

Task One:

The definition of play is widely used and well-recognised by the Welsh Government and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It states: 'That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' (UNCRC, 1990, cited by Brodie, 2018).

The Welsh Government (2014) recognises that play is a crucial aspect of the children's holistic development. Play should be an invaluable part of the children's life, that is beyond the realms of the school environment. For this reason, the Welsh Government wants to make communities more play-friendly by providing quality opportunities for play for children in various regions (Play Policy Wales, 2024). The intended outcome is that through play, children will develop their own personal wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2022).

The main focus of this essay is to draw upon two different types of play; which are creative play and exploratory play, and to look at the wide range of feasible applications that these types of play have in the Early Years Professional setting (EYPS) and for the children's cognitive and mental development.

Creative Play:

According to the Welsh Government (2024), childhood should be a rewarding time for babies and toddlers. It can be a time for fuelling imagination, promoting self-expression, collaboration, exploration, fun and discovery; all of which underpins the idea of 'creative play.' This is when children start to use modelling; such as clay, playdough or sand, to engage in role-playing and meaningful discussions with peers in the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1933, cited by Blatchford *et al.*, 2009).

Vygotsky (2004, cited by Greenway and Hutchings, 2022) believes that creativity through play allows children to depart from reality and to gain a wider perception of the world around them. They use their imagination skills to move from the past to the present, and to effectively communicate their own thoughts and feelings to other people in their surroundings. For him, creativity allows children to deeply connect to the social world and gain insights into their new given situations. It stretches the children's intellectual and emotional capacity from the youngest age.

Similarly, in Donaldson's report (2015), he believes that through the Expressive Arts Areas of Learning experiences, professionals can highly encourage students to utilise their creativity skills in the learning environment. Their start to explore, and navigate the world around them independently, by using critical thinking skills, collaboration skills, and imagination. This contributes to the New Curriculum for Wales framework (2022), in which children develop as enterprising, creative contributors, ready to work in rich contexts for which they can fully communicate with others and are prepared to learn from critical appraisals.

However, in Isaac's work (cited by Brodie, 2024), she argues that play is a key indicator of the children's intellectual development and personal growth. Children should be presented with the opportunity to choose their activities that promotes the use of creativity and imaginative skills. The environment, from which the child is enacted in, must be conducive to success and productivity. Her emphasis on child-centered practices was widely used by Reggio Emilia's approach (2022), which creates flexible spaces to encourage children's innovation and curiosity. They also place children at the forefront of their teaching and learning experiences.

Exploratory Play:

One of the first types of play that children will experience in their lives is exploratory play. This is when children start to use a wide range of toys and objects in their environment and manipulate them. Through this type of play, children will start to gain a wider yet subtle understanding of the world around them (cited by Edwards-Rees, 2022). This play was first pioneered by Piaget (1938, cited by Tinney, 2022), both of whom she felt that children are 'little scientists', who like to personally experiment in their own learning environments.

According to Piaget (cited by Tinney, 2022), children have a desire to explore and experiment with their physical outdoor playgrounds. Giving children the space required to play is essential in allowing them to play freely and independently, but whilst exploring new ideas, places, or locations. They must also be prepared to develop their own gross motor skills when lifting fallen tree trunks or any tangible object. The Welsh Government (2022) highly recommends students having to employ a wide range of schemas from the onset of their exploration.

Likewise, the Welsh Government (2022) argues that children from the youngest age use a wide range of schemas that will effectively enable them to develop the

scientific and mathematical concepts required for future life. They should use the following schemas: trajectory, rotation, enclosing and enveloping, that will undeniably allow them to explore shapes, heights, speeds, distances, spatial awareness, and rotation of 3D objects in their outdoor or indoor learning environment. Children may show a fascination with a wide range of schemas in self-play.

Exploratory play is significant in the Early Years Childhood, as because it motivates young children to find out how and why things happen, and it strengthens their neural pathways, thus allowing them to make swift and strategic decisions and to make connections with their learning (Welsh Government, 2022). Similarly, in a recent study proposed by Lai *et al* (2018), 20 out of the 43 NDGs participants, felt that creativity, alongside with knowledge acquisition, problem-solving skills and literacy was essentially important in the curriculum. The results show that play can promote the innovative and cognitive development of pre-school infants.

