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Section 1

What is play?

According to Macdonald (2022), play is explained in general terms within comment 17 on Article 31 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

'Children's play is any behavior, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by the children themselves: it takes place wherever and wherever opportunities arise'.

The difficulty with defining play is that it then adopts the concept that there actually is a specific definition for it to place itself in. Play has its own individuality like the children who are experiencing it (MacDonald, 2022).

According to Rowan, (2018) Reggio Emilia suggests that there are five stages of play, the whole concept is based around this being child-led and where professional practitioners are co-learners. The setting provided is the 'third teacher' and the observational documentation provided displays that the children are engaged and interested. Children have 100 languages of learning, where there are no fixed criteria but where learning and play are developed as one (Rowan, 2018).

Murphy, (2022) suggests that Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) was one of the earliest theorists to acknowledge the importance of play. This included the child's right to experience play within the world around them. This is also supported through Fredrick Froebel's (1782 – 1852) theory that children required a vast range of experiences through play where these are child-led, or the child self-selects for themselves. He suggests that nature contributed immensely to this and supported a child's development. Furthermore Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952) perceived children and their childhood with care and understanding during a time when children 'should be seen and not heard' She believed play was a positive event and encouraged chosen activities with objects. This differed to Rousseau and Froebel who viewed nature and the world around them as the object. In conclusion Rousseau, Froebel and Montessori all suggested that children have the right to play, and that the importance of play is integral to their individual developmental journey.

The Welsh Government in 2002 created the first ever National Play Policy. The first national play policy in the world. It was developed to strengthen the understanding that all children have the right to play. The Welsh government was committed to providing settings to meet children's needs and that the development of the policy held children's needs at the centre within the policy development (play.wales, n.d.). The policy principle

was based on a definition of a child's play and information regarding why play is required in a child's life and the importance of that participation.

This is strengthened further through the United Nations Rights of the child and the 54 articles that are annotated to protect children and their individual rights. Considering article 31, Wales supported this through their national play policy from 2002.

'Article 31 of the UNCRC says that children and young people have the right to have fun in the way they want to, whether by playing sports, watching films, or doing something else entirely. They have the right to rest, too.' (The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, n.d.).

There are many types of play to consider where children are able to participate. According to Rees-Edward, (2022) role play is considered an integral part of a child's development for their overall cognitive development and well-being. A child pretends to be familiar to them, such as parents, carers or siblings. This can also include those individuals they observe like doctors, nurses, shop assistants, or authoritative figures. Role play allows children to develop their imaginary play so that they can investigate and explore numerous characters whether familiar or fictional. It is advantageous for children's language and communication skills whether verbal or non-verbal communication. Role play encourages children to discuss their ideas whilst playing collaboratively. When an adult is encouraged to join in, this is on a child-led level of communication. This has a positive outcome for their future creative development.

Also explained by Rees-Edwards, (2022) fantasy play is known as 'pretend play' These are fictional scenarios of play that children are very unlikely to experience within real life. These scenarios can develop from superheroes or those of superhuman nature. Fantasy play allows children to grasp the concept of the real world and those who surround them. This allows demarcations between what is fact and fiction. This type of play encourages individuality and creativity through their imaginations. Fantasy play also allows children to act out a situation that is causing them concern or making them feel anxious or uncertain. Children control the outcome of this type of play, which encourages achievement.

Taking everything into account, role play and fantasy play both offer children a rich and imaginative world where they can explore their own individuality, creativity, develop their social skills and discover the world around them through play. During play children can develop their language and communication skills whilst learning empathy for others, sharing and the ability to problem solve and develop their critical thinking.

Role play focuses on creativity and enacting a fictional world through familiar situations by assuming the role of a 'real life' character whereas fantasy play explores imaginary worlds and fictional characters. This is reinforced by Dr Russ, (2016, cited in Singha et al, 2020) who suggests that these forms of pretend play offer children the opportunity to develop new concepts through creative expression. Both forms of play enhance the experience of children and their overall cognitive development by learning and discovering through the importance of play.

Section 2

Self-directed play is an integral part of the early years. It encourages creativity and imagination, develops decision making through critical thinking, verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional well-being and individual self-confidence. This also includes cognitive and physical (gross and fine motor skills) development. Children are encouraged to explore their own interests. Through providing opportunities for open-ended play, professional practitioners and parents support children to thrive due to the benefits from the participation with self-directed play.

According to the Welsh Government, (n.d.) the professional practitioner must grasp the necessity of play, including the children's development. During the early years planning, must be suitable and encourage positive outcomes for the children within their provision to enable their future cognitive development. A setting including both indoors and outdoors provision is required to provide a vast range of copious, play experiences daily that encourage and importantly interest the children to nurture their overall future development.

