

Early Years Curricula

Part I: Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports (1500 words).

According to Cambridge Assessment International Education (2014), implementing an early childhood education curriculum based on play is essential since it helps shape children's educational experiences and builds the foundation for their future development. Additionally, the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (2016) claims that prominent educational theories, most notably constructivism and socio-cultural perspectives, emphasise the significance of play in children's development and active learning.

Given this, Piaget's constructivist theory (1964) provides a fundamental framework for comprehending the significance of play within the context of early childhood education. According to Piaget, children actively develop their understanding of the world through their interactions with the environment. Moreover, as Piaget defines it, play is not simply a recreational pursuit but a cognitive process by which children investigate, test, and comprehend their environment. Additionally, Cohen and Waite-Stupiansky (2022) sustain that in the context of play-based early childhood curriculum, Piaget's theory proposes that play serves as an instrument for children to actively participate in knowledge formation. In view of this, children use play to integrate new knowledge into their cognitive structures and adjust their understanding when encountering new experiences. For example, when toddlers engage in imaginative play scenarios, they rely on their existing knowledge and use it differently, increasing their cognitive flexibility and problem-solving abilities.

Furthermore, Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) offers another perspective on implementing play-based early childhood education. Vygotsky emphasised how social interaction and cultural context shape children's learning experiences. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the difference between what children can achieve independently and what they can do with the guidance of a more knowledgeable peer or adult. Moreover, Bodrova and Leong (2015) claim that, regarding play-based learning, Vygotsky's approach emphasises the importance of social

interactions when playing. Play allows children to collaborate on problem-solving, negotiate roles, and share ideas with their peers. Moreover, children scaffold one another's learning by offering support and encouragement as they explore novel ideas and concepts. Furthermore, play reflects cultural standards, beliefs, and practices, allowing children to develop a shared understanding of their social environment.

According to Wainwright (2014), the ideas of play-based learning, which place an emphasis on experiential and child-centered approaches to education, are strongly aligned with the New Curriculum of Wales. With its foundation in the Four Purposes, which are as follows: learners who are ambitious and capable; contributors who are enterprising and creative; citizens who are ethical and informed; and individuals who are healthy and confident, the curriculum emphasises holistic development and personalised learning opportunities, according to the Welsh Government (2022a). In other terms, according to Million (2022), the New Curriculum places a strong emphasis on building children's competencies in critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork, and play-based learning is a method that aligns with this approach. In view of this, children can participate in meaningful, hands-on activities that cultivate their sense of wonder, inventiveness, and problem-solving ability during play. The emphasis placed on interdisciplinary learning and authentic contexts in the New Curriculum is consistent with the integrative nature of play-based curricula. Play-based curricula teach students to connect different topic areas and apply the information they have learned in classroom settings to real-world situations. Furthermore, Barry, Clarke, and Dowling (2017) claim that the New Curriculum strongly emphasises well-being and holistic development, highlighting the significance of play in fostering social-emotional competence and resilience in children. Play-based learning environments offer children a secure and supportive atmosphere in which they can express themselves, form relationships, and acquire the ability to self-regulate. Therefore, educators can improve the well-being of children and cultivate a pleasant learning environment by including play in the curriculum. In that case, every child feels appreciated and supported.

Similarly, according to Thomas and Lewis (2016), play-based early years curricula provide several advantages strongly aligned with the New Curriculum for Wales's ideas and objectives. One of the main characteristics is the emphasis on comprehensive development. Given this, the New Curriculum emphasises the importance of children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being, considering education to support the whole child. Given this, play-based learning is ideal for this holistic approach because it engages children in complex experiences that promote several aspects of their development at the same time. Children can

explore, experiment, and create connections across domains through play, fostering a broad understanding of their surroundings.

