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Module: Childrens Play: Theories and Practice

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Childrens Play: Theories and Practice of Play

Section 1: Play Types

Hughes (2011) developed sixteen types of play in his taxonomy of play types, and for this section I will be looking specifically at recapitulative and symbolic play.

Hughes (2011) defines Recapitulative play as “the exploration of survival skills”.

Hughes (2011) suggests this play can be observed when children are engaged in rhymes, storytelling, rituals, ancestry, fire and den building. This type of play enables explorations of elemental forces and human instincts and drive. According to Hall’s (1906) recapitulative theory and Parham (2018), recapitulative play is a chance for children to freely act out stages of evolutionary development through play, including animalistic behaviours and establishing tribal groups, which provide a cathartic outlet to explore behaviours that might otherwise be considered undesirable but may help prepare children for the demands of adult life. Copper (2014) states children may naturally use different tenses when communicating experiences from their own lives, and begin to compare and connect similarities and differences between different traditions, artifacts and materials from different time periods. Practitioner’s may observe children beginning to use a chronology in their play and make connections from the past to the present events.

EYFS (2024) and Development matters (2023) propose that stages of development and the Characteristics of effective learning can all be observed during recapitulative play providing a holistic overview of the unique child. Hanson (2016) discusses how physical development, gross and fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination and

balance are necessary when navigating different terrains and building. Hanson (2026) also explores how cognitive development is stimulated by curiosity and sensory experiences of outdoor exploration, problem-solving and children's observations of nature, while Cree and Robb (2021) posit that practitioners might observe children comparing, sorting and counting stones and twigs. Social and emotional development skills including empathy and self-esteem can be seen as children working together, sharing ideas, and helping one another. When role playing, storytelling and being creative, children have the freedom to express their feeling and emotions. Children may wish to express themselves creatively using body paint, making clay objects or making daisy chain coronets.

Knight (2016) and Cree and Robb (2021) suggest that programmes such as Forest Schools offer recapitulative play opportunities which build upon a child's confidence, resilience and risk taking. Practitioners can offer guided play experiences when building and lighting fires or using knives to prepare food, as well as free-play to explore environment features such as soil, clay, water, different terrains, and working with peers to create dens and other structures, giving children a chance experience complex problem solving, negotiation, critical thinking and cognitive flexibility. Tassoni (2017) recommends that Practitioners could further adapt and enable the outdoor learning environments to offer further opportunities for recapitulative play by providing areas and resources for gardening.

Hughes' (2011) idea of 'Symbolic play' is when a child uses objects, words, gestures or images to represent actual objects, events or actions. This play is open to endless possible scenarios. Symbolic play allows a child to have gradual exploration, increased understanding, and control, in order for the child to not become overwhelmed. Jean Piaget's (as cited in Tomlinson and Tomlinson (1973)) 'Preoperational stage' of cognitive development states that children use symbols in their play to represent words, images and ideas. Through these symbols children can begin to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the world. Additionally, Vygotsky (1962) stated that play is the driving force in a child's development and that symbolic play and language acquisition are entwined throughout childhood.

Friedman (2021) proposes that Symbolic play is a way of expressing views and representing ideas, thoughts and emotions. Tickell (2011) identifies that the characteristics of effective learning can be observed as children begin to think critically develop their own ideas. Birth to 5 matters (2021) states that Practitioners might observe object-substitution, with wooden blocks representing different foods depending on shape and colour, or ropes become rivers. Symbolic play can be expressed by imagining absent objects, such as pretending to hold a sword or becoming a rocket and going to the moon. Children may assign absent attributes in sociodramatic play, where a child or group of children assign characters to themselves and peers in play, such as becoming an animal or role playing as the teacher. Scott-McKie and Casey (2017) suggest that several life skills are developed through symbolic play, including problem solving, abstract thought, visual representation, creative and artistic expression, self-confidence as children take on different personas and explore objects in new ways, free movement and communication through stories and ideas.

