

Children's Play: Theory and Practice Portfolio ECEY4003

I have not used any AI in this assignment

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Section 1

Evidence of a clear understanding of the importance of a variety of play types. The significance of holistic play should also be considered.

Section 2

Evidence of a clear understanding of why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play.

Section 3

In depth discussion and understanding of an observation method for young children.

Section 4

Demonstrate an understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children and consider how this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation.

References

Section 1

According to Bottrill (2018) play can be defined as being creative, self-chosen and free, and suggests play should encourage risk and challenge. He states freedom to play in early years is important and has a positive impact on development. Similarly, Waters-Davies (2022) suggests that play should be freely chosen, stating that the children's desire to play will help drive their growth and development and suggests the practitioner must engage and support authentic play. This view is supported by the Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy (2006) that is set on the principles that children should have free choice in their own play to help enrich learning and states play is critical to all areas of development. Furthermore, Play Wales (2022) state that the play sufficiency duty (2010) supports play by making it the duty of local authorities to access settings in the area to ensure there are sufficient opportunities to play.

Waters-Davies (2022) and Brodie (2024) suggest that according to Mildred Parten, an American sociologist, there are six stages of play to be recognised. The stages are unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, co-operative play and associate play. Brodie (2024) states unoccupied play would be the first stage where babies from newborn until three months will portray early movements, she suggests according to Mildred Parten, children will progress through the stages with age and arrive at cooperative play around the age of four where children should be able to interact through play by sharing and talking. Cohen (2018) states the importance of understanding the different types of play as it will allow caregivers or practitioners to support the holistic needs of the children through play.

According to play Wales (2023) and Waters-Davies (2022) there are many types of play that can range from being loud, chaotic and social to a more solitary, quiet and focussed type of play. Waters-Davies (2022) gives examples of the varied types of play, some of these are communication play, creative play, deep play, dramatic play, imaginative play and exploratory play.

This essay will look more closely at exploratory play and communication play. According to Play Wales (2023) exploratory play is where children are given the freedom to assess the possibilities of an object or environment and encourages them to explore and investigate indoor and outdoor play. It is a play that according to

Waters-Davies (2022) employs all the senses by allowing children to feel, hold, smell and touch. Frobel's theory according to Bruce (2012) underpins the pedagogy in early years, Frobel believed experiences learned should be through senses and movement, for example, children need to be able to feel the bark on the tree the apple came from rather than seeing the apple in a picture for a concrete learning experience. He suggested these experiences were crucial to being human and identified that children who were free to play with materials or given the time to explore in nature were better developed.

Reggio Emilia International approach (2022) adopted this view and suggests the environment should itself be seen as an educator, allowing the children to use the environment and objects to promote curiosity and creativity. Frobel's theory is echoed in the Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales that states to develop holistically, children need to have a variety of learning experiences. For example, children must understand nature, having the time to explore, build and play to gain essential skills in an engaging and meaningful environment. According to Brodie (2025) explorative play could relate to associative and cooperative play and states children can explore their surroundings side by side or together and explains that this kind of play does not always have the same end goals.

Creative play according to Waters-Davies (2022) is usually associated with arts and crafts. She suggests most activities that provide the children with opportunities to explore and express themselves can be creative play and states allowing children to have the time to explore new ideas can help stimulate their cognitive development. Similarly, Wilson (2018) suggests creative play builds confidence can help children problem solve and improve critical thinking skills. Lai (2018) would agree with Waters-Davies and Wilson and states children learn through creative play and playing games and suggests children can benefit by learning how to problem solve enhancing their literacy and cognitive skills as games provide critical thinking experiences. This is consistent with the Department for Education (2022) that points out children must be given the time and space to explore their creativity and suggests creative play can be expressed many ways including, painting, exploring, music, and dance. These views are underpinned by Welsh Government (2014) Play Policy (2002) that states children must be given the time to

explore through quality play experiences using for example, loose parts to stimulate creativity by risk taking and material exploration.

According to Runco (2025) divergent thinking is stimulated through creative play and states children can produce many ideas when faced with open ended tasks such as loose parts play. According to O'Donnell (2013) theorist Maria Montessori an Italian physician and educator suggests she sparked curiosity in children through play with objects such as wooden materials and described learning as being spontaneous, stating the whole child should be supported both mentally and physically allowing them to be free children to explore through creative play. Both Montessori and Froebel would agree that play needs to be holistic. However, whilst Froebel's theory is based more upon the natural outdoor world, where children learn from real experiences, the Montessori approach is more about objects placed inside the setting.

Maslow (1943) hierarchy of needs would support the holistic view of Montessori and Froebel as creative play would fall in both physiological and esteem. This is because according to Play Wales (2018) children have an intrinsic need to play, therefore this need would be as described by Maslow a physiological need. Creative play according to Maslow would lend itself to esteem, children can express themselves through play boosting self-esteem.

