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Play Theory and Practice Assignment

Section 1

As Theirworld (no date) suggests, play is an important part of a child's development. McInnes *et al*. (2013), supports that play is a key element to educating and learning, however, adults often portray play as just an activity or game. Bottrill (2018) argues that play can only be defined by how the child perceives it and must be intrinsically motivated, otherwise it is not considered 'play'. As established by the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2021) Article 31, all children retain the right to participle in play and various activities such as sports. Pestalozzi (1907) discusses the impact that play has on children's emotional well-being, along with the belief that all children should be encouraged to follow and explore their own interests.

As explained by Moyles (2013), creating play is a fun and experimental process, allowing children to discover their likes and dislikes through creativity. As supported by Lunga *et al.* (2022) play contributes to a child's overall holistic development and encourages children to investigate their abilities with their bodies and minds whilst also giving them a sense of freedom and independence. Van Hoorn *et al.* (2014) suggest that for children who are unable to or struggle with vocally expressing themselves, play can provide the support and encouragement that these children require.

The early years foundation stage (EYFS) (2015), encourages the use of play to help children acquire skills and knowledge that is needed for them to have a stable basis for further developing their education. However, this type of 'play' is often considered adult-led play. Adult-led play is where the adult plans and initiates an activity for children to participate in.

In Wales, the Foundation Phase Framework (2015) emphasizes the impact play has on children's holistic development. It is said throughout this framework that children

best learn through first-hand experiences, supporting self-image and self-esteem development. As supported by Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012), children who are deprived of quality play opportunities can often be met with significant negative effects throughout life, some of which may include, obesity, attention deficit disorder, and overall physical developmental issues.

Dramatic Play

As shared by Good2Know (2019), dramatic play is a self-chosen type of play where children pretend to be someone or something that is not themselves, this can be anything that their imaginations wish. As suggested by Western Governors University (2021), there are numerous benefits to dramatic play in the early years, some of which include, communication, social and language development, problem-solving skills, independence skills, math, and literacy skills, especially when the scenario includes numbers, such as a bakery or supermarket, and finally, it can teach children how to empathise with others.

As supported by Nikiforidou and Stack's (2020), documentation of dramatic play has shown social, cognitive, and emotional developmental benefits for young children. Vygotsky (1978) supported dramatic play as he believed it enabled children to gain knowledge, skills, and the ability to perceive objects and roles in an abstract creative manner. Ihmeideh's (2015) study revealed an uprise in children's early writing behaviours after participating in dramatic play activities, and those children developed a more positive attitude towards the writing process.

As suggested by Erstad (2022), practitioners can support dramatic play in their settings by providing appropriate resources such as a 'prop box' along with costumes and themed toys. Offering a dedicated space for dramatic role-play and allowing children free time for them to choose their own form of play.

Sensory Play

Action for Children (2022) supports that children are ready for sensory play from birth. They also state that sensory play consists of any activity that stimulates a person's senses. These are; taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing. Gascoyne (2016) describes sensory play as an outlet for children to experiment and explore all

five of their senses. Froebel (1826) stated that sensory play and first-hand experiences are valued instruments for learning.

According to Action for Children (2022), sensory play is more than just a lot of fun, it also has many developmental benefits for children. For example, it supports language, communication, and social skills, promotes independent and creative learning, improves fine and gross motor skills, and enhances memory. Cleveland Clinic (2022) also supports that sensory play assists with cognitive growth by allowing children to discover how things work, and experimenting and analysing new information presents them with increased problem-solving skills.

As supported by Action for Children (2022), there are so many sensory activities, all of which can be altered for different ages, needs, and capabilities. As suggested by Gascoyne (2019), sensory activities are an outlet for children with disabilities to express and enjoy themselves. Thompson and Raisor (2013) explain that sensory experiences are endless and are not limited to those with disabilities, for example, painting or colour matching may not provide children who have sight impairments with enriching learning experiences, however, they may benefit from playing in a sand pit or water activities.

Section 2

As supported by NiDirect (no date), freely chosen or 'self-directed' play is where children can pick and control their own form of play also, as suggested by Schwarzmueller and Rinaldo (2013), self-directed play is when children are given complete freedom to test their abilities and explore the surrounding environment.

As supported by Jarvis, *et al.* (2014), concerns are growing in regard to deteriorating mental health concerns amongst children throughout the UK and America which has been linked to the lack of opportunities to partake in free play. As proposed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2019) choice is a requirement of play and all individuals should advocate for the rights of children to take part fully in artistic and cultural life.

