

ECEY4003 – Children's play theory and practice

Jordan MacDonald 2411206

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Section 1

What is play?

The definition of play is widely used but difficult to summarise, as it is a unique situation that everyone will have a different idea of what it means to them (MacDonald, 2022 cited in Waters-Davies, 2022; Bottrill, 2022; Johnston et al., 2018; Howard and McInnes, 2013). According to Play Wales (2022) play is fun. The act of play is an activity that produces feelings of pleasure; a feeling of enjoyment, it is natural; allowing children to feel comfortable in their play, play is also spontaneous and authentic it can be enjoyed without regulation (Playful Childhoods, 2023). Play can be both independent and collaborative (Bruce, 2011). Play engages children and allows them to be creative and use their imagination (Grimmer, 2019). Playing is the foundation of learning, it promotes opportunities to develop children holistically (Cannings and Rekers, 2022 as cited in Water-Davies, 2022). Clement (2022 cited in Water-Davies, 2022) gives recognition to the environment that children play in and how indoor and outdoor play offer different learning outcomes. Play is open ended; meaning there is no end goal, it can be freely chosen; child initiates how, when and what they want to play (MacDonald, 2022 cited in Water-Davies, 2022). Play can also be enjoyed during adult planned activities that extend child learning (Birth to 5 Matters (2020) While play has been described as free or freely chosen one can argue that play can be governed by limitations such as time and adult interference, implying that it is not entirely free (Howard, 2020). The limitations of play will be discussed in more depth throughout.

Why is play important?

While different theorists interpret their own ideas on the importance of play, one point that is commonly shared is that play is important (MacDonad, 2022 cited in Water-Davies, 2022). According to Bottrill (2022) play is fundamental to child development, it provides children with opportunities to grow their knowledge, about the world in which they live and better understand who they are as individuals. Play can help mould the characteristics of children in preparation for their adult life, demonstrating the impact play has on children. Piaget (1951) believes that play is vital to the holistic development of children and agrees that it is essential to support the growth of knowledge. Moreover, Howard and Mcinnes (2013, p2) describes play as “natural resource” that facilitates the development needs of children as a whole being. The Welsh government agree that play is fundamental to children's development and growth (Play Wales 2002). According to UNICEF (2024) under article 31 “Play is an essential need for every child”. Maslow's hierarchy of needs lists water and air amongst the most essential physiological needs of human existence, as UNICEF uses the word “essential” to describe play this suggests that play is just as important as the air humans need to exist (Pichère and Cadiat, 2015).

Types of play

Many people acknowledge the existence of multiple different types of play, including a range of skills that complement the play types helping to develop children in a multitude of ways (Reeds-Edwards, 2022 cited in Water-Davies, 2022; Veraksa, et al., 2022; Marsh, et al., 2016). It is important that adults are familiar with different play types so that they can facilitate opportunities for children to develop as not all children learn in the same way (MacDonald, 2022 cited in Waters-Davies, 2022).

Here are two examples of the different play types that exist.

Exploratory play

Exploratory play usually begins in the first few years of life, babies and toddlers use their senses to discover and explore objects. During this developmental stage babies and toddlers explore objects as a way of working out what they can be used for and so begin to make sense of the world around them. Treasure baskets can support the exploration of real, natural objects, including kitchen utensils and pinecones this activity provides an independent play that is overseen by an adult to ensure babies are safe while investigating the items in the treasure basket (Hughes, no date, cited in Froebel Trust, no date). They handle items around them showing curiosity about how things look and feel, using their fine motor skills to grasp and grip (Bottrill, 2022). Babies often have an impulse to use their mouth as a way of finding out more new objects. Initially babies and toddlers will repeat the same actions on toys or objects, such as mouthing them and or shaking (Johnston *et al.*, 2018; Halpenny and Pettersen, 2013). As children's minds mature their exploration becomes more advanced, they will start to develop concepts of the toys they play with and begin to realise the effects of their play create different outcomes, for example hitting two objects together, makes a new sound or placing one item on top of another allows things to balance or fall down (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Exploratory play includes the manipulation of natural materials such as sand, playing with sand stimulates senses and allows children to explore the possibilities sand can provide, different textures, how sand feels different when dry or wet (Play Wales, 2017). This investigative play develops cognitive learning, it promotes critical thinking and understanding (The Curiosity Approach, 2024). Exploration is often solitary, children will typically play alone while exploring, however exploratory play like sand can encourage collaborative play, such as problem solving or turn taking (the Curiosity Approach, 2024). In early years settings adults can facilitate exploration by setting up a messy play activity, such as play doh, play doh can be made from scratch by the children (Early Years Alliance, 2024). Another way adults can support in exploratory play is demonstrating cause and effect when playing, showing how the which in which they play can have different outcomes (Tecwyn et al., 2023).

