

ECEY4003C

Children's Play – Theory and Practice

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Section 1

Constructive Play

Constructive play takes covers a wide range of activities for children to engage in, some examples of Constructive play in an early year's setting are: Building and stacking with objects, arranging and pattern making. den building. Assembling tracks for cars, trains, marbles, and dominoes. Building sandcastles, filling objects with water, woodwork using tools. Clay creations, cardboard box play and outdoor play such as digging, rearranging, planting, and using natural materials to create new things.

Best described by theorists and research scholars as an open ended, non-predictable form of engagement, Constructive play has been linked to Early Years development for many years. Piaget (1962) A Swiss psychologist who extensively studied child development was one of the leading theorists to research and actively name the action of constructive play within his 'Stages of learning and development theory.' Rubin, K. *et al* (1976) However, Dewey, Vygotsky, Montessori, Froebel, and many other Early Years theorists reflect on constructivism as an advantageous approach to learning.

The definition of Constructive Play according to Drew, W.F *et al* (2008) is the process of constructing original and personal creations. As children from an early age manipulate and organise their materials, their use of imagination becomes inspiration for inventiveness and self-discovery. With this mindset children can characteristically begin to question and explore. 'What will happen when I add this object to this material?' 'How high can this go?' 'How long can I make this?'

Drew, W.F *et al* (2008) believed this process of behaviour allows constructive play to direct and channel the child's mind towards personal inventive discovery, which can impactfully satisfy self-confidence and be linked to developing multiple life skills.

Research into the links between constructive play and learning and Development in the Early Years is vast and plentiful. Constructive play contributes to spacial ability and awareness, linking strongly to mathematical problem solving. (Oostermeijer, Boonen and Jolles, 2014) Children can develop a deeper thought process with a drive to succeed which is paramount in logico-mathematical cognition. (Miyakawa, Kamii and Nagahiro, 2005) Constructive play develops problem solving (Bruner, 1972) encouraging innovative thinking while building logical reasoning skills.

Drew, W.F *et al* (2008) cite research from Cohen (2008) Pickett (1998) and Neuman and Roskos (1993) to support their found connections between Language and Literacy skills alongside constructive play. These examples include the use of new learnt vocabulary when interacting with objects and people during construction. The use of storage labels identifying objects, promoting reading and word association. Additionally, the facility to enable the child to create labels independently increasing understanding of language, writing and vocabulary.

Another important skill children can learn from constructive play is linked to risky play and understanding (Drew, W.F *et al* 2008) When a constructed piece falls or needs to be 'tidied away' it can promote understanding into the short-term nature of the constructed project. Children initially find this difficult to process and adults can alleviate these situations by taking pictures or getting the child to record/draw/write about their creation. This enables meaningful interactions and prepares the child to deal with natural emotion, while inspiring language and development skills by asking the child open ended questions and introducing some new descriptive vocabulary.

Fantasy Play

Young children will use constructive play as a pathway into the world of fantasy play..... (Arnerich 2021)

Pretending in play has from the earliest point in history, been a model for generating innovative ideas. (Paley 2004) The process of pretending she describes as the least restricted of all play and learning activities. Pretending serves as a sidestep avoiding the restraints of conventional activities and behaviours. According to Berk, L and Meyers, A (no date) Citing Vygotsky (1978) Many forms of imaginative play scenarios can be governed and restricted by realistic rules following the learnt and expected behaviours of the characters they are becoming within their make-believe situation. E.g. A Mother caring for a baby or an astronaut walking on the moon.

Examples of fantasy play

Real life mirroring fantasy; Having a tea party, playing school or shops. Going to the doctor's surgery.

Fantasy using unlikely scenarios; Going to your friend's house in a boat, fighting a shark and not getting injured. Having tea with the Queen,

Impossible fantasy scenarios; Travelling in a time machine, playing with fairies, having magic powers. (Fantasy play helps creative thinking in children | BPS, 2022)

The writers suggest using evidence from their research that parents and teachers should be encouraging children to practice fantasy play to develop their creative thinking skills.

The adult's role in fantasy play is to actively enter the child's world when invited, promoting, and reinforcing the self-esteem of the child by disregarding all boundaries just like the child. (BPS 2022)

Section 2

PlayWales.co.uk is an independent charity funded by the Welsh Government to raise awareness of the needs and rights to play in Wales. Their aim is to promote provision for every child's play needs. Playing is at the heart of the child's wellbeing, physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. Playing is non prejudice or discriminatory and is a Right set out in the UNCRC (Article 31) relating to every child worldwide. (Play Wales | Home, 2022)

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) creates a specific right for all children to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

(Holland, 2022) States in the spotlight report, that young people and children ages 3-7 expressed the importance of their own individual need to play and that it was a top priority for their happiness and healthiness.