Additionally, Lalani (2020) claims that play-based early years curricula are consistent with the New Curriculum's emphasis on experiential, child-centered learning. The curriculum emphasises active involvement and hands-on experiences, acknowledging children as active participants in their learning path. Moreover, play-based strategies enable children to take control of their learning by allowing them to follow their interests, make decisions, and explore inquiries in ways that are significant to them. Play-based curricula build a sense of agency and autonomy in children, encouraging a positive attitude about learning and an ongoing enjoyment of exploration. Furthermore, Mansori *et al.* (2024) claim that the New Curriculum's commitment to developing abilities such as critical thinking, creativity, and teamwork is aligned with the play-based learning approach. Additionally, children can develop the necessary abilities to succeed in an increasingly complex and interconnected world by engaging in open-ended inquiry, problem-solving, and imaginative expression through play. Moreover, Donaldson (2015) sustains that the New Curriculum places an emphasis on the necessity of acquiring higher-order skills in addition to topic knowledge. This is because the New Curriculum recognises that these abilities are vital for overcoming obstacles, making the most of opportunities, and providing a constructive contribution to today's society. Correspondingly, play-based early years curricula offer abundant opportunities for cultivating these abilities because they allow children to experiment, take chances, and collaborate with their peers in a supportive and nurturing environment.

However, Lam (2018) sustains that despite the potential benefits, implementing play-based curricula presents several challenges. One major challenge is the misconception that play is purely recreational and lacks academic rigor. This perception may lead to reservations from policymakers, educators, and parents who prioritise traditional academic instruction. Additionally, Saracho (2020) claims that to ensure that play-based curricula are effectively implemented, educators must have a comprehensive understanding of the principles of child development and the pedagogical strategies that apply to play-based learning. Moreover, to effectively guide children in exploring, discovering, and making sense of their surroundings, educators need to be able to scaffold children's learning experiences while they are engaged in these activities. Given this, early childhood educators should participate in ongoing professional development to improve their capabilities in facilitating play-based approaches, according to Saracho (2020).

Additionally, evaluating learning outcomes within a framework based on play presents another challenge. Traditional evaluation methods may not adequately capture the profundity of children's learning experiences in play-based environments. As a result, alternative assessment strategies are required that are in accordance with the principles of play-based learning, according to the Department of Education (2022). In view of this, Becker, Rigaud, and Epstein (2023) claim that alternative assessment strategies should be in accordance with the principles of learning through play. To provide a comprehensive understanding of children's progress and development, these strategies need to consider qualitative observations, portfolios, and narrative assessments. Besides, according to NAEYC (2019), to guarantee that all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status or ability, have access to high-quality early childhood education, play-based curricula must address equity concerns. Given this, play-based approaches can reduce achievement discrepancies and promote educational equity by providing inclusive educational environments that accommodate a wide range of needs and backgrounds.

In conclusion, implementing play-based early childhood curricula is a complex interplay of theoretical frameworks, empirical facts, and pedagogical principles. Additionally, by critically analysing the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and possibilities associated with play-based approaches, educators may explore the terrain of early childhood education with a comprehensive understanding based on research and theory. Moreover, by combining these observations with the New Curriculum of Wales concepts, educators may create enriched learning environments that encourage children to thrive and prosper throughout their educational journey.

PART II: Considering the concept of the ‘Unique Child’, critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula (1500 words).

According to O'Prey *et al.* (2019), the 'unique child' concept is central to early childhood education. It recognises that every child has unique characteristics, abilities, and learning styles. Moreover, this concept is fundamental to play-based curricula and the New Curriculum for Wales, emphasising the importance of tailoring educational approaches to individual children and promoting their holistic development while respecting their unique abilities. In view of this, the New Curriculum for Wales and play-based curricula include assessment methods to capture the various ways children learn and develop at different stages of their lives. Notably, one common approach is through **observation**. While children are engaged in play, educators observe them and make observations about their interactions, strategies for problem-solving, social skills, and emotional responses, according to Early Years Wales (2020). Given this, Wortham and Hardin (2020) claim that the observation process can take many forms, and each provides a unique insight into the growth and development of a child. The child's play experience can be captured in anecdotal records and brief descriptions of specific events or behaviours, providing snapshots of the child.

By contrast, running records provides an expanded description of ongoing behaviours and interactions, thereby painting a comprehensive picture of a child's journey through play, while checklists and rating scales, despite being less qualitative, provide a structured approach to recording specific skills or milestones that the child has demonstrated. Observation functions not just as a method of evaluation but also as a process of recording and introspection, according to Ornstein (2018). Moreover, educators document the progress of children, communicate with parents, and reflect on their teaching practices using observation data. Given this, engaging in this reflective process is essential for the continual improvement of teaching strategies and the optimisation of instructional approaches to support the educational progress of children more effectively.

However, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017) highlight that challenges in observation must also be recognised. Given this, one significant challenge is the possibility of bias, and to ensure accurate and impartial assessments, educators must constantly recognise and minimise their own biases. Furthermore, conducting thorough observations can be time-consuming, necessitating balancing the demands of observation time and other classroom responsibilities.

At the same time, consistency in observation methods across educators and settings is essential for providing reliable and valid assessment data.

Additionally, according to Drezner (2022), documentation is another valuable assessment method used in play-based curricula, which includes photographs, videos, and written reflections that capture the experiences that children have while they are learning. The documentation of children's progress provides concrete evidence of their development, highlighting their creative abilities, critical thinking, and social interactions. However, it is of the utmost importance to maintain a balance in the documentation, ensuring that it reflects the learning process rather than merely the final product. This approach is consistent with the idea of valuing the different ways in which children think and learn.

Furthermore, anecdotal records are frequently utilised in play-based curricula, and these records are narratives that are highly explicit and describe specific moments, behaviours, and interactions observed by educators, according to Fawcett and Watson (2016). Moreover, Mukherji and Albon (2018) claim that anecdotal records provide a wealth of information regarding the development of a child, highlighting the child's distinctive characteristics and the progression that they demonstrated over time. However, just like observations, they are susceptible to being influenced by the perspectives and biases of the observer.

Alternatively, formal assessments are sometimes used to provide benchmarks for children's progress, although they are used less frequently in play-based schools and other educational environments. The play-based philosophy does not fully align with standardised tests and assessments, even though they provide a more structured approach to evaluation, according to Pyle *et al.* (2023). However, Guarrella, van Driel, and Cohrssen (2023) assert that when these evaluations are conducted, they frequently concentrate on academic skills, which may cause them to overlook the holistic development that play-based education is intended to encourage. Given this, when contemplating formal assessments, educators must conduct an in-depth analysis of their significance in relation to the 'Unique Child' concept and the broad goals of the curriculum.

Additionally, progress tracking in play-based curricula and the New Curriculum for Wales is a dynamic process that captures each child's overall development. Portfolios emerge as a highly effective method within this framework, providing a comprehensive view of a child's development and achievements over time. These portfolios are valuable collections of a child's work, reflections, and results, providing educators, parents, and children with a

perspective on the progression of skills, interests, and development, according to UNSW Sydney (2023). Correspondingly, Zwozdiak-Myers (2018) claims that portfolio reflections provide a better understanding of a child's development. Educators encourage children to reflect on their work and experiences, developing metacognitive skills and self-awareness. These reflections may include thoughts about challenges overcome, discoveries made, or personal accomplishments achieved. Through this reflective process, children gain greater agency and ownership over their learning. Moreover, portfolios are invaluable assessment tools for educators. They provide a tangible record of a child's progress in various areas, including cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. Educators can examine portfolio trends and patterns to identify strengths and growth areas. This data-driven approach informs instructional practices, enabling educators to tailor learning experiences to each child's needs, according to Pyle *et al.* (2023).

Additionally, Mahmudah, Kapi, and Muslimah (2021) maintain that parents play an important role in the portfolio process as well. Portfolios provide parents with insight into their child's daily activities and achievements at school. By reviewing the portfolio regularly, parents can learn about their child's interests, strengths, and developmental areas. This collaborative approach between educators and parents promotes a better understanding of the child while ensuring continuity between home and educational settings.

Along with portfolios, learning stories emerge as an effective tool for tracking progress. These narratives integrate observations, experiences, and learning outcomes to create captivating stories about a child's development. Moreover, learning stories are more than just interpretations of events; they are thoughtful reflections on significant moments and achievements according to Mahmudah, Kapi, and Muslimah (2021). Additionally, Escamilla (2021) sustains that through crafting learning stories, educators can establish connections between a child's actions and the desired learning outcomes. A child's ability to work together with their peers during a building activity, for instance, demonstrates social skills and the principles of engineering and teamwork, and this could be narrated as a learning story. Given this, learning stories demonstrate the breadth and depth of a child's educational experiences by drawing attention to the connections between subjects, according to Escamilla (2021).

