

Children's Play: Principles and Practice

Children have the right to play, engaging in various leisure opportunities and recreational activities including culture and art. Allowing space and time for fun, uncertainty, challenge and flexibility in play is necessary; freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated by the child with no specific goal in mind. Throughout play children must be respected for their unique qualities and capabilities, their ideas, and perspectives, enriching their learning journey process and leading them into successful futures (Unicef, 2013; Welsh Gov, 2021; Welsh Gov, 2002).

Section 1:

Role play/imaginative play

Vygotsky believed role play is the prominent activity in preschool, a distinctive role which other activities cannot achieve. It encourages imagination, creativity and cognitive/social development while actively achieving curriculum goals (Scharer, 2017). Children make sense of their world through role play (Huleatt, 2018); they are developing a strong interest in the adult's world, and they desire to be a part of it (Scharer, 2017); According to Welsh Gov (no date) imaginative play allows children to imitate roles and events that include people/experiences that are important to them, for example mum/dad/teacher; they might use past/present and future speech including imitation of voice, tone, and body language and depending on roles, it might include mathematical skills influenced by sorting objects/counting/measuring/matching/comparing for example in a play shop (Welsh Gov, 2019; Welsh Gov, 2018).

According to Sigmund Freud, play impacts a child's emotional health and wellbeing by providing opportunity for them to search and express their emotions freely and safely, processing traumatic experiences or suppressed memories for example, imitating neglect/abuse in a home corner, coming to terms with their fears in a safe place (Freud Museum London, 2017; Pound, 2005); Bandura (1925) also believed that children copy the behaviours of those they observe and while considering peer relationship, if they have good role models, they will eventually learn to take turns, share, and collaborate ideas within their roles, influencing empathy while considering each other's perspectives; listening, and using eye contact (Huleatt, 2018; Pacey, no date).

Role play supports cultural awareness including gender/race/disability/language and religion; children can communicate and interact with their friends by discovering, exploring, and understanding diversity including similarities and differences that they share with each other and the world around them. As they explore their curiosities, they can learn about belonging and acceptance which influences a developing confidence in who they are and how to play cooperatively for example in a home corner where individual cultures can be shared based on experiences (PhD, Rettig, 1995; Welsh Gov, no date).

Physical development is also supported in role play; there are limitless exciting ideas for what the outdoors could represent to children, strengthening their bodies as they use their arms and legs to create large movements for example, climbing as pretend fire fighters/spiderman; reaching, and running then picking things up and moving symbolic items from place to place as they continue their imaginative roles, developing smaller muscles too (Welsh Gov, 2019; Welsh Gov, no date; Huleatt, 2018).

Role play can be supported by ensuring the adult plans appropriately providing meaningful resources and opportunities indoors/outdoors; ensuring it is inviting/stimulating/flexible and rich in language, encouraging the child's motivation to learn. For example, including dress up/dolls/food/furniture and changing the theme depending on the child's interests and including visits to influence the play for example, a class walk to a local shop so role playing shop becomes real to them. The adult can enrich/strengthen/scaffold by intervening/indicating/modelling when necessary, linking to Slimansky's (1968) sociodramatic play theory. However, providing time/space for uninterrupted play while listening/observing as they lead is important too. Children should be able to take ownership of their role, feeling confident to explore and express freely, therefore, following their interests (Welsh Gov, no date; Unicef, no date; Scharer, 2017; West Sussex County Council, 2020; Goddard, 2019; Smith, 2010).

Social play

According to NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (2017), social play starts early through smiles, sounds and imitations however, as children grow, they develop skills such as sharing/turn taking and the meaning of rules while interacting directly and joyfully with others (co-operative play). Social play considers both spoken or visual communication, quiet or loud voices and in large or small groups, influencing a desire to explore

relationships, perspectives, resilience, and success/failure. This links to Plato's, 360BC/1974 view on the value of social play and how it supports creating a cultured society of respectable future citizens as they learn to interact (Andrews, 2012); Donaldson supports this in the four core purposes of the new curriculum for September 2022 (Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act, 2021).

