

1.The Importance of a Variety of Play Types.

There is a general consensus amongst many theorists about the importance of play in the holistic development of children. Froebel stated that play is “the highest level of human expression in childhood” (Early Education, no date) and Montessori famously called play “the work of the child” (Larson,2013). There are, however, subtle differences in their views on how play should be facilitated, with Isaacs advocating lots of freedom, whilst Montessori settings have a more structured approach (Gray and McBlain, 2015).

Over time researchers and theorists have attempted to categorise the many types of play children engage in. Piaget (1962, cited in Syeed and Guerin, 2001) identified three different stages which children’s play moves through; practice play, then symbolic play and finally playing games with rules. Isaacs also observed three stages of play, these were; firstly, movement and mastery over the body, secondly, curiosity about the world and surroundings and finally, delight in their internal world, imagination and the infinite possibilities it holds. In 1979 Hutt devised a taxonomy of play that also suggested three overarching play types; epistemic, which concerns the environment, ludic which is imaginative play and finally games with rules. These are further broken down into subcategories (First Discoverers, 2019).

Rough and tumble play can take many different forms, it may consist of chasing, play fighting and wrestling or can be combined with imaginative elements, such as playing super heroes, monsters or animals. It is commonly observed in children up to and including their teenage years and particularly in free time, such as after school, which is evidence that it is very much self-directed (Storli and Sandseter, 2017).

Hughes (1999) discusses the features of rough and tumble play that differentiate it from true aggression. In terms of body language, participants can be seen smiling and laughing, rather than looking serious and staring at each other. It is usually found to draw children together, often being a group activity, rather than driving them apart, whereas fighting usually involves two people and drives people away. As well as the obvious physical benefits of rough and tumble play, there are social benefits. Children gain practice being both dominant and submissive. They must communicate with each other, using both body language and verbal communication. It is important that children themselves are aware of these subtle differences, as there is evidence that children who show aggressive behaviours are less likely to experience prosocial behaviours from their peers (Persson, 2005, cited in Coelho et al., 2017).

The value of rough and tumble play needs to be acknowledged by practitioners, as a lack of understanding can lead to it being viewed as aggression or as fostering future violence. In Norway, practitioners were found to be more tolerant of such play in the outdoors environment, which suggests that space may be an issue, one which can be overcome by spending more time in open spaces. A higher proportion of Early Years practitioners are female, and there is evidence suggesting women are less likely to engage in and value rough and tumble play than men. The reasons for this are unclear and likely to be a combination of many factors including social conditioning (Hughes, 1999. Storli and Sandseter, 2017.)

Engaging in imaginative play shows a child developing, as they go beyond the present, recognising things they have experienced in the past and changing things to practice for their future. Role play and pretend play which acts as a rehearsal for various adult roles is the manifestation of this 'free-flowing' and abstract thinking. It enables children to have a go at being other people or beings and to understand things from a different viewpoint (Bruce, 2001). Imaginative play is full of fun, creativity, imagination and representation and these are all elements of the arts, including music and literature. Its cooperative nature also leads to lots of problem solving, which helps children to become critical thinkers (Gray, 2009). Waite (2011) states that role play allows children to have a go at being different people with different attitudes, to explore new speech patterns and extend their vocabulary.

In order to promote the holistic benefits of imaginative play, practitioners should look at the layout of their provision as it occurs most frequently, though not exclusively, in smaller spaces, particularly indoors. Props can be important, but do not necessarily need to be realistic, a child will happily use pebbles as money, food or shopping. Practitioners should be interested, but not take over and control play, as the deepest experiences will occur in scenarios self-directed by the children. Most importantly, children need time and space to play, rather than expensive toys and props (Goddard-Blythe, 2018, cited in Wilde, 2018).

Playing games with rules is considered higher level play, part of Piaget's third, concrete-operational stage or the Interactionist stage four, where children can interact with self, others, objects and structures (Sayeed and Guerin, 2001). It is characterised by involving competition between at least two players and being governed by a set of rules which are agreed in advance, it may be intellectual, for example cards or board games or sensorimotor such as ball games, marbles or hide and seek. The spontaneous rule making sometimes required is the product of a prolonged socialisation process which demands empathy, cooperation, mutual

understanding and the ability to delay gratification, all complex skills (Hughes, 1999).

Benefits may include physical development, gross or fine motor skills, building self-esteem and increased ability to cooperate with others. Practitioners can facilitate this play by grouping children according to their abilities or stage of development, providing varied and suitable resources and by sensitive intervention if a problem should arise. For example, helping the children to find a solution if there is a disagreement about the rules.

2. The Benefits of Risky Play

Risk and challenge are fundamental elements of free play, in particular play which occurs in the outdoors. Risky play may consist of activities at height, like climbing, where speed is too high to control or rough and tumble play. It can also include the use of tools such as knives, dangerous elements such as deep water or fire, or simply lack of physical boundaries such as fences meaning children can get lost or walk away. Children report feeling conflicting emotions when undertaking risky play, when on the borderline of positive reinforcement and real fear, these ambivalent emotions lead to pleasure of an intense and high level of arousal (Sandseter, 2010).

