

Curriculum Module

Section 1

Introduction

In the subject of early childhood education, the implementation of play-based learning in early years curricula is a matter of great importance Zosh, J et al. (2017), Lillard et al., (2017) NAEYC, (2009) and Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). This critical analysis explores the impact of play-based learning strategies, utilising data and reports from evaluative research to provide insights.

The foundation of play-based learning is the concept that children learn best when they are actively involved, exploring and experimenting. Since play is a powerful tool for promoting holistic development, play-based curricula strives to capitalise on this fact. The early years are a key stage in social, cognitive, and emotional development.

Cognitive Development

The beneficial impacts of play-based curriculum on cognitive development have been repeatedly demonstrated by research (Smolik and Duijnstee, 2019), (Lillard et al., 2017). The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky emphasise the role that play serves in the establishment of understanding as well as the development of problem-solving abilities. Research shows that meaningful play improves creativity, critical thinking, and the capacity to link concepts (Aubrey and Riley, 2022), (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014) and (Woolfolk, A., 2014).

According to Lillard et al., (2017) Howard and McInnes, (2013) and Siraj-Blatchford, (2009) research suggests that children participating in play-

based learning consistently exceeded their peers in regular schools in terms of academic achievement and cognitive flexibility. Therefore this implies that play-based learning methods help create a stronger basis for intellectual capacities.

(Aubrey and Riley, 2022) and (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014) discuss that theories of developmental psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, two significant researchers, have a strong alignment with play, this is also agreed by (Woolfolk 2014). Through absorption and accommodation, play serves as a process for combining new information into established cognitive frameworks, according to Piaget (Woolfolk 2014) and (Conkbayir and Pascal, 2014). In contrast, Vygotsky highlighted how play supports and scaffolds a child's zone of proximal development (Berk, 2009) and (Aubrey and Riley, 2022) while Froebel adds that play activities for children are supposed to be appropriately challenging and agrees with Vygotsky that they should also be scaffolded to take into account each child's individual abilities (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). These ideas are incorporated into play-based curricula through activities that stretch children's thinking skills while providing room for development.

According to Van Hoorn et al., (2014) Berk and Meyers, (2015) learning through play frequently incorporates problem-solving exercises. Play provides children with a variety of obstacles, whether they are acting out dramatic play scenarios, working out puzzles, or constructing block buildings. Van Hoorn et al., (2014) and Berk and Meyers, (2015) explain that these tasks call on spatial awareness, flexible thinking, and the capacity to plan and carry out strategies, which all contribute in the improvement of the ability to solve problems, and also agreed by Bodrova and Leong, (2007).

Goncu and Gauvain, (2012) and Lillard, (2013) believe in order to stimulate creativity and imagination, both of which said to be essential elements of cognitive development, researchers suggest that play should be encouraged. Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2009) and Lillard, (2017) also agrees and discusses playing pretend games, such role-playing or building fictional places, encourages divergent thinking and the production of unique concepts. The favourable connection among cognitive creativity and imaginative play has been shown repeatedly in research.

Bodrova and Leong, (2007) discuss that memory retention, control of inhibitions, and flexible thinking are examples of executive functions that are essential for cognitive growth. Bodrova and Leong, (2007) and Ursache and Noble, (2016) agree and explain that play-based activities help children to enhance their executive functions by challenging them to plan, organise, and carry out tasks. Playing pretend, for instance, requires children to manage several roles and scenarios, which can help to improve their recall capacity and cognitive agility.

According to Ginsburg and Milteer, (2011) and Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2009) programmes which focus on learning through play frequently include practical, multisensory learning. These tasks, which include handling items, partaking in sensory play and building buildings, aid in the blending of motor and sensory pathways. Since it creates links between perception, actions, and thinking, this combination is crucial for the growth of cognitive skills.

Clements and Sarama, (2011) and Ginsburg and Milteer, (2011) imply that learning methods centred around play lay the groundwork for subsequent academic success. They believe that mathematical

principles are established through categorising, calculating, organising and measuring activities that are incorporated into entertaining environments. In similar ways, play activities that involve role-playing, storytelling and having discussions improve the development of languages.

