

Contents page

Page 2- Analysing the challenges of play-based curricula

Page 6- The concept of the unique child

Page 9- Play-based curricula blog

Page 14- Reference list

Critically Analyse the Challenges of Implementing Play-Based Curricula

Play-based curricula are widely recognised as central to early childhood education, with extensive research demonstrating their value for cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (Whitebread et al., 2017). Frameworks such as the EYFS (England) and the Curriculum for Wales position play as a fundamental pedagogical approach (Welsh Government, 2022). However, despite strong policy endorsement, implementing play-based learning in practice remains complex and contested. This section critically analyses the key challenges practitioners face, drawing on contemporary research, policy analysis and international perspectives.

One of the most significant challenges is the tension between play-based pedagogy and policy-driven expectations for “school readiness”. Research consistently shows that accountability frameworks push settings toward more formal, teacher-led instruction, even in early years (Bradbury, 2019). Ofsted’s focus on progress measures and curriculum sequencing has contributed to a shift toward structured teaching, which can conflict with child-initiated play (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). In Wales, although the Curriculum for Wales promotes holistic, play-based learning, Estyn inspections still emphasise progress evidence and curriculum coherence, creating similar pressures (Estyn, 2023). These accountability demands can lead practitioners to prioritise measurable outcomes over exploratory play, despite evidence that play supports deeper learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

A recurring challenge is inconsistent practitioner understanding of what high-quality play-based learning looks like. Research shows that while many educators value play, they often lack confidence in balancing child-led exploration with intentional teaching (Skene et al., 2022). Wood (2020) argues that play pedagogy is conceptually complex, requiring practitioners to make sophisticated decisions about when to intervene, scaffold or observe. Without strong professional development, staff may default to either overly structured activities or unproductive “free play” lacking meaningful learning opportunities (Fleer, 2019). This variability is worsened by workforce inequalities. In the UK, early years staff often have lower qualification levels than school teachers, and professional development opportunities are unevenly distributed (Bonetti, 2019). This makes consistent implementation of play-based curricula difficult across settings.

Parents' beliefs about what constitutes "real learning" can significantly influence curriculum implementation. Studies show that many parents equate learning with formal instruction, worksheets and visible academic outputs (Lynch, 2015). When parents perceive play as "just playing", practitioners may feel pressured to introduce more formal activities to reassure families (Fisher et al., 2011). This challenge is particularly pronounced in communities where educational success is associated with early literacy and numeracy performance (Hedges et al., 2011). In Wales, research indicates that some parents remain unfamiliar with the play-based ethos of the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales, leading to tensions between home expectations and school practice (Taylor et al., 2021). Effective communication can mitigate this, but it requires time, confidence and shared understanding all of which are uneven across settings.

High-quality play-based learning requires rich environments, varied materials and flexible spaces. However, many settings face constraints such as limited outdoor access, small classrooms, or insufficient resources (McInnes et al., 2013). Ratios also matter. Research shows that when staff-to-child ratios are high, practitioners struggle to observe, scaffold and extend play effectively (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2011). In deprived areas, resource shortages can further limit opportunities for open-ended, imaginative play (Pascal & Bertram, 2018). In Wales, although policy emphasises outdoor learning, not all schools have safe, accessible outdoor environments, and weather conditions can limit use (Maynard & Waters, 2007). These practical barriers can significantly reduce the quality of play experiences.

Another major challenge is the administrative burden associated with documenting children's learning. Digital platforms such as Tapestry and Evidence Me have increased expectations for photographic evidence, observations and progress tracking (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Research shows that this can lead to "datafication" of early childhood education, where play becomes something to capture rather than experience (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Practitioners report spending excessive time collecting evidence, often at the expense of interacting with children (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). Although the revised EYFS (2021) and Curriculum for Wales encourage reduced paperwork, cultural expectations within settings often maintain high documentation demands.

