages and types of play. The stages of play are based on social interaction observed during play, from solitary to social play. Alternatively, they are classified by the type of play, like symbolic play or play that incorporates structured games with rules. The play types are based on the activities involved, like language or constructive play. Each type is valuable, and as children naturally develop, they incorporate and combine different play instead of discarding one type for a new one.

Object play.

We employ various items throughout our daily lives, similarly, objects play a significant role in our imaginative processes. In the first year of life, infants develop greater command over their manual actions, attributing symbolic meaning to an object as something else, and using these actions to investigate their world. The foundation for examining play stems from the theories of Piaget, who observed infants' interactions with objects to comprehend their developing understanding of the physical world (Piaget 1945, 1952). Piaget highlighted a change in infants' object interactions during the second year, noting their awareness changes, recognising that objects exist independently of themselves.

As infants grow older, they start incorporating objects into the realm of imagination through pretend play. An example of the progression of self-directed play could be of a very young infant simply banging a toy ambulance, a one-year-old pushing the vehicle across the floor while imitating the siren sound, and a two-year-old might take it a step further by placing a small world figure on top of the ambulance, simulating a drive to hospital. As toddlers undergo development in language, attention, and social cognition, their symbolic play becomes more advanced. The early instances of pretend play is simple and short-lived, evolving into more extended and intricate narratives during the second and third years. According to Weisberg & Bloom (2009), almost any object becomes a potential substitute for another in the context of pretense. Like the one-year-old pretending to drink with a toy cup and then switching to play with something else; an 18-month-old pretending to drink and pour tea from a teapot; and a 24-month-old who has laid a table for a tea party, put water in the teapot and is using whatever is to hand

like leaves and pebbles to replicate food. These embellishments in children's pretend play underscore their comprehension that objects can be employed in imaginary situations that exist independently of reality (Vygotsky 1967).

Physical play.

Physical play involves children engaging in activities that exercise their bodies and utilise their large muscles. This type of play is crucial not only for promoting and maintaining children's physical health but also because it is connected to every aspect of a child's overall development. Physical play can range from large-scale activities like running and jumping to finer motor skills such as picking up small blocks or threading beads. The engagement in various physical activities contributes to the development of both gross and fine motor skills, fostering a range of movements that are fundamental to a child's overall physical development and coordination. According to Piaget (1973) children are not passive recipients of information but rather active participants who construct their understanding of the world through interactions, exploration, and experiences with the environment. This approach highlights the importance of hands-on learning, exploration, and play in a child's cognitive development.

Engaging in physical play, both indoors and outdoors, contributes significantly to enhancing a child's brain activity. Exposure to fresh air and physical exercise allows the child to learn through their senses, gaining insights into aspects such as pace, spatial awareness, and the surroundings. This type of play is crucial for the development of language, communication skills, and social abilities.

Furthermore, physical play aids in developing a child's stamina, muscles, balance, and coordination. It provides an avenue for releasing energy and tension, offering a sense of freedom, adventure, and a safe space for exploration. This, in turn, promotes the child's confidence and autonomy, fostering a sense of self-governance. Physical play serves as a holistic developmental tool.

Providing space for physical play is essential for a child's enjoyment and development (Bilton and Crook 2016). Visiting parks or playgrounds with play equipment, including climbing frames and slides, trees, and tunnels, offers valuable opportunities for diverse physical activities. Access to bicycles and scooters further challenges their coordination and balance, contributing to motor skill development. Additionally, utilising the space for ball games and creating obstacle courses allows children to express their creativity

freely. This freedom fosters the creation and development of new games and play scenarios, encouraging imaginative and unstructured physical play.

Section 2

The concept of play, as discussed by Bottrill, (2022), is often widely misunderstood, and within today's educational landscape, is frequently undervalued. Despite this, play stands out as the most essential element for development. The ability to play is, without a doubt, the greatest gift we can offer a child. Regrettably, the constant emphasis on measurable outcomes and the prevalence of adult-centric thinking often overshadows the genuinely enriching potential of play. Instead, it gets replaced by a monotonous routine of worksheets, rigid structures, and the repetitive nature of factory-style checkbox activities.

Supporting self-directed play in children is essential to promote their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Several theorists have emphasised this, and their ideas have guided adults in fostering an environment that encourages self-directed play. Piaget (1953) suggests providing open-ended toys and materials that allow for creativity and exploration and avoiding over-structuring playtime, allowing children to discover and create on their own. Vygotsky (1978) advises offering a variety of materials that can be used in diverse ways, encouraging children to engage in imaginative and pretend play, supporting their play by being present, only helping when needed. Erikson (1950) according to Kivnick & Wells (2014) encourages independence by allowing children to make choices about their play activities, acknowledging and praising their efforts, fostering a sense of accomplishment.