Symbolic play does not require specific resources per say. Tovey (2017) suggests that deconstructed role play may help to encourage Symbolic play. Where possible children should be play freely with minimum interference from adults. Lee et al (2019) states symbolic play is usually part of early childhood development, however, some children with Autism Spectrum Disorder may struggle to develop these skills and will need them modelled before they able to explore play independently. Practitioners have also used symbolic play as an effective tool to support language delays during early stages of language acquisition (Glazewski (1988), Snyder and Scherer (2004).

Section 2: Self-directed Play

Afflick (2022) states that Steiner's philosophy values that play as it impacts both the soul and spirit; that self-directed play or free-play supports the development of relationships, and freedom in play gives children freedom in thought later in life. Tovey (2017) highlights that Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) thought play needs both freedom of choice and movement for children to gain an understanding of the world through direct experience within it. Froebel also believed that adults play a crucial role in providing guidance during play. Hughes (2011) describes self-directed play as

“personally directed and intrinsically motivated and rather than extrinsically driven for reward”. Children should direct and determine the content and intent of their play, steered by their instincts, curiosity and personal fascinations.

Greeno's (2024) Schemas might be described as exploring a child's fascination, in which self-directed play allows children to be free to pursue their schemas. Although these repeated actions or representations may not make immediate sense to the observing adult, they play an important role in a child's of understanding the world and themselves (Athey (2007)). Louis et al (2013) posits that schemas in play can support the development of independent choices, problem solving, prediction and speculation. England (2018) states that practitioners may support schemas in play by providing loose parts, supporting development, and offering sensory stimulation and supporting self-regulation; this can also provide practitioners with an understanding of schemas. Nicholson (1971) states that loose-parts environments are spaces where children can be inventive, creative, and discover. Outdoor spaces such as woods are a prime example of a loose-parts environment with leaves, twigs, feathers, log piles (Cree and Robb (2021)).

Brown (2003) stresses the importance of a child's environment needing flexibility, and that flexibility in an environment leads to flexibility within a child. This compound process can then be seen as contributing to the mental wellbeing of a child, as they feel they have greater control in their play as well as within the learning environments. Brown (2003) believed that self-directed play is powerful and essential to a child's development, and that their environments should offer opportunities for inventiveness, discovery and creativity to support this development. Nicholson (1971) argues that there is no evidence some children are inventive and creative and others not. Instead, he posed that children need access and exposure to making and exploring in environments that captures their curiosity and gives them pleasure, such as water, fire and living things such as insects and flowers, which then leads to discovery, invention and creativity. Erikson (1950) agrees that through play children can achieve control over experiences that challenges them or their sense of self. Self-directed play can give children an outlet to explore wishes and concerns and make sense of demands in their social environments. According to Erikson (1950), it is when children start nursery and explore play with peers that they begin to develop a shared view of the world - Erickson called this stage the 'Macrosphere'.

Playwork Principles (2021) state that play is “an innate need and necessary for healthy development and wellbeing of both individuals and communities”.

Bronfenbrenner’s (2009) ‘ecological systems’ theory puts emphasis on the importance of environmental factors on a child’s development, posing that it is the interactions between individuals and environments that is important to a child’s development. Reed (2007) concludes that to meet the holistic development of a child, practitioners need to understand how children explore the world around them and to consider how to adapt environments, as development in one area may impact other areas of development. Physical development engages cognitive development, and language acquisition can impact social and emotional development. The EYFS (2023) and Development matters (2023) states that the understanding of the ‘unique child’ at the core of their development is key, by enabling environments that are relevant and stimulating, and offer playful opportunities that foster positive relationships and encourage independence. The EYFS (2023) goes on to say that children need playful opportunities and to support their holistic development. Play Wales (2021) reiterates in its play principles that the role of the adult is key in providing areas in which all children can access free play, while taking into consideration the balance of risk against developmental benefit and wellbeing. Practitioners require a sound knowledge base of the processes of play through training and reflective practice, a view also shared by Forest School practitioners Cree and Marina (2021) and Hughes (2011).

