

An insight into the effects of play as the main driver for learning and development in early years.

Abstract

This study explores the effects of play, when used for the main learning and development tool for children in the early year's environment.

The research will assess if play should be used as a stand-alone method for teaching and learning or whether there is a need to incorporate it into a more traditional teaching method.

This research will aim to conclude if play is a positive pedagogical movement to support children and help them to develop in a holistic way when children view learning as play.

The report will include methods into gaining research from a diverse audience in order to create a well-rounded, fully informed judgement on whether play should be considered most appropriate for children to learn in this ever-changing modern world.

Welsh government offer a wealth of research and implementation of the initiative, stating that education provisions should follow guidelines to create a healthy happy learning experience where children explore and flourish within their own age and stage of development – which will be unpicked in more detail throughout the report.

The rationale of this research report is to challenge the notion that children learn best through play.

Ethical considerations will be incorporated to ensure compassion towards all viewpoints of those involved, with sensitivity and respect.

Literature Review

Play is described as an integral part to children's well-being and development. Children engage in learning experiences if it is authentic and relative to them. (Wainwright, et al. 2019).

Montessori Many care and education settings have adopted this to inform the way in which they teach children about the way the world works through hands on engaging activity.

Randolph, *et al.* (2023), exemplifies this to be a success; explaining that one quarter of students ranked higher than those that were given traditional schooling. Continuing to reflect that in correlation to authentic contexts, this was viewed as a greater success rate.

Froebel highlighted this in his theory of play, stressing that through play, children use their imaginations in a creative way to form active assumptions on the way in which the world works.

Vygotskys Findings agree this to be true, implying that children cannot simply learn through being told – they need to have real life, hands on experiences to be able to put this new information into context.

Arguably, children do require formal learning experiences to fully grasp the concept of any given situation.

This in early years can be difficult. All children should be exposed to a variety of learning methods to give a better understanding of how they learn best of to give care givers n that environment access to beneficial insights to how better accommodate the development of the individual child.

Rodgers and Lapping (2012) explain that with regards to the professions required to implement this initiative., it can lead them to a variety of obstacles. For example, it is for the educators to depict what is useful learning through play and what is known as “stagnant” play. Similarly, Ouvre and Furtado (2020), outline the challenge to create a learning environment suitable for the needs and intended learning outcomes; to secure beneficial experiences from which the children thrive and develop their skill set, in line with current curriculum reform.

Policy and Theory

There are already documents in current circulation, into the benefits of play in early years. Welsh Governments & Core Aims, lay foundation for the need to adopt a holistic approach to children’s learning and well – being.

In contrast there are also a number of items that have researched in depth and found play to be an accompaniment to formal, traditional methods of learning.

.... Research into this identifies that children, only engaging in the learning through play initiative, have a lower academic development level to those children that have formal, structured days of teaching. In contrast, Brosseuk (2022) is implying this was only for assessment purposes and the attainment of higher academic data. To compare, it is seemingly viewed that formal teaching is only favoured to show what children can do rather than what they show in understanding through play. Whilst.... Defends the need for formal teaching.

Universal Design for Learning Framework (1940), to this day highlights just how knowledgeable the children involved in hands on learning can evidently become should they follow the guidelines to encapsulate children's learning. This shown through "Representation" - of what children use to learn a skill. "Engagement" - ensuring the children are eager to learn with relatable topics and explanations. Finally, "Action and Expression" - which gives children opportunities to communicate what they know. All of which Linda and Galvin (2023) explain can be shown over a grand variation of teaching and leaning techniques. They simply push for the children to be involved, engaged and understand their task to succeed.

Torfaen County Borough Council (2022) follows current laws for children to have access to an enriching play-based model of learning. Education settings that care for children aged 3 years – must comply with Play Sufficiency Assessments to ensure children are gaining a high level of education and first-hand experiences through play. The importance of this for the area in which the research project is being conducted is widely substantial. It will engage the local community in terms of families and consider their involvement in it. Equally, Play Wales (2022) demonstrates to those involved that it is part of current legislation for children to have full access to quality play-based activities, to support their holistic development.

