

ECEY4003 Children's play: theory and practice Portfolio.

I have not used AI within this portfolio.

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Section 1

Play can be defined as experiences provided to children where they have the opportunity to risk taking, collaborate and build their imagination. However, the definition of play is never ending (Bottril, 2018 p.26). The term play is also used to express a variety of behaviors and interactions with people, objects, or the environment (Play Wales, no date).

Every child has the right to play under article 31 of the United Nations on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, no date). In Wales, there is statutory guidance due to the importance play has on child development. According to this, guidance play is important to a child's life especially in the early years as it supports developing social skills and resilience while developing physical and emotional health. According to this guidance play supports a child's brain in developing critical thinking and feeling a sense of belonging (Play Wales, 2024).

Children being allowed to have opportunities to play, supports them in developing holistically. Play supports critical areas of their social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual growth. A child developing in these areas supports them as they grow in life to understand and contribute to their community, so they can positively participate in society. (Bionguin, Encarnação and Ray-Kaeser, 2018). According to Rudolf Steiner's seven-year cycle of development he acknowledges the importance of play, especially free play. Steiner believed play supports a child holistically while stimulating their imagination (Brodie, no date).

Stiener's thoughts of the importance of play are like those of Mildred Parten. Parten a sociologist developed a theory on the distinct stages of play. Parten breaks downplay into various stages for developmental milestones for caregivers and practitioners to understand the progression of play (Shaine, 2024). These stages range from birth to four years plus and outline what kind of play a child will be conducting in accordance with their age (Brain and Mukherji, 2005). According to Cohen (2018) for practitioners to support holistic development they need to understand the play varieties.

Role play is a form of play that provides the child with learning opportunities to act out real life experiences, so they can understand the world around them (Huleatte, 2018). According to Play Wales (2017) role play is a form of play which allows the child to experience new roles that may be familiar to them. It is during this form of play they are given the chance to imitate their views on the situation or person. Children can experience role play through costume or everyday resources such as kitchen items. Children experience role play through child led experiences where they can replicate real life and fictional experiences or characters (Waters-Davies, 2022 p34).

According to Piaget's theory of stages of play role play is in the 'preoperational stage.' This is the stage where the child is starting to communicate more and being shown real world experiences (Gallo, no date). However, while role play only falls into one stage of Piaget's theory it falls into two stages of Parton's theory. Role play can be a stage of associate play as at this time that the child is starting to interact more with peers but may not working in collaboration. Role play also falls into cooperative play, during this stage some children will be working in collaboration with their peers as they have a shared interest of goals (Brodie, no date).

Role play supports a child developing across all areas that encourage holistic development. This method of play promotes a child's creativity while supporting them develop their cognitively (EVOKE, no date). Through this form of play a child can develop their social skills by how they interact with practitioners and peers while being able to build the skills required to problem solve. Through the child being able to have access to role play they can start the process of working collaboratively (Rhino play, no date).

Creative play is a form of play that is the most apparent in settings, this can be seen in practice through the child engaging in craft activities (Play Wales, 2017). Painting and junk modelling is a good illustration of creative play. Through this play the child can express themselves without judgement (Wilson, 2018).

Creative play supports a child developing holistically as it promotes the child to develop and grow their confidence and self-esteem while building cognitive life skills such a problem solving (Waters-Davies, 2022 p30). Padayichie and Main (2023) suggest that creative play is a form of play that children engage with and motivates

them. They suggest that this form of play supports development of hand-eye coordination while supporting their sensory development as activities in this form of play are very hands on.

Both role play and creative play share similarities as they both require the child to be creative and imaginative. Vygotsky believed that imagination is a key component to creativity (Penfold, 2019). However, there are limitations to both forms of play. Settings are experiencing many financial struggles due to cuts which can limit the resources available to them especially for role play areas as costumes can cost substantial amounts (Hughes, no date). Many children will struggle to play creatively especially those children who have faced trauma. For those children who experience difficulties they will require more support from the practitioner (Willard, 2024).

Section 2

Self-directed play is a concept that refers to children having the opportunity to play without structured framework, adult input, and no learning goal (Play Adventures, no date). Self-directed play is when a child is given the opportunity and explores at their own pace. This form of play provides children with the opportunity to take the lead and to build their own games with their own rules. A child is then creating a personal experience (Russell, no date).

Steiners theory of play was to develop an environment that promotes self-directed free play. He believed that this type of play would support underpinning the foundations that children require to build relationships, self-discovery and learn fantasy and reality (The Education Hub, 2020). This approach of play can be seen in practice by practitioners providing a range of resources at the setting for a child to access. This will then provide the child with the freedom to create their own experience and curiosity (Twinkl, no date).

There is a lack of knowledge and awareness of the benefits play has when supporting the development of children, especially self-directed play. Practitioners will often support children with play to much resulting in it becoming structured (Bionguin, Encarnação and Ray-Kaeser, 2018).

