

Cover Sheet

For this assessment I have submitted the following:

Component 1: Play Portfolio

I acknowledge the use of Copilot to support research and proof reading between 2nd February to 26th February.

I used the prompts:

1. Proofread this piece, focussing on grammar.
2. Proofread this piece, focussing on spelling.
3. Check my reference list is in the correct order.

I can confirm that I have not presented AI generated work as my own.

According to Play Wales (2017) symbolic play is a fundamental part of children's development, supporting children in using different materials to imagine and represent experiences, objects, and ideas. When children use one object to symbolise another, such as imagining a block as a mobile phone, they demonstrate an emerging understanding of representation, a key aspect of early communication and literacy development (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). Symbolic play also provides opportunities for children to explore creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction. Children benefit from easily accessible, open-ended materials that can be used for different purposes, both indoors and outdoors. Practitioners can support this by joining in with a child's pretend play, such as using a scarf as a dress, a cardboard box as a house, or a clipboard as an iPad. They can also play alongside small world figures, ask children what their characters are doing, use bowls and sticks for cooking, and provide painting tools and chinks to represent ideas creatively. These approaches (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021) illustrate how symbolic play can be embedded into everyday practice. Research by Quinn and Kidd (2019), drawing on Bruner's theory of symbolic representation, shows that symbolic play creates a rich opportunity for communication development, with children and caregivers demonstrating increased joint attention. By responding to children's ideas, encouraging their curiosity, and taking advantage of learning moments that happen during play, practitioners actively support engagement and development, an approach aligned with the Curriculum for Wales, promoting active, joyful learning guided by children's interests (Welsh Government, 2022).

Beyond its cognitive and communication benefits, symbolic play allows children to immerse themselves in ideas, feelings, and relationships, exploring how they can impact others and their environment. This process fosters creativity, emotional awareness, and interconnectedness, reflecting how children use imagination and representation to make meaning of their world, as emphasised by Tina Bruce (Froebel Trust, 2020).

Building on their experiences, children often engage in constructive play, actively manipulating, shaping, and combining materials to create something new (Rees Edwards, 2022). Constructive play involves materials such as sand, water, cardboard, playdough, or blocks, providing opportunities to develop creativity,

problem-solving, collaboration, and co-operation. Children consolidate understanding of materials and objects while enhancing social and cognitive abilities, applying knowledge and imagination from earlier play.

A case study conducted on behalf of the Froebel Trust (n.d.) at Dalreoch Primary School supports theories of symbolic and constructive play by demonstrating how block play enhances children's communication and language development. The project explored how open-ended materials like blocks enable children to represent ideas, objects, and experiences, reflecting the principles of symbolic play and early literacy development. Froebel (n.d.) notes through block play, children engaged in discussion, explanation, and collaboration, naturally supporting and promoting language use. Teachers provided a language-rich learning environment, illustrating how constructive play builds on symbolic thinking as children assign meaning to their constructions and actively share ideas. The study also highlights how intentional use of block play can improve confidence and well-being, reinforcing the value of symbolic and constructive play in practice.

The importance of both symbolic and constructive play is further reinforced from a rights perspective. Article 31 of the UNCRC recognises every child's right to play, leisure, and participation in creative and cultural activities (UNICEF, 1989). Ensuring children have regular opportunities to engage in symbolic and constructive play supports cognitive, social, and communication development, as well as basic rights. By providing open-ended materials and sufficient time for child-initiated play, practitioners uphold Article 31 while supporting imagination and representation in ways aligned with Piaget's preoperational stage (Lumen Learning, n.d.).

However, although both constructive and symbolic play are types of early childhood play, they focus on different cognitive skills and serve different developmental purposes (Jakobsen & Fischer, 2025). Constructive play involves manipulating real objects to create something concrete, highlighting hands-on exploration, problem-solving, and motor skill development. Symbolic play involves using objects, actions, or ideas to represent something else and engage in imaginative stories or roles, reflecting developing abstract thinking and social understanding. This aligns with Piaget's theory that during the preoperational stage, children begin to use symbols and mental representations to understand the world, rather than just relying on

physical interaction with objects (Lumen Learning, n.d). Symbolic play therefore demonstrates children's emerging ability to use imagination, language, and symbolic thought, a key characteristic of the preoperational stage (Jakobsen & Fischer, 2025).

