

Curriculum portfolio:

- Part 1- Critically analyze the challenges of implementing play-based curricula (word count: 1,347)
- Part 2- Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child', critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking or age and stage related development models within play-based curricula (Word count: 1,676)
- Part 3- A Blog based on Growing Learners Outdoors: Embedding Curriculum in Nature for Richer Learning Outcomes (Word Count: 1,372)
- Reference list (1,2,3 joined together)

Part 1- (1347)

Education and curriculum play a central role in shaping children's learning experiences, providing structured yet flexible frameworks that guide pedagogy, assessment and the organisation of learning. Priestley and Biesta (2021) state that a curriculum represents both the planned learning experiences and the values that underpin educational practice, making it a crucial mechanism for supporting equitable and meaningful learning. In early childhood education, play-based curricula have gained prominence due to extensive evidence demonstrating that young children learn most effectively through active engagement, exploration and social interaction. Wood (2020) states that play enables children to construct knowledge through meaningful experiences, while Weisberg *et al.* (2016) argue that play supports cognitive, social and emotional development, making it a powerful pedagogical tool.

Play-based curricula such as the Curriculum for Wales and the Forest School approach emphasise child-centred learning, agency and holistic development. The Welsh Government (2022) states that play is fundamental to children's well-being and learning, while Knight (2016) argues that outdoor, nature-based play fosters resilience, autonomy and problem-solving. Socio-cultural theorists such as Vygotsky highlight that learning is socially mediated and culturally situated, reinforcing the importance of responsive, relational and context-driven curricula, a point supported by Edwards (2017). Examining the pedagogical foundations of these two approaches reveals how each conceptualises the child, positions the learning environment and embeds core educational values, while also highlighting the practical challenges of implementing play-based pedagogy in Welsh early years settings.

The Curriculum for Wales represents a major shift in Welsh education, moving away from prescriptive content towards a more holistic, child-centred and play-based framework. The Welsh Government (2022) explains that the curriculum is built around four core purposes, which aim to develop ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. These purposes reflect a commitment to nurturing the whole child rather than prioritising narrow academic attainment. The Curriculum for Wales is organised into six Areas of

Learning and Experience, encouraging interdisciplinary learning and recognising the interconnectedness of knowledge. Rogers and Evans (2021) state that the Curriculum for Wales positions play as a legitimate and essential mode of learning, aligning with contemporary developmental theory.

The curriculum also places strong emphasis on well-being, belonging and relationships. The Welsh Government (2022) states that children's emotional security and sense of identity are foundational to learning, and practitioners are encouraged to create nurturing environments that reflect children's cultures, languages and experiences. This aligns with socio-cultural perspectives, such as those of Vygotsky, who emphasised the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning, as discussed by Edwards (2017). Assessment within the Curriculum for Wales is formative, ongoing and child-centred. Taylor and Davies (2023) state that this approach supports a more holistic understanding of children's development but also requires significant professional judgement and reflective practice. Overall, the Curriculum for Wales presents a flexible, values-driven framework that foregrounds play, well-being and holistic development, though its success depends heavily on practitioner expertise and adequate resourcing.

Forest School offers a contrasting but complementary approach to play-based learning. Originating in Scandinavia, it is grounded in the belief that regular, sustained engagement with natural environments supports children's holistic development, resilience and well-being. Knight (2016) describes Forest School as a learner-centred pedagogy that prioritises experiential learning, risk-taking, problem-solving and connection with nature. The Forest School Association (2020) outlines six core principles, including long-term, regular sessions; child-led learning; holistic development; and the use of a woodland or natural environment. Leather (2018) states that Forest School supports children's physical development, creativity and social skills, while also promoting environmental stewardship.

Furthermore, the successful implementation of play-based curricula relies heavily on practitioners' confidence, autonomy and understanding of child development. Priestley and Biesta (2021) state that curriculum reform is only effective when educators are

empowered to interpret and enact guidance meaningfully, yet many practitioners report uncertainty when balancing child-led play with curriculum expectations. Wood (2020) argues that high-quality play requires skilled adult interaction, sensitive observation and a deep understanding of children's interests, all of which depend on sustained professional learning.