Task two:

Self-directed play is the belief that children should be allowed to play on their own independently. The children decide on the roles and rules that they wish to undertake within their play, without adult interference. Within this type of play, most children will make the decisions to whom they play with and choose the range of activities that will encourage them to use problem-solving, creativity, and self-determination skills (PPSG, 2005; MacDonald, 2022; Montessori, 2024).

Many educators in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) hold this perception that children who have access to self-directed play from the youngest age are more likely to experience greater developmental outcomes in their lives (Whitebread *et al.*, 2017, Lake *et al.*, 2022, cited by McLean *et al.*, 2023). The child's understanding of play in childhood is important, as it effectively allows them to independently navigate and learn through the world around them (Einarsdottir, 2014). However, there are variations of play amongst adults and children's experiences.

This essay will focus upon the notion of self-directed play, in the context of EYEC professionals and adults. Whilst having to consider the reasons why children should have the opportunity to choose their own play; and the implications of play for subsequent learning and behavioural outcomes.

Role of adults in self-directed play:

Effective pedagogy in the Early-Years Education is successful, if and only if, adults work alongside with their children to ensure that they engage in meaningful, authentic play activities (Bilton and Crook, 2016). According to Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), he suggested that adults should work meaningfully with their children to ensure that they build upon their self-directed play. However, there is a concern that if adults dominate the play and push their own agenda, then children might lose freedom and their own self-independence (McInnes *et al.*, 2013).

If adults do not know what self-directed play is, then its overwhelmingly difficult for them to provide and maximise support for their children to learn through play in childhood education (McLean *et al.*, 2023). It is important for adults to ensure that they make strong cross-curricular connections with their children's activities, to promote a highly comprehensive and a broad curriculum framework (Welsh Government, 2022). During play, the adult should use direct involvement with their

child; such as body movement and facial expressions, so that the activity itself is being predominately led by the children themselves (Loizou, 2017).

Whilst this is true, it is inevitable that culture shapes the way through which adults might perceive play, and how children might experience self-directed play. In countries such as Denmark or Norway, there is a strong emphasis on this notion of outdoor play and risky play for young children (O'Brien *et al.*, 2016). However, in Eastern countries, there are greater barriers to children's outdoor play than in Western counterparts (Lopes *et al.*, 2020). Over 73.4% of Greek parents refer to a lack of play spaces available in their local communities. The media has swayed people's perceptions of risky play-led activities for children.

Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, we can deduce that children's learning from play stems from adults, practitioners, and the wider society (Morris and Bronfenbrenner, 2006). It is the adults who exert a great influence on the child's self-directed play and are part of the 'microsystem.' They also play a leading role in passing down the culture to their children, and so they are the ones who fully regulate the play environment. This is known as the macrosystem. For parents, the implication of this is that they should prioritise children's learning and to encourage their use of natural curiosity in self-directed play (Welsh Government, 2022).

Why is self-directed play important?

Self-directed play gives children an invaluable opportunity to take control of their independent activity, and it instils them with a sense of freedom. Many Froebelians would strongly resonate with the belief that play should be placed in the hands of the children, and that it should not be dictated by the adults themselves (MacDonald, 2022). For Vygotskians, play is the only way in which the young child learns, or that all kinds of play promote well-being and holistic development. With all sorts of contexts for learning and curriculum progression (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Through play, children start to make competent decisions on their own and demonstrate higher levels of autonomy, self-esteem, and empowerment.

According to Pickler, infants should have the right to explore their surroundings without adult intervention. When children are placed in their environment, they start to build upon and use their movement stages – crawling, pulling up, standing, cruising – on their own without the support of parents (Anguera *et al.*, 2021). This closely applies to the Article 31 of the UNCRC, by which adults must give children a

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chance to play, enjoy, and relax, in a wide range of events (UNCRC 1990, cited by Brodie, 2018). However, for children who are not yet independent enough, and are highly dependent on the adult's support; the self-directed play is almost being dominated by the parents themselves (Brodie, 2018). It is important to ensure that the environment through which the child is enacted in is calm, pleasant and supportive, so that they will gain a wider intellectual curiosity.