Implementing a play-based curriculum requires balancing child initiated activity with adult guided learning. This balance is difficult to achieve. Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe a continuum from free play to direct instruction, with guided play in the middle. Many practitioners struggle to operate confidently along this continuum. Wood (2020) argues that curriculum frameworks often present play as both a method and a context for learning, creating ambiguity. When learning objectives are tightly prescribed, practitioners may feel compelled to steer play toward predetermined outcomes, reducing children's autonomy (Hedges & Cullen, 2012). This tension is heightened in Reception classes, where the transition to Year 1 expectations can lead to a rapid shift away from play (Fisher, 2020).

Play-based curricula must meet the needs of diverse learners, including children with SEND, multilingual learners and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, research shows that standardised expectations can marginalise children whose development does not follow typical trajectories (Barton, 2016). For example, age-banded developmental frameworks may label normal variation, leading to deficit views of children (Oates, 2014). Children with SEND may require adapted environments, specialist support or alternative communication methods, which not all settings can provide (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Socioeconomic inequalities also shape children's play experiences. Children from low-income families may have fewer opportunities for enriched play outside school, placing greater pressure on early years settings to compensate (Gill, 2014).

Implementing play-based learning requires practitioners to hold a strong professional identity as pedagogical decision-makers. However, research shows that early years educators often feel undervalued, underpaid and lacking professional status (Bonetti, 2019). This can undermine confidence in defending play-based approaches against pressures for formal instruction. When practitioners feel insecure, they may adopt more traditional, teacher-led methods because they appear more academically rigorous (Lynch, 2015). Professional identity is therefore a structural challenge, not just an individual one.

Successful implementation depends heavily on leadership. Studies show that when senior leaders understand and champion play-based pedagogy, practice is more consistent and confident (Bennett & Tayler, 2019). Leadership shapes the extent to

which practitioners feel empowered to use professional judgement, prioritise child-led learning and resist pressures for formal instruction. However, in many primary schools, leaders come from Key Stage 2 backgrounds and may be less familiar with early childhood principles (Fisher, 2020). This can result in pressure to align early years practice with whole-school systems designed for older children, such as formal lesson structures, ability grouping or data-driven progress measures. These expectations can undermine play-based pedagogy by imposing inappropriate levels of structure and accountability. In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales requires whole-school curriculum design, but early years specialists report that their expertise is not always recognised in leadership decisions (Taylor et al., 2021). When leadership lacks understanding of early childhood pedagogy, practitioners may feel compelled to justify play-based approaches continually, which can erode confidence and consistency. Conversely, strong leadership that values play creates a culture where practitioners feel supported to implement high-quality, child-centred practice.

Implementing play-based curricula is a complex attempt shaped by policy pressures, workforce challenges, parental expectations, environmental constraints and broader social inequalities. While play is widely endorsed in research and policy, the realities of practice often constrain its potential. Addressing these challenges requires investment in professional development, leadership understanding, parental engagement and structural support. Without these, the transformative potential of play-based learning remains difficult to realise.

Considering the Concept of the 'Unique Child', Critically Evaluate Methods of Assessment, Progress Tracking and Age/Stage Development Models within Play-Based Curricula

The concept of the Unique Child is central to early childhood frameworks such as the EYFS (DfE, 2021) and the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). It emphasises individuality, holistic development and the recognition that children learn in diverse ways and at different rates. However, assessment systems, particularly those used within play-based curricula often struggle to reflect this individuality. This section critically evaluates key assessment approaches, progress-tracking practices and developmental models, examining how far they align with or undermine the Unique Child.

The Unique Child principle is grounded in sociocultural theories that view learning as relational, contextual and non-linear (Rogoff, 2003). This perspective challenges universalist assumptions about development and calls for assessment that recognises diversity and complexity. However, many assessment systems are influenced by developmental psychology traditions that emphasise typical milestones and age-normed expectations (Oates, 2014). This creates tension: while play-based curricula value individuality, assessment frameworks often require comparison against standardised norms.