Berk and Meyers, (2013) Goncu, and Gauvain, (2012), and Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2009) imply that a child's natural curiosity and desire to learn about the world around them are naturally fostered by play. Goncu and Gauvain, (2012) State whether examining the qualities of various substances in a science-themed play centre or delving into the properties of materials during water play, these types of activities ignite children's interest and motivate them to seek out and learn something new. (Berk and Meyers, 2013) and (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2009)

Hirsh-Pasek et al., (2015), Bradbury and Swalies (2022) and Playful lessons foster intellectual development in a way that is transportable to other scenarios. Bradbury and Swalies (2022) and Bodrova and Leong, (2007) agree and discuss play-developed abilities, such as imagination, critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving, may be used in a variety of educational contexts and real-life circumstances (Pellegrini and Holmes, 2006). The play-based framework's development of cognitive skills is made more practically useful by their adaptability.

Emotional and Social Development

Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) and Howard and McInnes, (2013) both discuss how the play-based curriculum is well known for its beneficial advantages on the emotional and social growth of children. They discuss how research by theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, suggest that

play can offers a natural environment for children that encourages interactions with others, self-control. They believe that children can pick up skills including negotiation, cooperation, communication and navigating challenging social circumstances through interacting with their classmates. Conkbayir and Pascal (2014) and Howard and McInnes, (2013) share how play-based techniques can enhance social skills and emotional resilience and suggest how important play is in forming healthy interactions and emotional stability in children.

Corsaro, (2014) and Hughes, (2013) suggest that children can intuitively connect with their classmates in play-based activities. They discuss how playing acting out scenarios, playing cooperative games, or collaborating on a task together help children grow and develop important social skills. Elias, Berk, and Repine, (2011) agree and believe that the fundamentals of healthy interactions with others are fostered through these encounters, which involve sharing, settling conflicts, partnership, and discussion.

Play settings frequently entail children adopting various roles and viewpoints, whether imagining they are a character in a fairy tale or acting in theatrical play. Lillard (2013), Taylor, (2004) and Elias, Berk, and Repine, (2011) have similar view that as children think about other people's perspectives and feelings, empathy is fostered. Hughes, (2013) Taylor, et al., (2004) agrees and discusses that the children gain an understanding of and the ability to empathise with their friends' emotions as a result of these activities.

Landreth, (2012) and Levin and Rosen, (2001) state that children may communicate and learn about their feelings through play in a secure and creative environment, which also links to Bowlby's attachment theory,

who believed that friendships and environments that make the child feel secure and at comfortable are essential to the child's overall wellbeing (Macblain, 2022).

Landreth, (2012) and Levin and Rosen, (2001) speak about how children can express themselves with art, storytelling and pretend play, amongst various other forms of play. Play can also be beneficial in the development of emotion regulation abilities in children because it teaches them how to manage and regulate what they're feeling through various play activities.

According to Ladd, G. W. (2005), Rubin, Bukowski, and Parker, J. G. (2006), and Bradbury and Swalies (2022) environments centred around play encourage healthy interactions between peers, giving children the chance to make friends and develop a feeling of community. Bradbury and Swalies (2022) further discusses that studies reveal children who participate in playful collaboration activities improve their social skills and have healthier connections with their classmates.

Corsaro (2014) and Bradbury and Swalies (2022) suggests that play has been found to be an effective way to practise communication abilities, both verbal and nonverbal, which are both essential for the growth of social skills. They explain that through play, children develop their ability to interact, regardless of if they are debating the rules of a game or choosing roles in a pretend play scene. This improves their capacity for self-expression and fosters successful relationship building.

Hirsh-Pasek, et al. (2009), Eberle, (2013) and Wood, (2013) agree that activities centred around play frequently call for cooperation and teamwork. They believe that children learn the value of cooperating to achieve a shared objective through team art projects like building

structures out of LEGO. Bland, (2015) agrees and implies that these cooperative activities aid in the growth of cooperative and collaboration abilities.