Section 2

According to the Montessori school of the Berkshire (2024) self-directed play should be freely chosen, be child led with no specific or end goal and suggest children must have freedom to explore their own interests and ideas to help build confidence, encourage independence and teach children how to problem solve. Similarly, The Steiner Connection (2022) state self-directed play allows children to take control of their own learning and suggests it can help children develop holistically. Bottrill (2018) suggests children need time and space to deep play allowing them the freedom to become engaged in their own learning, exercising the brain and body. Waters-Davies (2022) would agree and suggests children understand the world around them using play and states that positive experiences have the capability to deepen engagement and support development. Both Bottrill (2018) and Waters-

Davies (2022) state the importance of child led play, suggesting practitioners must allow the children to facilitate their own learning to create feelings of positive self-esteem. In the same vein Howard (2020) talks about the importance of self-directed play and how play and playfulness can support self-esteem, resilience and wellbeing. McInnes *et al* (2013) state the importance of allowing children to learn through play and suggest children should see all tasks as play and state that completing tasks through play can naturally help them improve their own performance.

The importance of play is recognised by the United Nations convention on the rights of the child [hereafter UNCRC], (2024) article 31 that states children have the right to relax and play in a wide range of activities. The Welsh Government (2022) supports self-directed play in the Curriculum for Wales and shares the child centred pedagogy showing children at the centre of the learning experience. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) recognises every child is unique and states for children to develop holistically practitioners must provide learning experiences that are authentic and meaningful, creating exciting and interesting environments for play. Furthermore, the Curriculum suggests practitioners must see the outdoors as an extension for learning and states outdoor learning provides children with enriching experiences where children can use all their senses to explore and learn through play, developing their ability to assess risks. Play Aotearoa (2023) suggests the international approach Te Whariki shares similarities with the Welsh Curriculum and states children learn through curiosity and exploration, suggesting this type of enriched free play can help promote independence.

According to Encarnacao, Ray-Kaeser and Bianquin (2018) the role of the practitioner in self-directed play is to facilitate the learning experience by guiding and supporting the children creating a suitable and enabling environment. Andrews (2017) would agree and suggests practitioners must support children in a meaningful environment providing freedom to explore. However, according to Sagastui, Herran and Anguera (2022) there are some that would dispute the role of the practitioner and see them as barriers to play. In the same vein, McInnes and Howard (2013) suggest that practitioners can be the critical cue and point out that children are more reluctant to play if there is an adult observing. According to Sands (2013)

adulteration can occur when practitioners want to control the play, improve or join the children and can have a negative effect on the play cycle.

King and Newstead (2019) state the play cycle can help practitioners understand how they can support play through observing and suggest a clear understanding of the theory and the six elements can be beneficial to practice. However, according to King and Newstead (2019) not all practitioners have a clear understanding of the play cycle and recognise that there are inconsistencies in the way the play cycle is taught.

According to Else (2014) it is important that the practitioner is aware of the children's play cues and suggests children can do this with spoken words, using eye contact or by using any other signal to communicate. For example, children may kick a ball towards the practitioner creating a cue for them to join in. Similarly, Sands (2013) suggests play cues can be verbal, using eye contact, body language and copying. The Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales talks about the enabling adult and suggests that by getting to know the children, practitioners are better equipped to see cues that can help the practitioner make the most of the natural teachable moments that happen during free or self-directed play.

Section 3

According to Gokce (2020) observation is an authentic technique that can be used in early years education and states that it provides valuable data for practice and suggests observing through play to be most beneficial. He suggests that by observing children, practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of where the child is developmentally and be better equipped to provide progress strategies. Similarly, Bruce, Louis and McCall (2015) state that observation and keeping records is a fundamental part of working with children and suggests through observation practitioners can see strengths and weaknesses that can help them to support the child by meeting their needs and state how important it is for the practitioner to enjoy spending time with the children, putting emphasis on listening and watching, getting to know the children better. This view is supported by the Welsh Government (2024), who state the importance of assessment and learner progress in early year settings and suggest practitioners must enable children's learning experience by being

supportive and promoting challenges, helping to develop the child holistically. According to Smidt (2009) this runs in the veins of theorist Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who specialised in child development and shares his theory, the Zone of Proximal Development and suggests practitioners need to support the children by giving them what they need to complete a task and states by allowing the children to learn from collaborative working, their capabilities will grow.

