

Play-Based Assessments

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Observation 1: Infant/Toddler Play

Case and Setting Description:

On March 29th, 2023, I observed Charlie, an 18-month-old white male, at Kiddin' Around Coppell. The facility offers various play options such as indoor and outdoor playgrounds, doll houses, colorful plastic toys in bins, wooden train tracks and buses with interactive features, a movie room, a TV room with cushions, and a ball-room. Other children at the facility during my observation ranged from 18-months to 6 years.

Notable Observations:

Charlie followed me to a bead maze, and I demonstrated how to slide the beads down the loop. He carefully watched me and as the beads fell, he said, "Wowwwwww". He immediately mimicked my actions to the bead maze and watched the beads fall again saying, "Wowww". Later, Charlie was playing on a floor cushion by the TV. He repeatedly straddled the highest point of the cushion and then plopped down on the other side. Upon impact, he would say, "Ow!". I looked at him and said with a smile, "That didn't hurt!", to which he responded with a big smile and giggle. The exchange exemplified Gregory Bateson's theory of play and fantasy. Charlie effectively conveyed his engagement in play despite his limited vocabulary through nonverbal cues, allowing him to temporarily remove himself from the context of reality (Frost et al., 2012).

While playing by himself, I observed Charlie engage in private speech. Charlie utilized babbling sounds to recognize and become more familiar with objects he was interacting with (Frost et al., 2012). By engaging in private speech, he was able to enhance his play experience and gain new knowledge simultaneously (Frost et al., 2012). Charlie's expressive speech and

self-talk have positive implications for his future language development, as they reflect his growing ability to express himself, communicate emotionally, and engage in simple conversations with others.

To caregiver figures at the center, Charlie responded with warmth, laughter, smiles, and an eagerness to learn and play. Charlie's response to his caregivers at the center is indicative of a secure attachment. A secure attachment provides children with the confidence to explore their environment and enhance their social skills (Frost et al., 2012). At one point during my observation, I saw one of the caregivers at the center reading an animal book to Charlie and Jackson (another 18-month-old). The book had images of different animals accompanied by patches of "fur" and other surfaces to show textures. She repeated the animal's name on each page while touching the texture on the page. She would encourage them to touch it by saying, "Touch it! Touch it!" while demonstrating how to do so and allowing them to try it out themselves. When left alone with the book, I watched Charlie flip through the pages until he found the duck. He proceeded to try and stick his right thumb into the yellow, fuzzy spot on the page.

By providing this support and guidance through scaffolding, the caregiver helped Charlie learn to explore within his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Frost et al., 2012). When Charlie was by himself with the book, he could utilize what he had learned and exhibited his comprehension by independently interacting with the book, which enabled him to enhance his fine motor and sensory abilities.

Most of Charlie's play with small objects involved him placing them in his mouth, which is a typical exploratory behavior among infants and toddlers, known as teething behavior (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). Charlie's interactions with bigger objects, like rubber balls and toy trucks,

resulted in him shifting his attention away from fixation and towards engaging with the object itself. In the ball-room, Charlie watched his 18-month old peer, Jackson, sit on one of the rubber balls and bounce. Charlie imitated this movement, but occasionally had trouble balancing on the ball or getting his leg over it. Despite encountering setbacks, Charlie persisted in repeating the action numerous times and seemed to be enjoying himself. This play experience is indicative of Charlie developing his fine-motor skills while learning through experiences and interactions in his environment (Frost et al., 2012). By engaging in exploration and repetitive behaviors, Charlie can practice skills until he has mastered them (Frost et al., 2012).

Transferring Observations to Practice:

While observing Charlie, I had a first-hand glimpse at how “play drives the pursuit of knowledge” in young infants and emerging toddlers (Frost et al., 2012). Through the act of play, Charlie inadvertently engaged in a process of cognitive development, augmenting his reservoir of knowledge and honing skills that will prove valuable in future endeavors, without conscious awareness of this process. This experience demonstrated to me that children possess knowledge beyond what they express, and it requires careful attention and patience to witness certain developmental achievements.