According to Ginsburg and Milteer, (2011), Hughes, (2013) and Brostrom (2018) learning through play can create a space that is emotionally supportive and allows children to freely express themselves. Gartrell, (2017) and Bennett and Glover, (2016) believe when practitioners establish a secure environment that promotes emotional exploration it can help children have an optimistic outlook on both their own and their classmates feelings and emotions.

Corsaro, (2014) and Hughes (2013) suggest that through play, children are able to discover and show off their independence in a monitored, secure environment. They believe that children gain an awareness of independence and one's own identity by decision-making through playing, for example choosing games or characters for pretend play. As a result, they develop a good self-perception and become more conscious of their unique qualities.

Bennett and Glover, (2016) Ginsberg and Milteer (2011) and Lillard, (2013) discuss that learning methods centred around play can give children the chance to experience obstacles and failures, which can help them build resilience and coping mechanisms. Bennett and Glover, (2016) and Lillard, (2013) Ginsberg and Milteer (2011) further explain that children develop their ability to adjust, endure, and overcome challenges through play, which helps them become more emotionally resilient when faced with challenging puzzles or social disputes.

According to Wang and Looi, (2017) and Wang, Tan, and Ho, (2018) play-based learning curriculum can also support the growth of

inclusiveness and cultural awareness. They suggest that children can develop empathy and understanding by learning about and appreciating various cultures and viewpoints through a variety of play resources, books, and inclusive play scenarios.

Section 2

In the context of play-based curriculum, taking into account the concept of the unique children entails practitioners who appreciate and acknowledge every child's distinct characteristics, aptitudes, and interests. This critical review focuses on how well age or stage related models of development, progress monitoring, and assessment techniques all support the idea that every child is unique.

Coherence towards the Unique Child Principle

According to Wood, (2013), Goncu and Gauthier, (2012) and Copple and Bredekamp, (2009) Curriculum centred around play may use observational evaluations enabled practitioners to identify each child's individual traits, passions, and learning preferences.

Wood (2013) Bodrova and Leong, (2007) and Ginsburg and Milette, (2011) suggest that Practitioners may acquire knowledge on every child's intellectual, emotional, and social growth by concentrating on immediate time observations made while playing.

Hyson (2011), Jones and Reynolds, (2011), Göncü and Gaskins, (2007) imply that Standardised assessments might not adequately represent the variety of ways that children play to communicate their knowledge and abilities. They discuss that it is possible that quantitative measurements will not accurately capture the specific aspects of a child's development. According to The Welsh Government (2022) the early years curricula's assessment techniques are essential to record each child's unique and holistic growth.

Observational assessments

Ridgway and Quinless, (2018) Wood (2013) and Fleet and Patterson, (2010) suggest that In order to learn further about children's connections, behaviours, and participation in different tasks, practitioners can carefully observe children while they're playing. Sandseter and Sando, (2018), Moyles, (2014) and Duffy and Crosby, (2012) imply that observational assessments are essential to activities in the curriculum that are centred around play to comprehend every child's uniqueness.

Practitioners observe as children begin playing, work with others, complete puzzles, and communicate feelings. Gartrell (2017), Corsaro (2014) and Wortham and Hardin, (2015) discuss how observations can offer insightful information about how play affects a child's social, intellectual, and emotional development. Korkeamaki and Mariam, (2012), Nutbrown and Clough, (2009) believe that providing practitioners with training on good observational procedures and assuring consistency among practitioners are crucial factors to take into account. Snyder et al., (2015), and Van Hemel and Brown (2014) agree that Reliability needs to be carefully considered because observations are subjective.

Standardised Evaluations

Meisels and Atkins-Burnett, (2017) and Kostelnik et al., (2015) suggest even though play-based curricula place a strong emphasis on qualitative assessments, standardised assessments may occasionally be included to meet external demands or to monitor particular stages of development. Wortham and Hardin, (2015) agree and imply that standardised assessments used in play-based curricula must recognise

each child's uniqueness and be in line with the principles of education. Meisels et al, (2015) believes that standardised measures are guaranteed to enhance qualitative assessments and offer an expanded view of how the child has developed. Bredekamp and Rosegrant, (2014) and Wortham and Hardin, (2015) highlight how it is essential to carefully analyse the significance and age-appropriateness of standardised assessments. They emphasise practitioners must, to support assessments that follow play-based learning principles and make a significant contribution to the assessment system as a whole.

