

Early Years Curricula

No AI has been used in this assignment.

Content:

1. Critically analyse the challenges of implementing play-based curricula.
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.
3. Write a blog suitable for a professional publication linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum.
4. Reference list

1. Critically analyse the challenges of implementing play-based curricula.

According to UNESCO (2026), education is a right that should be available to everyone and is described as an ongoing process that supports individuals to learn, grow and develop throughout their lives. Through education, people gain the knowledge, understanding and skills which are needed to engage with the world around them, build meaningful relationships and contribute positively to society. Within the education system is a curriculum, which plays an important role in guiding children's learning and development by setting out what children are expected to learn and experience during their time in an educational setting (Department for Education, 2024).

In Wales, children's learning is guided by the 'Curriculum for Wales', which is a national framework for children between the ages of 3 to 16, and aims to support their holistic development and wellbeing. The Curriculum for Wales also gives schools and practitioners a greater flexibility to create learning experiences that meet the needs and interests of their children, which supports a more child-centred approach to learning (OECD, 2020). At the centre of the Curriculum for Wales are the Four Purposes, which aim to support children and young people in becoming 'ambitious and capable learners, creative and enterprising contributors, ethical and informed citizens and healthy and confident individuals.' Together, these purposes provide a foundation for learning and are intended to guide and support children in developing the skills and knowledge that are needed throughout their educational journey and for later in life (Welsh Government, no date a).

Welsh Government (2019) states that the learning within the Curriculum for Wales is organised into six Areas of Learning and Experience [AoLE]. These areas are in place to help children achieve the 'Four Purposes' and to build connections between all the areas of learning, which supports a holistic approach that focuses on the development of the whole child rather than one area of learning at a time. Each AoLE contains 'What Matters' statements, which highlight understanding and skills that are considered important for the children to develop. Both the AoLEs and What Matters statements help support children's overall learning and development in a holistic way.

The Curriculum for Wales has a strong focus on play-based learning as it recognises the important role that play has in children's learning and development, as well as the value of providing opportunities for them to explore and make sense of the world around them through their own interests. Play-based learning allows children to develop a range of social, emotional, physical, creative and intellectual skills through play within the setting, which is supported by practitioners and the learning environment (Welsh Government, 2023). It also supports children's wellbeing and overall development by providing them with opportunities to build friendships, learn new things and enjoy themselves, and many children recognise play as an important part of their lives that helps them learn, relax and connect with others (Supporting School Age Childcare in Scotland, no date).

The importance of play in children's learning is not a new idea and can be linked to theorists and approaches such as Froebel and Montessori. Froebel believed that play is vital to children's learning and development and encouraged children to learn through play, exploration and meaningful experiences, with adults providing guidance when needed (Froebel Trust, no date). Similarly, Montessori encouraged children to be curious and promoted learning through independent, hands-on experiences, which allowed children to learn at their own pace (Montessori, 2023). Right to Play (2024) suggests that play-based learning is different from adult-directed and guided play, because in adult-directed play, it is the adult who decides the learning goals, sets activities and determine what outcomes they want the children to achieve. Guided play still involves adult support, but is less structured, because the learning is often planned around children's interests. Whereas play-based learning is child-led and open-ended, and gives children the freedom to make choices, explore their own interests and direct their own learning. Adults will still observe and support children when needed, but it is the children who take the lead in deciding how and what they want to play.

This assignment will critically analyse the challenges of implementing the play-based learning approach within the Curriculum for Wales. Even though play-based learning is a central part of the Curriculum for Wales, there are a number of factors that can make it harder to put into practice.