This highlights the need for ongoing investment in training to ensure that both the Curriculum for Wales and Forest School can be delivered effectively. Although the Curriculum for Wales and Forest School differ in structure and origin, they share several philosophical and pedagogical similarities. Both position the child as an active, capable learner and emphasise holistic development rather than narrow academic outcomes. Both value play as a central mode of learning, recognising its role in fostering creativity, problem-solving and social competence. Both also highlight the importance of relationships and well-being. The Curriculum for Wales identifies well-being as a core purpose, while Forest School explicitly aims to build confidence, resilience and emotional literacy through supportive relationships. Florian and Spratt (2020) state that secure relationships are foundational to learning, reinforcing the shared emphasis on relational pedagogy.

However, there are notable differences. The Curriculum for Wales is a national curriculum with statutory expectations, whereas Forest School is a voluntary pedagogical approach adopted flexibly. The Curriculum for Wales encompasses a broad range of learning experiences across six Areas of Learning and Experience, while Forest School focuses specifically on outdoor, nature-based learning. The Curriculum for Wales provides detailed guidance on assessment and progression, whereas Forest School relies more heavily on practitioner interpretation and reflective practice. These differences mean that while the two approaches are compatible, they require different forms of professional expertise and organisational support.

implementing play-based curricula such as the Curriculum for Wales and Forest School in Wales presents several challenges. Professional learning is a significant issue. Estyn (2023) states that access to high-quality professional development is inconsistent

across Wales, undermining practitioners' confidence in delivering play-based pedagogy. Forest School training is costly and time-intensive, creating barriers for settings with limited budgets, as noted by Maynard and Waters (2020). Funding is another major challenge. Play-based approaches often require rich environments, high-quality resources and adequate staffing. The Curriculum for Wales encourages outdoor learning and experiential activities, but many schools lack the financial capacity to develop suitable spaces. Forest School requires access to natural environments, tools and safety equipment, which can be difficult for urban or under-resourced settings to secure. Leather (2018) states that these structural barriers can restrict the depth and quality of practice.

Staffing and ratios also impact implementation. Play-based learning demands close observation, responsive interaction and flexible planning, all of which require sufficient staffing levels. In Wales, early years settings frequently report recruitment difficulties and high workloads, which can limit the depth and quality of play-based practice. Inclusivity presents further challenges. Florian and Spratt (2020) argue that inclusive pedagogy requires sustained professional development and collaborative practice, which are not always available. While both curricula emphasise child-centred learning, practitioners may struggle to adapt play-based approaches for children with Additional Learning Needs without adequate support.

In conclusion, the Curriculum for Wales and the Forest School approach both demonstrate strong commitments to play-based, child-centred learning, reflecting research that emphasises the importance of agency, exploration and holistic development in early childhood. Wood (2020) and Weisberg *et al.* (2016) highlight the developmental value of play, while Edwards (2017) reinforces the socio-cultural foundations of relational learning. Forest School's focus on nature-based learning complements the Curriculum for Wales' emphasis on well-being and identity, reflecting Knight's (2016) argument that outdoor environments support resilience and autonomy. However, significant challenges remain. Estyn (2023) highlights inconsistent access to professional learning, while Maynard and Waters (2020) note disparities in Forest School training. Funding constraints, staffing pressures and limited access to natural

environments further restrict the depth and quality of play-based practice. Pascal *et al.* (2018) state that high-quality early years practice depends on reflective, well-supported practitioners who can adapt pedagogy to meet diverse needs. Ensuring equitable access to training, funding and outdoor environments is therefore essential if the Curriculum for Wales and Forest School are to fulfil their aims and genuinely support all children's learning and well-being.

Part 2- (1,676)

The concept of the Unique Child is central to contemporary early childhood education and reflects the understanding that every child develops along an individual pathway shaped by cultural background, identity, relationships, neurodiversity and lived experience. According to the Ministry of Education (2017), children are viewed as competent and capable learners whose development cannot be meaningfully captured through universal or linear expectations. Assessment in early childhood refers to the processes used to understand children's learning, development and well-being, and within play-based curricula it is typically formative, observation-driven and holistic, capturing learning as it naturally emerges through play. Carr and Lee (2019) argue that such assessment must be responsive and relational in order to reflect the complexity of children's lived experiences.

It is therefore essential to consider the Unique Child when assessing learning, since rigid or inappropriate assessment practices risk misrepresenting children's abilities, particularly those with Additional Learning Needs or who are neurodivergent. Rix (2022) states that assessment systems which rely on normative expectations often disadvantage children whose developmental pathways differ from the majority. This essay critically evaluates assessment methods used within Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia, examining how effectively they support the Unique Child and where tensions arise.