Practitioners can support self-directed play by supporting the child to have the opportunity to experience freedom in their play. It is the adult's role to observe, facilitate and to provide a meaningful experience (Andrews, 2017). For practitioners to support children during self-directed play they need to understand play and how to extend play (Siraj et al., 2002., Sylvia et al., 2014 cited in Walters-Davies). It is the role of the practitioner to become a partner in play to the child through building trusting, respected positive relationships that are consistent. The practitioner needs to become attuned with a child's communication through verbal and non-verbal cues so they can read signals off the child. Practitioners need to allow children that free time and space where they can indulge in their play and use their imagination (Howard. J, & McInnes, K. (2013).

Self-directed play supports children in their creativity and curiosity. Children who can experience self-directed play are able to develop cognitive skills which supports them as they grow (Edmentum, 2024). Self-directed play supports development

physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and intellectually these are the five key areas that contribute to holistic development. Children can learn at their own pace without having to follow academic milestone guidelines (Ledendecker, 2020).

According to Juster (no date), self-directed play is important for children to start learning to take risks. She suggests that a child is an expert in their own play. Juster believes that children who can experience this type of play allows them to have freedom and make their own choices. Self-directed play allows children to practice new skills and to gain independence. A child having freedom to select what they are doing supports their learning being embedded (Sunstone Montessori School, 2019). Maria Montessori developed her theory with an emphasis on self-directed play due to the benefits it provides (Early Years TV, no date). Montessori's theory is a child-led approach that encourages a child to have opportunities of exploration with hands on activities (Mansio Montessori of Geneva, 2013).

The Welsh Government have acknowledged the benefits that self-directed play and child-led learning has on the holistic development of the child. The Welsh Government have a new curriculum which is shown through the concept of four purposes (HWB, 2023). The curriculum for Wales is now tailored around ensuring that children have a balance of structured learning set by the practitioner and the opportunity for self-directed play (Welsh Government, 2015). The curriculum in New Zealand referred to as Te Whariki holds similarities to the curriculum for Wales. Te Whariki deems important for children to learn through a holistic approach while incorporating self-directed play. Within this curriculum they support children in play and learning while looking through the lens of the child (Veazy, 2020).

However, according to Gallo (no date) self-directed play and learning does have disadvantages as many children, strive off routine, structure and direction and this type of learning does require a lot of determination and effort to come away from the routines. Self-directed play and learning can cause disadvantages to children when it comes to the time where they need to participate in a structured game which is led by a practitioner (Megan, 2022).

Section 3.

According to Dr Louis (no date) who follows the Froebel approach, she believes that observation is a process that acknowledges what a stimulates and engages the child. Observation is a process that takes place to learn and notice more and supports practitioners to understand a child interests and how they are developing (West Sussex Council, 2015).

Observation goes beyond understanding a child's interests and how they learn but by developing a picture of the child while taking their needs and progress into account. Observation includes a balance of a child's development while acknowledging barriers so pupils can be identified for additional support (HWB, 2023). Observation especially in play supports following the Curriculum for Wales as it focuses on the first of the four purposes becoming an 'Ambitious, capable learners' (Welsh Assembly Government, no date).

Statutory framework states that observation is a requirement. It is important to observe as it supports understanding the child's strengths and being aware of areas of development. It is important for practitioners to observe as this will support reflection in their practice so they can develop and provide provision suitable to a child's ability and interests (Parenta, no date). According to Rob Spreeuwenberg observation in Early Years is taken place every day. He suggests it is important for practitioners to understand and notice how a child interacts with peers and adults and noticing any interactions or environments which change how they behave. He believes the importance of observation is to be able to document findings and share relevant information (Spreeuwenberg, 2022). Observation is important to support professional dialogue. Practitioners need to be able to discuss their observations to decide if they need further support from external agencies such as speech and language therapists (Welsh Government, 2023).

Ferre Leavers a Belgian professor developed the observation method 'The Leuven Scale' (Nutkins, McDonald, Stephen, 2013). The Leuven scale is a method that includes two aspects to measure the child's wellbeing and the child's involvement using a five-point scale (Arnerich, 2021). For each level of the five-point scale there is a description provided. Level five of the scale is where the child shows immersed involvement and wellbeing. Whereas level one is lowest involvement, and a low

wellbeing (MacRae and Jones, 2020). The Leuven scale being developed using wellbeing and involvement ensures that socio-emotional development and cognition and competence development is being observed and assessed to support the child thriving (Laevens and Declercq, 2018). The Leuven scale links to the area of learning 'Health and Wellbeing' in the Curriculum for Wales. This area acknowledges how the child's experiences can affect mental and emotional health. By scaling a child's wellbeing, the child can reach the progression steps throughout the area (HWB, 2022). This method is a standardised test that not only practitioners use but caregivers can understand and follow. (Kids Club HQ, 2022).

An advantage to using this scale is that it supports identifying those children who have social emotional behaviour needs so interventions can be organised through measurable data (Jackson, 2023). Practitioners' completing this form of observation supports, more than supporting a child with their developmental needs but identifies changes needed within the environment as it is suggested within this scale that children need to be in a positive environment with enriched activities (Pound, 2006). The Leuven scale is a valuable method of observation as it assesses wellbeing and involvement which supports the re-animating Jean Piaget's theory of child development, where the child is placed at the heart of the learning (Structural Learning, 2021)

However, critics of this observation style are similar to those of Bowlby's attachment theory. Where children who are from diverse cultures convey different behaviours. This style does not provide accurate measurable data for those children who have additional learning needs especially if they are non-verbal (Learning Journals, no date). This observation may not always provide accurate data as the engagement of the child and their wellbeing may differ throughout the day (Structural Learning, 2021).

