

Section 1.

(Dumford, 2009) States children have an innate desire to play; It helps their growth and development. To promote learning a child needs to be motivated during their play, this aids enjoyment, persistence, and performance. Supporting and enabling a child's inherent motivation to engage in play encourages a child's natural learning and development. Children who are intrinsically motivated to play show more excitement, interest, and engagement (Macdonald, 2022, p.5).

What is play?

“Play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development. Not only for individual children but also for the society in which they live,” (Play Scotland, 2023).

Play Wales (2023) argues that when children are given the opportunity, all children will play instinctively but not all children can participate in structured activities. Therefore, it is important that children are provided with resources, time, and opportunities to play freely. This will enhance each child's development in all areas of learning. Alike, in New Zealand one of the five strands of the Whariki curriculum is 'exploration through play.' The strand brings together children's learning and play through active playful exploration of the environment. Similarly in Wales, embedded in policy are children's rights (Lewis et al, 2017) young children are recognised as learning best through playful engagement with their surroundings (Water-Davies, 2022, p. 15).

(Froebel,1782-1852) believed that childhood should be respected and appreciated. That children need to be nurtured and protected from harm. All children have a right to play and explore the natural world. (Murphy, 2022, p. 41).

(Macdonald, 2022, p. 3) Play is frequently associated with children and essential for their holistic growth. The importance of play is acknowledged internationally in article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC (UNICEF,1990) which is summarised as 'Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities' (UNCRC, 2017).

Play

Heuristic Play- is where young children explore and interact with everyday objects. The purpose of heuristic play is to provide a wide range of sensory stimulations, this facilitates children to learn and discover things for themselves (Murphy, 2022).

(Hughes, 2015) on behalf of the Froebel Trust specifically looks at the treasure basket, containing between 80-100 every day and natural items. Sensory play using fingers, hands, and mouth. The more variety of items in the basket will contribute to a greater stimulation for the infant's interest, promoting brain development. Elinor Goldschmied, (1910-2009) designed the 'Treasure Basket' as she was confident that young children could learn scientific and mathematical concepts through their play, and interaction with contact of sensory materials. It allows the infant to explore all senses and promotes holistic development by encouraging active learning, creativity, critical thinking, development of problem-solving skills, self-directed play, using gross-motor skills, and promoting conceptual learning in which they can play autonomously.

Bruce (2020) states that by engaging in heuristic play children will enhance their creativity as they are free to imagine and play as they choose. Children will also develop gross motor and critical thinking abilities as they are free to explore objects.

In practise, it is extremely important for the practitioner to consider resources are safe for children to handle, especially if they are putting objects into their mouth to explore. Therefore, selection of appropriate resources needs to be taken into consideration prior to choosing what to offer, Tassoni (2014).

Bruce (2020) is an advocate regularly having access to free flow play to support their holistic development. Where children will take the lead on what to do and how to do it. She argues that when children play freely it gains momentum and moves naturally from one scenario to another, or one phase to the next, which makes children feel free, in control of their own destiny, empowered and contented.

Moyles views differ to that of Bruce. Moyles believes that play is used to support learning, uses the term 'playful teaching' focusing on the child's need for play to aid their holistic development, adults' structure and plan the play to focus on learning outcomes. Moyles' play spiral maintains that children need to have a balance of directed play and

free play which will help them to obtain a variety of skills, aiding development in all areas of learning (Pound, 2009).

Creative Play- is often thought of as arts and craft activities. However, any activity where children are given opportunities to satisfy their curiosity, where they can express themselves and explore, will encourage children's creativity. When children face challenges during play, they gain skills to problem solve and this promotes their creativity. Children need to feel confident they can change the environment they are in and objects within that environment without feeling they will be judged or reprimanded. Allowing children to choose what happens whilst in play, can nurture their emotional wellbeing. (Rees-Edwards, 2022, p.30).

Creativity should be recognised in all forms, for example; Musically, artistically, and imaginatively, through child responses. The environment must be well thought out to stimulate interest, engaging children to use all their senses during the creative process.

Creativity should be regarded as an ongoing process, not a product (Thomas and Dudley, 2010, p.51).

The holistic role of play means embracing everything it has to offer. The stimulating factors that surround that situation of play, the environment and what is in that environment. The other children that are present and the dynamics between those around them to help build relationships (Canning and Rekers, 2022, p.57). Practitioners could adapt this to creative play. As this form of play is so open ended and a truly holistic experience.

(Bateman, 2022, p. 91) believes pretend play is a child's natural source for creative experiences. It can help with resilience and for a child to express and cope with their feelings. Therefore, this develops a range of coping strategies for the future.

Section 2.