Frederick Froebel believed children learn and begin to express themselves through creating and playing. (Aubrey and Riley 2019) The author also cites Mooney (2000) who writes regarding Piaget's suggestions that children are able make sense of the world through play.

Individual freely chosen play is when a child or young person decides to take charge, combining their personal inclination, their enthusiasms, and their imaginations. They can play without adult interaction and without boundaries. This improves health, wellbeing, and development. (How play helps children's development, 2022)

Play is transformed using the individual child's interests, by their questioning minds and the environment they reside in. When children lead and develop their own explorative play, they test their independence and creative thinking processes. Language skills are cultivated, mathematical and scientific skills are explored. Nature and the environment become integral, and a holistic play can begin to develop through circumstance, scenario, and meaningful cultural connections. (Child Led Play and Exploration, 2022)

Free play is a significant component within early childhood curriculum standards and heavily influences the child's choices towards gaining strengthened communication skills alongside supporting continuing knowledge. Some benefits of free play are identified as helping to increase mental capacity, improving memory, enhancing language and storytelling skills and enriching vocabulary. (Irvin 2017) The author also agrees with Bruner (1976) that free play promotes reasoning and problem-solving skills.

An example of child led play appears in a journal discussing the support of children's empowerment in play.

Two four-year-old children are happily playing a game of imaginary 'House' when one child who is holding a teddy bear announces that the baby is unwell. The second child proceeds to take the teddy carefully and administer pretend medicine. This immediately explores an emotional and empathetic response during play for both children, the response is natural but may have been witnessed in the child's home environment. Still, the response allows child two to give what she feels is the correct reaction to the problem. When child two returns the teddy, child one declares "All better" Child two feels validated and appreciated invoking self-esteem and confidence within the scenario. (Canning, 2007)

The Playwork Principles set out in 2005 by the PPSG (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group) are used by professional and ethical playworkers to follow some aspects of a framework provision, deconstructing, and defining the approaches required to successfully contribute to holistic and experience rich play. The principles identify the uniqueness of child led play and provide playworkers (professional adults) to use the evidenced knowledge for new adaptable play behaviours within their roles.

Just looking at Principle Eight, it states that the Playworker situationally chooses an intervention pathway that firstly enables the child to expand their play experience, and secondly balances safety, developmental benefits, and the wellbeing of the child. (The Playwork Principles, 2022)

(The Play Cycle, 2022) cites the research of Sturrock and Else (1988) as it describes additional principles within the policy, stating the benefits to help practitioners better understand play and their role within it. The research describes some key areas of focus within the cycle and what to look for when a child is leading play such as **Metaludes**: Has the playworker supplied a stimulating environment or provided interesting objects that will inspire engaging metaludes? **Cues**: A reassuring invite? A misleading diversion? A physical, verbal on nonphysical/nonverbal gesture? Play cues can present themselves in so many ways. **Return**: the response to outside influences in the form of peers, adults, and the environment. **Annihilation**: When the child chooses to finish the game and move on. **Adulteration**: The adult feeling the need to rescue, inform, build on and control the play.

Adults must try to avoid questioning and regulating the child's play ideas but welcome and encourage the inventiveness and freedom they show during play. (Drew, W.F *et al* 2008)

Section 3

There are various methods and observational tools used within the educational setting to develop and enhance a greater understanding of the unique child. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2017) using observation methods for the purpose of key research is potentially going to generate a more substantial output of accurate data.

There are certain methods of recording that fall within the subtext of 'Structured Observation'. A structured, more methodical observation has the potential to specifically enable the observer to develop a more precise form of data collection. This in turn can further contribute to distinguishing between situational development when considering the surroundings, environment, patterns, tendencies, and consistencies. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2017)

Time Sample Observations record these patterns within a specific timescale and can be especially helpful when noting concerns with behaviour. It adapts awareness considering the holistic circumstances. (Classroom observation protocol in Wales, 2022)

Time Sample or Time Interval Recording adds to the accuracy of collected data by evaluating the percentage of time that the pupil is on task or engaged in one or more behaviours. The practitioner begins by surveying the initial situation at the start of a specific interval of time, for example every one minute and records the factors and behaviours demonstrated. This is a simplified indicator to show whether the child is on or off task. This is often noted quickly using the plus or minus symbol. When using simple coding such as this, additional notes in the form of a narrative input can be introduced to strengthen the information making it easier to reflect upon later.

