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Section 1

Play is primarily linked to children and its crucial to their overall development learning and growth (UN Committee on the rights of the child, 2013). The United Nations Conventions article 31 acknowledges the value of play on a global scale. Children create meaning about the world around them through play, children's independence and self-reliance within play are its main pillars (Tovey, 2020). The theory of the stages of play was developed by the American sociologist and researcher Mildred Parten. Based on her study of young children at play she noted and documented the behaviours of children especially their interactions with others during play and discovered that children's play and interactions became increasingly complex as they got older. Parten classified play into six categories based on her research. These were unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play and cooperative play (Waters-Davies, 2022).

Imaginative play also known as pretend or fantasy play involves using children's imagination to roleplay and act out situations. This type of play is essential for cognitive, social and emotional development. children ability to solve problems and speak is improved as a result of being encouraged to use their imagination to create new worlds, roles and stories (sets, D.B 2019). Zero to three (2021) highlights that pretend play is important for the development of functioning abilities like planning and decision making. However, Lillard *et al* (2013) states that there is not enough evidence to prove the importance of play on the development of children as better research is crucial for clarifying. Milcroy, A.T. (2021) states that there are five stages of imaginative play. The first stage being enactive naming. In this stage children demonstrate their knowledge rather than actively 'imagining'. Likewise, Staff, E (2025) emphasises that children start to associate objects with actions. For example, children use blocks to make a phone call gesture. By creating this, the children start to understand the objects symbol through the action. The second stage is auto symbolic schemes. This is when children start to show signs of using their imagination. Children begin to use facial expressions and actions (Milroy, A.T.2021). Similarly, Slumberkins (2023) adds that children start to illustrate their cognitive skills by making noises and imitating sounds. The third stage of imaginative play is decentred symbolic schemes. This is where children start interacting with other children and involve them in their play (Milcroy, A.T.2021). Staff, E (2025) implies that the third stage of imaginary play is where the child's developing ability to comprehend of the world and its roles. The fourth stage is sequencing pretend acts. Milcroy, A.T(2021) states that a child learns to apply a logical sequence to her pretending during this stage. For instance, children will undress before bathing the doll. The child is improving their memory skills so that they can use what they have learned by watching others and how they act in different situations when playing. The fifth and

final stage of imaginary play is planned pretend play where children will collect all of their resources needed to act out their imaginary scene (Team, B.L. 2021).

Vygotsky emphasized pretend play's social component and its developmental significance. According to his theory, children use symbols in a fantasy environment to learn about the social world. Specifically, he highlighted that interactive social pretend play was more advanced and beneficial for development than less social play. The ability to focus on multiple perspectives of an object at once rather than just one, which is required for tasks like assigning pretend properties, is one of the cognitive aspects of play that Piaget emphasized. Additionally, he discussed how social interactions lead to pretence that becomes more complex (Smolucha, L. and Smolulcha, F. 2021).

Block play provides a flexible, imaginative, and worthwhile learning and play experience that can be used in any environment. Children are given the freedom to explore, disassemble, and reassemble any block-based creation they can come up with (Chewter, C. 2021). According to Marketing, G. (2020) and Ph,D,A.W. (2024) Children can benefit from block play in many ways, including cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Children's fine and gross motor skills are strengthened as they manipulate and construct structures with blocks, which also improves their spatial awareness and hand-eye coordination. Block play fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in children, which sets them up for future academic success. Socially, it fosters communication, cooperation, and negotiation as kids work together and share resources while playing. Emotionally, block play fosters resilience and self-worth, enabling kids to take chances, feel a sense of accomplishment, and cultivate a love of learning. Block play supports a variety of skills that are vital for lifelong learning and wellbeing, offering an all-encompassing approach.

There are three main stages of block play. The first stage being stacking. At this stage, children begin building towers, rows, and stacking blocks. The stage is highly linear. The child is joining blocks to form a shape, whether they are stacking towers or rows. Children thrive on repetition during this stage, which is why it's also referred to as the repetition stage. Children are repeating building patterns, and once more, learning is the main goal. Despite being extremely fundamental, this stage is nonetheless crucial. Children will try both horizontal and vertical constructions. Children begin with two blocks, progress to three, and so forth. The horizontal structures are bigger than the vertical ones, as you can see. Children will occasionally use the blocks for play during this stage (sticks and stones education, 2023). Likewise, Discovery Building sets, 2020) states that in this stage, children start stacking blocks to create shapes and keep repeating patterns until they figure out what the next block play progression is. The second stage is bridging. Children create a gap between two blocks, then use a third block to fill it. Children in this stage eventually construct rows and stacks, constructing passageways and bridges Spry, D.2020). the last stage is building enclosures. Children

use other blocks to fill in the gaps between them. Children start making plans for how to close off an area and deal with issues in order to accomplish their objectives. Children start building stacked enclosures after enclosing a space with blocks on the floor. Among them are passageways. They frequently include narratives and miniature signs, people and animals (Stages in Block Play, N,D).