Social play enables children to explore and discover the world around them, taking risks and developing their imagination and emotional security together in an interactive way; it considers culture/beliefs/traditions and can take form through imagination, humour, songs, chants, and the use of materials/resources in various creative ways for example, role play, object play, exploratory play, physical play all within their peer groups; like the Te Whariki approach to learning, social play is built on children's current knowledge/experiences from home, therefore knowing the children holistically is important and as they interact playfully, they learn through their responsive, reciprocal relationships, places, and things (Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency, 2009; Ministry of Education, no date). This also links to Vygotsky's opinion that culture influences academic achievement and at the core of education is the child, suggesting that when considering children at play, the children's voices matter for example, what they enjoy (NurseryWorld, 2016). Parten also found interest in social interaction suggesting learning is best achieved together; (Hornung *et al*, 1976); for example one child may be engaging in exploratory play collecting sticks/leaves/acorns during Autumn and after on-looker for a while, another child decides to join them adding more to their basket and using language/maths skills to describe/match/sort and count the items through social play (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008; Vogler, Crivello, Woodhead, 2008).

Social play can be supported in practice by ensuring there is a wide range of rich, stimulating opportunities/experiences available to them for example, objects to explore, experiment and investigate, reading books, music, and instruments, creative, imaginative/role play areas, construction, small world, sand/water (Early Years Matters, 2022). However, according to Loebach (2020), the outdoors offers more diverse opportunities for powerful play experiences – a more enriched environment than the structured indoor setting; with nature based and more physical play included, she suggests these spaces influence the children's positive physical, emotional, and social development, reducing stress and mitigating symptoms of ADD/ADHD in

children; at any given time, 20% of children are suffering psychological problems and allowing for child initiated play outdoors with their friends builds confidence and resilience which are vital preventative factors for mental health and wellbeing (Children's Plat Services, no date). According to Froebel, the outdoors is a great opportunity for development, believing that nature, the garden, light and space during play supports effective learning; Mc Millan's theory more specifically outlined the importance of time and space outdoors improving health and well-being (Pound, 2005).

Practitioners must allow for uninterrupted time to play with others and be prepared to stand back observing, as they take the lead, learning when it is appropriate to intervene for example if a child might get hurt (Diaz, 2022)

Section 2:

According to Moyles (2013), play is a worldwide necessity to deepen a child's learning through hands on opportunities and experiences that are enjoyable for them; Elkind (2008) agrees, play influences healthy development including cognitive, physical, and emotional. However, Bottril (2018) suggests play in its true form is child initiated, open ended and offering a range of possibilities and interpretations. Furthermore, Jarvis (2007) suggests play is defined by a feeling rather than something that must be done suggesting a child may not learn all that they could from an engagement if it is not freely chosen, because it is not perceived as play to them (Bruce, 2011). Broadhead (2005) argues that play is not only a child's work but also a holistic approach to who they are and what they understand and what they might aspire to become – a child is reaching their full potential as they explore their wonder, curiosities, ideas, and joys, developing confidence and self-esteem. Froebel believed children should be allowed to freely engage in what they enjoy and express through play without the concern of what is next, and adults must commence where they are (Pound, 2005).

Allowing children to engage in self-directed play creates more meaningful outcomes for them, they begin to make sense of the world as they actively engage and discover meaning from their curiosities by associating it with current knowledge. It creates natural opportunities for deep involvement and combines many areas of engagement for example, language, social interactions, maths, creativity, imagination and physical development including taking safe risks both physically and emotionally, problem

solving and all the while building relationships with their peers by analysing other ideas and points of view (The LEGO Foundation, 2018; Welsh Gov, 2014; Scottish Gov, 2023; Learning Through Play, no date; Ginsberg, 2007; Welsh Gov, 2017; Sutton-Smith, 2003).

Play Wales has emphasized the importance of play being freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated therefore adults must be aware of the balance between self-directed play without planned goals and that of free play that serves other agendas for example, play therapy. If children are engaged in what should be self-directed play without goals intended, then there must be enough time for play development and it must be uninterrupted allowing them to explore their own likes and interests spontaneously; by doing so these hands-on experiences will have positive outcomes to their learning (Welsh Gov, 2008; Welsh Gov, 2014)

The adult's role is to ensure quality learning opportunities are presented to them through child-led play experiences. Time, space, resources, and permission is crucial so that children feel they are free to choose and take ownership of the space they have available to them, including indoors and outdoors spaces, all-weather types, the natural world of plants/animals/insects and mud as well as the stimulating, rich and well-resourced areas within the classrooms for example, role play, puzzles, sand/water, construction, small world, reading corner, digital media and so on. These experiences should be planned by reflecting on observations and must mirror children's age/stage, abilities, interests, and culture to allow a natural progression based on their current knowledge (Welsh Gov, 2014; Australian Gov, no date).