This research will empower the Early Years sector, providing them with the confidence to implement play as early as possible as it is evidently a leading factor in children's learning at present. Sennedd Cymru provided £1m to Local Authorities, in Wales, to implement national

implementation of play into its curriculum. This enforces that play should be used from the beginning of children's learning for them to become secure and embed knowledge to lead them into the routines set in place within mainstream, local authority provided education systems. Welsh Government (2018), documented, then Children's Minister, Huw Irranca – Davies, justifying that funding was given to "improve play opportunities... as growing evidence that playing makes a significant contribution to the fitness and well – being of children..."

A letter of update written by Jeremy Miles (2023) – The Minister for Education and Welsh Language confirms the success of play in early years and babies and stresses the importance for it to long continue.

Whether in agreement or those that oppose the notion of play as a tool for learning, it will be stressed that even in early years, it is hugely important for children to have access to it, outlined in The Children and Families (Wales) Measure (2010). This research will deepen the understanding of why and give context to the rationale behind introducing traditional teaching methods until children are at a more developmentally ready age to embed such formal learning.

International Studies

Introduction of formal teaching from the age of 7 years has hugely impacted the readiness and capabilities of the children to absorb the skills that they are being taught. Likewise, for the children in China. Richardson (2015), reported on studies showing that their education provision allows children to have hands on experiences whilst learning important social, physical and cognitive skills, but attain these in a far more regimented way as to what they are allowed to access.

This research will use Piaget's theory to determine whether play in the early years and early periods of children's schooling supports that of international approaches whilst analysing the data for standardised tests, to result in a deeper understanding of why this is the case.

Both methods have shown great developmental success. One celebrating the child led approach whilst the other allowing the children to choose from a collection of arranged activities.

Research has shown that giving the children an opportunity to take control over their learning supports their rights and, in some cases, needs.

However, it poses the question over whether it is ethical for a child to make such decisions at such a young age.

Children make decisions from the very second, they are born. A child can communicate when they like or dislike something. Their decisions should be heard and incorporated into their learning, leading to agreement of learning outcomes and full attainment.

This research project will explore the opinions of children and adults to form a multi generative outlook whilst leading to a conclusion to whether play as a driver for learning meets the needs of children. Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (no date) distinguish children that may not access full range of play or education in terms of and special educational needs, should be given an alternative way to engage with their environment. This research will take that into consideration.

Methodological Considerations

This research will use a variety of mixed methods. This will explore a number of viewpoints
Timings will need to be carefully organised to give fairness and full exclusivity to those involved. It is to ensure the trueness of the finding are understood and heard in a respected manner.

Participants will be offered the choice to be involved through a combination of Primary and Secondary data collection. This will mean that although participants will be providing the data it will the role of the research team to devise an appropriate strategy and include resources to allow the research to be conducted.

The team will consist of the Early Years lead, The Head Teacher of the School, where the research is conducted, The ALNCO; to ensure diversity of the children and families involved – this will allow for equality and a range of viewpoints to be considered. It will also include the governors of the school – to assess the findings, documenting and surmising the findings into a document for the local community.

Staff working within the classroom will undertake the observations as well as have some involvement in the interview process. They will also lead the collection of questionnaire forms from the parents or guardians within their designated classrooms.

All parties involved will record any subsequent materials; for example, unplanned conversations with other parties, which may lead to beneficial information relating to the research.

Observational approaches will give understanding of how children engage in play. Explains that observations provide explicit detail of the level of learning and enjoyment a child is engaging in.

Counteracts this explain that observations pose risks of inaccurate data. With Confirming that should children become aware of the presence of those observing, it can create the Hawthorn Effect.

Children often alter the way in which they display their characters when faced with the potential anxieties of being observed. Gabrieli, *et al.* (2021), conclude the “trustworthy” data to be gathered will need to be assessed before completion.

This in turn may lead the professional working with the children an opportunity to intervene. They can simply select specific children they are aware of that will not react or display signs of manipulating their behaviours, as opposed to selecting the children that may give a more accurate representation of what play is within the setting. In comparison, the Halo Effect will be considered in this research and guidelines for how to overcome within the setting will be discussed with the professionals.

Equally observations themselves can be manipulated, depending on the individuals involved. For example, during the random research the practitioner within the learning environment may coheres a situation to provide useful data when in reality it may be the intervention of the practitioner, or recordings of data, causes inaccurate or biased information.

These restrictions will need to be carefully considered when conducting the research. Researchers will need to approach observations with an open mind and be free from bias.