According to Donaldson (2015), the New Curriculum for Wales strongly emphasises individualised, child-centered education, and portfolios and learning stories are aligned with that aspect of the curriculum. Moreover, capturing each child's unique abilities, interests, and

accomplishments contributes to the curriculum's objective of cultivating balanced, self-assured, interested, and active learners, according to Pyle *et al.* (2023). Furthermore, according to the Welsh Government (2022b), involving parents in tracking progress is an important factor in play-based curricula and the New Curriculum for Wales. Given this, parent-teacher conferences offer educators the opportunity to share learning stories, portfolios, and observations with families, fostering collaboration and shared knowledge and allowing parents to contribute their viewpoints regarding their child's development. Moreover, educators can generate a more comprehensive view of each child's development by integrating families into the assessment process, incorporating the experiences that children have at home, according to Popovska Nalevska, Popovski, and Dimova Popovska (2021).

Several developmental theories underpin play-based curricula, providing frameworks for children's growth and learning. Notably, Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development is a fundamental model frequently discussed. It outlines the phases of cognitive development, from sensorimotor to formal operational, focusing on how children actively achieve knowledge through play and discovery. Piaget's theory supports the idea that children's play is enjoyable and vital for learning and understanding the world around them. (Moore, 2017). Likewise, the Sociocultural Theory developed by Vygotsky (1978) is another prominent paradigm, highlighting the significance of children's social interactions and the cultural environment in their education. In situations built on play, according to Veraksa *et al.* (2022), educators support relationships between children and their peers and scaffold children's play, fostering social and cognitive development. Given this, Vygotsky's theory is consistent with the emphasis placed on collaborative learning and the significance of social experiences in building children's perceptions of the world surrounding them. Furthermore, Erikson's Psychosocial Stages provide insights into children's emotional and social development. These stages, which include trust versus mistrust and initiative versus guilt, offer a framework for understanding how children manage their emotional worlds through play. Given this, educators can help children develop by providing environments that correspond with Erikson's stages and foster trust, autonomy, and positive social connections (McLeod, 2018).

In conclusion, practical assessment, progress tracking, and development models in play-based curricula should be consistent with the 'Unique Child' concept. In view of this, educators can build enriching learning environments that support a wide range of abilities and interests if they value each child's uniqueness and originality. Additionally, continuous introspection, ongoing professional development, and close contact with families are all

necessary to guarantee that evaluation processes follow the play-based philosophy and encourage meaningful learning experiences for all children.

PART III: Write a blog suitable for a professional publication (for example, Nursery World, Small Talk) linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum/curriculum change (1000 words).

According to Edwards (2017), both structured learning and play-based approaches have been discussed in early childhood education for a considerable amount of time. However, in recent years, there has been a rising acknowledgment of the significant advantages that play-based curricula offer in terms of supporting holistic development in early childhood. There are several important things that teachers must consider before beginning the process of introducing a play-based curriculum or applying adjustments to the curriculum.

Given this, Ritblatt and Longstreth (2019) claim that understanding the fundamental role of play in young children's development is the first and most important step. It is not enough to say that play is only a form of pleasure; instead, it is the fundamental means by which children make sense of the world around them. Moreover, exploration, experimentation, and the construction of their knowledge of concepts, connections, and themselves are all accomplished through play, according to UNICEF (2018). Therefore, changes to the curriculum need to be based on a profound respect for the role that play has in learning and growth. In view of this, Krieg, Maracle, and Froats (2023) claim that as educators shift to a curriculum built on play, one of the most important factors to consider is their attitude toward learning. Moreover, educators play a crucial role in facilitating children's meaningful play experiences, and instead of acting as play leaders, they should adopt a child-centered approach in which they engage in the roles of guides and observers. Moreover, a shift in mentality is required to value children's autonomy, creativity, and agency, and this involves allowing children the opportunity to explore and make decisions in a supportive setting, according to Palaiologou (2016).

In addition, Moore *et al.* (2014) claim that the play-based curriculum must align with child development and learning theories. Given this, understanding developmental milestones and learning domains can help educators build developmentally suitable educational experiences that support children's progress. Moreover, drawing on ideas like Piaget's constructivism or Vygotsky's sociocultural theory might help to comprehend how children

learn through play and the importance of interaction with others in their growth and development.

Furthermore, another essential factor to consider is the physical setting of the classroom or other learning environment, as the environment shapes children's experiences and relationships, functioning as the third teacher in a play-based approach, according to Gandini (2011). In order to foster investigation, creativity, and collaboration, it needs to be created with careful consideration. Moreover, Biermeier (2015) highlights that it is possible to promote children's curiosity and imagination by including open-ended materials, flexible locations, and natural components in play, and this will result in play experiences that are diverse and varied.