I believe my observation of Charlie provides an example of how play is transformative, while highlighting the equally important role of adult support in facilitating this experience. Childcare providers, early childhood educators, and their facilities collectively assume a crucial role in creating environments that encourage and support play. Additionally, caregivers must be attentive to individual children, their needs, and interests, as increased responsiveness and warmth encourages receptiveness to learning and aids in overall growth and development.

Observation 2: Children Playing with Toys

Case and Setting Description:

On April 7th, 2023, I conducted an observation at Kiddin' Around Coppell, a local play care center, where I observed Walter, a 4-year-old African American boy. The center was bustling with around 30 children engaged in diverse activities, including playing in the indoor playground, media room, with toys, and getting their faces painted for Easter.

Notable Observations:

My observation began with Walter playing with Legos. He started building a tower of multiple-colored Legos. He called his building an ocean and said he was going to add the fishes. He said, "octopuses have 8 hands" and "we're doing an ocean with crab and ocean" as he continued building the Lego towers. As he played with the Legos, he counted down "5, 4, 3, 2, 1". He said that he was making an "ocean" (tower block) for each of his family members, "my mom, my dad, my sister, my brother, and uncle". He started counting the number of blocks in each tower, focusing closely on each one. He would remove some blocks then re-count them, exclaiming the number of blocks proudly.

Observing Walter's constructive play with Legos provided me an opportunity to assess his fine motor skills, specifically his ability to manipulate small materials with precision and control (Frost et al., 2012). Additionally, I was able to evaluate his attention span as he focused on constructing his tower for a sustained amount of time while engaging in imaginative play.

When one of the caregivers at the center complimented a girl's pink earrings, he said, "girls do pink, not boys". When asked if he wanted any face paint, he similarly stated, "no

because I'm a boy" and resumed playing. This response is not uncommon in young boys, but it is important to remain aware of gender-based ideals that are shaped by culture and socialization.

As a child of traditionally African parents, Walter's refusal to deviate from typical "boy" activities are potentially reflective of the traditional gender normative mentalities of many African communities and family systems. These ideals are common in many cultures and translate to certain toys or activities being segregated by gender, with boys encouraged to engage in activities that promote masculinity: such as playing with blocks, transportation toys, and manipulative objects (Frost et al., 2012).

He continued playing with the Legos for roughly 45 minutes and stated that he did not want to play with anything else because he likes Legos. Walter created a Lego structure and handed it to his caregiver. When the Lego block tower broke in half and fell to the floor, Walter said, "I can help you!". Through this interaction, I was able to observe Walter's prosocial behavior, which is associated with greater levels of empathy, social competence, effective coping strategies, and problem-solving abilities; all of which predict positive relationships in the future (Frost et al., 2012).

Walter also excitedly ran around the indoor playground and played with small plastic toys in a house, where he would set them up and tell them what time "wake up" time was. He also showed an interest in completing puzzles with numbers and letters. According to Piaget's theory, Walter's play with toys and engagement in imaginative play suggests that he is in the preoperational stage of cognitive development within the symbolic function substage (Frost et al., 2012). Walter's imaginative play with small toys and his construction of an ocean-themed Lego tower for his family members demonstrate his increasing ability to use symbols and engage in pretend play. Furthermore, Walter's involvement in play that incorporated numbers, as well as

his verbalization of them, alongside his play with Legos demonstrated his capacity for numeracy and abstract representation through play (Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

Transferring Observations to Practice:

My observation emphasizes the role of play in promoting various developmental aspects, such as fine motor skills, numeracy, and prosocial behavior. Additionally, observing Walter further strengthened my belief that play is not only crucial for reflecting a child's learning and development, but also their imagination and perceptions.

This experience reinforced the importance of being aware of the diverse range of gender norms and practices that exist among different cultural communities. When working with children from various backgrounds, it is important to avoid imposing Western gender norms onto them and instead, advocate for gender equality and empowerment for all, regardless of gender. Nonetheless, it is essential to remain aware that gender norms are dynamic and subject to change over time. Overall, this observation has given me greater appreciation for the value of play in the promotion of holistic development and the role of educators and caregivers in fostering inclusive, supportive play environments.