Adults must learn children's play cues to avoid interfering unnecessarily and breaking their play cycle, for example an adult might want to educate, improve, rescue, control or simply join in with play; however, adulteration can have detrimental effects on a child's development causing harm to the learning that is taking place through the child-initiated play; for example, consider a child engrossed happily colouring a picture of the seaside but the adult suggests the sky should be blue instead of pink (improve/educate), the child begins to feel aggravated and walks away from the activity because they wanted to colour a picture, not talk about colours. A play cue is simply an invite involving the child/other people/objects within the environment and it is shown in varied ways such as a look, gesture, verbal expression, and actions; adults

must look for that invitation that influences a healthy necessary response returned for example, the child colouring might ask the adult, “what colour is the sky?” and the adult may respond because of that cue, “the sky is blue” contributing to more playfulness throughout their learning. Research suggests that children’s use of a cue for adult involvement is a significant feature in their perspective of what play/not play is; variations of interactions allowing children free choice and control over their play without adulteration was emphasized, influencing learning (Oxfordshire.gov, no date; McInnes *et al.* 2010; Howard, 2010). Montessori’s believed children can only find freedom in their explorations when the adult learns to be an acute observer; these learning spaces provide experiences/materials to utilize their natural abilities to learn (Pound, 2005).

When children engage in free play, they are free to be themselves entirely; their brains are thriving; creativity and imagination is explored and they learn to think, concentrate, invent, and resolve on their own. Free play influences children to become successful adults as they will develop the skills required to achieve well in life, for this reason, protecting play is vital – ensuring adults have clear knowledge and understanding of play appreciating the importance of free choice and how it develops and enhances learning (Homan, 2016; Children’s Play Services, no date; Welsh Gov, 2006).

Section 3:

Scale based observations – Foundation Phase Profile

Observation should be an integral, daily part of the foundation stage assessment and planning cycle. Observation is used to support findings on children’s development, influencing future planning based on the holistic child’s needs/desires. It appreciates where progress is made including the individuals’ involvements/interactions, likes/dislikes and considers achievements and outcomes by gathering a range of information on the child’s developing skills. There are many ways to observe however the Foundation Phase Profile, scale-based observations will be discussed for this assignment (Welsh Gov, 2008 a; Welsh Gov, 2008 b).

The Foundation Phase Profile tracks early years development. A National Statutory Baseline Assessment is carried out in reception which aligns with the Statutory Teacher Assessments at the end of the foundation years (year 2); this gives a small insight to the expected stage of development and so supports practitioners to plan

appropriately for the children, so they progress at their own stage. Although the profiles track 3–7-year-olds, it has been designed to align with assessments that are done from birth onwards, therefore it creates opportunity for professionals to identify any developmental delays/SEN early, influencing early interventions, if necessary, for example speech and language therapy. The Baseline is carried out within the first 6 weeks of reception through a range of practitioner's observations and covering 4 main areas of development: Personal, Social Development, Wellbeing and Cultural Diversity; Language, Literacy and Communication; Mathematical Development and Physical Development. These observations are done over a wide range of activities and acknowledges a series of skills in the form of a ladder for the different areas of learning. Each stage of the ladder supports the practitioner in making judgments, for example a 4-year-old should be able to count to 10 objects reliably; the practitioner can observe and assess where the child is on the ladder and whether they are below average, where they should be or above average enabling them to start progressing to the next stage. There is a scoring method which allows practitioners to arrive at an overall outcome for each developmental area and can be used alongside the end of phase assessment. There is no baseline requirements for year one, but practitioners must use the profiles to collect evidence of progression throughout their observations (Welsh Gov, 2017; Welsh Gov, 2015; Welsh Gov, 2016; Welsh Gov, 2019 a).

The scale-based method of observation links to Piaget's theory; he also believed in stages of cognitive development with children going through each stage in a particular order. However, he wasn't interested in how well a child could do something for example, count to 10, he was more interested in the way a concept like number emerged and he believed success could be observed spontaneously as children interact with their environments naturally, for example counting money in the role play shop (Egan (2012)).