Additionally, while implementing a curriculum using a play-based approach, it is necessary to carefully consider the balance between activities initiated by children and those that adults support. While play that the child initiates provide for autonomy and self-directed learning, activities that adults support can provide scaffolding and enhance the learning experiences that children have. Moreover, assuring children have opportunities for independent exploration and guided instruction is essential to fostering holistic development across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects, and establishing an appropriate balance ensures that children have these opportunities, according to Palaiologou (2016).

Collaborating with families and maintaining open lines of communication are also essential components of developing a curriculum centered on play, and according to Virtual Lab School (2023), educators should involve their children's families as collaborators in their educational journey to establish a shared awareness of the relevance and value of play. Moreover, Epstein *et al.* (2018) sustain that it is possible to improve continuity and coherence between the home and school environments by providing families with information about the reasoning behind changes to the curriculum and by providing them with techniques to promote play at home.

Additionally, Pyle *et al.* (2020) claim that assessment and documentation are essential components of a play-based curriculum but in a format different from conventional methods. Given this, instead of focusing simply on academic achievements, a play-based evaluation entails monitoring, documenting, and reporting on children's play experiences and relationships. By doing this, educators learn about children's interests, strengths, and areas for development through accurate observation, which informs responsive planning and individualised assistance. According to Flewitt and Cowan (2018), the practice of observation

is very important to this process. With an excellent understanding of the children's activities, interactions, and facial expressions, educators engage themselves in the context in which the children are playing. Moreover, educators can get useful insights into these different aspects of children's development through the process of careful observation, and, in this way, they are able to recognise not just the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive processes that are at play, but also the meaning of the play itself.

Furthermore, as an evident record of these observations, documentation serves the purpose of capturing the nuances and complexities of the play experiences that children engage in, according to Child Development Laboratory School (2022). Moreover, various types of documentation, such as written notes, photographs, videos, and samples of children's work, can be included in this documentation. Educators gain greater awareness of children's learning and development through the documentation methods that each offer their own distinct perspectives. (Child Development Laboratory School, 2022)

Moreover, the Cambridge International Education Teaching and Learning Team (2019) claims that it is essential for educators to engage in reflection as part of the assessment process because it enables them to give meaning to the observations and documentation they have made. The patterns, changes, and emerging themes in children's play are taken into consideration by educators through the process of reflective practice. They give some reflection on the significance of these observations in relation to the children's individual areas of interest, strengths, and opportunities for development.

Moreover, when using a play-based approach, one of the primary goals of assessment is to provide information that can be used to inform responsive planning, according to Parker, Thomsen, and Berry (2022). Additionally, using their observations and reflections, educators are able to personalise learning experiences for children that expand their learning and build upon the interests they already have. It is possible for educators to create meaningful opportunities for children to engage in exploration, discovery, and inquiry by aligning the content of the curriculum with children's spontaneous play.

Additionally, when it comes to the implementation of a play-based curriculum, another factor that cannot be ignored is professional development. For educators to be able to improve their understanding of play-based pedagogy, improve their observational skills, and expand their capacity to effectively scaffold children's learning, they require ongoing support and training. Educators can be empowered to embrace and excel in a play-based approach by

participating in professional development opportunities such as workshops, collaborative learning communities, and reflective practice (Mansori, 2024).

Furthermore, Nieto (2015) highlights that it is important to acknowledge that the implementation of a curriculum centered around play cannot be standardized. Every learning community is distinct, having been formed by its environment, culture, and set of values. Consequently, modifications to the curriculum must be responsive to the needs and interests of the children, educators, and families involved, as well as contextually relevant. In the effort of ongoing improvement, educators must possess the qualities of flexibility and adaptability to successfully navigate the complexity associated with the implementation of a play-based curriculum.

In conclusion, the implementation of a play-based curriculum or modifications to the curriculum necessitates thoughtful consideration of a multitude of aspects. These include the mindset of educators, congruence with child development principles, design of the learning environment, equilibrium between activities initiated by children and those supported by adults, cooperation with families, assessment methodologies, professional growth opportunities, and contextual applicability. Through deliberate and thoughtful integration of these factors, educators can establish profound and significant play interactions that serve as the foundation for enduring knowledge and achievement.

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