Self-directed play

“Self-directed play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. This means that children can make choices and control their own play, decide on their own rules and roles within the play, and that the play is not performed for any reward but undertaken for its own sake,” (Play Wales, 2023).

Froebel (1782-1852) believed that children needed to be nourished by the adult around them, facilitating children with meaningful play experiences that developed and enhanced their self-expression and creativity. He believed child-led activities that were self-chosen developed intrinsic motivation and allowed the child to learn whilst being active (Murphy, 2022).

According to Ledendecker (2020) When children embrace self-directed play, it is important for adults to remember the children are the ones in control of the situation and within safe boundaries will initiate play on their level. Practitioners tend to have pre-determined ideas of what the outcomes should be for an activity. Practitioners need to take a step back and become the facilitator observing the children during play rather than guiding the children through the process.

Brown (2014) looks at the importance of a practitioner's response to a child's play cue to engage with that child during play, stating that if the practitioner had a well-balanced childhood with quality play experiences, they should be able to recognise play cues and actively respond. Brown (2014) also highlights if a child's play cues are consistently missed, this may have a damaging impact on their play and learning.

McInnes *et al.* (2011) carried out a study that considered the role of the adult during self-directed play. Their findings were practitioners with valuable experience and knowledge of the Early Years were able to intervene and enhance children's play when needed and understood when they needed to take a step back and wait for initiation from the children. McInnes *et al.* (2011) pointed out the importance of practitioners needing to adapt for self-directed play to be successful. It was considered that practitioners tend to focus on the children's behaviour when evaluating their practice, not

considering their own behaviour. This study analysed the main factor of the practitioner's understanding of play and learning, the benefits of self-directed play when enabled by the adult to progress effectively. McInnes *et al.* (2011) found that many practitioners have difficulty promoting self-directed play, offering children choice and control. Due to these factors this would turn into adult-led play where the adult makes all the choices and decisions.

Welsh Government (2022) recognises the importance of play in children's development and learning, that play is something children take very seriously. The new curriculum for Wales focuses on the adult's role, which is integral to the progress of all children in Early Years. When adults observe children in the setting, they should consider the interests of the child, plan and organise stimulating environments which allow children to holistically play, learn and develop (Welsh Government, 2022). Froebel also believed that adults require the skills and knowledge of assessing when and how to intervene in children's play. He stated that there are times when children do not require help and other times they do. Froebel was an advocate for child-initiated and child-directed activities (Bruce, 2011).

Howard and McInnes (2012) considered the link between children's emotional well-being and play whilst trialling a small study on one hundred and twenty-nine children aged between 3 and 5 years old. Children were guided to an activity session using the same resources, one being set up 'like play' and the other 'not like play.' All children participated in these sessions and their emotional well-being was measured. Howard and McInnes (2012) found evidence that the children accessing the 'like play' session were more focused on the activity and had higher levels of emotional well-being compared to those children participating in the 'not like play' session. The study highlighted those children taking part in a 'like play' activity felt more confident in trying new things and problem solving as they were in control, choosing their own play so there was a small risk of failure. In the adult-led session, not like play, children felt that they needed to achieve a specific outcome to satisfy the adult. The conclusion of this study emphasises the need for training of adults working with children. This would help the practitioner to reflect and understand the importance of play and to consider how their role plays a crucial part in all children's play and learning.

Well-being can be explained in many ways, but it is thought to include social, emotional, and physical health (Statham, Chase, 2010, p. 737).

Children's well-being is set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2009, p. 737).

Section 3.

Observation

According to (Woods, 2016, p.8) It is important for practitioners to understand why and how child observations are a crucial part to effective planning, what is provided and if interventions need to be applied. Facilitating practitioners to utilise tools for the observation and assessment of children, sustaining and enhancing early years care and education that is of the highest quality. When researching Laevers' ideas, concepts, and themes it is apparent they are repeated and emphasised, forming the foundation of his theoretical approach and practice in observing children's learning. These subjects are incorporated into signals and scales of involvement.

The Leuven Scale was used to assess emotional well-being (Laevers *et al.* 1994; Laevers 2008). This scale contains two components. The first being a list of ten signals. Statements that correlate to the signals are used to guide the observer's awareness, to make a judgement of the child's overall involvement. Using the signals, the level of involvement is measured by a five-part scale. Level one being no activity to level five sustained intense activity. (Howard, McInnes, 2012 p.739).

According to (Bateman, 2022, p.85) There are benefits of measuring well-being in childhood. This includes identifying individual issues and applying appropriate support measures where necessary. The data that is gathered may have an impact on policies and practices in the setting. Measuring well-being can be difficult and subjective, as it examines emotional and psychological details.

When observing from the perspective of the learner, it is vital for the practitioner to focus on two processes the 'emotional well-being' and the 'level of involvement.' 'Well-being' indicates that the basic needs of the child are met, how does the child respond, is the

child at ease, acting spontaneously, are they confident and full of animation.