Observation is widely regarded as the most appropriate assessment method in play-based settings because it captures learning as it naturally occurs (Fleer, 2019). When used effectively, observational assessment supports the Unique Child by recognising individual interests, motivations and learning pathways. However, observational assessment is time-consuming and vulnerable to practitioner bias. In busy environments, staff may struggle to observe deeply while also engaging meaningfully with children (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). Digital platforms such as Tapestry have increased the volume of observations but not necessarily their quality, sometimes leading to performative documentation rather than genuine understanding (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Narrative approaches, such as learning stories, foreground children's identities, dispositions and learning journeys. These methods align strongly with the Unique Child because they capture complex learning episodes and value children's voices

(Carr & Lee, 2019). However, narrative assessment requires skilled interpretation and reflective practice. Without adequate training, practitioners may produce descriptive accounts lacking analytical depth (Drummond, 2018). Narrative assessment can also be difficult to align with accountability demands for measurable progress.

Development Matters (2021) and Birth to 5 Matters (2021) offer broad developmental pathways rather than prescriptive checklists. Both emphasise individuality and caution against using age bands as assessment tools (DfE, 2021; Early Education, 2021). However, research shows that practitioners often continue to interpret these frameworks as linear progressions, despite guidance to the contrary (Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). This can lead to deficit thinking when children do not fit expected patterns.

Age-normed developmental models remain widely used in early childhood assessment. While they offer structure and clarity, they risk oversimplifying the complexity of child development. Critiques highlight that children develop unevenly across domains and that age-banded expectations can characterise normal variation (Barton, 2016). In play-based curricula, rigid developmental models can undermine child-led learning by pushing practitioners to steer play toward predetermined outcomes (Hedges & Cullen, 2012).

Digital tracking systems have become widespread, driven by accountability pressures. While they can support organisation and communication, research shows that they often contribute to the datafication of early childhood education (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Datafication can shift focus from learning to evidence collection, reduce complex learning to quantifiable metrics and encourage comparison between children. These practices conflict with the Unique Child by prioritising standardisation over individuality.

Assessment for Learning (AfL) aligns well with play-based pedagogy because it emphasises formative, responsive assessment. In early years settings, AfL can involve tuning into children's interests, co-constructing learning intentions and providing feedback within play (Black & Wiliam, 2018). When implemented effectively, AfL supports the Unique Child by recognising individual strengths and supporting personalised learning pathways. However, AfL requires high practitioner

skill, time and reflective capacity conditions not always present in under-resourced settings.

Assessment systems often struggle to accommodate children with SEND or multilingual learners. Standardised expectations may not reflect their developmental trajectories or cultural experiences (Norwich & Eaton, 2015). Inclusive assessment requires flexible, individualised approaches, yet many systems remain rigid. This creates tension between policy aspirations for inclusion and the realities of assessment practice.

Assessment within play-based curricula is shaped by tensions between individuality and standardisation, holistic learning and accountability, and professional judgement and institutional demands. While observational, narrative and formative approaches align strongly with the Unique Child, their effectiveness depends on practitioner expertise, time and supportive leadership. Age-normed models and digital tracking systems offer structure but risk undermining individuality and promoting deficit thinking. To honour the Unique Child, assessment must be flexible, reflective and context-sensitive, supported by strong professional development and leadership that values holistic learning over narrow metrics.

Play Is Not a Luxury: What Practitioners Need to Know When Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum

If you work in early years right now, you'll know the feeling, curriculum reforms, new expectations, shifting assessment guidance, and the ever present pressure to show progress. In the middle of all this noise, one message keeps resurfacing, play matters.

But knowing that play is important and actually embedding a play-based curriculum are two very different things. The research is clear, high quality play supports deep learning, wellbeing and long term outcomes (Whitebread et al., 2017). Yet in practice, implementing a play-based approach can feel messy, political and sometimes overwhelming.

So, what does it really take to make play the beating heart of your curriculum? Let's break it down.

Start With a Shared Understanding of What Play Actually Is

Every setting talks about play. But not every setting means the same thing. Some practitioners imagine free flow chaos. Others picture carefully curated invitations to play. Some leaders think play is what happens when real learning is finished.