The Unique Child is grounded in socio-cultural theories that emphasise individuality, context and relational learning. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory suggests that learning is socially mediated and that each child's developmental trajectory depends on their experiences, relationships and cultural tools (Edwards, 2017). This perspective challenges standardised developmental expectations by highlighting the variability of

learning pathways. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory demonstrates how children's development is shaped by nested environmental influences, reinforcing that no two developmental journeys are identical (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Furthermore, Gibson's ecological theory of affordances, later expanded by Heft (2018), proposes that children perceive and use environments differently based on their abilities, interests and cultural backgrounds. This theory aligns closely with the Unique Child principle, as it acknowledges that children engage with learning opportunities in diverse ways.

Te Whāriki explicitly embeds the Unique Child within its principles of empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships. The Ministry of Education (2017) states that children's identities, languages and cultures must be recognised and valued, and that learning dispositions should be prioritised over narrow developmental outcomes. Moreover, research by the Education Review Office (2023) highlights that high-quality early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand depends on recognising children's cultural identities and individual learning pathways.

Reggio Emilia also foregrounds the Unique Child through its image of the child as competent, curious and capable of constructing knowledge. Rinaldi (2016) explains that the curriculum is emergent and relational, meaning assessment must adapt to the child rather than the child fitting predetermined criteria. Gandini (2020) further states that documentation in Reggio Emilia is a democratic process that positions children's perspectives at the centre of learning.

Both frameworks challenge traditional developmental models and require assessment approaches that honour individuality, context and agency. Florian and Spratt (2020) argue that inclusive pedagogy demands that educators adapt environments and practices to support diverse learners rather than expecting children to conform to normative expectations. This principle is fundamental to understanding the Unique Child.

Te Whāriki uses learning stories as a primary assessment method. Learning stories are narrative assessments that document children's learning episodes, focusing on dispositions such as curiosity, resilience, collaboration and responsibility. Carr and Lee (2019) emphasise that learning stories are designed to be accessible to families and to strengthen relationships between home and early childhood settings.

Moreover, learning stories strongly support the Unique Child because they capture learning in authentic, play-based contexts and focus on strengths rather than deficits. The Ministry of Education (2017) states that learning stories should reflect children's cultural identities and family knowledge, which is particularly significant in a bicultural curriculum grounded in Māori values. Research by Hedges and Cooper (2018) demonstrates that narrative assessment enhances children's sense of belonging and supports culturally responsive pedagogy. For neurodivergent children, learning stories avoid deficit-based comparisons and instead highlight individual progress, interests and ways of engaging with the world. Rix (2022) argues that narrative assessment is more inclusive than developmental checklists because it does not rely on normative expectations. However, learning stories also presents challenges. Blaiklock (2020) notes that they are time-consuming and require skilled interpretation, which can lead to inconsistency across practitioners. Furthermore, Sims and Waniganayake (2020) state that narrative assessments may lack reliability and validity if they are overly descriptive or insufficiently analytical. These limitations suggest that while learning stories align strongly with the Unique Child, they require significant professional expertise to be effective.

Reggio Emilia uses pedagogical documentation, a rigorous process of observing, recording, interpreting and revisiting children's learning. Documentation may include transcripts of dialogue, photographs, artefacts, drawings and practitioner reflections. Rinaldi (2016) explains that documentation is not merely recording but a reflective and interpretive act that makes children's thinking visible.

Pedagogical documentation supports the Unique Child by valuing multiple languages of expression and encouraging deep listening. Edwards, Gandini and Forman (2018) state

that documentation positions children as co-authors of their learning, which aligns with inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming practice. Chapman (2021) argues that documentation is particularly effective for neurodivergent learners because it recognises diverse ways of communicating, processing and expressing ideas.

However, documentation also presents challenges. It is labour-intensive and requires extensive professional training to ensure that interpretation is reflective and ethical. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2019) caution that documentation can become performative if used to impress parents rather than deepen pedagogy. Furthermore, the OECD (2021) notes that documentation does not easily support standardised reporting or long-term progress tracking, which can create tension in systems that require measurable outcomes.

Both learning stories and pedagogical documentation strongly align with the Unique Child, yet they do so in different ways and with different limitations. Learning stories emphasise dispositions and identity, offering a culturally responsive and relational approach that foregrounds children's strengths. In contrast, pedagogical documentation focuses on making children's thinking visible and supporting collaborative meaning-making.