Observation 3: Play of a Child with Different Cultural Background

Case and Setting Description:

I visited Kiddin' Around Coppel on April 13th, 2023 to conduct my observation. During my time there, I observed a 4-year-old Indian boy named Mahir. The play care center had a relatively calm atmosphere, with only around 8 children engaged in play at the time of my visit. The center had a range of play areas available, including an indoor playground, a media room, and a ballroom. In addition, there were various toys, dolls, and stuffed animals for the children to play with. The center also had a "home" section, which included mini furniture, kitchen supplies, and grocery items for the children to explore and play with.

Notable Observations:

When I entered Kiddin' Around, I noticed that Mahir was playing with a baby doll and interacting with another young girl named Hannah, who appeared to be around his age and of Caucasian descent. Both Mahir and Hannah had their own baby dolls and were playing with them. Mahir tried to put the doll into a carrier but struggled, commenting that the doll was too big for it. In response, Hannah proposed that they put their dolls to bed, and Mahir agreed, saying, "Time for bed! Can you put him (to bed)?" When I inquired about the baby dolls, Mahir was quick to respond, stating that he was the daddy and Hannah was the mommy.

Frost et al., (2012) states that play often imitates real life, and it has become increasingly common for boys to engage in pretend play roles that involve nurturing, such as being a caring father. Play can socialize children into their culture's gender roles, values, and power dynamics, such as participating in pretend families, but it is important to recognize that behavioral patterns in one culture may not be shared in another culture (Frost et al., 2012). As for Mahir, his play is reflective of his learning about the cultural values and social expectations of his own community.

His pretend play may be suggestive of the type of interactions he has observed of male figures in his own family and how they engage in caregiving roles. After putting their babies to bed, they continued their pretend play using stuffed animal cheetahs in the indoor playground. When I asked Mahir if he thought the cheetah needed food, he made an awkward face, avoided eye contact, and shook his head while saying no. A few moments later, I heard him talking to Hannah saying, “They don’t need food... they need food, water, juice, and that’s all!”

Parental beliefs and practices of involving adults in children’s play vary across cultures, with some encouraging it while others prefer to let children play independently (Frost et al., 2012). Goncu et al., (2000) compared children’s play behavior across cultures and found that children from the Indian village Dhol-Ki-Patti engaged in 0 instances of adult conversation during play, unlike children from Salt Lake City and San Pedro. Mahir’s reluctance to interact with me during his playtime could be influenced by his beliefs about adult involvement in play, as well as my status as a stranger. This interaction could reflect the differences in child play strategies that are valued in different communities to achieve certain developmental goals (Goncu et al., 2000).

Later, while Mahir and Hannah were playing with dolls, Hannah asked him if he spoke another language. He replied, “No. I only know English...mommy, daddy...I only know mujhe paanee do (give me water).” Being of Pakistani origin, I understood the Hindi translation of these words. She followed up by asking where he was from, and he replied that he was from India.

Afterward, Mahir and Hannah started playfully saying “Hola” and laughing together. While there are cultural differences in the type of play that children engage in, this interaction demonstrates the universality of children’s primary concern for human relationships, such as those with their family members (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). Furthermore, while Frost et al.,

(2020) suggests that children from different ethnic groups are less likely to play together in kindergarten years, this interaction between Mahir and Hannah demonstrates that shared interests and language can facilitate cross-cultural play among young children. Lastly, while Mahir's use of a Hindi phrase reflects his exposure to multiple languages at home, their playful use of Spanish words showcases how children can learn from and enjoy different cultures through play.