Evidence is emerging that risky play may have a number of developmental benefits. A child needs to learn how their own body works, this will include experiencing what happens when they run fast and climb high (Ouvry, no date). Other benefits include teaching children to risk assess activities themselves, encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving skills, increasing resilience and adaptability (Russell and Lester, no date, cited in Bazley, 2018). There is evidence that an intensive offer of risky play in school can improve risk perception and competence in young children. This risk competence allows them to see an opportunity and decide whether to engage in potentially ground breaking activities, whether to adapt the activity to make it safer or to not participate at all if they deem the risk too high (Lavryson, 2015).

The Curriculum for Wales 2022 is aiming to change education in Wales with a view to developing capable and creative learners. There is an increased emphasis on health and well-being, with children and young people who gave feedback to the consultation stating a need for them to develop resilience (Welsh Government, 2019a). Risky play, particularly in the outdoors and influenced by the Nordic model would provide a means to deliver these goals.

A risk-aware and possibly risk-averse culture can prove a barrier to stimulating and challenging play activities. The cultural norms of childhood vary greatly, with testimony of three-year olds walking home from school unaccompanied in Gambia and the array of risky activities in forest schools in Norway providing a huge contrast to the safe and sanitised childhood provision seen in the UK. There is however, a difference between risk-taking and hazardous behaviour and the strict regulation of, and organisation within a registered setting should make it the ideal place for risky play to happen (Waite, 2011).

The role of practitioners is largely to balance the duty to protect children from avoidable harm with the need to provide challenging and stimulating provision. This highlights a need for risk assessments to be viewed as dynamic, working documents, that involve all of the staff and where possible those attending the setting (Maynard and Waters, 2014). Knight (2009) discusses the different levels of risk; minimal and acceptable mean an activity can carry on, moderate would indicate that steps must be taken to reduce risk, substantial means that the activity should not be continued until the risk has been reduced, and unacceptable means that an activity should not be started at all.

The Health and Safety Executive recognise the importance of play and are keen to stress that risk cannot be eliminated entirely but a balanced approach is needed to control real risk, secure benefit to children and not lead to unnecessary paperwork. This view aligns with General Comment 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC, which also states that balance is needed and that children should be empowered to take precautions regarding their own safety. Play Wales recommend practitioners use the ABC method of dynamic risk assessment; A-Actions that are likely to result in harm, such as collision, abrasion or falling; B-Behavioural modes that can lead to diminished ability and awareness, such as emotional state; C-Context specific factors that could increase risk, like weather conditions, proximity of others or integrity of a structure. (Bazley, 2018).

Viewing risk assessments and the policies and procedures of a setting as enabling rather than preventing risky play is a positive step forward. Children possess physical and behavioural traits that help to protect them from serious harm. They are lighter and more flexible than adults, they move slower and are closer to the ground. Children act on instinct and usually with a degree of caution, these things combined mean that injuries sustained during play are usually minor and beneficial to learning cause and effect (Waite, 2011).

3. A discussion of the running record method of observing young children.

Parents, carers and practitioners all constantly observe the children in their care and as such, monitor their progress. However, the requirement of Government for data, and the need for information to be shared has led to observations becoming more formal and measurable. It can be argued that having an early view of where a child is developmentally provides a baseline to measure and monitor both the rate and quality of learning (Sayeed and Guerin, 2001). There are many reasons why practitioners should document a child's learning, parents and carers are keen to know what their children are learning and to see them achieve developmental milestones. Observing children's learning may identify what Vygotsky referred to as the 'zone of proximal development', meaning the gap between what a child can already do alone and what they may be able to do with some help and support. It will inform practitioners of what can be done to 'scaffold' learning, as advocated by Bruner (Smidt, 2015).

Montessori settings believe the child must be free to learn without interruption, they therefore use contemplative observations, which are different for every child and take into account cosmic or holistic development (NAMT, 2016). Reggio Emilia practitioners take great care and attention to observe and document every child's learning and value the fact that it provides a record, can reveal connections, reviews the past and can inform future planning. This documentation honours the child and their family and is also used to educate the teacher (Smidt, 2015).

A running record is a very detailed form of documenting observations of a child at play. The practitioner notes the details of the child, the date and is careful to record time during the observation, so that duration of each activity or interaction is noted. Information recorded should always be objective, reliable and relevant (Sayeed and Guerin, 2001). Written information should record, as accurately as possible, what the child does and says, including any non-verbal communication and interaction with others. It may also include what other children who are involved with the play do and say, depending on its relevance to the focussed child. Analysis and interpretation of the observations should not happen during the observation period as they can distract from the observation taking place and important things may be missed (Bruce, 2001).