Play is crucial for the holistic development of children. During cognitive development play allows children to solve problems, make decisions and enhance cognitive abilities and critical thinking, while pretend play fosters imagination and creativity, helping children develop a rich inner world and the ability to think abstractly (Piaget 1953). Their social development is enriched through play by providing opportunities to interact with others, improving their communication and language skills, developing empathy by understanding perspectives and emotions, and promoting cooperation and collaboration in group play as they work together towards common goals (Vygotsky1978). Play allows children to express their thoughts, feelings, and desires in a safe and enjoyable manner through self-expression to

develop their emotional well-being. Erikson (1950) agrees play provides a natural outlet for emotional expression and helps children learn to manage and regulate their emotions as they build self-confidence through achieving goals and overcoming challenges. As discussed earlier active play develops gross motor skills, while fine motor skills are refined through motion while drawing and building for physical development along with improved coordination. Piaget proposed that cognitive development in children occurs through stages, and these stages influence their ability to understand and engage with language by vocabulary expansion and storytelling, which also helps with sequencing of events. Freud (1923) has influenced the idea of a sense of self, and this is developed through play when children experiment with roles, allowing them to develop a sense of identity and understand their own wants and strengths., while allowing them to explore and understand cultural norms, values, and roles. It is important to develop coping mechanisms and relaxation through play as the child engages in enjoyable and unstructured play, which helps to reduce stress and contributes to a balanced and healthy lifestyle, while promoting mental well-being. These stages of play are a multifaceted and integral aspect of childhood that supports holistic development, allowing children to explore, learn, and grow in a manner that is natural, enjoyable, and tailored to their individual needs and interests and is achieved throughout multiple play types.

During their study, Howard and McInnes (2013) illustrated that children exhibit higher levels of emotional well-being when they perceive an activity as play compared to when they perceive the same activity as not play. The results revealed a significant difference in the emotional well-being displayed by children in these two types of activity sessions. Detailed observational analysis further confirmed increased behavioral indicators related to emotional well-being among children participating in 'like play' sessions as opposed to 'not like play' sessions. The observations of children revealed that when they perceived an activity as play, certain characteristics were prominent. These included a likelihood of being on the floor, choosing the activity themselves, and the absence of adult involvement. Conversely, when children were directed on what to play, engaged in activities at a table, or had adult involvement, they no longer considered themselves in a play context. This underscores the significance of autonomy, self-directed choices, and minimal adult interference in the children's perception and experience of play. Indeed, the highlighted observations underscore the significant impact of children's perception of an activity as play on their emotional well-being.

If children do not consider an activity as play, there is a possibility that the potential benefits associated with play and Playwork theories may not be fully realised. Play and Playwork theories often emphasise the importance of autonomy, self-direction, and intrinsic motivation in fostering various aspects of a child's development.

When children do not perceive an activity as play, and elements such as autonomy and self-selection are absent, it may impact their engagement, motivation, and overall experience. The benefits linked to play, as discussed, may not be as pronounced if the activity is not perceived as enjoyable or intrinsically motivated by the child.

In essence, aligning activities with the principles of play and Playwork theories, where children have a sense of agency and enjoyment, is more likely to yield the intended positive outcomes. It is important to consider and respect the individual preferences and perspectives of children to create play environments that align with their developmental needs and promote well-being.

Therefore, supporting self-directed play involves providing a rich and stimulating environment, offering age-appropriate materials, and allowing children the freedom to explore and express themselves. Incorporating elements from various educational theories can create a holistic approach to fostering children's development through play.

Section 3

Observing children during play is a valuable method for effectively assessing their capabilities and interests. As previously discussed, Howard and McInnes (2013) studied children at play and through their observations highlighted the difference in children’s well-being after a play activity that the child perceived as play or not play. Without this observation, practitioners could not facilitate the new curriculum of learning through play. The role of the adult during observations is to record the actions and behaviours of the child to be able to make informed assessments on their developmental needs.

Various observation methods are employed when working with young children, catering to their needs or the reason for observation. A written observation, for example, involves closely observing a child for a

brief period and meticulously documenting every aspect of their behaviour. It requires a detailed and comprehensive account, covering what the child is playing with, who they interact with, and how they respond to various stimuli. A running record, a type of written observation, is particularly useful when a specific behaviour is noted, but the reason behind it is unclear. The detailed nature of this method allows for a thorough examination of the child's actions, aiding in the identification of any patterns that may emerge during play.

While written observations can be valuable for specific purposes and pattern recognition, it comes with some challenges. The process is time-consuming, demanding focused attention and the ability to provide an elevated level of detail. Nonetheless, when used with a clear objective in mind, written observations can be a powerful tool for accurate and insightful documentation of a child's behaviours and interactions during play.

An alternative observation tool is the interaction tracker, which involves mapping the areas a child utilises during the observation. This tool highlights the specific locations where the observed child is actively engaged and interacts. It proves beneficial for understanding which aspects of the environment the child is drawn to, as well as identifying areas that the child may deliberately avoid. Connecting this information with other observations can provide a comprehensive view of the child's interactions.

Despite its advantages, this observation method has some drawbacks. The use of a code system, which may only be understood by the observer, can be a potential challenge. On the positive side, it is a straightforward tool that requires less writing during the actual observation. However, the process of writing up the observation later may involve more detailed elaboration.