One of the challenges of implementing a play-based learning approach in Wales is ensuring that it is delivered consistently across all the different age groups. Although the Curriculum for Wales covers children between the ages of 3 and 16 (Welsh Government, 2024a), play-based learning is mostly strongly emphasised for younger children within the early years and foundation learning, with guidance available to support practitioners (Welsh Government, no date b). However, as children get older, there is often more pressure on practitioners to focus on formal teaching methods, covering curriculum subjects, assessment and academic outcomes (British Educational Suppliers Association, 2026). As a result of this, it may become more difficult to maintain the same level of child-led play and exploration that is encouraged within the early years. This could lead to play-based learning becoming less visible as children progress throughout school, despite it being an important part of the Curriculum for Wales and a recognised children's right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], which highlights the importance of children and young people having opportunities to engage in play (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, no date). However, Johnston, Wildy and Shand (2022) suggest that play can support older children's education rather than hinder it. This is because their study found that older children reported that having hands-on and creative learning activities helped them understand ideas better, remember what they had learnt more easily, and stay focused and engaged in lessons, compared to more traditional teaching methods, such as worksheets. This suggests that play-based learning should not be viewed as a barrier to education but instead as an effective way to support learning outcomes, motivation and wellbeing in older children.

Another challenge to play-based learning is that practitioners may not have the knowledge or understanding needed to implement it effectively. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) found that many teachers only had a limited understanding of play-based learning, and with increasing pressure to improve children's academic outcomes, practitioners often had very little time to explore or experiment with the play-based approach. This made it difficult for some practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of how play-based learning should be used in practice and led some teachers to continue using more traditional teaching methods, either because they were more familiar with them or because they seemed to fit better with the

educational expectations in schools. This can also lead to practitioners lacking in confidence when using play-based approaches and not recognising the value of play, which can lead to play being seen as less important and treated as a second option within schools (British Educational Suppliers Association, 2026). These issues highlight how important it is for practitioners to get appropriate training in play-based learning, as this can help them develop their understanding, confidence and knowledge in using it effectively. This is particularly important because Welsh Government (2022a) highlights the role of the ‘enabling adult’ in supporting children when learning through play. The adult needs to guide, support and extend children’s learning rather than directing it, which requires practitioners to have a good understanding of how play can be used to support children’s holistic development and progress.

Crittenden and Gray (2024) note that a lack of funding and resources in schools can also be a challenge to implementing play-based learning effectively. This is because for children to take part in different types of play, such as symbolic, creative or physical play, schools often need to have lots of different materials and equipment. Especially open-ended and multi-sensory resources as these encourage curiosity, creativity, social interaction, and problem-solving skills, which are key aspects of play-based learning. It is also important that the learning environments are well organised and rich in resources to support children’s choices and independent play (Cambridge International Education, no date). Therefore, without enough funding or access to the right resources, it can become difficult for practitioners to provide and create these types of environments for their children. This can then limit children’s opportunities to fully take part in play, which would make it less effective and harder to achieve the expected learning outcomes. However, some open-ended resources such as loose parts, natural resources and reusable items, for example bottle tops, egg boxes, stones or twigs, can be easily collected over time (Nurturing Skills, 2024). These can often be gathered through donations, from everyday household items, or by children and parents collecting materials from the natural environment, all of which can help to reduce the impact of limited funding in schools.

To conclude, even though play-based learning can be challenging to implement due to pressures around academic outcomes, a lack of practitioner understanding and limited resources, it is still a critical part of the Curriculum for Wales. Therefore, it is

important that these challenges are dealt with, either through support, training and proper provision, as play-based learning offers many benefits for children's learning, development and wellbeing. When it is implemented effectively, it can be a highly beneficial approach that supports children's holistic development, provides them with meaningful experiences and helps them reach their full potential.

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.

When considering the concept of the ‘Unique Child’, it is recognised that every child is an individual who learns, develops and experiences the world in their own way (Department for Education, 2025). This is because every child grows and develops differently based on their own individual needs, experiences and circumstances (Leach, 2025). Every child has their own strengths, interests and needs, which practitioners should take the time to observe and understand in order to provide children with appropriate support and opportunities for learning (Department for Education, 2025). The concept of the ‘Unique Child’ is important because it encourages practitioners to view children as individuals rather than comparing them to others and their progress. By understanding each child's strengths, interests and needs, practitioners can adapt activities and support to help children make progress in a way that works best for them (The Early Years Foundation Stage, 2011). This child-centred approach helps make learning meaningful and relevant to each child and their needs.