As established by Juster (2015), numerous years of studies have shown that child-directed play further promotes a child's overall holistic development. As suggested by Ledendecker (2020), self-directed play has a variety of benefits for young

children. It allows them to use their own problem-solving skills to figure things out for themselves without any adult intervention

As supported by Catalano (2018) adults play a key role when allowing children the freedom they need to explore their surroundings on their own terms in a safe and secure environment.

Oxfordshire County Council (no date) Suggests that in order to understand and support play more efficiently it is beneficial to be educated on the Play Cycle. As explained by King and Sturrock (2020) the Play Cycle can be described as a model that highlights the process of play, beginning from the child's first inner thoughts of wanting to play to being projected out loud. Further described by Oxfordshire County Council (no date) there are six stages of the Play cycle. These are, **the meta-lude**, which is when the child has the initial idea or contemplation of playing, **The play cue**, which is when the child gives a signal of their intention to play, this can be a gesture, look, facial or body display, verbal invitation, or exhibition of an object or an action. **The return** is when a play cue is returned by another child, adult, or object, **the flow** is the process of play, **the play frame** is the rules, people, environment, and objects with which the child wants to play in or with and **annihilation** (the play is ended) or **adulteration**, this is when an adult interferes to change, control, education or even play themselves when they are not required or asked to, (Oxfordshire County Council, No date).

King and Newstead's (2021) studies discovered that the Play Cycle had provided practitioners with an insight into when adults should and should not intervene during children's play and that playworkers consider their role in the Play Cycle as 'play maintenance', acting as a resource when children need something, for example, if they are unable to reach something they want to play with or they need something heavy moved for them.

McInnes *et al.* (2013), suggest that children are unlikely to identify and take part in a play activity if an adult is present, therefore it is important for adults to wait patiently for the child to initiate play with them by demonstrating a cue, instead of impulsively intervening. However, Hakkarainen, *et al.* (2013) argue that adult participation in children's play is necessary as it can be considered beneficial in improving and supporting children's skill levels and abilities. Alongside this, Vygotsky's theory

(2004) supports the theory that children learn from social environments and require rich learning experiences in order to develop and grasp new concepts of their surroundings, emphasising the role of social play in a child's development.

Dickey *et al.* (2016) suggest that when at home children overuse electronic devices, resulting in a declining amount of children participating in active play experiences. Alongside this Wood (2014) explains that many settings and schools are under pressure to meet the structural curriculum targets throughout policy framework.

The Welsh Government (2014) supports the idea that adults are responsible for providing children with the correct environments in order for them to have these enriching self-directed learning experiences. As suggested by Rymanowicz (2015), adults retain responsibility for the environment in which children play. Ensuring a safe, age-appropriate, secure play area (indoors or outdoors) can enrich children's play allowing them to become independent and inquisitive beings.

As supported by Fleer (2021) having an inviting environment and accessible resources for children such as blocks, dolls, dress-up costumes, and so on, can encourage children to explore their surroundings, giving them a sense of independence. However, according to Respectful Caregiving (no date), children should not be offered too many choices all at once as this can become overstimulating and distracting in some instances.

Section 3

According to Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (2019), observation can be defined as focusing closely on children's overall interactions, abilities, and interests. Emphasizing that observation should be taken with the intention to learn more about an individual or group of children. Just like Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems (1979), the child or children should be at the center of the observational process.

As proposed by Welsh Government (2008), there are various different ways to observe children, such as running records, interaction trackers, time trackers, and Schedule of growing skills (SOGS) tests. As supported by Bruce *et al.* (2015), it is important for practitioners to be trained in child observation to ensure they are able

to understand other colleges' observations, acknowledge and identify different types of play, and be educated on children's development.

As stated by Papatheodorou *et al.* (2013) early years professionals carry out observations for various reasons and numerous goals that differ in their roles and responsibilities. According to Peterson and Elam (2021), as a practitioner evaluates their detailed data, they may begin to notice reoccurring behavioural patterns which allow professionals to gather an understanding of the child's skills levels, abilities, and interests. For example, a practitioner working within a nursery setting may observe the children in their care, once they have discovered the children's likes and dislikes, they are able to adapt the environment to specifics that best support the children's interests and needs.

As suggested within the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings Welsh Government (2022) practitioners should use a variety of observational methods to ensure enough information is gathered to make the appropriate judgments regarding the child's needs.