Socio-Dramatic play

Socio-Dramatic play is the enactment of real-life experiences that have happened to children, sometimes imitating the adults in their life. It is a more advanced play type compared to role play however they may choose to add elements of make believe, this play type allows children to express real emotions, acting out genuine experiences enabling children to deal with their feelings and provides opportunities to cope with their worries (Reeds-Edwards, 2022 cited in Water-Davies, 2022). Children will play out everyday scenarios such as playing house or going to the shop, however the unfortunate reality for some children is these typical activities may not be as normal as other children would experience them. They may have witnessed violent or bullying behaviours (Play Wales, 2017). Socio-dramatic play allows children the chance to re-enact these experiences in a safe and nonviolent environment developing their emotional and social needs (Navidi and Hewes, 2016). A minimum of two children is needed to play cooperatively (Play Wales, 2017). Children are influenced by the adults around them, with secure positive relationships children are more likely to succeed in the future (Welsh Government 2023). Sara Smilansky recognised a connection between sociodramatic play and the effects it had on successful academic outcomes of children, she built on Jean Piagets work and expanded on his research of cognitive development. She noticed specifically the negative development effects on children living in disadvantage, therefore she developed her play theory so that children had equal opportunities to succeed (Early Years TV, 2024). Through observations the adult can identify where a child might need intervention and support and form the appropriate connections to safeguard the child (Department for Education, 2022).

Section 2

Why it is important children's play is self-directed and how adults can support children in their play.

Froebel Trust (2020) says that play is an opportunity that is fundamental to childhood development and deep learning. Frederick Froebel promoted the idea that play should be entirely self-directed in other words, child lead and the interests of each unique child should be supported by caring and well-informed adults. Self-directed play is when children take the lead with what and how they want to play, the adult will facilitate the play based on children's initiation, guidance and their own observations (Brodie, 2018). Ephgrave (2018) observed that when children command their own play, they were highly engaged and showed greater persistence with difficult tasks, furthermore, the independence children gained from having freedom to learn at their own pace in a way that was most interesting to them, recorded these children making greater progress in future. Boundaries are still a relevant and important aspect of child development and adults need to enforce expectations such as caring for the environment and other children. Adults should create an organised space at child level so that it is easier for them to tidy up and look after the toys after play. The Maria Montessori Institute (2025) promotes the concept of resources being within reach of child's eye level, this promotes independence and resilience. Adults should allow time for children to resolve

conflicts before prematurely intercepting and demonstrate positive resolutions when necessary (Ephgrave, 2018). It is important that a child's voice is not just heard but truly listened to, adults should view children as equals to themselves and that their views should be taken into consideration when it directly effects them (Bailey, Hunter and Marsden, 2018 cited in McMahon and Dyer, 2018). Bruce (2019) agrees that children should be free to explore the world in which they live uninterrupted, and that the role of the adult is to listen, observe and respond to the way children play and facilitate to extend their learning through their observations. MacDonald (2022) also acknowledges that children are in control of their play and that the role of the adult is to enable freedom of play. However, Bottrill (2022) argues that in practice not all adults allow children to lead their play, some educators are reluctant to adjust their teaching method and instead continue to use the same topics year after year simply because it has always been in their provision and while there may be some element of interest in these repeated topics, this is not a reflection of self-directed play and so the child's voice has not been listened to.