Transferring Observations to Practice:

It was refreshing to witness the intersection of cross-gender and cross-cultural play in action, surpassing my initial expectations and providing valuable insight to the relationship between culture and play. As educators and caregivers, we must acknowledge and appreciate the diverse backgrounds of the children we work with and provide ample opportunities for them to engage in play and explore each other's cultures and individual interests.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that the role of adults in play are different across cultures, and that children may have varying comfort levels with adult participation in their play. While in some instances teacher intervention may be helpful or necessary, it is important for adults to recognize when their presence is not needed or welcome during children's play to avoid interrupting it.

In conclusion, understanding and valuing the diverse backgrounds of the children we work with is essential for creating inclusive and welcoming play environments. By providing opportunities for cross-cultural play and exploration, caregivers can promote open-mindedness and cultural acceptance among children, ultimately leading to more positive and fulfilling interactions between peers of different backgrounds.

Observation 4: Play of a Child with Special Needs

Case and Setting Description:

I observed 3-year-old Ruby at Kiddin' Around Coppell, on Wednesday March 19th, 2023. Ruby is of Hispanic descent and her caregivers presume that she falls somewhere on the spectrum, though her developmental delays remain undiagnosed. During my observation, there were only three other children present, all of whom were the same age as Ruby. The environment at Kiddin' Around Coppell was typical, with a wide selection of toys available for the children to play with. The playscape also featured an indoor playground, toy houses, a ballroom, a home section, and a media room.

Notable Observations:

When I began my observation of Ruby, she was finishing up her lunch. She grabbed her pink stuffed animal bunny and left the table with a mouth full of fries. The caregiver at the center called her name and asked her if she was finished eating, but she did not look at her or reply. When she came back to her plate, her caregiver asked her again if she was finished or wanted more food. Still, there was no eye contact or response from Ruby, but she kept chewing.

When she finished eating, Ruby made her way over to me, grasping tightly on her pink bunny. As she took a seat beside me, she positioned herself in a way that left her head turned away from me. I asked, "Is that a bunny?" and she replied, "Ahh. Bunneh. Hoh! Hoh! Hoh!" while making it hop up and down.

Afterwards, Ruby went to the play area with a sink and crib, where she put her bunny in the sink while speaking incoherently to herself. She then moved the bunny to the crib, covering it with a cushion. This interaction helped to clarify that Ruby's unresponsiveness was not related to a hearing problem, but rather to a communication disability. Although she initially appeared uninterested in conversing with me, as demonstrated by her body language, Ruby was able to

respond when prompted. Furthermore, while her imaginative play showcased her cognitive functioning and animistic perspective, it also revealed her inconsistent pre-linguistic abilities, delayed receptive and expressive language, and difficulties with articulation (Frost et al., 2012).

After she left this play area, she moved on to playing with a toy firehouse and grabbed the trucks out, carefully inspecting them as she clicked the buttons all over it. She quickly put them down and grabbed a plastic miniature figure and started to try to wrap her up into a string hanging from the firehouse. It appeared that Ruby may have difficulty using toys appropriately or engaging in complex toy play, as evidenced by her play with the fire station (Frost et al., 2012). Given that her play behavior may be characteristic of children with autism, it is important to seek professional assessment to determine the underlying reasons for her behavior.

Eventually, Ruby lost focus on the task and started looking at her pink bunny again, and another 3-year-old approached the fire area to play, but she did not look at or acknowledge him and walked away from the toy. This play behavior is suggestive of socialization difficulties due to Ruby's disinterest in interacting with and acknowledging peer advancements for play (Frost et al., 2012).

In many cases, children with developmental deficits tend to interact more with adults than with peers, as evidenced in some of the following instances (Frost et al., 2012). Ruby grabbed her caregiver's arm and pulled her to where the puzzles were, pointing up at them while whining incoherently. She played with a block number puzzle and animal puzzle, both of which she repeatedly and effortlessly completed. She began moving the puzzle parts erratically and eventually threw it onto the table, then whined loudly to the caregiver. Ruby quickly got up and started roughly playing with the bead maze and then started tugging on her teacher again, whining utterances loudly with her mouth open. She returned to the puzzle where she continued

working but then shortly after began throwing herself forward onto the table saying "Ow! Ow!" and then fell to the ground kicking and whining.