Hughes (2015) posits that play is provoked by a bio-evolutionary drive. However, he also notes that spaces to play away from an adult’s presence or direction are in decline leading and under threat of being managed or interrupted rather than self-directed. Gerber and Johnson (2012) explain: “Be careful what you teach. It might interfere with what they are learning”. From this quote it is easy to see how well-meaning practitioners using ‘scaffolding’, wishing to extend a child’s knowledge, may inadvertently interfere with the child’s development.

Section 3: Observation

Peterson and Elam (2022) suggest that to gain a true understanding of the unique child preferences, drives, interests, strengths and weaknesses, practitioners need to observe with consistency, and preferably using a variety of techniques as each type

of observation will have strengths and limitations. McFarland (2006) explains that some of the most common types of observation used in early years include anecdotal records, checklists and rating scales. For this section, I will be examining anecdotal observations.

Pacey (2016) notes that anecdotal observations are snap shots of a child's learning and can take the form of post-it notes, movement/time records, or sociograms recording who a child interacts with and how on online platforms such as Dojo, Tapestry or Early Years log. Peterson and Elam (2022) posit that anecdotal observations are opportunities to capture interactions in play with peers and their environment and can provide a picture of progression over time. Creating an understanding of the unique child, this evidence can be then used by practitioners to support a children's learning and development (EYFS (2024)). Allingham (2023) addresses that since the introduction of the revised Statutory Framework, there is a misconception that observations are no longer required – however, this is not the case. According to Allingham (2023), detailed observations are vital in informing a practitioner's pedagogy and warns that if practitioners stop noticing and listening, they will lose sight of what motivates a child.

It is only through sensitive observations that are carried out over time that a holistic view emerges of a child's development. These need to be carried out by skilled practitioners who are able to unpick and interpret a child's attributes and behaviours (Atherton and Nutbrown (2013)). A practitioners training, experience and qualifications have been evidenced as impacting on the understanding of a child's learning and development (Pianta and Hamre (2009)). Sylva et al (2004) and The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project found that sustained shared thinking can help clarify, evaluate and possibly even extend a narrative. The report states that sustained shared thinking can be either adult- or child-initiated, but should be continued and led by the child, therefore sustained shared thinking may offer practitioners a way into a child's play without interruption or interfering and provide more opportunities to make anecdotal observations of children, gaining a deeper understanding of their learning. Sylva et al (2004) goes on to say that sustained shared thinking is quite unique as it can be a brief in the moment, but it can also be carried over days and weeks. If the child is motivated by the play, they

are more inclined to revisit it repeatedly, potentially providing the practitioner a holistic overview of the child's development and learning.

Louis (2022) states that the Froebelian approach to observing children might appear to the onlooker as practitioners only being in the background, but this is not the case. Practitioners are watching and listening to the child's play to understand what is motivating the play, picking up on interest and being aware of areas of development that are happening in the moment, reflecting on what the observation tell us about the child's development and learning. Bottrill (2018) agrees with Louis saying that practitioners need to 'stop, look, listen'; he points out that practitioners cannot hear a child's voice if they are too busy talking. Pacey (2016) suggests that before starting an observation practitioners should consider the way in which they observe, and if it intrudes or interferes with a child's learning. It should take in to account a child's previous experiences, culture, language or understanding, and observations should be positive, free of bias, and objective.

Anecdotal observations have advantages and disadvantages just like any other observational tool. The advantages of anecdotal observations are they can contribute to qualitative data over time and are helpful in tracking changes in development. They provide objective and descriptive evidence which can be collected formally or spontaneously. The disadvantages are that observations might be tainted by bias, or details might be overlooked and missed if the anecdotes are noted at a later time. Understanding these disadvantages help practitioners to consider how their methods can be used to retrieve specific information (Peterson and Elam (2022)). Taking these disadvantages into consideration, it is important that these observations are moderated regularly with other colleagues, if possible, to identify issues such as bias or missed information (Pacey (2016)).