Tinney (2022, cited in Waters-Davies, 2022) believes children should have a choice to spend as much time as they would like to play outdoors, she emphasises the benefits outdoor play has on the overall development of children, providing learning opportunities such as physical, social and language development. Bottrill (2022) agrees that outdoor play is essential for holistic development and that adults should not restrict time outdoors based on the weather, adults need to work with parents to ensure children are dressed appropriately so that if they chose to play outside, they could do so in all weathers. With this in mind Moyles (2015) recognises that not all families can afford appropriate wet weather clothing and says that settings need to accommodate spare wellies and coats for those who are living in poverty. Moyles (2015) extends her concept of outdoor play and says that playing outside still needs to be meaningful. It is not just an area in which children can run wild without purpose, adults need to facilitate their outdoor environment as an extension of their indoor classroom taking into consideration the child's interests. On the contrary Bottrill (2022) believes that the outdoor area should extend to more than just using indoor resources outdoors and that children should be free to use the outdoor space to take risks, like climbing trees and exploring nature. Be that as it may, one cannot ignore that some children are choosing to engage in digital play over physical play, the use of electronic devices is having a negative effect on children's physical and social development, technology is restricting freedom of play as most online games have a beginning and an end goal (Veraksa *et al.*, 2024) however research has shown that children were developing a range of skills while using iPads and they were able to successfully disengage offline and move on to physical play (Gray and Palaiologou, 2019).

As discussed, child centred play is necessary for deep and meaningful learning however in some settings not all members of staff share the same enthusiasm about self-directed play, this is sometimes due to lack of knowledge and without funding for up to date training, some teaching staff are unaware of the most recent pedagogy

and its benefits, therefore play is usually orchestrated by adults with out of date teaching methods (Welsh Government 2024). Because of this Bottrill (2022) believes that children cannot truly learn unless they are deeply engaged in play that has been independently chosen. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) also recognise the influence of well-informed adults and how their enhanced practice can support independent learning, resilience and all-round child development. While self-directed play is beneficial Lev Vygotsky recognised the benefits of both independent learning and development with the support of a knowledgeable adult, this is demonstrated in his model the Zone of Proximal Development (Gray and Macblain, 2015). Play Wales (2002) promotes the importance of play in their policies and identifies how it helps children to mature holistically. This is supported by Article 31 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2019).

Section 3

What is an observation and why is it important?

Smidt (2015) says that observation in early years refers to practitioners watching and listening to children while they play and record what they have seen and heard, from these observations practitioners will identify the likes, dislikes, deeper knowledge of children and their stage of development. Observations also help practitioners to record engagement levels and the success rate of different activities (Welsh Government, 2008). Practitioners who observe can also pick up on behaviours of children with additional needs, demonstrating how observation in early years is essential to help identify the need for early intervention support for children showing signs of additional learning needs (Macintyre, 2015). Observations feed into assessment meaning, practitioners reflect on their observations to interpret child behaviours and identify areas for improvement and plan how to best support their development (Birth to 5 matters, 2020). By recording observations practitioners can use what they have observed help to inform next steps, practitioners can plan further learning opportunities that improve practice and help to continuously develop the children (Bruce, Louis and Mccall, 2015). Ephgrave (2017) argues that there is no need for lengthy next steps and that an opportunity might present itself for a teachable moment, whereby the practitioner identifies an opportunity to expand a child's learning in that moment, thus avoiding further unnecessary time and paperwork. Anna Ephgrave emphasises the importance of observing children being the primary focus above all. Thomas and Lewis (2016) agree that observations are a priority and believe that they help to close the gap between theory and practice.