I believe Ruby's lack of communicative abilities led to her intense mental frustration, resulting in this emotional breakdown. Laying on the ground, she lifted her feet up and began wiggling her toes and staring at them. She then turned away and zoned out. This reaction may be due to her feeling overstimulated and overwhelmed, which is a common experience for children with developmental differences.

Later, while the other children were playing with digital tablets, Ruby proceeded to have another fit until she was approached by another caregiver who noticed her yelling and throwing a chair onto the floor. "What do you want?", the caregiver asked. She pouted and pointed up on the shelf to the Play-Doh containers. The caregiver set up her playdough station and she settled down and focused on playing. The caregiver was able to calm Ruby down and encourage her to continue playing.

For children with developmental differences, it is important to affirm their ability and interest in engaging in play, and to support their attempts to play in any way possible (Frost et al., 2012). She played for about 30 minutes in deep concentration, rolling the Play-Doh do, flattening it, and cutting it repeatedly. This repetitive and stereotyped manipulation in toy and object play is not a definitive sign of being on the autism spectrum, but it can be one of the potential signs when coupled with other behaviors (Frost et al., 2012).

While playing, she pointed at a stencil shaped like a horse "Hosh, Hosh." Ruby knowing animal names while playing is a positive sign in her cognitive and speech abilities to relate language and categorization. Beyond that, her ability to manipulate Play-Doh is indicative of typical motor functioning.

Transferring Observations to Practice:

My observation of Ruby's play revealed not only her difficulties with communication and speech, but how they impact her social interactions and frequently manifest as frustration and meltdowns. Through her play, I was also able to see her fine motor skills, her ability to recognize and name animals, her ability to engage in pretend play, and her interest in exploration and manipulation with toys and objects.

Despite Ruby's communication deficit, the adults at the center were able to assist her in her play and provide her with opportunities to engage in the activities she wanted to. The importance of attentive and supportive caregivers in facilitating play experiences for children with developmental differences cannot be overstated. Without the attention and care of the adults, Ruby would continue to feel frustrated and unheard.

The caregivers were also able to provide me with additional insight to her development. They stated that "she is high functioning in some aspects, others not so much". The caregiver also informed me that Ruby has a strong ability to memorize songs and dances from popular children's shows. However, her parents have expressed concern about her speech and are considering speech therapy for her.

In a meta-analytic review about the effectiveness of play therapy, Bratton et al., (2005) discuss how play therapy can be beneficial in helping children learn new ways of interacting with others and managing their emotions, leading to a reduction in problematic behavior. The study's findings suggest that play therapy can be effective for children of all ages and genders, regardless of their specific developmental issues (Bratton et al., 2005). I believe play therapy would be an effective intervention for children like Ruby who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Observation 5: Curriculum Development/Evaluation

Case and Setting Description:

On April 25th, 2023, I conducted virtual observations on children engaging in play-based learning activities featured on “Little People’s Landing” YouTube page. The children who participated in the activities were from diverse demographic backgrounds and ranged in age from 16 months to preschool age. The observations took place in early learning centers and preschool classrooms. The children had access to a wide range of interactive items, including arts and crafts materials, books, toy cars, blocks, puzzles, and learning charts on the walls. In the preschool settings, the children sat on bright floor mats and had access to big calendars, visual representations, and props to enhance their learning experiences.

Notable Observations:

During my observations, I noted a common trait among all the teachers featured in the videos - their effective communication skills. The teachers used clear and articulate speech, asked thoughtful questions, guided the children in their exploration, and praised their accomplishments. Each teacher had an intended purpose for their interaction in order to enrich learning in various subjects or developmental aspects (Frost et al., 2012).

For example, the teacher at Little People’s Landing led a drawing activity with a few girls. The girls scribbled, using their body movements to move the marker or tapping dots onto the paper. Guirguis (2018) states that “through the medium of play, literacy development is stimulated.” The teacher used various questions such as “Would you like purple?” and “What color is this?” to encourage the girls to identify and repeat the color names. By doing this, the teacher facilitated the development of both language and fine motor skills.