While symbolic and constructive play demonstrate the different ways children think and learn, their true value depends on how they are supported in practice. According to Play Wales (2022) for play to positively impact learning, children need opportunities to make their own choices. This places emphasis on children's autonomy and the responsive role of adults, rather than defining what play should look like.

"Play involves children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way" (Welsh Government, 2025, p. 6). This principle is demonstrated by self-directed play, which is initiated and led by the child, driven by curiosity and imagination rather than adult instruction (The Steiner Connection, 2022). Children often become fully absorbed in the moment, creating their own rules and exploring freely. Simple, open-ended materials such as cardboard tubes, sticks, or playdough are particularly effective, as they can be transformed in multiple ways and allow children to discover outcomes independently (The Montessori School of the Berkshires, 2024). While adults may need to step in to ensure that play remains safe, appropriate, and fair, genuine self-directed play must remain child-led and free from adulteration, a term used to describe the adult imposing their own agenda by joining, controlling, or attempting to improve the play (Sands, 2013). This aligns with the role of the enabling adult, who observes, notices and responds sensitively to children in order to determine whether and how to intervene (Welsh Government, 2022). Rather than directing outcomes, the adult supports children in developing meaning through thoughtful, responsive interaction, ensuring they retain the freedom to explore, experiment and pursue their own interests and fascinations.

Play Wales (2017) highlight the significant impact of self-directed play on children's holistic development, supporting their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Play supports social skills, friendship formation, conflict resolution, and the development of respect and tolerance. It also builds resilience by enhancing emotional regulation, confidence, creativity, problem-solving and perseverance, enabling children to manage stress and challenges effectively. Welsh Government

(2014) reinforce this, recognising that freely chosen play makes a positive contribution to children's physical, mental and social health, and forms an essential part of a healthy child.

According to the Froebel Trust (2025), for children to be truly engrossed in their play, they require long, uninterrupted periods that allow them to fully immerse themselves in their chosen activities, maintaining their freedom to explore and think independently. This principle is central to slow pedagogy, which values giving children ample time for play, learning, and relationship-building, promoting unhurried, caring interactions between children and adults. A key aspect within Froebelian pedagogy is the idea that play is fundamental to children's learning and development, with children having ownership of their play while adults provide 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a meaningful learning context. A perspective further supported by UNICEF (n.d), which emphasises that independent, freely chosen play fosters creativity, problem-solving skills, and early independence, as children develop their own ideas and solutions without adult direction

However, a key challenge to self-directed play and play-based learning is that practitioners often find it difficult to identify and evidence what children are learning through play. Play does not follow the fixed patterns or developmental levels outlined in curriculum guidance, and play skills are not always explicitly recognised as curriculum goals, making learning harder to track (Wood, 2020). As play can take many forms over extended periods, and involve imaginative and symbolic use of resources, educators may find it challenging to capture and demonstrate the knowledge and skills being developed through children's play (Wood, 2020). Some curricula are overcoming this challenge by adopting a more holistic approach to assessment. For example, Welsh Government (2024), through its guidance for funded non-maintained nursery settings, promotes progressive assessment strategies that recognise the value of play and understand progression holistically rather than as a set of fixed developmental stages. The guidance encourages settings to use ongoing observation and professional dialogue to understand where children are in their learning and to plan appropriate experiences that support progression, rather than relying on predetermined outcomes alone.

Another curriculum that demonstrates this organic and holistic approach to assessment is Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017), New Zealand's early childhood curriculum. It structures learning around five interconnected strands, wellbeing (mana atua), belonging (mana whenua), contribution (mana tangata), communication (mana reo), and exploration (mana aotūroa). Each strand includes broad learning outcomes encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions. Kaiako, the teachers or educators responsible for implementing the curriculum, use these outcomes alongside ongoing observation to monitor children's progress, plan responsive learning experiences, and evaluate development in a holistic way. By addressing the challenge highlighted by Wood (2020), Te Whāriki, together with Welsh Government guidance (2024), demonstrates how progressive curricula can support assessment that respects child-led, play-based learning while capturing meaningful developmental progress.