Documentation and Reflection

Gandini et al., (2005) and Edwards, Gandini and Forman, (2012) state that the processes of documentation and reflection requires practitioners to observe and document behaviour, dialogues, and artwork of the children, while reflection entails deciphering and evaluating these recordings. Documentation for play-based curriculum may consist of written documents, films, and photos. Tarr and Bojovic, (2015) and Gandini et al., (2005) explain that practitioners analyse the documentation, taking into account the playing environment, children's responses, and the lessons that were taught. This process of reflection aids in guiding future assessment and planning. It takes time and deliberate effort to keep records and reflect. This evaluation method works well when practitioners are trained to document accurately and when frequent reflection discussions are organised (Korkeamaki and Mariam, 2012).

Parental Involvement

According to Dunst and Hamby, (2012) and Epstein, (2011) parental involvement contributes to a greater awareness of every child's skills and interests by obtaining information from families about their child's growth and experiences at home. They explain that practitioners include parents in the assessment processes through collaborative activities, parent-practitioner conferences, and frequent interactions. Dockett and Perry, (2014) suggest that parents may contribute an alternative viewpoint on their child's development by sharing important information about their play experiences at home. For this assessment approach, it is crucial to develop efficient lines of communication and guarantee that parents feel appreciated and included as collaborators in their child's education (Dockett and Perry, 2014)

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Collaboration and Peer Observation

Eadie and Burton, (2018), Drummond and Cockerill, (2014) and Moyles, (2014) imply that through peer observation, practitioners can monitor and evaluate how children engage with their classmates while they play, which can give them valuable insights on how children develop their teamwork and social skills. Drew and Karklin, (2016) and Brooker et al., (2014) explain that interactions between peers are commonly emphasised in play-based curriculum. Practitioners watch as children divide up tasks, share resources, and work out problems when they're playing. This method of collaborative evaluation helps students get a greater understanding of social dynamics in the learning environment. Berger, (2014) and Greenman, (2003) suggest that practitioners should find a balance between making observations and establishing a setting

that encourages constructive interactions between peers. This assessment approach is supported by offering advice on resolving conflicts and by encouraging sharing activities.

Monitoring Progress

Play-based curriculum portfolio assessments provide a detailed and individualised record of every child's development. A child's samples of work, reports, and reflections can all be found in a portfolio, which offers an in-depth overview of the child's progression throughout time (Van Hoorn et al., 2014). It might be challenging to find the time and resources necessary for detailed monitoring of progress, particularly in larger classrooms. Dichtelmiller et al., (2011) suggests that careful organisation and recording may be necessary for ensuring portfolios accurately reflect the array of experiences that each child has had.

According to Lillard et al., (2013) and Rogers and Sawyers (2012) in a play-based curriculum, monitoring progress involves documenting a child's progress over time and recording it. Through play, this technique seeks to give a detailed account of the child's development, challenges, strengths, and unique qualities.

Frequent Observations

Kostelnik et al., (2015) and Charlesworth and Lind, (2010) discuss how play-based curricula use frequent observations of children while playing as the basis for monitoring development. Teachers observe and record the way the children behave, engage with different playthings and situations. Teachers can record a wide range of developmental

characteristics, such as intellectual, emotional, social, and motor abilities, by regularly observing children in various play environments. A continuing and adaptive awareness of the development of every child is facilitated by frequent observations.

Models of development according to stage or age

According to Miller (2018) and Kostelnik et al., (2015) play-based learning curricula frequently adapt to stage or age related developmental frameworks. These curricula facilitate individualised development, acknowledging that individuals of the same age develop at different rates. This allows every child to learn and develop at their own pace. Bassok, Latham and Rorem, (2016) and Brooker and Edwards, (2016) suggest That the developmental variance present in play-based methods may clash with age-related expectations imposed by external pressures like standardised testing. It is difficult to strike a balance between fulfilling external goals and individualised learning.