Observation can provide valuable insights into various aspects of a child's development, but its effectiveness in offering a holistic view depends on the approach taken and the factors considered during the observation process. A well-rounded observation typically involves assessing multiple areas of development.

Holistic observation involves examining different facets of a child's behaviour, interactions, and skills. This includes cognitive abilities, emotional expression, social interactions, physical development, language skills, and more. Froebel (1887) viewed each child as an individual while recognising their

connection to a broader whole. His philosophy emphasised the importance of recognising the uniqueness of each child and valuing their individuality. During observation, it is important to acknowledge that it is a subjective process that may contain unconscious biases. Louis and Betteridge (2020) highlight this element of observations, emphasising that they are influenced by the observer's interpretations of what they see. When making and recording observations, it becomes essential to consider each child's 'wholeness' and their role as a part of the broader whole, which aligns with Froebel's perspective.

To gain a comprehensive understanding, observations should take place in various contexts, not only through play, but group activities, individual tasks, or interactions with peers and adults also. Different settings and situations can reveal various aspects of a child's behaviour. To gain a clear understanding of the child, observations over an extended period of time are necessary, this will help identify patterns, changes, and consistent behaviours over time. It is important to gather information from various sources, including parents, teachers, and caregivers, which also contributes to a more holistic view. Each perspective provides unique insights into various aspects of the child's life and development. There may be times when the behaviours witnessed at home are conflicting with those experienced at the setting. Using a range of observations assists in recognising and understanding the cultural context and is essential for a holistic view. Cultural factors can influence a child's development, including communication styles, values, and expectations. In Vygotsky's view, cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and shared knowledge, are essential for cognitive growth.

While observation can offer a holistic view, it is important to acknowledge that no single method is perfect, and there may be limitations. Additionally, a one-time observation might not capture the full complexity of a child's development. Combining observations with other assessment tools, such as interviews, standardised tests, and pupil centred reviews, can enhance the comprehensiveness of the assessment.

In summary, a well-planned and executed observation, considering various domains and contextual factors, can provide a holistic view of a child's development. It is essential to approach observation with an open mind, considering the uniqueness of each child and their individual strengths and challenges.

Section 4

As Froebel (1887) encouraged, observing children in play can provide valuable and often more accurate insights into their development than other assessment methods. Play is considered a natural and authentic context for assessing various aspects of a child's development.

Play is a natural and spontaneous activity for children. When engaged in play, children are more likely to exhibit behaviours that reflect their true abilities, preferences, and interests. This natural behaviour can offer a more authentic portrayal of their developmental level. As Howard and McInnes (2013) were able to observe, the difference in the children when play was defined by the adult compared to their definition effected, not only their well-being but, effort and attitude towards the activity.

During play, children often choose activities based on their interests and preferences. This self-initiated exploration provides insights into their curiosity, problem-solving skills, and the application of knowledge in a context they find meaningful. Play frequently involves interactions with peers, siblings, or adults. Observing these social interactions can provide information about a child's social skills, communication abilities, and capacity for collaboration. Play situations are dynamic, requiring children to adapt, problem-solve, and make decisions in real-time. Observing how children navigate these situations provides a glimpse into their ability to cope with challenges and changes (Vygotsky 1967).

Children are more likely to be comfortable and engaged during play, reducing the likelihood of performance anxiety that might occur in more formal assessment settings. A relaxed and engaged state allows for a more accurate representation of their capabilities. This raises the question of the effectiveness of assessments through observations in an education setting as the child does not usually have the freedom to choose the play when being observed as the reason for the observation becomes the priority. This was emphasised throughout the paper by Howard and McInnes (2011) when discussing the pedagogic interactions between children and practitioners influences their play and therefore the observation.

Play for observational reasons often changes the choice of play, the observation needs to align with the concept of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment derived from the activity itself, rather than relying on external rewards or

incentives. When children are intrinsically motivated, they find personal fulfillment, pleasure, or interest in the task, which often leads to a higher level of engagement and commitment.

In the context of play, when children are motivated to play for the sheer joy, curiosity, or satisfaction the activity brings, it is considered intrinsic play. This form of play is often characterised by increased creativity, exploration, and a genuine love for the activity. It contrasts with extrinsic motivation, where individuals engage in an activity for external rewards or to avoid punishment.

Recognising and promoting intrinsic motivation in children's play can contribute to a more meaningful and enjoyable learning experience, fostering a lifelong love for exploration and discovery. Adults must stay separate and allow play to ensure an accurate portrayal of the child's development. When evaluating the New Curriculum for Wales (2018) it is important to consider the research by Howard and McInnes (2013), particularly in terms of maintaining a play-based approach and preserving children's intrinsic motivation. To ensure an effective integration of play-based elements in the curriculum, it may be valuable to explore how the principles and practices identified in the research align with or inform the curriculum guidelines. This involves assessing the curriculum and addressing the factors identified in the research as conducive to maintaining intrinsic motivation, such as autonomy, choice, and the joyful aspects of play. It is an approach that underscores the significance of evidence-based considerations when implementing educational policies and frameworks.