Moreover, both methods capture learning in context and avoid deficit-based developmental comparisons, which is particularly beneficial for children with Additional Learning Needs or who are neurodivergent. Chapman (2021) states that assessment approaches which recognise diverse ways of knowing are essential for supporting neurodivergent learners.

However, both approaches require significant practitioner time and expertise, and their subjective nature raises questions about reliability. Sims and Waniganayake (2020) argue that narrative and documentation-based assessments can be inconsistent if practitioners lack training.

Age-and-stage models, such as developmental milestones or standardised progress trackers, are widely used internationally but often conflict with the Unique Child

principle. Gillies (2018) argues that such models assume linear, universal development and can pathologise difference. Norwich (2021) further states that normative assessment frameworks often disadvantage children with Additional Learning Needs. UNICEF (2019) highlights that culturally diverse learners are also disadvantaged by rigid developmental expectations.

Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia intentionally avoid these models, arguing that they reduce children to checklists and fail to capture the richness of play-based learning. Consequently, learning stories and pedagogical documentation are far more aligned with the Unique Child than age-and-stage models. However, Pascal *et al.* (2018) suggest that a mixed-methods approach, combining narrative assessment with flexible developmental guidance, may offer the most balanced solution.

In conclusion, the concept of the Unique Child requires assessment approaches that recognise individuality, context and diversity rather than relying on universal expectations of development. The analysis of Te Whāriki's learning stories and Reggio Emilia's pedagogical documentation demonstrates that both methods offer meaningful ways of understanding children's learning within play-based environments. Furthermore, both approaches foreground children's identities, strengths and cultural backgrounds, which aligns closely with inclusive and neurodiversity-affirming practice.

However, it is evident that these methods also present limitations. Learning stories and documentation rely heavily on practitioner interpretation, which raises questions about reliability and consistency. Moreover, both approaches demand significant time and professional expertise, which may not always be feasible in settings with limited resources. Despite these challenges, they remain more compatible with the Unique Child principle than age-and-stage developmental models, which often impose linear expectations and risk pathologising differences

Overall, the evidence suggests that no single assessment method can fully capture the complexity of the Unique Child. Consequently, a balanced and reflective approach is required, one that combines narrative assessment with flexible developmental guidance while avoiding rigid standardisation. Such an approach ensures that assessment adapts

to the child rather than expecting the child to adapt to the assessment, thereby fulfilling the central aim of supporting each learner's unique developmental pathway.

Part 3 - The Blog (1,372)

Growing Learners Outdoors: Embedding Curriculum in Nature for Richer Learning Outcomes

What if the most meaningful learning happens when children step outside and adults step back just enough to let curiosity lead?



(Early Years Outdoors, 2023)



(Pearce, 2021)



(Thimble and Twig, No Date)

Walk into any early years setting and you might see children balancing on logs, mixing mud potions, negotiating den-building or quietly observing insects. These moments are not simply enjoyable extras. They are powerful opportunities for learning that deepen when the curriculum is intentionally embedded outdoors. This blog is written for both practitioners and parents who want to understand why outdoor learning matters, how it supports curriculum goals and what we can all do to help children thrive.

Why Outdoor Play Matters for Learning and Development:

Outdoor play is a research-supported learning environment that strengthens children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Studies show that outdoor environments enhance executive function, including focus, memory and self-regulation (Whitebread and O'Sullivan, 2020). They also support language development, as natural materials and open spaces encourage rich conversation and storytelling (Bilton, 2016). Time outdoors is linked to improved well-being and reduced stress (Chawla, 2020), while open-ended natural materials promote creativity and problem-solving (LEGO Foundation, 2022). Physical development also benefits from uneven ground, climbing and running, which build strength and coordination (Knight, 2016). These benefits align closely with Te Whāriki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, which

emphasises holistic development, belonging and empowerment (Ministry of Education, 2017). The outdoor environment naturally supports these strands by offering freedom, challenge and connection to the wider world.

Reflective question: If outdoor learning supports so many developmental areas, why is it still sometimes treated as optional?

Embedding Curriculum Outdoors: What It Really Means - Embedding curriculum outdoors does not mean relocating indoor activities. It means using the natural environment to support learning in ways that are authentic, meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

Reggio Emilia which explains the outdoor environment as the “Third Teacher” Reggio Emilia philosophy positions the environment as a powerful educator. Malaguzzi’s work, interpreted by Rinaldi (2016), highlights how spaces can provoke curiosity, collaboration and deep thinking. Outdoors, this becomes even more evident. Natural materials invite exploration, open spaces encourage cooperation and seasonal changes stimulate inquiry.