Nutbrown and Clough, (2014) and Pound (2018) explain that in a play-based early years curriculum, stage and age related development models acknowledge that children move through different developmental phases, each of which is marked by distinct milestones and growing abilities. It is imperative to take into account the varying speeds at which children learn and the significance of customising educational experiences to fulfil individual requirements.

Recognising Developmental Milestones

Santrock, (2017) discusses how developmental milestones are skills or accomplishments that are anticipated at certain ages. These milestones are utilised by age-related theories of development as a reference to determine the abilities and behaviour characteristic of young children at different developmental stages (Santrock, 2017). Gartrell, (2017) suggest that developmental milestones are frequently incorporated into play-based curriculum to help practitioners determine which skills are suitable for students at a given age. Comprehending these developmental milestones facilitates practitioners create play activities that correspond with children's demands and foster their natural development.

Unique Progression Flexibility

While age-related development models offer a broad framework, play-based curricula place a strong emphasis on being able to recognise and work with children's unique differences in development (Brooker and Edwards, 2018). Lillard, (2013) explains that play-based learning methods acknowledge that children progress at varying rates and that differences among individuals are common. Practitioners alter the classroom setting to accommodate every student's different learning style, making that the curriculum stays mindful to every student's points of strength opportunities for development (Kostelnik et al., 2015) and (Lillard, 2013).

Planning Developmentally Appropriate challenges

Lillard, (2013) suggest how play activities that offer obstacles that are suitable for a child's stage of development can be implemented by practitioners with the use of stage or age related developmental frameworks. In the context of play, these obstacles foster intellectual, physical, and social and emotional development. Play-based curricula provide stimulating, demanding, but achievable activities in an effort to establish a balance. Practitioners can adapt play activities to each child's developmental needs in order to motivate and help them achieve a sense of accomplishment (Isenberg and Jalongo, 2019).

Frequent Contact and Interactions between Practitioner and Children

According to Van Hoorn et al., (2014) having meaningful discussions with children while they play can help practitioners gain a deeper understanding into the children's ways of thinking, methods to problem-solving, and ability to comprehend concepts. By means of frequent conversations, practitioners are able to establish strong bonds with children as well as acquire information regarding their socio-emotional and cognitive growth. Having regular interactions helps practitioners gain a broader perspective of how well children are learning in a play-based setting (Van Hoorn et al., 2014).

Combining Teacher-Guided and Child-Directed Methods

Isenberg and Jalongo, (2019) suggest when carefully planned, play-based curricula establish a balance between student-directed and teacher-guided learning, this gives children the opportunity to explore

and learn about themselves on their own whilst receiving direction and assistance from practitioners. Bruce (2011) implies it takes skilled informed practitioners who can adjust to the different demands of every child to balance various techniques. Considering every child's individuality requires practitioners to ensure that their guidance is encouraging rather than restrictive. To create a holistic and productive learning environment, play-based early years curricula must incorporate both teacher-guided and child-directed techniques.

This method recognises the value of giving children the freedom to choose how they want to learn while simultaneously acknowledging the role that practitioners play in directing and supporting these choices (Isenberg and Jalongo, 2019).

Section 3 - Navigating the Transforming Environment: Factors to Consider When Implementing a Play-Based Curricula

Introduction

In the dynamic field of early childhood education, the implementation of play-based curricula has been a revolutionary breakthrough (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). As practitioners along with their settings follow this route, factors that are essential to successful implementation must be considered. The purpose of this blog is to discuss the complexities and challenges involved in converting to a play-based curriculum and to highlight important factors that can help practitioners make these kinds of adjustments. Exploring many elements of establishing a play-based environment that supports holistic child development, reflecting on research and experience will be another focus of this blog.

The Conceptual Frameworks

Nutbrown (2014) suggests it is essential to comprehend the conceptual frameworks that support play-based curricula prior to diving into the practical aspects. Berk and Meyers (2015) implies that play-based learning, which is founded on well-known theories like Piaget's constructivism and Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective, acknowledges children's natural creative thinking and curiosity. According to Pyle and Danniels, (2017) in order to make this change, practitioners must now see play as an evolving activity that is essential to children's emotional, social, cognitive and physical growth rather than as a time away from learning.