If children are to lead their own play in meaningful and authentic ways, practitioners must develop a deep understanding of what is taking place within those experiences. Welsh Government (2023) states that careful and reflective observation, enables adults to recognise learning without interrupting or directing it, ensuring that self-directed play remains organic, while still informing responsive and purposeful practice.

Observation underpins effective early years practice, forming the foundation for both the adult's role and the learning environment (Welsh Government, 2022). Meaningful assessment arises from observing children in authentic contexts, such as play, transitions, and everyday interactions, enabling practitioners to develop a holistic understanding of each child (Bruce, 2019). Through careful observation, practitioners are able to recognise patterns in children's interests, learning dispositions, and behaviours, providing insight not only into a child's abilities but also into potential future development. By observing in context, adults can identify children's strengths and areas that need support, ensuring that planning is informed, purposeful, and bespoke to each individual. As the Froebel Trust (2022) highlights, observation involves attentively watching and listening to interpret children's motivations, choices, and problem-solving strategies, enabling practitioners to respond in ways that genuinely support learning.

The Notice, Analyse and Respond approach, highlighted in the Welsh Government Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (2022) and supported in the Assessment Arrangements guidance (2023), places the child at the centre of learning and ensures that observations are both structured and meaningful. During the notice stage, practitioners observe children during play, noting their interests, chosen areas of the environment, interactions with peers, and responses to challenges or tasks. These observations are often recorded as narratives, capturing an organic account rather than relying on predetermined checklists. This aligns with guidance from Estyn (2024), which emphasises that effective observation should not just document behaviour, but actively inform planning and provide insight into the child's developmental progress, preferences, and developing skills.

During the analyse stage, practitioners reflect critically on what the observation reveals about the child. They consider the learning taking place, as well as what it reveals about the child's strengths, dispositions, and possible schematic interests. Recognising schemas, as discussed by Athey and explained in Louis et al. (2020), provides an additional lens for understanding development alongside the child's expressed interests, enabling practitioners to identify repeated patterns of thinking and behaviour. Analysing observations in this way ensures that any interventions or planned activities are evidence based, supporting secure and progressive learning while respecting the child's individual learning journey. However, a notable challenge during this stage is consistency and reliability. Differences in practitioner's approaches can make consistency across a setting difficult. Smidt (2015) suggests that few practitioners have received in-depth training in observation as an educational tool. Without shared training and understanding, adults may interpret children's behaviour differently or focus on different aspects of learning, this can then affect the reliability of assessments and impact the quality of planning.

The final stage of responding requires adults to make informed decisions about how to move learning forward within authentic contexts, both through planned experiences and spontaneous opportunities that happen within the environment (Welsh Government, 2023). As young children learn in the present moment, practitioners must recognise and respond to unplanned "teachable moments" to

support and extend learning. As highlighted in Birth to 5 Matters (2009), skilled adults observe, assess and respond in the moment, ensuring learning is supported as it unfolds rather than delayed.

This responsive practice is further reinforced in the Birth to 5 Matters (n.d.) Observation, Assessment and Planning (OAP) guidance, which advises practitioners to move away from checklist-based assessment and instead rely on their professional knowledge of child development to make holistic judgements. Emphasis is placed on understanding children's learning within context and using reflection to inform next steps. In this way, observation becomes not just a record of events, but a responsive process that shapes practice and supports each child's overall development.

A recognised challenge of observation and assessment in early years practice is the time they require. The Early Years Foundation Stage Review (2011) found that some practitioners felt documenting every activity could be overwhelming, but more experienced practitioners explained that they often had the next steps in mind and did not always need to write everything down. Practitioners trained in observation and experienced with this approach rarely reported concerns about the time needed, highlighting that confidence, experience, and high-quality training are key to managing observation effectively. Birth to 5 Matters (n.d.) emphasises that when formative observation is embedded into everyday practice and summative assessment draws on this ongoing knowledge, assessment becomes a reflective and straightforward process rather than a time-consuming task. By integrating observation naturally into day-to-day interactions, practitioners can focus on engagement and personalised learning while still producing reliable, professional judgements about each child's development.

