

Section 1

A child's right to play is enshrined in law under article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF no date). The right to rest, leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities that is age appropriate. The new curriculum in Wales (Education Wales, 2022) and policies such as the play policy Wales (2002) layout guidance to schools and settings to facilitate play through enabling adults, engaging environments and authentic experiences.

Froebel emphasised that intrinsic motivation enabled children to choose and direct their own play. Practitioners today should ensure that the indoor and outdoor environments are enabling and responsive to each child's needs and interests to promote this (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

Self-directed play could be described using the Welsh Government statutory guidance - a play friendly country (2014:14) that play should be *freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated*. Children should be free to choose their own play activities with or without the intervention of an adult and the motivation to play should come from within with no expectation of reward or results. Holistic play is the nurturing of a child's emotional, social and physical well-being through various play types, such as role play and messy play.

Play Scheme (no date), suggests that creating inviting play areas and scenarios encourages role play, this allows children to act out scenarios to gain understanding from real life events that they may have encountered. It develops social skills, communications skills, collaboration, sparks creativity and allows them to explore different cultures through peer interaction thereby supporting self-directed and holistic play opportunities. Freud believed that through role play, children could develop emotionally by acting out their inner feelings without having to verbalise them and that role play could be used as therapy to allow children to address and make sense of trauma or distressing memories, for example, a child pretending to be a horse biting a parent, the horse doing the biting, not the child (Freud Museum, 2017).

Vygotsky believed that a child would learn through social interactions with those around them, both peers and adults, and that children should learn about the world and culture around them using tools such as language, stories and works of art. Role play could fit into this theory. Vygotsky believed that play is an important element in a child's intellectual development, suggesting that during play, such as role playing house, pirates or doctors. They will copy the behaviour of those around them to help them make sense of how their world works and how to grow into their role within it (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

Another type of play used to promote self-directed play and holistic development could be messy play, the Early Childhood Development Assoc (2017) suggest that messy play may support physical, creative, emotional, social, language and mathematical development. It can support physical development through improving fine motors skills by manipulating materials, improve language and emotional awareness through talking about the textures and colours and how they make a child

feel and discussing, for example heavy or light to introduce mathematics and also scientific concepts, for example, predicting if an object will sink or float?

Gasgoyne (2017) argues that messy play is a way for children who have experienced trauma to self-regulate their emotions through their ability to take ownership of a situation and manipulate the resources, be it water, sand or playdoh. This gives them a sense of empowerment where maybe they feel powerless in other aspects of their life. Messy play allows children to develop greater resilience, they learn to self-occupy and turn messy play from venting anger and emotions into more positive outcomes.

Else (2014) argues that when considering provisions for play, a child needs to feel safe in their environment before they can freely choose their play, well maintained equipment, for example, should be provided. Natural environments should be created using a variety of material and loose parts, resources that reflect the interests of the child should be provided and opportunities for creative play, mud kitchens, sand pits, provide opportunities to create something they can then destroy. Culture and a child's environment should also be considered and introducing an element of risk and challenge, for example, forest school with trees to climb or a park with a climbing frame.

Section 2

Education Wales (2022) argues that children have an innate need to play, that play is taken seriously and requires concentration and attention to detail. Through play children learn about the world they live in and learn to explore their emotions. It suggests play should be self-directed, that environments should be authentic to allow children to relate what they are doing to real life and that the adults within that environment should act as enablers and not take control.

Montesori similarly suggested that a constrictive curriculum would not be conducive to learning and that environments both physical and emotional that supported a child to explore independently would best support holistic development (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

Howard and McInnes (2012) suggests that children's emotional wellbeing increases when they take part in activities that they perceive as play rather than activities seen as not play. In their study, the like play activity took place on the floor, the adult is nearby and the child had a choice on whether to participate or not, the not like play scenario involved sitting at a table with an adult and the child was asked to take part, their findings suggest that children were more deeply engaged with the like play activity, smiled more and moved more freely than the children taking part in the not like play.

Mc Innes *et al* (2011) argues that the amount of involvement and control a child has in their choices plays an important role. The study looked at two settings, setting A was run cooperatively between the adults and children and setting B was strongly led by adults. The children in setting B saw the involvement of the adult as the

definition between play and not play. The children in setting A sometimes viewed the adult as the definition between play and not play. The results suggest that being led sometimes by the adult and sometimes by the children, may have a positive outcome for learning and development, it also looked at how the adults interacted with the children and the adults in setting A asked more open-ended questions than setting B.