Assessments are an important part of school life and are usually split into two main types, summative and formative. Summative assessment focuses on what a child has learnt over a long period of time and tends to happen at the end of a topic, term or school year. This type of assessment can be done as tests or tasks and are used to show what knowledge children have gained in a subject. Whilst formative assessment is different as it is part of everyday learning and focuses on identifying what children understand, where they may be having difficulties and what their next steps should be. This information is then used by practitioners to support them in adapting their teaching and support progress overtime (Cambridge, 2024; University of Surrey, no date). Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) state that assessment plays an important role in supporting the concept of the ‘Unique Child’, as continuous observation allows practitioners to build a picture of what a child is able to do independently, what their interests are and what they need support with. This allows learning experiences to be adapted to meet the individual needs and help children make progress in a way that reflects their own development.

This assignment will critically evaluate the Progression Steps within the Curriculum for Wales and explore how they support the concept of the Unique Child, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. The Progression Steps are informed by the principles of progression, which are in the Curriculum for Wales Progression Code which is set out under the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021. The Code must be followed by all schools and early years settings in Wales and provides guidance on how children's learning and progress should be planned and supported, highlighting that progression should be viewed as a continuous process rather than something measured at a single point in time (Welsh Government, 2021). The Progression Steps are aimed at children between the ages of 3 to 16 and describe how their learning should develop over time (Welsh Government, 2018). The Curriculum for Wales promotes a formative approach to assessment, where assessment is used to support learning and identify next steps rather than measuring knowledge at the end of a topic. Progression Steps support this by helping practitioners understand and track children's progress over time (Welsh Government, 2024b). The five Progression Steps can be found in all six Areas of Learning and Experience, which ensures that the learning is carried out holistically (Welsh Government, 2022b). Each Progression Step includes simple statements such as, "I can..." and "I have..." which describe what learners are expected to know, understand and be able to do as they progress (Welsh Parliament, 2022). The Progression Steps act as a general guide to progression, rather than set expectations, which help practitioners use observation and assessment to understand where a child is in their learning and what their next steps should be (Welsh Government, 2021).

One of the main strengths of the Progression Steps is that they recognise individual development and acknowledge that children can progress at different times and in different ways. The Welsh Government (2018) compares progression to a roadmap and describes it as a journey rather than a straight path, which reflects the idea that children should not be expected to reach the same milestones at the same time. This supports the concept of the 'Unique Child' as it recognises that learning should not be compared between children but instead focused on children's own progress from their own starting point. From this practitioners are able to focus on what each child can do and provide support that matches their needs and abilities (Welsh

Government, 2021). This can help support confidence in their learning by reducing pressure they may feel being compared to or having to keep up with others.

Another strength of the Progression Steps is that they support a personalised learning approach, which links closely to the concept of the 'Unique Child'. Morin (2025) explains that personalised learning involves adapting what, how and when children learn based on their individual strengths, needs and interests. Estyn (2020) provides an example of this in practice, highlighting that when practitioners know their children well, they can adapt their teaching to provide the right balance of support and challenge. Practitioners may change their questioning or level of support depending on a child's needs in that moment. This shows how Progression Steps can support a child-centred approach, where children are encouraged to make progress in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their own learning journey.

Another strength of the Progression Steps is that they promote a more holistic view of children's development. The Welsh Government (2024c) explains that schools in Wales no longer have to do the same national teacher assessments and can now decide on their own assessment methods, using approaches that best suit their learners. This links to the Non-Maintained Curriculum for Nursery Settings, which emphasises children's holistic development across social, emotional, creative and physical areas, rather than focusing just on what the child knows (Welsh Government, 2022a). As the Progression Steps are used across all Areas of Learning and Experience, they encourage practitioners to consider the whole child and recognise that children may show strengths in different ways (Welsh Government, 2022b). This approach supports a holistic understanding of development and reflects the idea that learning involves more than just academic outcomes.

