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MODULE: Children's Play: Theory and Practice (ECEY4003/C)

SECTION 1

What is play?

According to Tassoni, T and Hucker, K (2005, p. 1), most children will take part in play activities most days. Play is paramount to human development and is how children learn about the things around them. Throughout life and as an individual matures, the nature of play will change. Very young children may play using their feet and hands, whilst a slightly older infant may pretend by dressing up. Older children's play may include games or other leisurely pastimes and is often continued into adult life.

Play is thought to be a key requirement for a child – “a child's work!”

National Centre for Children and Families (2023) supports this but expands by suggesting that a child at play will also, experience a variety of emotions, whilst learning about interactions and relationships with others.

Garvey, C (1991, p. 4) suggests that it is widely accepted that:

- a) Play is fun.
- b) The goal should be intrinsic and generally unproductive.
- c) Often unplanned.
- d) The player freely elects to take part.

The UNCRC (1989), Article 31 requires that each child has the right to relax, play, and participate in a broad spectrum of artistic/cultural pastimes. Committing to this, the government of Wales statutory guidance, Wales – a Play Friendly Country (2014), is providing recreational and play environments within its policy. They state that positive play may help build a child's resilience and reduce poverty.

With this in mind, and noting that there are several types of play, two examples are given below:

Water Play

Tassoni, P and Hucker, K (2005, p. 141), state that life itself would not exist without water and remains an attraction for all ages. For children, playing with water provides a large variety of educational and enjoyable experiences.

Hughes, F (1991, p. 179) confirms that significant learning occurs during water play, where a preliminary understanding of flotation, (differing materials), measurement (Various sizes of containers), etc.

Early Years Educator (2017), explain that water is one of the necessary materials for meaningful play. Children can manipulate water in various ways – there is no correct way! Water facilitates exploration, creativity, and curiosity whilst promoting a science/maths understanding.

Considering the holistic approach of water play, Tassoni and Hucker (2005, p. 142) schedule the benefits as follows:

- Physical – Pouring liquids from one container to another, assists in achieving good hand-eye coordination skills. Additionally, the weight of liquids may strengthen young arms.
- Cognitive – Introduction to volume, flotation, and capacity whilst enhancing the understanding of water properties.
- Language / Social – Interaction between peers develops language and communication skills.
- Emotional – May provide a relaxing and calming environment for children.

Teach Early Years (2021), stresses the importance of water play as a sensory activity and how the use of aromatic water may stimulate brain activity. The use of both warm and cold water can promote discussion and an understanding of temperature, whilst the introduction of ice cubes offers a new physical state. Providing various channels using pipework etc, offers exploration in differing levels and pathways for water to flow. The addition of liquid soap will facilitate the making of bubbles and blowing/whisking will contribute to improved fine and gross motor skills.

Constructive Play

Water-Davies, J (2022, p. 29), opines that constructive play is a progression from children playing with various objects. Children begin to construct, manipulate, build, and shape materials to create a new form. Constructive play can include the use of many different materials; playdough, card, sand, and building blocks, all capable of enhancing development in problem-solving, imagination, and teamwork.

According to Einon, D (1985, pp. 109-115), construction resources will aid the development of hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. Rotating and twisting, screwing/unscrewing, fixing, breaking apart, and balancing items. Math and Science skills are both developed here, albeit not necessarily understood by the child. Children soon recognise that round 3D shapes may roll where flat-edged 3D shapes will not.

Einon, D (1985, p. 110) explains that at age 2, children will be able to build a pile of bricks, but at age 4, may have a vague structure in mind.

Hughes, F (1991, pp. 175-178), supports this by stating that building blocks may be one of the most popular resources for children and can be used by most ages. From the 1.5-year-old that slides blocks around the setting, to the 5-year-old who can create a complete structure using varying block types and sizes. Construction such as block play develops measurement basics and both spatial and numerical skills. Experiment with balance by placing blocks of various weights at different stages in the build. Furthermore, tidying/sorting blocks and arranging them in the correct and fitting order offers improved intellectual development and enhanced classification skills.

Tassoni, P and Hucker, K (2005, p. 155), explain that constructing items together can give a feeling of accomplishment, whilst also providing a useful life skill. Train tracks, blocks, and puzzles are all types of constructive play resources.

Tassoni, P and Hucker, K (2005, p. 156-157) schedule the benefits of constructive play as follows:

- Physical – The repeated use of hand movements will develop fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.
- Cognitive / Spatial – Develop an understanding of spatial awareness, materials, colours, and sizes. Problem-solving and retaining concentration whilst encouraging a flourishing imagination.
- Emotional – A feeling of success and accomplishment when a project has been completed. Improved self-confidence and independence.
- Social – Some children may communicate with their peers as to the progress of their own build, sometimes using their model as part of imaginative play.

SECTION 2

What is Self-Directed / Free Play?

(Schwarzmueller and Rinoldo, 2013, p. 37) consider that self-directed play by children happens when actions and thoughts are made to meet personal goals, or the agreed activity is a choice of the group. During self-directed play, children are permitted to pursue personal interests. The introduction of new ideas must arise from the child, who will remain in charge of the activity and instruct the adult as a member of the group.

