

Early Years Curricula

Part 1 - Critical Analysis

Woodford (2020) *et al* suggests that education can mean a range of concepts. Education can begin with a child constructing learning frameworks through play, books, and images to make sense of school, the hidden curriculum, and their place in the world. Whereas others may not focus on what it means by 'education' but how we become educated, for example, it is believed that family, community and culture play a role in shaping a child's education. It is thought that they provide a strong foundation for learning and self-discovery. Dewey stated that "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." However, it can be argued that the question "what is education?" has no simple solutions; rather, it only leads to additional questions.

GOV.UK (2016) describes curricula as essential to the operation of any school. Over time, curricula have gone through numerous modifications, but this has ensured that all children, regardless of their wealth, culture, or ability, receive the same attention. The benefit of living in the modern world is that there is no need to begin studying right away, and every pupil is given the time and possibility to become immersed in the great discussions of society and build an intellectual foundation that will serve them well throughout their lives. These can be seen as important because they prepare learners to thrive in a changing world. They promote the development of capable individuals, while ensuring education is flexible, inclusive, and relevant to real-life contexts (HWB, 2025).

According to Saracho (2021), a play-based curriculum views play as essential to children's well-being and development, supporting their right to play in all environments. It involves varied physical, mental, and emotional activities, whether independent or social, and ought to be enjoyable, open-ended, challenging, and spontaneous. Wainwright *et al* (2016) conceptualised a play-based curricula as being areas of learning that move away from traditional subject boundaries. It advocates for a child-led focus, utilising opportunities for outdoor play and fostering learner autonomy and responsibility, thereby supporting greater flexibility in learning experiences.

Throughout this assignment, part one focuses on the critical analysis of the challenges of implementing play-based curricula for the health and well-being of children between the New Curriculum for Wales and Forest Schools in Scandinavian countries. Secondly, part two consists of considering the 'unique child' while critically evaluating methods of assessment, progress and age within a play-based curricula. Finally, part three demonstrates a blog based on outdoor play and the considerations needed when implementing a play-based curricula.

The Curriculum for Wales, according to HWB (2025), centers on four key purposes: developing ambitious learners, creative contributors, ethical citizens, and confident individuals. It supports these aims through five developmental pathways to prioritise meaningful learning over simply covering content, encouraging practitioners to use their professional judgment to select relevant content, foster creativity, and make cross-disciplinary links that enhance learner outcomes. HWB (2025) also points out that mental health and well-being are central to the Curriculum for Wales, which takes a comprehensive approach to creating healthy, self-assured individuals. It includes five "What Matters" statements that address relationships, self-awareness, and self-regulation. It is intended for students of all ages. These are broken down into progressive steps and facilitate a whole-school approach, providing that learning experiences and school life are infused with well-being.

Stephanie (2019) maintains that forest school is a form of outdoor education that focusses on early childhood, which varies by culture and context, although they all share key traits. To illustrate, it promotes risk assessment, creativity, and critical thinking through time in woodland settings and supports whole-child development through experiential, child-centered learning. The Forest School movement began in mid-20th century in Denmark, driven by a strong outdoor culture and growing environmental awareness. It spread across Scandinavia as outdoor learning became integrated into formal education, supported by favorable laws and flexible curricula encouraged by governments. Flores (2021) expresses that forest schools are orientated around health and well-being as it provides a safe and supportive environment that enables children to practice independence, self-worth, and self-confidence. Not only that, but it has reduced childhood obesity and ADHD symptoms.

There are a range of similarities and differences between the Curriculum for Wales and Forest Schools. Firstly, both curricula value well-being, exercise, and relationships with nature. For example, Wales's curriculum offers a comprehensive framework for comprehending health and wellbeing as their play-based curriculum focuses on physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being, acknowledging that good health is key to successful learning (HWB, 2020). Forest schools emphasize that through frequent outdoor play and risk-taking, their curriculum primarily supports children's development of self-worth, physical activity, social and emotional skills, health, and immunity (Williams, No Date). The Welsh Government (2020) states that the Curriculum for Wales not only focusses on learner well-being, but they also consider the well-being of the school staff and the wider school communities including families to ensure a whole school approach. However, Vilhar (2018) implies that Forest School in Scandinavia rather than specifically addressing employees or the well-being of the entire school community, many descriptions focus on the children. Moreover, the explicit values written throughout the Curriculum for Wales that are legally required include physical well-being, emotional and mental health, positive partnerships, and prudent choices. Whereas implicit values expected are self-worth, respect, and kindness. In other words, self-worth, respect, and kindness are all implied when teaching positive partnerships (HWB, 2022). Similarly, Care Learning (2024) tells us that the explicit values for the Forest School Scandinavia approach include holistic development, emotional and social well-being, physical activity, and time for nature. Although, this approach too has implicit values that are not listed as a fixed curriculum list but are instead demonstrated through practice, such as respect, kindness, mindfulness and responsibility. Furthermore, the environments designed to follow the Curriculum for Wales will differ from those used in Forest Schools. Estyn (2023) portrays an example of this. Since the beginning, a school in Wales has been involved in the planning stages of implementing the new curriculum framework, to do this the school has created a curriculum that includes physical education, outdoor learning, health, and gardening under the health and well-being area of learning and experience. Through a learner-centered approach, these provisions have greatly expanded students' ways of thinking and enhanced their experiences. Nevertheless, Mackinder (2020) tells us that forest schools focus on outdoor learning only that provides constant opportunities to interact with natural