Howard and McInnes, (2013) suggest that a child's emotional well-being is impacted, dependent on the concept of play that they are participating within. During their study 129 children aged between 3 and 5 years old were involved. The prompts used to metamorphose play and not play were used to develop an activity that created a 'like play' and 'not like play' concept. The set activity remained the same throughout to demonstrate the fairness of their findings. Children were directed to either activity type, their emotional well-being was measured using the Leuven Involvement scale.

The children demonstrated a notable level of emotional well-being. Those who participated during the 'like play' activity scored far higher than their peers who participated in the 'not like play' activity. Furthermore, the data achieved through observation revealed a behavioral gauge identification where the 'like play' children portrayed these indicators rather than the 'not like play' children.

In conclusion, children who are involved in an activity that they deem as 'not play' have a greater emotional well-being than those participating in activities that are clearly identified as play.

Ashton, (2021) suggests that children require self-directed play so that it enables them to verbally communicate with others and discover friendships. It allows opportunity for them to change their minds about their individual concepts. Furthermore, they suggest that play comes naturally to children because they follow their instincts.

The role of the adult, (professional practitioner/parent/carer) in self-directed play is paramount for the children's optimal development through providing a supportive and enriching provision. This encourages self-directed play through the facilitation of social interaction. Professional practitioners can support children and augment the benefits of this essential activity. The adult must be conscious of providing this support whether through indoor or outdoor learning.

Whalley, (2021) suggests the adult is the facilitator that allows play to occur. They are responsible for the resources available in their setting. The adult as the scaffolder focuses on the developmental skills of the child. Scaffolding from the adult encourages support through modelling and prompting if applicable for the activity.

Tinney, (2022) suggests that an adult's role in outdoor environments is to facilitate the children's opportunity to experience it. This concept of outdoor play/learning is seen as an integral contribution to a child's cognitive development. The professional practitioner (adult) must consider the importance of children experiencing nature and participating with inanimate objects such as water, mud, trees, twigs, branches and wildflowers. These objects are enhanced by the professional practitioner adding further objects that would enhance the children's creativity and conceptual understanding. The adult's role is to be aware that all the children are in receipt of adequate protective clothing and footwear to ensure the children can access the activity, so they are able to participate without being inhibited by lack of essential protective equipment. The outdoor learning environment must be fully accessible for the full participation of all children. The professional practitioner (adult) purely observes the children so that they can adopt a sense of freedom to explore, create and develop as individuals.

Montessori viewed the adult's role as a co-ordinator or facilitator rather than a teacher. Observations were utilised by observing the children in order to develop the next steps required for future planning and support. The children's responses were noted so this enabled a positive adult, child relationship for the professional practitioner within the provided setting (Montessori Guide, n.d.).

Section 3

There are various observational strategies to observe children and document those findings. This enables a professional practitioner the opportunity to discover more about an individual child and their development. This can be developed through notes, video clips, photographs, written observations and the knowledge and understanding of the child. There are also more formal types of observation that support this fact (UWTSD, 2024).

A SOGS assessment, (Schedule of Growing Skills) grades a child's ability through the eight stages of development. These are 'locomotive, manipulative, visuals, hearing and language, speech and language, interactive social skills, self-care skill and cognitive' development. This assessment can occur at any time from birth to five years of age. Each stage has a total number level of achievement and at the end of the assessment the total is calculated. This is then annotated and plotted in accordance with the child in age and months. This would then offer the opportunity to consider these findings and act accordingly (Shropshire Community Health, 2022).

Nursery World, (n,d) states that the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Years) necessitates that assessment, begins with the participation in the observation of the children. An observation can be of a formal nature (advanced planning to enable the observation of an individual child or group) or informal. Professional practitioners can annotate important information even if they may not have planned to observe it.

An important point to consider from the EYFS is that 'All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their interests, development and learning'.

Emotionally Healthy Schools, (2019) point out that Dr. Ferre Laevers created a 5-point scale to measure and observe well-being and involvement. The research felt that if there were limitations, a child's future development would be impacted. The increased levels of well-being and involvement provided by the professional practitioner will encourage a child, and in turn this allows a more positive outcome for the child and their future development.