The Welsh Government (2024) state assessment through observation can help the practitioner identify next steps for the children's progress, stating that observing children is aligned with the four purposes in the Curriculum for Wales and suggests that assessment must be carried out as a continuation to be a true reflection of progress. According to Smidt (2009), Theorist Vygotsky suggests that children are active learners, and by observing children play, the practitioner would see them in their most natural state. Vygotsky echoes the Welsh Curriculum in his theory and states practitioners need to know where a child is in their development to put together next steps for development.

According to Pack (2016) one observation method used in early year education is learning stories, this assessment approach is carried out by the practitioner where children are observed during play activities. This is consistent with Brodie (no date) who suggests learning stories method of observation is an in-depth narrative made over a period and suggests the method adopts a more personal approach. Both Pack (2016) and Brodie (no date) agree and state that this kind of observation is usually documented by note taking and photographs that can be put together to share with the children and their parents or caregivers. They recognise this observation method as being beneficial by creating strong links and building positive relationships between the setting and home. In the same vein, Early Years Alliance (2019) suggest partnership working is central to development and recognise the benefits relationships through observation can have, suggesting they how they have a positive impact on the children's outcomes. This view is supported by Bronfenbrenner (1977) Ecological system where he describes the child at the centre surrounded by a support network that includes family and school. He suggests creating strong relationships are key to the holistic development of children.

However, according to Oswald *et al.* (2014) observation methods such as learning stories can be challenging for practitioners and cause a change in how the children would usually behave and suggests that practitioners can become barriers creating what is known as the Hawthorne effect. This is where children are aware they are being observed and can withdraw from the play activity not giving the practitioner an accurate reflection. The Welsh Government (2025) state the Hawthorne effect can lessen if children have secure relationships with the practitioner and suggest play observations will be a more reliable reflection. Holmes (2014) suggests this view is supported by John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist who highlights the importance of attachment and states children need to have at least one consistent adult they can connect with to help them develop.

According to the Welsh Government (2024) reflecting on an observation is important and gives the practitioner time to read and understand the children's capabilities. For example, children may need more intervention. Therefore, the practitioner would need to contact outside agencies for further support. Birth to 5 matters (2021) would agree and suggests that by reflecting, practitioners can make decisions on the holistic view of the child and create new learning experiences to help develop learning and development.

Section 4

According to Moyles (2010) play is a time where children can be their true selves and suggests their intrinsic need to play can deepen the learning experience and help support development. Smidt (2015) states both theorists Jean Piaget, a Swiss biologist and Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist would agree and suggest children are active learners and claim observing children through play will give the practitioner a true and reliable reflection. Both Smidt (2015) and Drummond (1998) state observation is a fundamental part of early years education and suggests practitioners must observe every aspect of the day by watching and listening to the children, gaining a better understanding of the child. However, Smidt points out that for the observation to become a tool used for learning and development, the process would need to be more deliberate and planned. This is consistent with King and Sturrock (2019) who suggest that when planning an observation method, the

practitioner will need to set up a range of activities prompting the children to use all their senses. Bruce (2012) suggests this view is supported by theorist Froebel who suggests children learn and develop using all their senses.

According to Howard and McInnes (2012) children who see an activity as play are more likely to participate and show higher levels of engagement and suggests when observing children, the practitioner must set out an activity that presents like play to support the well-being and holistic needs of the child. Similarly, According to Moyles (2010) the role of the practitioner is to support the children's observations through play by creating enriching and stimulating environments that will help spark creativity in the children. In the same vein, Besio *et al.* (2018) would agree that observation should be carried out with child led activities in familiar environments to be a true reflection. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales that states the learning environment should be inclusive and well planned by practitioners to scaffold the children in their learning experience.

Smidt (2015) talks about how the practitioner can become an active participant in observation and suggests by being involved and playing alongside the children the practitioner will be able to take key notes and gain a deeper understanding of the child. However, Howard and McInnes (2012) would disagree with Smidt and suggest children will associate practitioner involvement in an activity as non-play and state the negative effect on the child this involvement has. For example, stating children can become worried they may do something wrong causing the Hawthorne effect that was previously discussed in section three.

Moyles (2010) suggests practitioners must understand self-chosen play, the benefits and talks about playful pedagogy in early year education as being the fundamental focus. This is supported by the Welsh Government (2023) who suggest practitioners must value play as a learning activity and suggest play can be observed to enhance the children's learning. They suggest practitioners must support the children holistically by encouraging different types of play, putting emphasis on all areas of learning and development including social and emotional.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (2023), hereafter NSPCC, state when observing children the practitioner must be aware of the children's rights and state the importance of asking for permission. For example,

asking to take a photograph during the play activity. In the same vein, the Department for Education (2022) suggest practitioners must be ethical when observing children and be aware of children rights. This view is supported by the UNCRC (2024) article 12 that states every child has the right to an opinion on things that happen to them, and they must be taken seriously.

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