To further explain the plus or minus symbol in relation to the record, they can be used at the start of each one-minute section. For example, if ten minutes of an observation was being recorded the first data input might be the first plus sign to show that the child was on task and engaged. In turn the next two minutes can also be noted using the plus sign as the child continues to stay on task. However, the fourth entry at the fourth minute may be a minus sign with a brief narrative stating the word 'fussy.' Then there may be another three plus symbols followed by two minus symbols with 'out of seat' as narrative, proceeding to end with a plus as the child has managed to settle by the tenth minute. On examination of the data recorded within the ten-minute period, the child has been on task for seven minutes equating to 70 percent of the whole documented observation.

Adding narrative as previously described can be insightful and critical when deducing data however, the need to explain in detail may compromise the recording and time restraints may prove to be unmanageable, impacting the outcomes of the observation. This is where preparing an observation specific key prior to the surveillance, becomes a useful tool to rapidly record the most informative data. An example of this would be to number pre-existing and well-known

factors that can determine whether a child is off task or record positive data and goal achievement.

Number one – Talking

Number two – Out of Seat

Number three – Making silly noises

Number four – Fussy

Number five – Tired

Number six – Working well with others

Number seven – Engaged

Number eight - Contributing

Number nine – Good listening

Number ten – Content/Settled

These targets and behaviours can be built as time goes on and the practitioner begins to learn more about the unique child or the class/group as a whole. When observing a group or class setting it is recommended that the intervals are lengthened to five minutes each. This observation method is one of many identified to guide and support practitioners within education and childcare services to carry out objective assessments. This assessment can be used to highlight social, emotional, and behavioural issues along with engagement, interest, and development.

(City and County of Swansea 2022)

Record sheets should be pre-prepared within this method of observation, set out with the identified, need specific sections to capture snippets of data with ease. The information accumulated will be deduced and then used in the future in pedagogical planning and to inform and protect members of staff, Parent's, and any key adults within the child's daily regime. Some of the collected data may be used directly following the allocated time of recording while parts of the data will be banked and revisited setting goals for the future or creating a bigger picture. (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills 2022)

Section 4

Linking back to the types of play identified in section one, the need to deconstruct a recorded and well documented observation arose.

To begin, some influential theorists do not agree or believe that fantasy play is beneficial to early years children. According to Taggart, Heise and Lilliard (2019) Montessori strongly believed in reality verse's fantasy especially during the preschool and nursery and infant years. Montessori believed that rather than using toys or imaginative play, children should be taught from the very beginning to carry out actual tasks and objectives when imitating actions of

parents and teachers or things they have seen around them. Montessori would set out to provide the children with size appropriate equipment (not toys) to carry out the action realistically (Montessori 1967/1995 p.169)

Montessori believed children in her learning setting were drawn to real activities rather than imaginary ones. She viewed fantasy as exhibiting an inability to engage in and accommodate reality.

Observation was at the centre of a study where children from the age of three to seven were asked to select their preference from visual activities, these were mirrored one in toy/play form and one in life/realism form. The object of the study was to test Montessori's theory using observation skills to identify any evidence for or against the theorist's beliefs. (Taggart, Heise and Lilliard 2018)

The observation was carried out at the University of Virginia in 2018, using 100 children aged 3-6 years. The children were from multi-cultural, socio-economically diverse school backgrounds including a percentage of Montessori school students.

The findings of the research programme were consistent with Dr Montessori's previous observations. Children were clearly showing a preference to the real activities. 50 percent of the three and under showed no real preference for either form of play, and were observed being drawn to both scenarios. However, children aged four to six were automatically more engaged with the real activities. Some examples of these were.. Baking cookies, cutting vegetables, talking on the telephone, and washing the dishes.

The outcome of the observational study and research moved the writers to question if Montessori has in fact been right in her views on fantasy play. While stating that play and imagination were integral to discovery and enjoyment of oneself perhaps reality play would be more beneficial and engaging in the developing process of the child.

Children can go from being compulsive to restrained, one moment full of life and laughter rapidly transforming to despondency. Children are incomparable, so unique in fact that without observation practitioners would find it impossible to attain comprehension. Some children can communicate with ease and others can find it difficult to even make eye contact, practitioners must observe to have meaningful knowledge of the child to build relationships and enhance effectiveness within their role. (Forman and Hall 2022)

Practitioners must practice observation during play to discover the interests of the unique child, evaluate their objectives, recognise their needs, and acknowledge their personalities giving the child the absolute best chance to grow within their educational or care setting. (Forman and Hall 2022)

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