Atherton and Nutbrown (2013) raises the importance of sharing observations with parents and for them to share how the child interacts at home. This may help give a broader understanding of the child and how to support them in their learning and development. Chesworth (2016) agrees that fostering respectful relationships and having a dialogue with parents can extended the knowledge of what motivates and interests a child and may aid practitioners in developing an inclusive environment that supports the wellbeing of the child.

Section 4: Impacts of observation

Bruce (1987) states that quality observations capture details of the unique child; what the child is engaged in, the types of play happening, what this looks like, and the language used, as well as the child's voice. Observations can identify areas of concern, strengths and progression in a child's learning or development, which in turn can provide evidence toward assessment and planning. Birth to 5 matters (2021) confirm that observation is an underlying skill that is used daily in Early Years settings to enable practitioners to understand how they need to adjust pedagogy practices, including what experiences will enrich and extend the children's development and learning. Observation also plays a key role in building relationships between the practitioner, child, and parent or carer, through the sharing of information. Finally, observation is how practitioners access the child's world and enables the practitioner to adapt their pedagogy and to offer the best opportunities and environments and reflective practice. The Development Matters (2023) covers a number of developmental observational checkpoints that cover all areas of development these help practitioners consider key milestones in a children's learning and support practitioners identify where a child might need additional support, as well as inform the practitioners pedagogy and planning.

Peterson and Elam (2022) suggest that spontaneous observations, such as those in play, can offer moments where you can give intense focus on the child's play and ask open-ended questions to add wonder to their play. According to Piaget in Tomlinson and Tomlinson (1973), children need time to explore and discover, in which adults must not interfere or interrupt the child's thoughts and learning. However, Peterson and Elam (2022) posit that there are disadvantages to this type of observation; the longer a practitioner has to wait for information about a child's ability in a particular area of development, or not knowing if a child has potential gaps in understanding and knowledge, can make it tricky to track and assess development effectively and sustain accurate data. Gronlund and James (2013) points out that a practitioner's time is precious and limited, and by adding planned observations - be them individual or groups - can assist in managing our time as practitioners and gather specific evidence about a child's learning and developmental process. McInnes et al (2011) study provides anecdotal evidence that assessments or small group activities can have effects on play, as children have less choice with planned

activities. This is important to note if practitioners still want environments where children can choose freely and are self-directed in play. Ephgrave (2018) In the moment planning is a way to move away from adult led planning to child led, follows the interests of the children and increase engagement as the activities are chosen by the children.

EYFS (2024) states planning should support children's development by beginning linked to their interests and provide a broad, balanced and stimulating curriculum and is regularly reviewed to develop learning. Balanced planning gives opportunities for both adult and child led activity. Planning also helps practitioners to set routines and dedicate time to specific activities such as key group work. However there is another option to the traditional long-term cycle of observation, reflection and planning.

You can then use this knowledge to extend a child's learning in the moment, rather than taking the long-term cycle of observation, reflection and planning. With this approach, everything is done instantly.

The EYFS (2024) sets out several principles for effective assessment, such as acknowledging that every child is unique, each bringing their own personal history, culture, interests, knowledge and skills. Importantly, it includes that assessment should be a part of daily practice and should not take practitioners away from playing and interacting with children. There are two main forms of assessment: formative, and summative. Formative assessment is used throughout the year and informs planning and help practitioners address the need of all children and individuals and extend learning or bridge gaps, whereas summative assessment gives a holistic summary of a child's process, strengths and needs. Summative assessments may also include how to support a child and how they learn. Examples of summative assessments include two-year progress checks, reception baseline (RBA) and Early years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). Brooker et al (2010) posits there can be a lack of continuity in how children are assessed or evaluated by different practitioners, especially when comparing pre-school to school practitioners. An assessments' tone may change from positive to negative and from formative to summative, as children reach the end of reception and are assessed for meeting good levels of development (GLD) or assessed against criteria associated with the school curriculum.

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