A running record is rich in detail, and as such can cover holistic development, as observations are made about everything that the child does, which may demonstrate fine or gross motor skills, what

they say, revealing language and communication skills and their social interactions with peers and adults. These areas, along with mathematical development, are the four areas for observation as outlined in the Early Years Foundation Phase (Welsh Assembly Government, 2011). The running record method can be carried out anywhere and the forest school method of learning is based on such observations, as the programme is very much process-led rather than outcomes-led (Maynard and Waters, 2014). Running records identify both strengths and weaknesses and can be used to observe any child, regardless of whether they have an additional need. They can be carried out at any time and are especially good for documenting learning through play. It is natural and familiar for children to play, and as they do not feel threatened during play, they will perform to the best of their abilities (Sayeed and Guerin, 2001).

There are four approaches to gathering information when a child is at play; where the child plays alone and is observed by an adult, where a child plays with other children and is observed by an adult, where the child plays with one or more adults and a different adult is observing, or where the child interacts with the adult who is observing them (Sayeed and Guerin, 2001). Before starting the observation, it is important to decide what the role of the observer will be. Carrying out a running record, which includes vast amounts of writing, possibly alongside visual record such as photographs, is not going to be achievable whilst interacting and playing with a child. At times it may prove difficult for the observer to separate themselves from the play and to blend into the background unnoticed. It may also prove difficult to keep focussed on one child if they are engaged in play with a number of others, this relies on the skill of the observer.

Observations and the recording of information should lead to reflection and discussion with other practitioners, professionals and parents about planning for future learning, how provision can be tailored to meet individual needs and ways to extend learning through a child-led approach. Loris Malaguzzi advocated an emphasis on listening – we have to hear the child and pay attention to their actions to know what the child is asking us for. This is the main purpose of taking the time to observe (Waite, 2011).

4.The role of play in observation and assessment

It is largely accepted that children learn and make sense of their world through play and this has been central to the work of theorists and pioneers. Froebel, Montessori and Steiner all believed that childhood is important in its own right and that play is a serious and

holistic experience. Montessori believed that play is self-chosen, self-directed and that the player is free to leave the play at any time. Robert Owen, in common with Montessori, believed that no child should be forced to take part in any activity, and that children find it easier to play and learn when they are having fun. Their work and that of many others, along with the best pioneering overseas curricula such as Te Whariki in New Zealand, Reggio Emilia in Italy and the Nordic play principles have provided inspiration for the play based Early Years Foundation Phase and the new Curriculum for Wales due to be rolled out in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2019b).

Piaget was one of the first theorists to use observation and detailed note taking to try and make sense of the way children learn and develop. Montessori also placed great emphasis on observation, the role of the practitioner being one where they watch and listen to the child and make detailed documentation to help them in their role of creating stimulating environments for the children to learn in. In Steiner schools, assessment is primarily through the observations of the teacher who focuses on the emotional and social development in a holistic approach (Gray and McBlain, 2015).

If the observations that practitioners make are to be accurate, it makes sense that they should be made when children are performing at their highest level of engagement and have the greatest sense of wellbeing. Research carried out by Howard and McInnes (2012) found that young children displayed signs of increased emotional wellbeing when they perceive a task to be 'like play' compared to the same task being carried out, but 'not like play'. Three things differentiated the 'like play' activities from the 'not like play', these were the adult being proximal rather than directly present, the activity being available on the floor rather than on a table and the child choosing to take part rather than being asked to take part. Emotional wellbeing was measured using the Leuven scale, a recognised measure which is specifically designed for use in work with young children. Activities 'like play' led to deeper engagement, better focus, more free movement and children smiling more than when activities were 'not like play'.

A number of reports state that the emotional well-being of children in the UK is concerningly low (UNICEF 2007, cited in Howard and McInnes, 2012), with children now less resilient and failing to thrive emotionally, leading to higher levels of mental illness (UK Mental Health Foundation, cited in Jenkinson, 2012). This could be linked to an emphasis on academic pressures and a curtailment of time spent playing, which means less opportunity to develop the emotional skills necessary to cope with change and challenge

(Jenkinson, 2012). Less formal assessment and more opportunities to learn through play could help to alleviate stress and pressure on children.

Hughes (2012) stresses the importance of practitioner skill in knowing what, how and why they are observing the child at play, and for the need to recognise the impact that they can have upon play through intervening, which can ultimately spoil a game, simply through changing the dynamics. Howard and McInnes (2012) suggest that it would be beneficial for training in play to be put in place across children's services, in order that practitioners understand the processes involved in play and their role in facilitating play.

Guidelines on observing children in the Foundation Phase in Wales advise that observations should be frequent, so that children are used to them happening and will continue to play as normal. Also, that children should be observed in a variety of contexts, alone and with others, within different types of play and at different times/on different days (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). However, Donaldson's Successful Futures review and subsequent report on the curriculum in Wales has led to a New Curriculum for Wales 2022, and he advised that Wales needs a new kind of teacher, one with an understanding of why and how to work with children. It remains to be seen what training and guidance will be offered to practitioners working under the new curriculum regarding observation and assessment, but the use of progression steps does suggest that there will be an increased respect for the fact that children develop at different rates and that their learning is an individual process (Welsh Government, 2019b).

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