There are also some weaknesses to the use of Progression Steps in relation to the concept of the 'Unique Child'. One weakness is that even though they are designed to support each individual child's progression, some practitioners may still link them with specific ages or year groups. My Progression (2026) highlights that the steps are used instead of Key Stages and provides a rough guide to the ages linked to each Progression Step. These are ages 3-5, 5-8, 8-11, 11-14 and 14-16, which are stated as guidance only. However, there is a risk that they may be used as age-

related expectations by practitioners. This can lead to children being compared to others of the same age or viewed as being behind if they have not reached a particular step at the same time as their peers. This does not fully support the concept of the 'Unique Child', because it moves away from the idea that a child progresses in their own individual way and at their own pace.

A hindrance of the Progression Steps is that even though Wales aims to promote a more child-centred and holistic approach to assessment, mandatory national personalised assessments in literacy and numeracy are still used (Welsh Government, 2024c). These assessments gather information about children's reading and numeracy skills and create a progress report for practitioners, which is meant to support children's progress and identify next steps in learning (Welsh Government, 2025). However, because they focus on literacy and numeracy, practitioners will only get a snapshot of the skills children have in those areas. This does not fully support the concept of the 'Unique Child', as children's development involves a range of social, emotional, creative and physical skills as well as literacy and numeracy (Queen Margaret University Edinburgh, 2023). Whilst the Progression Steps encourage practitioners to view children's development holistically, the continued use of national assessments suggests that some areas of learning may be prioritised over others, meaning that assessments in Wales may not be fully child-centred in the way the 'Unique Child' approach expects.

Another weakness is that the use of Progression Steps relies heavily on practitioners' own judgement when assessing children's progress. Even though this allows practitioners to look at each child as an individual, it can also lead to differences in how their progress is viewed. Allal (2013) highlights that professional judgement can be influenced by a practitioner's own experiences and interpretations, meaning that different practitioners may make different decisions when assessing a child's progress. This can make it difficult to ensure that progress is being interpreted in the same way, consistently across practitioners and settings, which may affect how well children's needs are identified and supported.

Therefore, the Progression Steps support many aspects of the 'Unique Child' by recognising that children develop at different times and in different ways, encouraging personalised learning and promoting a more holistic view of progress.

However, there are still some weaknesses, including the risk of age-related expectations, the continued use of national assessments and the reliance on practitioner judgement. Overall, the Progression Steps show a positive move towards a more child-centred approach to learning and assessment within the Curriculum for Wales, but how effective they are depends on how well they are understood and applied in practice.

3. Write a blog suitable for a professional publication linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum.

Who decided that the best classroom should have four walls?

“The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky.” -

Margaret McMillan

(1925, cited in Machan, 2016)

As an early years practitioner, I often wonder why the outdoors is sometimes only used on ‘nice days’ or treated as an occasional reward, rather than being recognised as a valuable part of everyday learning. I have always found being outdoors calming and enjoyable and have seen first-hand how full of opportunities it is for children to learn through exploration and play. This has led me to question whether we, as practitioners, are making full use of the outdoor environment to support children’s learning and development.

This blog will explore the benefits of outdoor learning and play, consider some of the barriers when implementing it, and reflect on how we might begin to see the outdoor environment as a vital space for learning.

Why take the classroom outside?

In my opinion, the outdoors gives children some of the best opportunities to play, explore and develop in rich and meaningful ways, supporting all areas of development. Through climbing, balancing, running and exploring the outdoor environment, children can develop both fine and gross motor skills, learn to take manageable risks and build confidence and resilience (Patak, 2024).

Santoso (2022) highlights that being outdoors supports children’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, because it allows them to learn through hands-on experiences where problem-solving, creativity and teamwork can happen naturally through play. This is especially noticeable when children are given the freedom to explore open-ended environments, where learning happens naturally through play and investigation.