According to Froebel's theory, block play and other structured play activities are crucial for a child's overall development since they foster social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development. He promoted a planned setting where children could freely create and explore, with teachers acting more as mentors than as direct teachers. By emphasizing the crucial role that play plays in learning, this child-centred approach established the groundwork for contemporary early childhood education (Twinkl, 2020).

Section 2

The Steiner Connection, (2022) states that self-directed play gives children the ability to take charge of their learning and develops their independence, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, it is crucial for their development. The Steiner Connection, (2022) also adds that the objectives of holistic play can be naturally attained through self-directed play. In this way, holistic development is supported. Children discover how much they can do for themselves through self - exploration. They feel successful when they create their own games with their own set of rules. Through self-directed play, they can develop independence early on in a prepared, secure setting. When they play independently, children are compelled to be creative. We are enabling them to exercise their creativity by providing them with these chances. As they play, they will create their own narratives and discover possibilities no one else has thought of. Creating one's own rules inevitably leads to solving problems. Children will need to learn how to make things work the way they want them to. It enables children to read independently (Ledenbecker, M.2020).

Similarly, Self-directed play, which lets children experiment and explore their surroundings without outside restrictions, has been shown to improve cognitive development. This liberty fosters the growth of critical thinking and flexibility (Edmentum, 2024). Furthermore, NAEYC, (2025) implies that self-directed play helps children grow socially by teaching them how to cooperate, negotiate terms, and settle disputes with their peers. By giving children, the chance to express and control their feelings in a secure and encouraging setting, it also promotes emotional development.

According to Play like mum, (2023) in order for children to learn through play, adults need to make sure that they are playing a supportive role rather than one of dominance. Just having a parent or adult around can help children let their inhibitions down and play freely. The presence of an adult offers protection and stability. It's important to remember, though, that a child's play experiences can be influenced by projected thoughts and emotions. Their play experience may be more positive if their parent is content and at ease in that situation.

The role of the practitioner is crucial in this situation. Practitioners spend time there, resource it, and organize the space. "Rich play does not happen by accident, it emerges when the adult works diligently to facilitate it and serves as a potent catalyst" (Bruce in Gura 1992:26). Rather than posing closed questions that the practitioner already knows the answer to, the most beneficial interactions are those that offer comments on the structures and encourage children to think more deeply. There are instances when actions speak louder than words. The adult's role in sensitive play interaction is described by Tovey, H (2017) as "being a participative observer; listening; protecting

children's play; being a play partner; putting actions into words, questioning, supporting, and extending."

In the early years, effective pedagogy seems to involve the adult playing a range of roles, from leading activities to letting the child take the lead. Effective settings combine adult-led and child-led activities, according to research from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002). Adults also need to interact and engage with children, building on their own activities. With regard to play, however, this frequently presents challenges for practitioners, and there is frequently a mismatch between their practice and their beliefs and statements about play (McInnes *et al.* (2013).

According to UNICEF (2022) Playing freely is also crucial for developing problem-solving abilities. While playing, children can attempt to solve an issue or think of a solution on their own. They must articulate their own thoughts. When a child plays on their own, those abilities grow. Children can explore their surroundings in their own unique ways through free play, which also encourages creativity and the use of imagination.

Section 3

According to Smidt, (2015) Practitioners can gain insight into a child's growth and depth of learning by closely and thoughtfully observing them. Additionally, practitioners are able to interpret their observations and modify their methods to build on their previous knowledge. Young children can learn more, but only with the help of early childhood practitioners who can plan, observe, and enhance the learning process. Play in a naturalistic setting with children should be observed, with an emphasis on child-initiated play as opposed to adult-led play (Besio et al., 2018). Similarly, Lillio, (2023) states that In early years, observations are important because they are a key tool for comprehending and promoting children's development. practitioners can learn about each child's interests, strengths, and areas that need support by methodically observing them. Finding developmental milestones and customizing learning experiences to fit each child's needs are made possible by this process. Additionally, observations make it easier to record a child's development over time, offering useful data for assessment and planning. Additionally, they assist practitioners in identifying trends in student behaviour and learning, which enables prompt interventions and support techniques.