While the Notice, Analyse and Respond method provides a structured approach to observation, its effectiveness depends on observing children in play. Play offers a natural context where children's choices, interests, and skills are clearly demonstrated, ensuring assessments accurately reflect each child (Welsh Government, 2022).

Observing children in play provides the most authentic insight into their development, interests, and learning dispositions, enabling practitioners to make meaningful, child-

centred assessments (Bruce, 2019). Play offers organic opportunities for these observations, enabling practitioners to see children's abilities authentically rather than through adult-directed tasks. Through attentive observation, adults can recognise patterns in children's motivations, choices, and problem-solving strategies, using these insights to plan responsive, meaningful learning experiences (Froebel Trust, 2022). Observing in play also supports children's engagement. When learning is child-led, children are more motivated, focused, and willing to explore, increasing the accuracy of assessments. Play supports deeper learning by strengthening brain development, emotional regulation, and problem-solving skills, while providing opportunities for exploration, experimentation, collaboration, and curiosity-driven learning (We Skoolhouse, 2026). This avoids pushing more formal academic tasks too early, as children may not yet be developmentally ready.

However, practitioners must remain aware of potential challenges, such as the Hawthorne effect, where children alter their behaviour when they know they are being observed (The Open University, n.d.). To maintain authenticity, adults adopt the role of enabling practitioners, supporting learning without imposing their own agenda (Welsh Government, 2022), aligning with Article 12 of the UNCRC, recognising children's right to express their views and participate in decisions that affect them (UNICEF, 1989).

The adult's involvement in play varies depending on observations. Practitioners may remain largely passive, respond to play cues, or enrich play through thoughtful participation, always following the child's lead (King, 2020; Whalley, 2024). Intervening without invitation can disrupt play, highlighting the importance of professional judgement. Observation also informs the adult's role in scaffolding, facilitating, or modelling thinking, in line with Vygotsky's concept of the 'More Knowledgeable Other' and the Zone of Proximal Development, where gentle guidance extends learning without reducing the independence of the child (Bodrova and Leong, 2007).

Play also guides the design and continuous adaptation of an effective environment. Organised spaces that promote curiosity, independence, problem-solving, and high levels of ongoing engagement, such as Montessori-prepared environments, demonstrate how observation informs both adult involvement and environmental

support for holistic learning (Welsh Government, 2022; Montessori Academy, 2026). Through careful observation, practitioners can identify which areas of the environment are most engaging, which resources support certain skills, and how children use the space. This knowledge allows adults to make purposeful adjustments, adding, removing, or rearranging materials to better support learning and exploration. As the Welsh Government Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings highlights,

These environments will provide for wide and varied experiences that allow children to express themselves physically, creatively and imaginatively, and allow them to safely follow their interests, independently or with others.

(Welsh Government, 2022, p. 13).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a useful framework for understanding why such thoughtfully organised environments are key to engagement and learning. When children's physiological, safety, and social needs are met, they can fully participate in play, developing confidence, problem-solving skills, and independence. Observations allow practitioners to identify where support is needed to meet these foundational needs, enabling children to be confident and curious as they realise their potential (Maslow, 1943). By meeting these needs within responsive, well-designed spaces, practitioners foster creativity, collaboration, and sustained engagement, helping children progress towards self-actualisation within everyday play experiences (Welsh Government, 2022; Montessori Academy, 2026).

In line with the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022), the environment is not just a setting for play but an important part of the curriculum itself, shaping opportunities for inquiry, collaboration, and independent thinking. By creating spaces that respond to children's observed interests and needs, practitioners ensure the environment actively supports developmental progress across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Finally, observations must be meaningful and manageable, focusing on the child rather than simply recording events. Evidence can be collected through learning stories, one-page profiles, brief annotations, or digital tools, and can inform professional discussions or referrals (Welsh Government, 2023). By embedding observation into everyday practice, practitioners maintain a reflective and responsive approach that supports engagement, provides

accurate insights into development, and guides personalised, child-centred planning (Birth to 5 Matters, 2009; Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.).

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