Tassoni, P and Hucker, K (2005, p. 3), suggest that self-directed play is seen when the child can select the main elements of an activity without interruption or prompting from adults. Children best recall their own self-directed play as it has personal meaning to them. It retains their engagement for longer than one organised/controlled by an adult. Irrespective of the play type, children may become fully engaged in the play, since they have created it themselves.

Why is this Self Directed / Free Play important?

(Schwarzmueller and Rinoldo, 2013, p. 39) outline the importance of self-directed play, listing the potential benefits as follows:

- Social – Developing self-control and involvement within the community. Avoidance of egocentrism.
- Emotional – Discovering and expressing oneself. Relief of emotions.
- Spiritual – Character building, determination, self-awareness, and cultural identity.

(Schwarzmueller and Rinoldo, 2013, p. 37) explain that in current society, self-directed play has declined, primarily due to cultural influence and political/parental pressures. The many development opportunities of free play, therefore, have regrettably also been reduced. Accordingly, because of this reduction, the role of reinstating self-directed play in children has now become the responsibility of the education system. Educators must provide openings in the schedule for pupils to take part in free play, and so advance their development.

According to (McInnes and Howard et al, 2013, p. 269), a primary principle of early years development is that play is paramount for understanding and development. Therefore, play can be viewed as being at the centre of a young child's education and is rigidly included within numerous early years curricula.

The Role of an Adult During Self-Directed Play?

Leading on from the importance of self-directed play, Lindon, J (2001, p. 163), states that children absorb information through play. This progresses onto the role of an adult when facilitating children's play and resultant learning. The adult must seek a middle ground between minimal involvement and a high level of interference.

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2013. P. 268) state that it is unlikely that children will engage in an activity as play, when in the presence of an adult. However, their observational information demonstrated, that the presence of an adult may have been a critical factor in limiting learning. Nevertheless, information adopting the same study procedures identified that a child's behaviour was enhanced when an adult was near the play location, as opposed to being immediately adjacent.

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2011, p. 130) suggest that an effective environment does not depend on self-directed play alone but adopts a mix of child-led and adult-directed play. Children need choice and their own control of activities.

According to Play Wales (2023), play is an activity that is child motivated and led. A freely chosen activity that is controlled by the child using their own inspirations and ideas. They state that the role of an adult during play is:

- To organise and enable the process of play.
- Allow the play activity to proceed without interference.
- Assist children to create an area suitable for their play.
- Respond to children's play in accordance with current theory and reflective practice.
- Acknowledge their own influence on the space and the effects of children's play on the adult.
- Adopt an intervention strategy that allows children to expand their play. Adult intervention must be weighed up when considering risk against developmental advantage and safety.

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2011, p. 127) explain that the time for adult intervention was identified from observation in cases where a child's play resulted in mischievous or unsafe situations.

Waters-Davies, J (2022, p. 149) refers to the Colorado paper wherein the 'play cycle' was presented as a model to explain the stages of play, and how an adult may respond concurrently to the child's interest. An important aspect of the play cycle is that it assists adults who watch children play and respond accordingly. Beware of the risk of the adult, altering or taking charge of the child-led activity. According to Lancashire County Council (2012), the play cycle is made up as follows:

- Play Drive – Child initiates play.
- Play Cue – Signal that a child wished to play.
- Play Return – A response to a play cue.
- Play Frame – The process or area created by cues and the returns.
- Play Cycle – Full flow of play.
- Play Annihilation – Play ends.

SECTION 3

Observations

Palaiologou, I (2012 p. 43) opine that observations are one element of the early years of development. Carrying out good observations within the early years can provide vital details about children; their capabilities and information about what interests them, which may not be available elsewhere. Observing children through standardized methods can provide practitioners with a detailed view of children. This will improve our view of children and how they act. Observations examine the natural behaviour of a child in a specific setting, which is a prime process for monitoring development. These observations help early years

practitioners to acknowledge the phases of child progression and be responsible for assisting a child to improve.

Barber, J and Paul-Smith, S (2012, p. 3) state that observations remain paramount in childcare practice. It is via observations that practitioners get familiar with the child and use that information to direct when providing activities. An early-year's practitioner will need to review and highlight how to effectively view a setting, and excel in methods and observation, providing better results for children.

Foundation Phase Profile Observation

There are several different observation types, one of which is the 'Foundation Phase Profile' method.

According to the (Department for Education and Skills, 2017), the purpose of this method is to offer a national standard baseline evaluation that is consistent with the desired phase outcome. Utilising assessments and observations aid practitioners to develop a suitable curriculum with a 'holistic' approach. The foundation phase profile method is categorised into two sets of stages within four elements of advancement as follows:

- Advancement at a personal/social and cultural level.
- Maths advancement.
- Physical Development
- Communication / Language and literacy advancement.

The (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2017) explains that to assess where a child is developmentally when they arrive in a new setting, a baseline assessment should be carried out. This provides an entry point against which future progress can be measured.