The teacher also provided choices, asking “What color would you like?” to promote decision making skills. This activity served as more than just a drawing exercise, as it effectively

promoted essential skills such as attention, turn-taking, self-control, and patience among the children as well. Developing self-regulatory skills in early childhood can have a positive impact on academic performance, such as improved attention and focus on math and literacy concepts in school (Guirguis, 2018). These techniques can be used to enhance the learning experiences of children as they engage in play-based activities.

During a paper craft activity at Little People's Landing, the teacher distributed paper to the toddlers and began providing instructions. As the children explored the paper, some started smacking the paper with their hands or waving it in the air. The children started ripping or crumpling the paper, and one child put it in her mouth to rip. Playful experimentation with hands, feet, and senses can facilitate mastery of play, as it allows young children to explore their surroundings and objects as they engage in exploratory learning (Jones & Reynolds, 2011).

One of the children appeared disengaged from the activity and, recognizing the need for guidance, the teacher approached the child and demonstrated how to rip the paper. By initiating the tear and encouraging the child to complete it, the teacher effectively fostered engagement and participation among the children, ensuring that all of them were able to benefit from the learning experience. This observation highlights the importance of active teacher involvement and guidance in play-based learning. This observation is demonstrative of a teacher serving as a mediator, and offering understanding and problem-solving strategies to children as they complete activities (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). By guiding children who are struggling, teachers can promote engagement and exploration, creating an environment that is conducive to the children's learning and development.

Little People's Landing also used flashcard activities, in which the teacher prompted the toddlers with questions such as "What goes oink-oink?" or "What color is this?". While the

toddlers appeared to be watching, most were unable to respond to the prompts, with their attention quickly diverting elsewhere. Flashcards may not be the most suitable learning tool for young toddlers, as they are likely to benefit more from self-initiated exploration and hands-on experiences with objects that have shape, texture, and weight (Elkind, 2008).

Furthermore, it is important to note that while early learning centers offer valuable learning opportunities through play, children can sometimes become overstimulated. Later in the day, one child began to exhibit signs of distress, but the teacher skillfully intervened by diverting his attention to the window where he could see the snow, helping to calm him down. This event is an example of an appropriate time to use a stimulus shelter such as a cozy, secluded space to provide comfort for a child who may need a break from the active classroom environment (Frost et al., 2012).

Both preschool observations showcased how valuable curriculum can be carefully hidden in fun, activity-based learning experiences. During the morning circle video, students utilized ABC rock to practice their ABCs in an engaging manner, practiced counting using a dice and different movement techniques, and utilized visual blocks to learn about weather. The teacher also utilized name cards for volunteers, which not only allowed children to participate in the activity but facilitated their ability to recognize their own names and those of their peers.

Additionally, the incorporation of yoga provided a means of promoting gross motor skills and daily affirmations. In the shark math lesson, the teacher used a song and dance to teach math, while also providing an edible demonstration for students to further enhance their understanding of subtraction. The teachers in both classrooms met the children's need for repetition and rhythm by encouraging them to clap along with the songs. This not only helped them learn but also provided language stimulation and a sense of enjoyment through rhythmic movement (Elkind,

2008). Using these techniques, teachers skillfully weave learning into the curriculum and create an environment where children are encouraged to express themselves creatively and freely; all while unknowingly gaining knowledge and skills (Frost et al., 2012)

Transferring Observations to Practice:

This virtual observation taught me a lot about some wonderful techniques to promote learning through play while following a curriculum, as well as the role of adults in supporting it. Although seemingly trivial, activities such as drawing or crafting provide children with valuable opportunities to exercise and hone their skills across multiple areas of development. Furthermore, by serving as mediators and facilitators of play experiences, caregivers can provide guidance and encouragement to children as they navigate the world around them. Providing enjoyable, hands-on play experiences not only promotes intrinsic motivation but also facilitates the coexistence of love, play, and work, which are crucial elements for creating an environment that promotes continued learning in children.

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