According to Thomas and Lewis (2016) there are many ways to observe children such as, snapshot observing. Snapshot observations are spontaneous, noteworthy but brief written observations, an example of this would be writing down when a child has progressed, developed a new skill or if they have done something of interest that the practitioner highlights as a special moment such as helping a friend or seeing something that is a 'first' for that child (Machan, 2016; Thomas and Lewis 2016; Twinkl, 2023). . Snapshots allow practitioners to really get to know their children and understand who the children are as individuals, practitioners who observe regularly in

this way will also be able to spot when children are acting out of character allowing them to address any upset. Snapshots are often recorded on a post it notes in real time (Brodie, 2017). Bruce, Louis and McCall (2015) stress the importance of making observations on the spot. However, Carr and Lee (2019) argue that there are disadvantages to brief observations as they only offer insight into single moments that risk missing important details that explain children's behaviour, compared to detailed continuous observations like learning stories that would give a comprehensive reflection of children. Education settings have a duty to ensure their environment enables children to achieve the four learning purposes, when observing children, practitioners can assess whether the activities and environment provided, support and encourage children to become ambitious capable learners (Welsh Government, 2022).

Section 4

when observing and assessing children why is play important?

Howard and McInnes (2013) highlighted how play influences children's emotional, physical and intellectual well-being, they found that children who play demonstrate high levels of engagement in turn develop a range of skills, by observing play practitioners can reflect on how they can create experiences that support skills such as oracy and cognitive development, this suggests that observing has a significant role in understanding the effects of play.

The play cycle is a model that shows how play leads to embedded learning. Practitioners observe children who begin the cycle by showing an interest in an activity that interests them, from there the child explores the activity and tests the possibilities of fun from the activity, during the observation adults may recognise the need to facilitate the play which is mild involvement, the child's play continues then when repeated they have a better understanding of how the activity works for next time. However, if the adult overly controls and overpowers the play this is called "adulteration" the impact of adulteration is that the child is no longer control of their play and limits the child's ability to explore or self-correct. The best way practitioners can support during the play cycle to ensure observations are effective is to limit their involvement when necessary (King and Sturrock, 2020).

For observations to be genuine and reliable, they need to be observed when a child is engrossed and relaxed, playing naturally without adult intervention (Smidt, 2015). If a child has noticed that they are being observed this can alter their natural play meaning the observation is no longer a true reflection of that child in that moment, this is also known as the 'Hawthorne effect' (The Open University, 2018). However, there are times when observations can be altered because the child has initiated play with the adult observing, in this instance it might be difficult for the adult to continue observing as their focus has shifted to interacting with the child. This demonstrates how difficult it can be for practitioners to know when to be reactive in children's play. During observations adults might observe a potential risk and

therefore have no choice but to step in and disrupt the play from a safeguarding aspect (McCree and Rekers, 2022 cited in Waters-Davies, 2022).

Te Whariki (no date) says that observations of children who are engaged in meaningful activities that they have chosen, help to develop the curriculum so that adults can create a learning environment that continues to engage the children and will help to develop them holistically. Likewise, Birth to 5 matters (2021) agree that curriculum is influenced by the interests of the child. Through observations practitioners can reevaluate their learning environment, practitioners often talk about having 'difficult' children, arguably these children are not difficult but struggle to settle into certain environments, it is important that practitioners remember that not all children learn in the same ways (Murphy and Conn, 2022). Allowing children to have an opinion of their own and following their interests through observations can be reflected in the physical environment to help support their individual ways of playing and learning (Clement, 2022 cited in Waters-Davies, 2022). Reggio Emilia Approach (2022) agrees that the environment has a significant influence on learning.

When observing it is important to recognise what is and what is not play, when a child is engaged and interested, they show emotions of happiness it is fair to assume they are playful, however if an adult steps in and starts asking questions without the child's initiation and the child moves on from that activity it is clear that for the child the play has turned to work not play (Waters-Davies, 2022).

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