The research is intended to find positives in using play as the method for moving children's learning and development forward. It is the desire of the researchers to report the positives they witness. However, this may prove challenging as "positivism" can rule what the researchers see. What they see in early years learning can alter quickly and the interactions between those in the environment will have an impact on how their research is carried out. (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2017).

Questionnaires and in-depth conversations will be carried out with the adults involved with children's play and education.

Discussions between participants and researchers will include open ended questions, to allow them elaborate in their words, what and why they think play should or should not be used as the main pathway to learning. This is shown through a nonprobability sampling method. (Henry, 2009).

With regards the questionnaires, these will be solely closed questions, with an array of multiple-choice answers. This will target a more specific answer to the role of play within education and development. Bartram (2019) touches on this idea, explaining that questionnaires can be deemed conflicting, depending on the quality of questions. Researchers will carefully select appropriate questions to reach accurate opinions.

Legislations states that play should be provided to meet the needs of the children. This study is designed to view if this can be achieved with play as a stand-alone device or if in fact children require a balance of both, free and structured learning, to ensure an enriching learning experience.

The qualitative aspect of the samples used will be assessed more so than the quantitative. The quality of responses and findings will give a clearer insight into how play supports the development of children. Purposely showcasing that the quality outshines quantitative as it can be specifically identified and recorded through progression of the children.

Quantitative data will be noted but not formally included amongst the final findings. This research will be to assess the effects and benefits of play. Moreover, quantitative will only provide numerical evidence for the number of children that are involved in the study as apposed to the quality of the information provided.

The study will focus on discussions and questioning of different age groups as well as different cultures, professionals and traditions. This will be done to gain a breadth of opinions and knowledge from a diverse community, including those closest to the children. The qualitative aspect will shine through here. Nolan, Macfarlane and Cartmel (2013) offer the idea that this is a useful method as it allows for deeper, more focussed questioning.

Questionnaires will be sent to parents, staff, governors and older pupils in education setting, to collect their views on how play is viewed in relation to learning. This will draw upon personal experiences and opinions allowing a wider understanding.

The combination of samples used for this research is closely linked to The Mosaic Approach (Clark 2017), as cited in Roberts – Homles (2018). This justifies the use of a multitude of data gained by listening to the children's ideas and incorporating them into their learning. It also celebrates the use working alongside parents or other adults. For this particular research this is useful to reach a more accurate conclusion on play as a learning tool.

Current rights for children acknowledge this approach. UNCRC (1989) highlights the children's rights to be heard and have their views listened to. Article 12 fundamentally underpins the workings of The Mosaic Approach.

Therefore, the Mosaic method demonstrates the benefits of using these samples. It forms a holistic character of a child. As children are observed and interviewed, the way in which they work more confidently as well as the educational development the child is gaining through play will be communicated. (Lyndon, 2019).

Strengths and areas for improvement will emerge through the cooperative methods throughout the research.

Gathering of all findings will be safe from prejudice. Statistical research findings imply that prejudice is apparent in those of a mature age. Clear ruling for prejudice to be eradicated from this research will be secured before the project takes place. Advises sensitivity towards any misrepresentation of those involved. Researchers will present information that is a true interpretation of the participants involvement.

Ethical Considerations

To conduct this research will require a respectful understanding.

Consent will be sought from all participants. Documentation will be composed to ensure the safety and security of any information disclosed as well as a detailed explanation of what the information will be used for and how it will be stored. This complies with the Data Protection Act (2018).

Participants

It is important to conduct the research with those are directly impacted by the use of play as tool for children's learning. This means using staff that work personally with the children, the families effected and the professionals that organise the policy of play in to the education programme. In doing so, provides more accurate results. (Seiber, 2009. p. 106-142).

The research study will involve a range of individuals.

Children

Children within the setting will be providing researchers with information. This may be displayed through observational approaches. Researchers will note conduct detailed observations of children within the early year's environment with multiple focal points. This will help to determine the level of engagement, quality of learning, effects on their physical, social and emotional development. All of which will be reflected upon in their final research report.

Limitations of this approach may be witnessed through consensual participation from young children. Whilst every care will be taken to ensure the well – being of the child, it will primarily be obtained through consent from the parent/ guardian and the practitioner within that setting, to determine if it deemed acceptable for the research to be taking place with those specific children.

Answers given by pupils will need to be treated with care due to their age and understanding to the topic. It will also need validity for those that may face challenges with

communicating. The Children and Families Act (2014) secures safety for children and their families to have their rights adhered to and for respect to be given to them.