This lack of shared understanding is one of the biggest barriers to effective implementation. Research shows that when teams don't agree on what play-based learning looks like, practice becomes inconsistent and confusing for children (Skene et al., 2022).

A strong play-based curriculum starts with a shared vision. That means sitting down as a team and asking:

- What do we believe children learn through play?
- What does high-quality adult interaction look like?
- How do we balance child-led exploration with intentional teaching?
- How do we ensure play is purposeful without becoming adult-controlled?

Leaders play a crucial role here. When leadership champions play, practitioners feel confident to follow through (Bennett & Tayler, 2019). A shared vision becomes the foundation for curriculum design, assessment and daily interactions.

Build Environments That Invite Curiosity, Not Compliance

A play-based curriculum lives or dies in the environment.

Think about the last time you watched a child become completely absorbed in play. Chances are, the environment offered:

- open-ended materials
- space to move, build, imagine
- opportunities to collaborate
- a sense of freedom and ownership

Research shows that thoughtfully designed environments lead to deeper, more sustained play (McInnes et al., 2013). Conversely, cluttered rooms, over themed areas or adult dominated spaces can shut down creativity.

Outdoor learning matters too!

Outdoor environments support risk taking, resilience and wellbeing (Maynard & Waters, 2007). They offer sensory richness, physical challenge and opportunities for social negotiation that indoor spaces can't always replicate.

And yes even in Wales, where it rains sideways, outdoor play is worth it. Waterproofs exist for a reason.

Think about cultural relevance

Children need to see themselves reflected in the environment. That means materials, books and resources that represent diverse identities, languages and experiences.

Rethink Assessment: It's About Understanding, Not Evidence Collecting

Let's be honest, assessment is where many play-based approaches start to wobble. Practitioners often feel torn between supporting children's play and gathering

evidence of progress. Digital platforms can make this worse more photos, more observations, more pressure.

But both the EYFS (DfE, 2021) and Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) are clear, assessment should be meaningful, not burdensome.

Meaningful assessment looks like:

- observing children in play, not interrupting it
- using professional judgement, not ticking boxes
- focusing on what children can do, not what they can't
- reducing unnecessary documentation
- capturing learning stories that highlight dispositions, identity and agency (Carr & Lee, 2019)

Research warns that excessive data collection can digitalise early childhood education, shifting attention away from children and towards compliance (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

Narrative assessment is a powerful alternative

Learning stories, floor books and reflective journals can reveal the richness of children's thinking in ways checklists never could. They also help parents understand the depth of learning happening in play.

Bring Parents With You, Don't Leave Them Guessing

Parents want the best for their children. But many still associate real learning with worksheets, early reading and visible academic outputs (Lynch, 2015). If families don't understand the value of play, they may question your practice — or worse, pressure you to formalise it.

Communication is key

Try:

- sharing learning stories
- inviting parents to stay-and-play sessions

- explaining the research behind play
- using newsletters or blogs to highlight learning in action
- offering workshops on early learning and development

When parents see the richness of play, they become advocates rather than sceptics.

Invest in Practitioner Confidence, It Changes Everything

Play-based pedagogy is not letting children get on with it. It requires:

- deep knowledge of child development
- skilled observation
- sensitive scaffolding
- the ability to step in and step back at the right moment

This is complex work. And research shows that practitioner confidence is one of the strongest predictors of high quality play-based practice (Skene et al., 2022).

Confidence grows through:

- professional development
- coaching and mentoring
- reflective practice
- supportive leadership
- time to collaborate and plan

When practitioners feel valued and knowledgeable, they make braver pedagogical choices. They trust children more and trust themselves more.

Lead With Courage: Play Needs Advocates

Here's the truth, implementing a play-based curriculum requires courage.

In a climate of accountability, data demands and school readiness pressures, play can feel risky. But the evidence is overwhelming play supports deep learning, wellbeing and long term outcomes (Whitebread et al., 2017).