Forest School was created in order for children to measure Risk, gain Resilience and build Relationships. Forest School pedagogy promotes child-led exploration, supported risk-taking and emotional resilience (Knight, 2016). These principles strengthen children’s confidence and independence, which are key outcomes in both Te Whāriki and the Curriculum for Wales. Forest School also emphasises long-term engagement with nature, helping children develop a sense of belonging and environmental responsibility.

Although Reggio Emilia, Te Whāriki and Forest School all emphasise the value of the environment in children’s learning, they approach it differently, creating important tensions for practice. Reggio Emilia’s idea of the environment as a “third teacher” depends on adults having the time and resources to design inquiry-rich spaces (Rinaldi, 2016), which is not always realistic. Te Whāriki promotes holistic, relational learning (Ministry of Education, 2017), yet its flexibility means its principles can remain aspirational without strong practitioner confidence. Forest School encourages long-term, child-led exploration and supported risk-taking (Knight, 2016), but requires trained leaders and natural spaces that many settings lack. These differences show that high-quality outdoor learning demands intentional planning and critical reflection, not just enthusiasm.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory suggests that learning happens through social interaction, and outdoor play provides rich opportunities for collaboration and shared

problem-solving (Edwards, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights the importance of environments in shaping development, and nature provides a dynamic microsystem that supports exploration and autonomy (Guy-Evans, 2020). Gibson's affordances theory, further developed by Heft (2018), explains how outdoor spaces offer endless possibilities for action, supporting children's agency and creativity.

Ways in which the Curriculum is Actioned Outdoors:

- Mathematics - *through counting pinecones, comparing stick lengths and exploring shape in den-building.*
- Literacy - *through storytelling around a log circle, mark-making in mud and describing natural objects.*
- Science - *through observing weather changes, exploring habitats and testing materials in water.*
- Well-being - *through cooperative play, turn-taking and emotional regulation.*

Strong relationships are central to effective learning. Outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for connection. Adults become co-explorers rather than instructors, which supports high-quality interactions shown to improve learning outcomes (Siraj and Kingston, 2018). Children collaborate more naturally outdoors, negotiating roles, solving problems and supporting one another. Parents often find outdoor learning more accessible and joyful, helping them understand the curriculum in action (Brooker, 2019).

Reflective question: What relationships grow when children have the freedom to explore together outdoors?

Moreover, Observation outdoors can be richer and more authentic because children behave more naturally when they feel free and unpressured. Practitioners can observe problem-solving, resilience, communication, creativity and emotional regulation. These observations support formative assessment, which is more meaningful than checklist-style approaches (Bradbury, 2019). Reggio Emilia documentation practices also inspire practitioners to capture learning stories that make children's thinking visible (Rinaldi, 2016). **Reflective question: What might we notice about a child outdoors that we miss indoors?**

Furthermore, Outdoor environments are naturally inclusive when thoughtfully designed. Research shows that children with Additional Learning Needs often thrive outdoors because the environment is sensory-rich, spacious and flexible (Connolly and Haughton, 2021). This aligns with Te Whāriki's commitment to inclusive, equitable learning and Forest School's emphasis on individualised support. Inclusive outdoor practice may include sensory paths, quiet retreat spaces, adapted tools, visual supports, predictable routines and opportunities for movement. **Reflective question:**

Whose needs are met best outdoors, and how can we design for those who need more support?

How can parents and practitioners work together to support the childrens outdoor learning outcomes?

Parents can:

- Encourage outdoor play at home
- Dress children for all weather
- Ask about outdoor learning experiences
- Celebrate muddy clothes as signs of learning

Practitioners can:

- Communicate the purpose of outdoor learning clearly
- Share photos, stories and examples
- Invite parents to outdoor sessions
- Use risk-benefit assessment to support safe exploration which can be developed with the support of the children

Together, we can:

- Build a shared understanding of the curriculum
- Advocate for high-quality outdoor spaces
- Celebrate children's natural curiosity

A Call to Action: Step Outside and See Learning Differently: Outdoor learning is a powerful, research-supported approach that benefits every child. When parents and practitioners work together, the outdoor environment becomes a living classroom that nurtures curiosity, confidence and joy.**Final reflective question: What learning might we discover if we simply opened the door and followed the children outside?**

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