Running Records

Developed by Marie Clay (2000) and explained by Complex Needs (no date), a running record is an in-depth detailed written log that is taken over a specific period of time. Further explained, the observer takes notes and time stamps of everything the child does, including language, movements, cognitive development, and social development, during a length of time or whilst participating in activities. Complex Needs (no date), also states that it is necessary that the observer writes down factual naturally occurring behaviour that the child demonstrates rather than subjective descriptions or opinions of what they see. Smidt (2015) discusses that this observation type can take place anywhere within the setting, for example, during playtime, whilst the child is working, playing indoors or outdoors alone, or in pairs or groups.

Complex needs (no date) discusses that once a sufficient amount of observations have been collected, the observer should professionally assess all of the information that has been gathered in order to make informed judgments based on the child's needs. As supported by Children's Museum Team (2020) it is useful for practitioners, parents, and guardians to be regularly communicating as children are expected to

have different relationships with different people, therefore showing different characteristics. For example, some children may be shy within a setting and may not want to interact with practitioners or other peers, however, when around their parents or guardians, they demonstrate verbal skills that reflect their expected development level. As stated by Welsh Government (2008), although observations are able to tell adults a lot about a child's personality, needs, and interests, they are often not able to answer all the questions educators may have. For example, if a collection of observations indicate that a child does not like to interact with other children, it is then the adult's job to use that information and further investigate. Adults must be willing to ask the questions such as 'what may be causing this problem?'. Some observations may suggest that a child is showing signs of additional learning needs it is then the educator's responsibility to ensure that the child receives all the support they require to be diagnosed accordingly by a professional.

Section 4

Piaget's theory (1936) supports the idea that children best learn through first-hand experiences and play. He suggests that children participate in types of play that reveal their cognitive and physical developmental capabilities.

As supported by Kottman (2016), play can often be a way of release for children who have had traumatic experiences, have problems at home, or are experiencing undiagnosed or diagnosed additional learning needs. Kottman (2014) explains that some children find it easier to express their emotions through their play. Without observing these play sessions it would be difficult to detect and solve underlying problems that may be causing the child a plethora of negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness, and so on (Kottman, 2014). Van Hoorn *et al.* (2014) suggest that play can also educate practitioners on what would make the child happy, for example, what toys would bring that child enjoyment.

As stated by Smidt (2015) observing children whilst they play, explore, and test their capabilities can allow practitioners to identify if the child is reaching their expected developmental stage, if the environment provided is suitable and stimulating for their future development, and if that particular child will need any future support. Louis (2020) suggests that observing play activities can give an insight into how children prefer to learn, for example, a child may be drawn towards a construction area

throughout the observation process. Collecting this information can allow practitioners to adapt their way of teaching to ensure every individual child receives the best possible learning experience. Smidt (2015) suggests that this can also provide educators with the information they need to create an environment based on the children's strengths and interests, further advancing children's development and outlook on learning.

Welsh Government (2022) believes that observing children within practice allows practitioners to establish key knowledge regarding the children in our care, this can include, newly discovered skills, different unique personality traits, likes, and dislikes. As Neaum (2016) stated, acquiring this information by observing during play is necessary for addressing children's individual needs and ensuring that adults are providing support for enriching learning experiences.

Welsh Government (2008) also supports the idea that children should be observed when immersed in an activity, without the adult directly taking part but rather on the outside looking in. This can prevent the child from being distracted, and their play from being altered by any interference, in turn allowing practitioners to observe what skill, social, and developmental level the child has achieved, as accurately as possible (Welsh Government, 2008).

As supported by Van Hoorn *et al.* (2014) when children begin to develop the ability to self-reflect on concepts and to understand the perspectives of others, it can be informative for practitioners, often shifting their way of thought to putting social-moral development as a priority rather than just cognitive development.

Observations were the structure of Maria Montessori's theory (1907). She suggests that children should be observed at all times, especially during play as this is usually when children are authentically themselves. She also believes that adults should observe children when they are in their natural environment, this nurtures children's desire to feel safe and secure, enabling them to explore independently. Her theory proposes that by patiently observing children, they will show us which of their skills need to be developed or improved upon. PACEY (2016) states that observing children when they are participating in a freely chosen activity is a key element of a successful observation, as this is when you discover more about the child's characteristics, social skills, and abilities.

As proposed by Van Hoorn et al. (2014) play is a key resource that educators can use to communicate with parents and guardians regarding their child's development. It is also discussed that families often enjoy hearing about teachers' observations of their children's playful learning experiences, as it can give them a better understanding of their child's quality of education and care. It is similarly a way for practitioners and families to exchange any concerns they may have, for instance, if after assessing a plethora of observations, a specific child is showing signs of developing additional learning needs such as dyslexia, as supported by Smidt (2015), practitioners should discuss their findings with the child's family, to encourage more support for the child.

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