Within (Department for Education and Skills, 2017), it is explained that the Foundation Phase Profile observation model commences with a baseline assessment as follows:

Review Stage – Utilise current information obtained from previous settings, carers, health visitors, parents, guardians, and the child.

Plan Stage – Ongoing, enhanced provision for the initial 6 weeks at the reception class level. Creating suitable openings allows observation of each child's skills within the compact profile.

Action Stage – Within this period (6 – weeks), introduce plans via an ongoing and focussed provision. Keep a record of all observations.

Assessment Stage - Again, within the 6-week period, complete a summative grading utilising the stages and four areas of advancement. These assessments are to be founded only on the observations that have been carried out within the period. Outcomes for these are scored using the compact profile form or software.

Review Stage – This is the stage at which outcomes of the assessment stage are reviewed and whether additional monitoring and evaluation are required.

Plan Stage – Put in place, necessary, ongoing, and additional, directed measures focussed on the child's interests, discovery, and style of learning.

The evidence of a child's progress and skills should be recorded when observing all learning areas.

(Department for Education and Skills, 2017), has been created as a summative analysis tool that uses formative assessments and observations to create a 'holistic' view of a child's development in the key areas. This holistic approach is achieved by making observations outdoors and indoors and using a variety of adult and child-led activities, within an enhanced provision. It is encouraged that all children can empathise and are free to express their own views and feelings and can reflect on their own achievements. This aligns with article 12 of the UNCRC (1989), wherein it states that each child should be allowed to express personal feelings, wishes, views, etc. To further gain a whole picture of a child's development, interaction with parents/guardians is also important.

The (Department for Education and Skills, 2017), encourages a child to explore themselves, others around them, and beyond whilst having an appreciation of their environment. The promotion of self-esteem, beliefs, and good values alongside an acceptance of those with differing needs, capabilities, and views are all welcomed.

Benefits

As stated in the Foundation Phase Profile handbook, some of the benefits of the Foundation Phase Profile are as follows:

- It offers a holistic view of a child.
- It is aligned with other assessments undertaken by health professionals.
- It provides early identification of potential SEN (Special Educational Needs), ALN (Additional Learning Needs), and delayed development, thus facilitating further support as needed.
- Compiles relevant information for all stakeholders in children's development.
- Provides opportunities to communicate with parents/guardians.
- Flexibility for practitioners to use their own record and evidence-keeping methods.
- Aligns with the National Literacy and numeracy framework.

- Suitable for children with SEN and ALN.
- Numerical scoring offers easier measuring of progress/comparison by practitioners.
- Children develop their own sense of self and a growing understanding of language and enquiry.

Limitations

According to Social Research and Information Division (2022) limitations of the Foundations Phase Profile:

- Some skills required by 'the profile' were not easily observed through play and specific tasks may have to be set up to observe these.
- Additional time pressures in completing all the required observations and tasks.
- Too much of a 'ticking box' process and not specific to the child.
- Some difficulty in spotting learning needs due to vague and wide language use within the profile.
- Improved material required for guidance for assessments.

SECTION 4

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2013, p. 268) suggest that within the early year's education, play is paramount to pedagogy and learning, but it is thought not easy to define, so is commonly explained as being founded on an adult's interpretation of the visible play actions. However, play may be of most benefit when it is thought of as the start of a task, and how children explain the play, using cues within their surroundings. An important cue is the presence of an adult. Children seem to be unlikely to approach their actions as play if an adult is nearby. It is suggested that the way adults connect with children may affect the way children use this cue.

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2013, p. 270), state that a focal problem in explaining play is that there is no definitive answer. Whilst there are different definitions of play, they all fall short by focusing on the visible act of play from the adult viewpoint. There is a suggestion that a more valid approach is one that centers on play from the child's position. A child's perspective of play does not just focus on the visible act, but also looks into the internal content of play which is vital for education – playfulness!

(McInnes and Howard et al, 2011, p. 122) state that curriculum pointers across the United Kingdom advise that positive practice should be actioned via play. Practitioners often grasp this concept, but many accept a shortfall in knowledge about play, and how it connects to teaching. Therefore, practice is different with no match between what practitioners say and do.

According to Michigan State University (2015), when adults are present, they may direct or take charge of a child's play. They are breaking the primary principles of self-play being the child's choice and inhibiting their chosen direction. Loss of this independence results in the activity losing its true meaning. Alternatively, if we encourage a child's experience through adult presence and involvement, not however taking the lead, we permit them to engage in their exploration.

However, an opposing view to the hands-off process promoted by many is discussed in Simple Psychology (2023) wherein theorist Lev Vygotsky suggests that vital learning by children happens when there is an interaction with a skilled practitioner. They may offer voiced instructions and amend behaviours for the child, referring to this as the collaborative dialogue. These child attempts to undertake the directions given by the practitioner and further uses this to steer or control their own actions.

Within Early Education (2021), Friedrich Froebel's theory is discussed, whereby he appears to be occupying the middle ground by giving children freedom but with some guidance.

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