Wilson (no date) suggests that if a person is offered extrinsic motivation for doing something it alters or changes their intrinsic motivation to do so. The study looked at athlete's motivations to enjoy and achieve in their chosen sport, however, this research could be applied to an early years setting, an adult who offers a child a reward for their chosen play may then alter the child's perception of the play, they may not necessarily want a reward for doing what was freely chosen. Wilson also argues that what may affect one person's choices may not necessarily affect others.

Education Wales (2022) states that adults should act as facilitators and enablers to aid a child's exploration and not direct it. Both Wilson (no date) and Mc Innes *et al* (2011) could be applied to this as both suggest that an intervention, be it the adult taking control, directing their play or offering a reward, may cause the play to become non play.

Sturrock and Else (1998) suggests that the play cycle could help practitioners understand how a child initiates play, the steps play goes through and how best to support it. The play cycle follows six steps, metalude, cue, return, frames, flow, annihilation. The metalude, the step building up to the activity, comes from the child's internal need to play and interact with their environment. The cue could come from their own body language, that of another, or the presentation or recognition of an object they may then choose to engage with. The return is the response to the body language signal or result of their interaction with the environment. The frame then decides the space the play may encompass, the object included, and emotions explored which may change and develop as the play continues. The flow follows on when both the return and frame is satisfied. Annihilation is when the play naturally ends. Adults can disrupt any stage of the play, which is called adulteration, that may be at any stage, maybe not picking up on a child's cue to play, not giving the return they are hoping for or expecting, maybe intervening and changing the rules of the game, trying to educate a child or maybe stopping play due to time constraints. The play cycle also looks at levels of intervention by the adult from play maintenance, simple, medial and complex intervention and integrity where the adult is asked to witness disruption to the play but not intervene to change an outcome. The play cycle summarizes the need for self-directed play and the role the adult should play to aid the completion of the cycle.

Section 3

The Welsh Government (2017) states that the foundation phase profile supports professionals to assess children during the foundation phase which should aid teachers and practitioners to build up a developmentally appropriate and holistic

curriculum for all children and should also help identify children who may need additional learning support. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development highlights the need for knowing and understanding where a child is developmentally and that the most effective learning takes place within that zone (Gray and MacBlain, 2015). The profile looks at four key areas of learning, Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity, Language, Literacy and Communication Skills, Mathematical Development and Physical Development and is aimed at providing a baseline for teachers and practitioners. It recommends carrying out an assessment within the first six weeks of a child starting reception class and again at the end of key stage 2, however, it could be used during nursery and several times throughout these periods if needed.

There are strengths and weaknesses to the foundation phase profile. Firstly, the strengths, it is a nationally consistent assessment, every early years practitioner has access to this, therefore it should provide a broad base of information on every child assessed covering the four key areas. The criteria is designed to help children through transitions by providing a baseline for any practitioner to understand where a child is developmentally and how to support their next steps, this links again to Vygotsky's zone of proximal learning, if a teacher or practitioner knows where a child is developmentally, they should be better placed to support their progression (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). There is also the consistency of when the assessment should take place, within six weeks of starting reception.

Secondly, the weaknesses, although children may start reception class together, there may be an age difference across the class of almost a year which the assessment does not take into consideration. It also does not consider children with learning difficulties and any support or interventions that may be in place. There is no wider picture of the child's background or culture, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory suggests that every child has a greater society acting upon them and practitioners should understand a child's background to be able to support them holistically (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Some children may be struggling with the transition between home and school or nursery and school which may affect their outcome. Flying start (2017) suggests that transitions should be gradual and build a cohesive partnership between the child, school and the family, it also states that some children will need more time to adjust to new settings, which may mean, in terms of the timing of the assessment, that some children are still struggling with the transition. It does not ask for attendance statistics which may also have a bearing on outcomes.

The foundation phase profile handbook (Welsh Government 2017) states that there is no set method for recording the observations which may give rise to differences in opinion as to how best to test each skill and whether a child has displayed a particular behaviour, it does not give a definite guideline as to how many times a behaviour should be displayed before it can be marked as achieved, it also states that Estyn does not require a set amount of evidence for each profile, it is at the discretion of the school. Estyn will scrutinise the information in each profile and check its accuracy through speaking with the child.