‘Involvement’ is evident when children are concentrating, focused, and showing interest during play whilst pushing their limits of capability (Woods, 2016, p.9).

Cardiff Flying Start use a simplified version of a Well-being and Involvement screening tool. This has been designed to help practitioners to observe children in their play. The Flying Start advisory team value this assessment tool and feel it is essential all flying start childcare providers use it, and as a team complete the assessment. This takes place at the beginning of each term once the child is settled in the provision, usually after the first three weeks. This gives children time to become familiar with their surroundings and adapt to routines. Then the assessment tool is completed in the final two weeks, before the child leaves for their nursery entitlement. The format is in a colour coded chart – Low involvement/well-being in red, medium in amber and high in green. There are also comment boxes to disclose information how you have arrived at your conclusion. If a child scored red, strategies will be put in place to support that child’s needs. The ‘How to Guide’-Wellbeing and Involvement (2020).

(Woods, 2016, p.10) Whalley (2007: 58) suggests: Laevers’ work is well established and thorough, it is accessible to early years workers. Laevers has been looking at the processes of learning as well as the outcome or product. He is interested in what is happening inside children, as they learn. Edwards *et al.* (2010: 136) agrees with Whalley, process over product supports children’s learning and knowledge. Process over product has been emphasised as a vital area of learning, suggesting that participation in play is more important than what the play itself produces.

Section 4

Howard and McInnes (2012) highlighted one of the most predominant considerations in this study, the importance of completing observations during children’s play. They found that children accessing a ‘play’ activity were deeply engaged and focused during their play. To put it more simply this means that a practitioner would see a true reflection of a child’s interests and abilities when observing them during play. Howard and McInnes (2012) found that when they observed children in a ‘not like play’ situation, the children got easily distracted and did not focus on the activity. Consequently, practitioners

observing this activity would not see the children's true interests, abilities, and development.

Moyle (2010) agrees with Howard and McInnes (2012) relating the importance of observing children during self-directed play, as they are fully absorbed in what they are doing, controlling their own learning which is often repetitive.

Smidt (2015) also considers the essential role of adults when observing and supporting children during play. He states, *"it is through watching and analysing we can start to support and extend learning."* Smidt (2015) emphasises that adults need to observe their environment closely to recognise if the activities set out are successful and how they may be adapted to meet the needs of the children. Howard and McInnes (2013) say that observing play should be ongoing, taking place at various times and places. Practitioners should take time to observe the play closely and discover what is happening, a quick glance of play can determine a different outlook. When play is observed and misinterpreted by adults, it is usually due to limited effort and time being spent observing (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

(Smidt, 2015) focuses on observing children carefully, thoughtfully, generously, and attentively can give us insights into the complexities and richness of their learning. It is important to observe children to make sense of what we see, this is the responsibility of early years practitioners who care and educate young children.

Vygotsky stressed the value of play in children's learning, how they construct their own play and develop within their environment, working alongside other children and adults. Vygotsky focused on treating each child individually taking into consideration that each child develops at their own pace. He believed that adults play a vital role in assessing children's abilities and potential to provide opportunities for them to meet their full potential in the future (Mathias, 2023).

Bruce (2011) recognises that there are numerous ways of completing observations for children in play, but states that traditional narrative observation is recommended. This requires the practitioner to observe children in play, making notes on what they observe and hear, which allows the possibility of analysing the play later, photographs and videos can be useful to refer to also (Bruce, 2011).

Susan Isaacs emphasised the need for quality observations to reflect on the child's learning and that observations required accurate details to be effective (Pound, 2005). Howard and McInnes (2013) also discuss the importance of assessment and observation in identifying children with additional learning needs as early as possible to make referrals to the relevant services. Taking natural opportunities to observe children during play, which means that they are likely to be fully engaged and enthusiastic.

Smidt (2015) states that testing children on an occasional basis and completing box ticking exercises provides no evidence about children's skills and ability. This method could make children feel anxious and pressured within a stressful environment if the practitioner is sat in front of them completing forms. Smidt (2015) says that by observing play, practitioners can compile evidence like drawings and writing the children have accomplished. These will provide more evidence and would be a true reflection of their abilities as the child does not feel pressured or nervous.

According to Welsh Government (2022) the new curriculum for funded, non-maintained settings state that assessment and observation is essential to ensure that practitioners can provide enabling experiences and environments to support children's learning. The curriculum states that observations should take place naturally indoors and outdoors during different activities and experiences, then recorded effectively to enhance planning. The curriculum also says that assessment of the children should be a useful continuous process and not a one-off tick list task (Welsh Government, 2022).

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