Engaging in conversations with children can offer an innocent insight to how children perceive their learning. Researchers will need to adapt their language to meet that of the children to give the children a fair chance at expressing their views. This will encourage positive relationships which may lead to a greater quality of response from the children.

If conducted successfully, this research can provide an outlook on the child's perspective on their involvement in play. Informants to the way in which the children view their involvement in play should be free from upset and distrust. Turgeon (2013), explains that trusting in their experiences offers mutual respect, in turn the children handing over their cooperation to result in more specific target information.

Research will be carried out in an environment familiar to the children. This will support their well-being as they can feel reassured to share their views in a safe space. Johnson, et al. (2014) notes this as a beneficial action for researchers.

Parents

When speaking with parents and retrieving their questionnaires, welcoming and positive attitudes will need to show from researchers to ensure full participation is achieved. It is the aim of the research to form conclusions based on experience and to reserve judgement on any negative comments made towards play. Limitation may be present here – questionnaires might not be returned resulting in lack of evidence as well as parents/cares not wanting to be involved with the research study.

Likewise, it could be the inaccuracy of parents understanding of play in the Early Years. Most enquiries into play-based learning are found to be somewhat contradictory. Some offer a beam of encouragement whilst others shown reservations – expressing their concerns to children merely playing all day with no intended educational purpose.

Encouraging families to participate in this research will lead to a significant understanding of the child's learning and development. Caspe, *et al.* (2013) shows it can support children's

ability to transfer essential skills into their daily routine throughout a range of setting. Thus resulting in the skills being secured and progression can be made.

Parents are to be fully informed of intentions and the way in which the input of their and their children's opinions will be involved before research is conducted.

Professionals

The professionals involved in this research will have a clear understanding of the reasoning for this report. Therefore, it is of importance that the skills set of the professionals is of high quality and a good foundation of knowledge is pre-existing to allow for the correct avenues of research to be taken. This finalising a true reflection of how play is portrayed in education. Something that Moloney (2011) advocates in her research findings.

Giving participants opportunity to physical experience learning through play can lend itself to a more accepting trial. This stresses the importance of the research – to explore whether play is beneficial to the children's development.

The setting in which the research is being conducted may come under some scrutiny. The conflict of privileged vs deprived areas plays a significant part in how play is achieved within settings. When working in the setting researchers will provide an open-door policy with the community to relieve any assumptions being made. The purpose is to have a clear image of what the research is intended for and in what circumstances it will be assessed; with what is achievable for the setting and that of the surrounding areas.

The rise in poverty may play a significant factor in this research. Negative impacts may lead research to highlight the quality of play on offer may not be in accordance with that of another setting in the surrounding areas. The research will work sensitively not to place attention on the implications of poverty to its families and young children. Flying Start initiative works towards removing negative aspects by providing support for the families living in the areas. The research will consider this as it moves forward.

As outlined by budgeting for schools in different areas alter drastically, meaning that not all children are gaining the same experience of learning as others. This may hinder the results of the research, depending on the areas that the individuals involved are located.

As this research will be conducted within a singular setting, researchers will network with other education providers in the area to compare the results.

Analysing the results will give context to how play is supported and maintained throughout the cluster, with the aim to share practice and improve the quality of care to children within early years.

Information gathered will be treated with care and any information received will be recorded and used for research purposes, conforming to the GDPR (2018) regulations.

Ultimately, engagement of all participants is due to rise in comparison to previously recorded engagement, as fully involving families and children in the decision making, whilst valuing their opinions, motivates them - in turn gaining a higher quality of education for all children. linking back to the Halo Effect. Implying that research reports can influence what others think and should be proposed in a positive manner.

The participatory methods accounted for in this research will in turn allow for more credible and truthful representations of play in the early years.

First-hand knowledge will be obtained, giving clear views on how it currently being used in practice. The conclusion of whether it is deemed suitable and effective as the main driver for learning in the early years provision inevitably will prevail throughout, informing future planning of the success of children's learning and development. Vaugh Gething – Deputy Minister for Tackling Poverty - states in Welsh Government (2014) legislation that involving the families is a positive move to understand how their children are learning. Furthering this notion; children and families should part of the decision making for their interests and how they are put to good use, especially within their education. This research will strive to explore if play mirrors the benefits for children's learning and development.

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