Courageous leaders:

- protect time for play
- push back against unnecessary data demands
- trust practitioners' professional judgement
- communicate the value of play to governors, parents and staff
- create cultures where curiosity is valued over compliance

Play is not the easy option. It is the expert option.

Final Thoughts

A play-based curriculum is joyful, complex, demanding and transformative. It asks practitioners to trust children, trust themselves and trust the research. It requires environments that inspire, assessment that illuminates and leadership that protects space for curiosity.

When we get it right, we honour the Unique Child not as a slogan, but as a lived reality. And in doing so, we create learning communities where children flourish, practitioners thrive and play becomes the powerful pedagogical force it was always meant to be.

Reference list

- Barton, E. (2016) 'The impact of developmental norms on early childhood practice', *Early Years*, 36(2), pp. 121–135.
- Bennett, J. and Tayler, C. (2019) 'Effective early childhood leadership', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 49, pp. 1–10.
- Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (2018) *Inside the Black Box*. GL Assessment.
- Bonetti, S. (2019) *The Early Years Workforce in England*. Education Policy Institute.
- Bradbury, A. (2019) 'Datafying early years education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40(7), pp. 970–986.
- Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G. (2017) *The Datafication of Early Years Education*. Routledge.
- Carr, M. and Lee, W. (2019) *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. Sage.
- Cottle, M. and Alexander, E. (2014) 'Parent partnerships and documentation', *Early Years*, 34(1), pp. 54–67.
- DfE (2021) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: Department for Education.
- Drummond, M. (2018) *Observing and Assessing Young Children*. Routledge.
- Estyn (2023) *Annual Report*. Cardiff: Estyn.
- Fisher, J. (2020) *Moving On to Key Stage 1*. Open University Press.
- Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. and Gryfe, S. (2011) 'Conceptualising guided play', *Child Development*, 82(1), pp. 1–17.
- Fleer, M. (2019) *Play in the Early Years*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, T. (2014) *The Benefits of Play*. National Children's Bureau.
- Hedges, H. and Cullen, J. (2012) 'Participatory learning theories', *Early Child Development and Care*, 182(7), pp. 921–940.

- Hedges, H., Cullen, J. and Jordan, B. (2011) 'Revisiting parents' perspectives', *Early Years*, 31(2), pp. 113–125.
- Lynch, M. (2015) 'More play, please', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(5), pp. 325–333.
- Maynard, T. and Waters, J. (2007) 'Learning in the outdoor environment', *Education 3–13*, 35(2), pp. 161–174.
- McInnes, K., Howard, J., Crowley, K. and Miles, G. (2013) 'The nature of adult–child interaction', *Early Years*, 33(1), pp. 74–89.
- Norwich, B. and Eaton, A. (2015) 'Developmental delay and SEND', *British Journal of Special Education*, 42(1), pp. 4–19.
- Oates, J. (2014) *The Role of Developmental Norms*. Open University.
- Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2018) *Effective Early Learning*. Birmingham: CREC.
- Pyle, A. and Danniels, E. (2017) 'A continuum of play-based learning', *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(2), pp. 235–249.
- Roberts-Holmes, G. (2015) 'The “datafication” of early years', *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(3), pp. 600–613.
- Roberts-Holmes, G. and Moss, P. (2021) *Neoliberalism and Early Childhood Education*. Routledge.
- Rogoff, B. (2003) *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford University Press.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2011) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. DfE.
- Skene, K., Knight, C. and Henderson, L. (2022) 'Practitioner confidence in play-based pedagogy', *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 20(1), pp. 3–17.
- Taylor, C., Rhys, M. and Waldron, S. (2021) *Curriculum for Wales: Early Implementation Study*. Cardiff University.
- Welsh Government (2022) *Curriculum for Wales Guidance*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

Whitebread, D. et al. (2017) *The Importance of Play*. University of Cambridge.

Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvalja, M. and Verma, M. (2017) *The Importance of Play*. University of Cambridge.