This links closely to the importance of protecting children's play and giving them the time and space to do it freely. Play Wales (2020) explains that play needs freedom, flexibility and opportunities for children to lead their own play. This can look messy, noisy or chaotic to adults, but it is often where meaningful play happens. They also emphasise how important it is to provide open-ended resources, such as loose parts, and avoid too much adult control, as this can take away children's independence, which is what makes play so valuable in the first place.

The outdoors also gives children experiences that cannot always be recreated inside the classroom. The changing seasons, different textures, sounds and natural materials create opportunities for children to experience 'awe and wonder' through all of their senses. These real-life experiences encourage children to be curious and creative, whilst helping them connect more deeply with the world around them (Welsh Government, 2022a). Griffin (2024) highlights that spending time outdoors can have a positive impact on children's mental health and wellbeing, whereas a lack of access to nature has been linked to behavioural difficulties. In my experience children often become deeply engaged when they are able to follow their own interests outdoors, whether that is searching for bugs, using sticks in imaginative play or exploring mud and water.

If we know the benefits, why are we still keeping children indoors?

Even though there are numerous benefits to children being outdoors, there are still many barriers and challenges that practitioners may face when trying to make it a part of everyday learning. Patchen *et al.* (2024) identify barriers such as concerns around health and safety, limited time and resources, curriculum pressures and a lack of confidence in teaching outdoors.

One of the most common barriers is the weather and ensuring children have suitable outdoor clothing (Patchen *et al.*, 2024; Learning Through Landscapes, no date), especially in the UK, where it is easy to view the rain or cold weather as a reason to stay inside. However, this does raise the question of whether the weather itself is the barrier, or whether it is our attitudes towards it.

Another concern practitioners may have is giving children the freedom to explore and take risks whilst still ensuring they are kept safe. There may also be worries about managing behaviour outdoors, as practitioners can feel they have less control over

the environment compared to indoors (Learning Through Landscapes, no date). However, if we focus too much on avoiding all risk, we may unintentionally stop children from developing confidence, resilience and the ability to recognise and manage risks for themselves.

Outdoor learning can also sometimes be seen as an extra or ‘treat’ rather than a meaningful part everyday learning, especially when practitioners feel pressure to meet curriculum demands (Patchen, *et al.*, 2024). The way adults view outdoor play can also influence the opportunities children receive, as practitioners’ own views on play, what they think children are capable of, and the purpose of the outdoor environment can shape the experiences they provide (Waters and Rekers, 2019). Some practitioners may lack confidence in teaching outdoors or have limited access to training to support meaningful outdoor experiences for children (Patchen *et al.*, 2024; Learning Through Landscapes, no date).

Who can we take inspiration from?

Using the outdoors to support children’s learning is not a new idea, and there are many educational approaches that have emphasised the importance of the outdoors for many years. Froebel believed that nature is one of the most valuable learning environment for children, and that they learn best through hands-on experiences and interaction with the natural world, where play is seen as a central part of development rather than separate from it (Tovey, 2016). Froebel’s ideas are still used in numerous schools and early years settings today within the UK (Froebel Network, 2026), showing that these ideas are still relevant and highlighting the importance of giving children time and space to explore, discover and learn through real experiences.

Similarly, in many Nordic countries, outdoor learning has been a valued part of children’s learning for many years. Many children spend most of their time outdoors in all seasons and weather conditions (Forest School Foundation, 2020), which encourages them to explore nature, follow their own interests and learn through real-life experiences. This approach allows children to be curious, adventurous and independent, whilst also giving them opportunities to take manageable risks and develop confidence and resilience (Olsen, 2024).

Reflecting on outdoor learning

Overall, outdoor learning should not be viewed as an extra activity or reward, but as a valuable part of a play-based curriculum. When children are given the time, space and freedom to explore outdoors, they can learn through meaningful experiences supporting all areas of development. However, the biggest barrier to implementing outdoor learning may not be the weather, but how we as practitioners view it. This raises an important question: do the best classrooms really need four walls?

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