The evaluation through observation begins whilst assessing the levels of well-being and involvement utilising the Leuven scale. When the Leuven scale for well-being is extremely low, the child demonstrates signs of anxiety or distress. Low, the child displays non-verbal communication, indicating that they are clearly uncomfortable. Moderate, the child shows very little or no emotion. High, the child shows clear indicators of satisfaction, but these indicators are not constantly present with the same enthusiasm. Finally, extremely high is where the child looks contented, smiles, cries, out with excitement. Their mannerisms are instant and expressive. The child may talk to

themselves, play with sounds, sing or hum. The child does not demonstrate any signs of anxiety or discomfort. They demonstrate self-confidence.

When the Leuven scale for involvement is extremely low, the child lacks energy and appears vacant, looking around and observing others. During low, they cause interruptions during the activity. The child initially looks engaged, but during the observation period they stare into space. Moderate, the child demonstrates being involved in the activity but at a routine level, showing lack of full participation. High is when the child participates continuously with the focused times, they are not easily distracted within the activity. Extremely high, the child engages with focus and demonstrates a vast amount of interest and involvement. They are imaginative, vibrant and persistent through the whole observation.

Considering both the positive and negative concept of the Leuven scale, there is concern that it does not consider those children with ALN (Additional Learning Needs) or disabilities. The characteristics described within the scale are not applicable and, in some cases, not present or as clear in SEND (Special educational needs and disabilities) children. Some of these children are non-verbal too, and even though observational teaching is still required the restrictive nature of these observations can be limiting or incorrect for these children.

However, even though it is not without its negative faults. The fact that the Leuven scale gives a professional practitioner an observational tool that is vast in scientific concepts means that it is one of the most important ways to gauge child's learning and involvement (Learning Journals, 2021).

Section 4

Play is an essential activity for children and provides valuable insights for the professional practitioner involved during the observation as an observer. There are many reasons why play is integral whilst observing a child. Play allows children to be spontaneous and free, allowing the observer to witness their cognitive development, social and emotional, and physical development through this type of naturalistic behavior. It is also suggested through neuroscience research that play; especially active play has surpassed simply physical development but has a positive outcome for brain development as well (Importance of play, 2019).

Play often takes place in unstructured settings where children are given the freedom to explore, experiment and develop their imaginations. Social interactions are visible between peers and adults, allowing the observer to witness the nature and quality of these interactions. This includes empathy, resilience and resourcefulness. A child's cognitive development is nurtured through play. The observer or professional

practitioner can witness their understanding and engagement through pretend play, use of verbal communication, problem solving and exploring their surrounding environment. Play provides a safe space for children to express their emotions. The observer can address any concerns and support through appropriate coping strategies. Observations give an insight to a child's overall and current developmental stage. Whilst observing a child participating in play an observer can identify any possible developmental delays or concerns that may require further investigation by liaising with the parent or carer and the involvement of external multi agency support.

Observing children is an effective practice for observation, assessment and planning. Observation is the process of observing children within the setting provided. Importantly listening to them and making notes of what is seen and heard. Children are assessed to gauge a deeper understanding of their development. During the planning process the professional practitioner develops the next steps.

Research suggests that the learning of young children develops when they have a secure relationship that is affluent with appropriate interactions (Plone site, n.d.). Furthermore, learning through play is an integral practice as it improves a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. Through play children discover the world and themselves as individuals. These skills are important for their future development (NI Direct, 2018). According to Jean Piaget (1896–1980), children develop their own thoughts and understanding of the world through the experiences provided (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2016). It is also suggested that Piaget's theory impacted the Foundation Phase in Wales, where a child's conceptual understanding occurs more successfully when they are utilising and exploring in a provided, exciting and challenging setting. A child develops far more through self-play when they can discover independently (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008).

There is no disputing the benefits of play but there are some negatives that surround observations and the possible tools utilised. Observations are not fully inclusive for children with ALN (Additional Learning Needs) or SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) when observation tools such as the Leuven scale are used.

Haddad, (2017) suggests that it is integral to grasp the concept that observations only provide a small picture of a child's development or behavior. This occurs in a particular provided setting at a selected moment in time. Consideration must be given to certain activities or the time of day that could impact the child during the observational time. Furthermore, the noted observation needs to run in combination with the professional

practitioner's running records, evaluations and information provided by the parent, carer and other professionals.

Howard and McInnes, (2012) also acknowledge the importance of an activity deemed as play and the overall impact this has on a child's well-being. Their findings also identify the need for professional practitioners to receive the appropriate training to nurture this developmental journey for the children in their setting.

Play is the freedom to be anything you want to be. This is developed through a child's own concepts, through investigation and enjoyment. Play is the opportunity to explore whilst having fun (Luckett, 2024). Barta, (2014) suggests that of all human experiences, play is the activity that is most associated with the term to be free or freedom.

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