Task three:

Arguably, one of the most important aspects of Education in the EYFS professional field is observation skills. Observation is essentially the process of watching the children play in their outdoor learning environment, as they begin to explore, learn, and navigate the world around them (Features, 2021). They start to gain social interactions with other children in their specific play-led activities.

According to the Welsh Government (2019), observation allows practitioners to identify what motivates, interests, and engages children within their own indoor and outdoor learning environments. Effective observation helps us to analyse what children might see, hear, touch, and smell in their play; and to respond to different ways in which children might make progress in their own independent learning. Through these observations, educators can make thoughtful decisions about the current and future planning of their curriculum settings (Bruce *et al*, 2019).

The main highlight of this essay is to provide an in-depth discussion of a chosen observation method for young children, and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this specific technique. With a deliberate focus on whether this method relates to play and the holistic development of children.

An explanation of the chosen method:

The Leuven-Scale of Emotional Wellbeing and Involvement Framework is a type of observation scale that is widely recognised by learning professionals across the world to assess the extent through which the child is making consistent progress in their own self-directed play (McRae and Jones, 2023). This type of observation technique was first pioneered by Dr. Ferre Leavers; and it draws attention to the two crucial indicators of learning, progression and development of children in the Foundation Stage: 'wellbeing' and 'involvement' (Northumberland County Council, 2017). Wellbeing refers to a state of being free and feeling at ease, but whereas, involvement connotes the individual's engagement to take part in the activity independently and freely. The scale gives out specific band descriptions for each level; with level 5 denoting high levels of well-being, spontaneity, self-reliance, involvement and intense activity participation, and level 1 the least (MacRae and Jones, 2023). For Leavers, unless the child is reaching level 4, and 5 from the onset of the curriculum progression, then they will not gain the skills required to extend their independent learning (1994, cited by Greenway and Hutchings, 2022).

Strengths and Weaknesses of the chosen method:

The Leuven Scale is a holistic way of measuring the child's personal wellbeing and involvement in education. If a child is to gain a good degree in motivation, self-resilience, autonomy and confidence; then they will develop a real desire to deeply engage in activities that will promote their use of academic, social and cognitive development (Northumberland County Council, 2017). Recent studies proposed by the Research Centre for Experiential Research (RCCE), have shown that adult interactions with children are highly essential to overcome any barriers impeding their learning (Early Learning, HQ, 2020). These stimulating interventions are examples of nerve impulses that engender involvements, such as: asking thought provoking questions and suggesting them the type of activity that they wish to undertake in their play-led activities (Leuven, 2011). Although, on a deeper surface level, the Leuven Scale is a meaningful way to resist the rise of the educational cultures of testing times, that are being slowly imposed by the hands of the EYES professional sector (Moss 2016, cited by MacRae and Jones, 2023).

However, one of the major flaws in using the Leuven Scales in schools is that it undermines the ability to recognise children with specific learning needs (SpLD), disabilities and diverse cultural backgrounds (Learning Journals, 2021). There is a growing perception amongst some people that when the scale is being applied, embedded and enforced into schools; then some EYEC professionals and adults might wrongly believe that some children are 'lacking' with their wellbeing and involvement skills (MacRae and Jones, 2023). There could be a greater amount of intervention between the parents or carers of the child and with the teacher or practitioner in this learning environment (Lester, 2020). Furthermore, there is a likelihood for the Leuven Scales to be leaked into other professional disclosures; so, this information could be used disproportionately to victimise or target any poorly and disadvantaged children (Lee, 2019, cited by MacRae and Jones, 2023). Nonetheless, the implementation of the Leuven scale must be addressed carefully, such that the child's capacity to reach the holistic wellbeing and involvement is underpinned by the context of their social and economic status.