Early childhood practitioners can measure how much a child is engaged in a self-selected activity by using the Leuven scale, an observational scale with a range of 1 to 5. Level 5 indicates the highest level of involvement, while level 1 indicates the lowest, according to the scale's descriptors. The scale is predicated on the idea that greater levels of participation can serve as indicators of better-quality facilities (MacRae and Jones, 2020). The Leuven Scale is a useful observational instrument in early childhood education that is intended to evaluate emotional well-being and involvement, two crucial aspects of children's development. practitioners can better understand each child's emotional state and level of engagement by methodically assessing these factors. This allows them to design lessons that foster deeper learning and development (structural learning, 2023).

The Leuven Scale's capacity to pinpoint areas in which children might require more assistance is one of its main advantages. For example, a child's low well-being may be a sign that they don't feel safe or at ease in their classroom, which can make it difficult for them to participate fully in activities. On the other hand, low levels of participation could indicate that the offered activities are not interesting enough or challenging enough for the child. By identifying these indicators, teachers can modify the classroom setting or instructional methods to better suit the needs of each student (Kids club HQ, 2022) The Leuven Scale also promotes a child-centred method of instruction. practitioners can create an atmosphere that meets each child's particular emotional and developmental needs by concentrating on their individual experiences. This

individualized care not only improves the educational process but also advances the child's general growth and well-being (structural learning, 2023).

Although the Leuven Scale is a useful instrument for evaluating children's engagement and well-being, practitioners should be aware of the limitations (Cheqdin, 2019). This type of observation raises serious concerns because different observers may interpret behaviour patterns differently, resulting in assessments that are inconsistent. Furthermore, it's possible that the scale will miss some aspects of a child's experience, like cultural differences or particular needs. Moreover, using the Leuven Scale to conduct in-depth observations can take a lot of time, which could take away from spending time with the child directly. practitioners must receive sufficient training for proper implementation; otherwise, the results could be misunderstood. Additionally, the standardized approach of the scale may limit its applicability by failing to take into account the distinct contexts of all educational settings. Finally, there's a chance that children will be classified according to their test results (C0,F. (n.d).

According to Azarova,M.(2023) The occurrence where children change their behaviour because they are aware that they are being watched is known as the Hawthorne Effect. When children are observed using the Leuven Scale, this effect may appear when they alter their behaviour because they are aware that they are being evaluated. For example, just because a child is aware that they are being observed, they may exhibit increased engagement or enthusiasm during activities, which may not be representative of their usual behaviour. This awareness may cause the child to exhibit behaviours that are not typical of their normal state, which could distort the evaluation's findings. This effect links to Maslow's theory of being safe and secure. Children need to have a sense of security in order for them to feel safe and comfortable with what they are doing (Bitesize learning, n.d.).

Section 4

‘Play is powerful. Play deepens children’s learning and understanding because it enables them to begin learning from first hand experiences, based on what they already know and can do.’ (Moyle, 2009:28). Understanding children's development and adjusting instructional strategies to meet their needs require watching and evaluating children while they play. Children naturally express themselves, explore their surroundings, and acquire a variety of skills through play. practitioners can learn about children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development by watching them while they play (Jennifer, M *et al* 2022). By identifying each person's strengths and areas in need of assistance, this process makes it possible to create individualized learning experiences. Additionally, because children participate in enjoyable activities that reveal their developmental stage, play-based assessments offer a comprehensive picture of a child's abilities. Including play in observation and evaluation procedures guarantees that assessments are based on real and context-rich interactions (Lillio, 2020). According to Kelly-Vance, L and Ryalls, B.O (2005) Practitioners can gain a thorough grasp of children's needs and abilities by using play-based assessments to watch how they interact with peers, solve problems, and interact with their surroundings. Given that it mimics children's natural interactions and behaviours, this approach is regarded as ecologically valid. Though play observations offer insightful information, it's crucial to understand that they should be a component of a more comprehensive assessment approach. A more thorough and accurate understanding of a child's development is ensured when play observations are combined with other assessment techniques. This all-encompassing method aids in determining areas in which children might require more assistance and in developing suitable interventions (Peterson, G and Elam, E. 2020). However, according to the Hawthorne Effect, when people are aware that they are being watched, their actions and performance may alter (Ingram, O. 2023).

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