However, observations can have disadvantages due to the 'Hawthorne effect.' According to Cherry (2023) when observation is taking place, performance can be to a higher standard, so data is not a true accurate finding. Aswani (2024) believes the Hawthorne effect is a significant concept that enhances the involvement during an observation.

The Leuven scale is an approach that supports the holistic view of the child. This method focuses on not only how the child develops cognitively but their emotional wellbeing and engagement (Early Years Staffroom, no date). By having a holistic view, it supports a child in developing across their cognition, emotionally and spiritually (Medical News Today, 2024). Holistic development supports children emphasizing their academic skills while building motivation and resilience which is one key aspect of the scale, this is a holistic view as it is preparing the child for challenges they may face in society (School of Scholars, 2023). The organization 'Parenta' (2023) argues that having a holistic view of a child through observation can support all children, even those with additional learning needs as it looks at the child as a whole.

Practitioners being able to have a holistic view of the child connects to Bowlby's theory. He believed that attachment is a key aspect of developing holistically, as children build assorted styles of attachment based on the experiences and interactions their caregivers have shown them. Depending on their attachment style the child will have various levels of wellbeing and engagement (Hive Education, 2022).

However, there are limitations that come with having a holistic view of the child. Holistic development requires an investment of time and finances which many settings may not have access to. Due to holistic development being a very individual design it can be challenging to plan a curriculum with holistic development at the focus (St Andrews International School, 2023). According to Drew (2024), many parents do not agree with having a holistic view of the child as it takes away from their academic skills. He suggests that a holistic approach is not incorporated after the early years.

Section 4

Observing a child play provides practitioners with the opportunity to build a picture of the child while deepening their understanding and identifying where a child needs support (HSR Psychology, no date). According to Spreeuwenberg (2022) he suggests that the importance of observing play is to develop the practitioners understanding of the child's weaknesses while celebrating their strengths. Alexandra Louis an early childhood educator holds similar views to Spreeuwenberg, she suggests that not only will practitioners develop understanding on a child's knowledge but will be able to provide further provision and facilitate learning to strengthen the child's learning (Louis, 2020). Play can often be carried out in a natural flexible way which is an individual experience for each child, observing play is considered to be important as it provides the practitioner with an opportunity for them to reflect on their observations, so they make adequate changes to support development for the child (Birthto5matters, no date).

According to Mohamed (2023), observing play provides adults with an enlightening reflection of a child's development as play is an authentic time for the child. Play uses all five senses and amplifies their development domains so can provide an accurate reflection of where the child is (Norwood, 2022). The Curriculum for Wales has set out to play learning guidance that provides a framework for practitioners to follow when observing play. Within this framework for all areas of learning there are learning objectives, vocabulary that should be encouraged by practitioners, activities and assessment as well as play developmental stages to provide accuracy (Welsh Government, 2008). However, while Wales has set five developmental pathways to provide an accurate reflection through observing play all children develop at various stages and require varied support (Welsh Government, 2023).

Practitioners' role during play is a diverse role, it is the practitioner's role to provide enriched experiences to encourage the child's curiosity. There will be opportunities for the practitioner to facilitate, scaffold and support a child's play. This will provide the practitioner in building a meaningful connection with the child, while providing them with a deeper understanding of what the child values and the experiences they have had (Amin, 2022).

Froebel believed that he developed profound knowledge through observing play. He suggested that practitioners can support the child by providing them with the opportunity to play without intruding. (Louis, no date). It is the practitioner's role to allow the child opportunities of free play which includes the child being able to risk take. During this it is the role of the practitioner to comply with health and safety policies to ensure that boundaries have been set so the child's physical and emotional safety is secure (Howard and McInnes, 2013 p121-122).

The role of the practitioner when supporting observation through play is to keep a child-led focus and building an environment that is enabling (Wilson, 2018 p45-46). According to Hodgman (2012 p2) an enabling environment can be shown in practice by practitioners providing a space for the child where there are appropriate resources that are accessible. Piaget theory connects to the influence the environment has on a child as he believed that children's development happened due to the environment (Cullen, 2021 p31).

For practitioners to be able to support the child they need to build a relationship with the child. This enables the practitioner to gain knowledge on what enhances the child's engagement in play and what activates their imagination (Estyn, 2024). According to Play Wales (no date) practitioners have a responsibility to provide children with the time and space to experience meaningful play opportunities. Janet Moyles a professor developed the 'spiral theory.' In this theory it is suggested that the role of the practitioner when observing play is to provide engaging, meaningful play experiences that will support improvements in a child's development. Practitioners being able to follow Moyles theory allows them to provide tailored provision to the interest of the child as a focus and improve the development data in observations (Smith, 2021).

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