Professional Development

Isenberg and Jalongo (2019) and Pyle and Danniels, (2017) believe the initial step in putting a play-based curriculum into practice effectively is to provide practitioners access to the required training. Effective observation skills, adaptive tactics, and theoretical foundations could be included in this professional development designed to prepare practitioners for the transition to play-based learning. This guarantees that practitioners are ready to support and scaffolding play experiences that correspond with learning goals.

Establishing Interesting Educational Environments

Samuelsson and Johansson, (2018) thinks that a play-based curriculum's foundation is the development of intentional learning spaces that encourage inquiry and discovery. Pyle and Danniels, (2017) and Bennett and Smilan, (2014) suggest activities that are guided by practitioners and those that are directed by the students should be balanced in classroom design. Think about where the learning zones should be located, how accessible the resources are, and whether or not to include versatile areas that promote both solo and group play.

Complying with Developmental Milestones

Gestwicki (2018) recommends establishing age-appropriate learning experiences requires an understanding of developmental milestones and how to match play-based activities with them. Gartrell (2017) suggests that practitioners should be knowledgeable about the many developmental paths that the children under their supervision are at, and

they should adapt tasks to meet the needs of each unique child while encouraging an environment of challenge and success.

The importance of Parent Partnership

According to Epstein (2018) the successful implementation of a play-based curriculum requires close collaboration with families. With frequent updates, workshops, and cooperative activities that include parents in the learning process, communicating plays a crucial role. In order to assist children's growth at home and at school, practitioners and parents can collaborate by developing a shared understanding of the curriculum (Pomerleau and Fortin, 2018).

Assessment Techniques

Göncü and Gauvain, (2018) suggests the traditional evaluation techniques might not work well with the play-based learning approach. Think about implementing assessment techniques which prioritise qualitative perspectives, records, and observation. Practitioners can acquire a thorough understanding of child development and adjust support by documenting the subtle aspects of their play experiences.

Taking Adaptability and Flexibility Into Account

Wood (2013) implies that because play is ever-changing, practitioners must be responsive and flexible in their methods. Adaptations to the curriculum may be necessary in light of the children's changing interests and needs.

Jones (2018) and Nutbrown (2014) suggest frequent reflection and collaboration between practitioners facilitates continuous improvement, to help guaranteeing that the curriculum stays responsive to the individual characteristics of each student.

Carefully Including Technology

Paciga and Donohue, (2019) and Wang and Looi, (2017) discuss that in the era of digitalization, play-based learning can be improved through careful incorporation of technology. They suggest practitioners should think about using interactive resources, multimedia, and apps for learning that support curriculum objectives. Nonetheless, in order to preserve a balance that enhances rather than takes the place of hands-on play experiences, a purposeful and careful perspective is important.

Management and awareness

According to Isbell and Raines (2014) and Fler and Hammer, (2015) management and awareness are critical for the effective implementation of play-based curricula in educational settings. They imply in order to establish an environment where morals act as an effective instrument for learning, managers are essential. This entails giving continual assistance, resources, and chances for professional development in order to maintain the dedication to play-based learning for example as discussed earlier, training opportunities to ensure practitioners remain knowledgeable and ensure they are focusing on relevant learning subjects.

Promoting Inclusivity and Diversity

Roopnarine and Johnson, (2018) and Dunphy, (2018) suggests an inclusive and diverse curriculum should be emphasised through play. The diverse cultures, ethnicities, and ability levels of children should be reflected in educational resources, tasks, and environments. Within the learning community, practitioners foster a sense of understanding, respect, and belonging by establishing an inclusive environment.

In summary, the transition to a play-based curriculum is both innovative and stimulating. Practitioners may overcome the challenges and take advantage of the chances for growth presented by curriculum changes by carefully assessing their own professional development, creating purposeful spaces for learning, aligning them with developmental milestones, involving families, using methods for assessment, being flexible, integrating technology, promoting diversity and inclusivity, and being committed to diversity and inclusivity. We are establishing the path for a future class of learners who are not simply academically successful but also innovative, inquisitive, and prepared for a lifetime of meaningful achievement as we celebrate the fundamentals of play in early childhood education.

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