Although the Foundation Phase provides a structure for learning through play giving large opportunity for observation/assessment, there is still a clear, large emphasis on adult input/focussed tasks assessing where children sit on the scale and throughout baseline assessments, adults give the children practical activities to do while they observe (Welsh Gov (2014; Department of Standards and Testing Agency, 2018)). However, Plowden believed that not everything that is measured carries value, a child doesn't necessarily learn something by being tested and she supported the idea of

individual and active learning; this suggests self-directed play for more accurate baseline observations could be more affective (The Plowden Report, 1967).

Another thought to consider with this method is if it is too soon to observe and accurately judge the outcomes for the baseline. Some of these children will have been separated from their parents/carers for the first time and getting to know a new environment experiencing anxiety as they process the motions of settling in, possibly affecting their usual behaviour. Pressure to meet the baseline deadline in the first 6 weeks of reception could impact the accuracy of the observations because the children are unsettled therefore not necessarily interacting as they would ordinarily (Department of Standards and Testing Agency, 2018; Pacey, 2022).

Section 4:

According to Welsh Gov (2014) a range of interviews were carried out across Wales, Evaluating the Foundation Phase; the voices of 239 classrooms, 341 practitioners, 37 members of the local authority and 4 non-maintained organisations was heard. Overall practitioners were seen more to be observing children more during focussed tasks rather than throughout periods of continuous and enhanced provision with adult-led focussed tasks taking priority over child-initiated play.

The role of play allows for effective observations and assessments to be carried out on the child. When children are actively engrossed in a child-initiated play situation, genuine interests, learning preferences and abilities, interactions, emotions and behaviour and progression can be seen and heard accurately; this is because they are doing something they want to do instead of something they have to do, for example a child might happily play threading beads if it is freely chosen; whereas they might refuse or rush if it is something they perceive as 'not play' – a focussed task where an adult is asking them to do it (McInnes *et al.* 2010; Pacey, no date; Bruce, 2011).

The child's most natural behaviour might also change if they know they are being watched, for example they might start showing signs of discomfort/shyness and stop what they are playing; it is vital the adult is sensitive when carrying out observations to get the best and most accurate judgement of the child; it requires a respectful approach toward their play choices/interactions and an attitude of appreciation for their learning plan (the play cycle), noting their expressions, gestures, talk and interactions

and considering what play is of interest to them without adulteration that causes unnecessary upset in the process (Drake, 2006; Pacey, no date).

The Foundation Phase/Stage puts value on the continuous/enhanced provision across all areas of development and considers the emotional/indoor/outdoor environments; it provides children a continual environment to feel safe to explore while consistently challenging their knowledge/understanding through self-directed play. It encourages them through a range of appropriate activities to make independent choices that demonstrates to the adult observers what they have achieved and how best to plan to enhance that learning including any conflicts the adult might observe.

Erikson believed in psychosocial stages and his focus was on conflict providing turning points in development which leads to success or failure; he believed the basic conflict for preschool children is 'initiative v's guilt' as they begin questioning if they are good or bad people. Through exploration/play they can achieve success in establishing empowerment which gives them a sense of purpose ensuring they feel good. It is important throughout these periods of free choice that adults are aware of the impact/effectiveness of continuous/enhanced provision and in using it to observe and assess them more accurately (Essex County Council, 2022; Kelly, 2015; Erikson's Psychosocial Stages Summary Chart, no date; Welsh Gov, 2008).

The role of play can also be therapy supporting the observations/assessments of professionals such as Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Counsellors, Social workers, and other mental health specialists (O'Conner, 2000). Play can be a powerful tool that is enjoyable for children and effective with a range of approaches for example, art, role play, sensorimotor and ludic play, addressing issues including anxiety, depression, impulsivity, distractibility, and behaviour (Hall *et al.* 2002). This links to Freud's theory, suggesting emotions/experiences can be explored by the child and observed by the professional as they use play to unfold/process what they have been through (Freud Museum London, 2017).

Observational contributions on each child while they play can be carried out by a range of staff members; this ensures the information is from a variety of adult perspectives, offering a fuller picture of the child (Drake, 2006). Observing children is vital, each child is entirely unique and different play situations allows the adult to capture those gifts and abilities influencing discussions with the child, parents, carers, other staff in the

setting and any outside partnerships too (Early Years Matters, 2022). Adults must be willing to stand back, watch with interest and listen as the child engages through voice, body language and expressions in their own child-initiated play (LDonline, 2021).

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