Howard and McInnes (2013) looks at how a child's well-being increases when they are carrying out tasks they perceive as play and not play activities, the results suggest that children who practiced a problem-solving skill under playful conditions showed higher levels of performance in terms of time and accuracy and displayed higher levels of well-being. If a child is asked to carry out a task, be that by a practitioner or an Estyn inspector, that they may not view as playful, this may result in them not fully engaging with and performing the task as well as they could.

Setting could provide opportunities to initiate role play through the engaging environments as suggested by education Wales (2022), visitors or staff from other classrooms could visit the setting to observe social interactions, also observing the school drop off and pick up interactions. A practitioner could use a variety of methods to evidence the observations from photos, videos, observation notebook for each child to a central observation board or a set time is given each day for observations.

The Welsh Government (2017) recognises that the foundation phase profile should be part of a bigger profile for each child, linking with Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and is designed to align with assessments from other professionals to build a holistic representation of the child.

Section 4

Recognition of the importance of play has led to laws and policies to ensure that the opportunities to play are accessible to all children, UNICEF (no date) and Welsh Government (2014). Bottrill (2018), argues that real play lights up a child, is not necessarily planned and the opportunities and possibilities that play create should be endless. According to Fisher, play is enjoyable, gives the opportunity to be creative and flexible, it does not need an end goal and should give the child opportunities to explore and make sense of their world (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). According to Keung and Cheung (2019), in play children are empowered to explore and express themselves through their own decision making.

Howard and McInnes (2012) ascertain children who viewed activities as play rather than non-play demonstrated higher levels of well-being, which in the context of observations should be beneficial to seeing a true picture of the child under conditions most favourable to them. During the study, the children carrying out tasks under playful conditions (the adult was proximal, the task was on the floor and the child had a choice on whether to participate or not), showed higher levels of concentration than children carrying out the task under not play conditions, (sat at a table with an adult and asked to participate). The results indicate that when a child approached a task under playful conditions, of their own choosing and direction, they demonstrated greater independence and confidence, again an opportunity to gain a true representation of a child's abilities and nature. This links to Play Wales's (no date) suggestion that play, for children, is fundamental to healthy development, both physical and mental and that children demonstrate greater capacity for learning whilst in play, however, the Howard and Innes (2012) study, was a small-scale study

with only 129 children completing the task and broader research and studies may be needed.

McInnes *et al* (2013) argues that children who practiced a problem-solving activity under playful conditions exhibited significant improved performance in terms of time and accuracy which would indicate that these conditions would provide a more positive outcome for a child being observed. However, this study looked at the outcomes of eight children, the children in setting A saw the presence of an adult as the difference between play and not play and in not so in the second setting, this is a very limited study in term of subjects. It did analyse the role of the adult in asking open or closed questions and identified the adults that asked more open questions were likely to be seen as co constructors of the task, it also highlighted that in setting A the child initiated the task as they had to ask the adult what was involved before deciding whether to participate or not.

Sharman, Cross and Vennis (1995) suggest it is important to remember the act of observing may change how a child behaves, they may become embarrassed or inhibited or they may act out if they are aware that they are being observed and, as such, adults should be as unobtrusive as possible. Sassoli de Bianchi (2013) similarly suggests that by observing something you may change the thing being observed and that observation and interpretation are two different things, the act of observing should be to describe, not to explain what has been observed. Sharman, Cross and Vennis (1995) also highlight that an observation is a snapshot and, as discussed in Section 3, should only be a part of building up a better understanding of a child. One observation, in isolation, cannot be relied upon as an adequate representation of a child.

McInnes *et al* (2013) suggests that the intervention of adults may inhibit learning and that could affect the outcome of observations. Practitioners should be aware of how their presence may impact upon a child, how they ask questions, how they interact with a child, may influence how a child perceives an activity and therefore the outcome of that activity.

The setting is important when considering when or where an observation is going to take place. Is the environment inviting and engaging? Does it allow a child the opportunity to explore? (Education Wales, 2022). Observations may take place to gain a better understanding of the child, or maybe to investigate a concern. A broad variety of activities or opportunities to engage with should be made available to enable a child the freedom of choice, Play Wales (2023) which should in turn allow the child to become more immersed in their own activity and, hopefully, unaware that they are being observed.

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