Overall, the Leuven Scale is a useful observation tool for identifying children's wellbeing and involvement in the classroom environment. For Leavers, this scale indicates that for "[practitioners], then the personal, social, and the emotional development of a child is going well" (Early Excellence, 2022). Using this type of

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observation skills allows EY professionals to make a detailed analysis of what resources children need to grow holistically (Welsh Government, 2022).

Task four:

Observation is important in self-directed play, because it is strongly emphasised in the rollout of the New Curriculum for Wales framework, and in other legislative policies (Welsh Government, 2022; Howard and McInnes, 2012). According to the Welsh Government (2022), the practitioner should be grounded with the knowledge that observation helps us to analyse the child's development; and that it is the children themselves who are placed at the centre of this process. These 'records' must not be restricted to a given problem or moment. They are highly applicable to situations through which the child is developing in the confines of his or her own spaces even within play (Howard and McInnes, 2012; Taylor, 2019). For EYEC professionals, the use of observation must take place in a wide range of learning environments, both indoor and outdoor, independent or collaborative play (UNICEF, 2018). By engaging in a diverse range of activities, children will gain the right, necessary skills required to become more independent, challenged and creative contributors in their rich contexts of play observation (Donaldson, 2015).

However, there is another interpretation as to why observation is crucial in self-directed play. According to UNICEF report (2007, cited by Howard and McInnes, 2012), over the past few years, children who are living across the UK are starting to feel increasingly unhappy with their lives. Studies have shown that children in the UK were the poorest in terms of their subjective well-being, physical engagement with activities, and health across the whole Europe (Bradshaw and Richardson, 2009; cited by Howard and McInnes, 2012). That is why there was a 'push' from the Welsh Government and other policymakers to ensure that children are more physically, socially, and mentally active in their play-led activities during the school year (Play-Based Wales, 2024). It is a fundamental right for all children, and this is highly recognised in the Article 31 of UNCRC (1990, cited by Brodie, 2018). The implementation of observations within schools must be closely monitored by EYEC professionals, so that children become highly aware of the different creative expressions and play-led opportunities that are being placed in their own learning environments; in order to fully maximise their own holistic well-being and self-involvement (Welsh Government, 2022; MacRae and Jones, 2023).

Assessment is an intrinsic part of the Welsh Curriculum and in the context of the wider professional field on an international level (Welsh Government, 2024; Donaldson, 2015). Assessments can take place in a wide range of scenes, both in

indoor and outdoor settings, solitary and collective play-based activities (Welsh Government, 2022). Recording pupil's progress is a statutory requirement from the EYES professionals, and they have a legal duty to identify any areas of improvements in which pupils will need to develop in their curriculum progression. They create a vision that is highly supported by the learner's understanding of the 'four purposes' and 'five developmental pathways' in their written and non-written assessments (Welsh Government, 2022). The use of assessment is strongly connected to observations, as it helps practitioners to make an in-depth analysis of the stages through which the child is being placed at in their own learning development (Play-Based Wales, 2024). By using play as a source of appraisal, educators can gain several insights into the skills, qualities, and knowledge that pupils should possess to optimise their academic attainment and holistic wellbeing (Mulyasa, 2012, cited by Danim, Hadiwinarto, Hamzah, and Gunawan, 2021).

However, on a wider international scale, there is a different perception of what the term 'assessment' means, in the context of EYFS statutory framework. For example, the New Zealand curriculum, Te Whariki, argues that assessment is a way for children to explore what motivates them, how they are progressing in schools, and whether they are required to have any additional support (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017). It is highly formative; and they might use this to inform parents or carers of children, and other Kaiako agencies about children's holistic development, and their positive stride to learning over time (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017). Family and community life is one of the five main principles of the Te Whariki curriculum, and this idea is also deeply rooted in the context of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Morris and Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Effectively, the use of communication skills between educators and families is important to ensure that children receive a robust quality of learning from a young age. They all have a direct contact with the child in and beyond the school environment, so they are a part or member of the 'microsystem' (Sadownik, 2023). Hence, play assessments is an invaluable opportunity for parents and practitioners to work together to confirm that the curriculum is being fully placed into action (Howard and McInnes, 2012).

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Confirmation Statement – Use of Generative AI:

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my own drafts, notes and resources that I have previously used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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