loose parts, nature, risk taking, no matter the weather or season. This was built on Froebel's kindergarten theories, which connected outdoor play to health and wellbeing as a vital component of child development, in result, children were granted more freedom since they were seen to be more capable. Additionally, children's sense of safety when they return to familiar natural settings reinforces their sense of comfort and belonging, both of which are critical elements of emotional well-being. Finally, when looking at the pedagogy between both curriculums, a study that was carried out by Welsh Government (2025) using the curriculum for Wales that demonstrated the way in which practitioners ensure health and well-being is embedded throughout learning. Senior leaders regularly mentioned that they were focused on making sure the health and well-being area was intended to suit the needs of all learners, including those with additional learning needs, and that schools heavily relied on the assertions of the five 'what matters' statements to support curriculum design. To carry this out, practitioners ensured that teachers and support staff had the knowledge and expertise to create and implement a customised curriculum that promotes learners' well-being, offered a variety of learning opportunities in a nurturing and engaging setting, including the use of outdoor spaces, and underlined the significance of setting up in-school review and evaluation procedures to facilitate ongoing advancements in curriculum design and implementation. Similarly, according to Dean (2019) Forest Schools to focus on meeting the health and well-being needs of children, having said that, as mentioned previously they carry this out in a different way, by encouraging and providing children with the possibilities to take part in engaging in extended, child-directed outdoor experiences where they regularly encounter and manage risks. An example of this is, children may evaluate the angle of a ravine hill themselves before confidently walking down, skillfully navigating over slippery pine needles while developing their physical health and strengthening their fine and gross motor skills.

When researching how to implement forest schools into practice and the curriculum here in Wales, there was a representation of multiple benefits. HWB (2025) reminds us that the Curriculum for Wales focuses on 4 purposes, to create; enterprising, creative contributors, ambitious, capable learners, healthy, confident individuals and ethical, informed citizens. Therefore, forest schools have a strong alignment with the curriculum for Wales. According to

Natural Recourses Wales (2015), Forest schools began to be implemented into Wales in the year 2000. This demonstrated many strengths such as encouraging independence, resilience, and confidence through meaningful experiences in nature. Children gain social, physical, and communication skills, while also becoming more motivated and focused. Spending time in the same outdoor setting helps them build a strong connection to the natural world. The inclusive nature of Forest School makes it especially valuable for learners who find traditional classrooms challenging, and it complements the priorities of the new Welsh curriculum, particularly in well-being and outdoor learning. Nonetheless, implementing forest schools into the Curriculum for Wales is not that simple, there are many limitations that occur, to illustrate, funding and sustainability, staffing and training expertise, uncertainty of safety, weather, accessibility and lack of recourses. For example, Bridgend County Borough Council (2023) discuss that the Welsh Government provided funding for forest schools to improve the wellbeing of children, however, only 8 in 63 schools will receive this meaning many children will be missing out on the opportunity of experiencing the correct time and experience outdoors and for those schools fortunate enough to receive the funding, must ensure to sustain these forest schools. Secondly, Harris (2022) suggests that practitioners of forest schools must be able to support children in learning how to recognize risks and, if needed, modify their behavior. To test the equilibrium between adventure and danger, they must simultaneously push them beyond their boundaries, climb a little higher, balance on a higher or wobblier log, and so on. According to forest school administrators, this also enables practitioners to take charge of their own health and well-being. Consequently, practitioners here in Wales may not have the training or confidence to foster such learning into their teaching. Finally, Dabaja (2023) observes that the adoption of forest schools is hindered by the need of practical areas and shelters in the event of severe weather, he also notes that weather and climate conditions pose a major logistical obstacle for outdoor education and the children's safety.

In conclusion, both the Curriculum for Wales and the Forest School approach share a strong emphasis on learner well-being, holistic development, and experiential, child-centered learning. While the Welsh curriculum is structured around key purposes and developmental pathways that support creativity and professional autonomy, Forest Schools offer a flexible, nature-based

model that promotes independence, resilience, and self-worth. The two approaches complement each other in their values and aims, particularly in supporting children's physical, emotional, and social well-being. Although Forest Schools have already been introduced in parts of Wales, their wider integration into the national curriculum offers further potential to enrich educational experiences. However, practical challenges must be addressed to ensure successful implementation.

Part 2 – Critical Evaluation

The Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS) in England emphasises that each child is an individual with their own learning journey, possessing the potential to develop resilience, capability, confidence, and a strong sense of self. Since development is not predictable and children advance differently in different areas, they develop individually and at varied speeds. "The Unique Child" represents one of the four main concepts that supports the fundamentals of early childhood education. From birth to age five, the way in which practitioners support children's learning and development is guided by these themes. This idea focuses on acknowledging that all children are capable learners from birth (Department for Education, 2025).

According to the Department for Education (2025), the term 'assessment' within the early years often refers to the teacher's professional understanding of what the child understands, retains, and is capable of doing daily. It serves as a way to determine whether a young child is developing correctly. It is not required to be planned or recorded and might occur during regular encounters with other children. At the conclusion of the EYFS, it should compile a profile designed to offer a reliable and accurate summative evaluation of each child's progress on factors such as; language and communication, social, emotional, and personal progress and physical development while aligning it to the expectations of the nation. Collectively, assessments are used to assist children in making smooth transitions, educate parents and caregivers on the progress of their children, meet the needs of all children holistically and to recognise children requiring extra learning support, enabling the provision of appropriate interventions.

Practitioners are encouraged to provide personalised support for children, in line with the Early Years Foundation Stage principle of recognising each child as unique. Since each child has unique learning requirements and skills, practitioners should pay close attention to the results of what they do as well as how they affect the development of high-quality practices. Practitioners can precisely target children for additional one-on-one interactions by identifying those with higher linguistic and developmental needs for the purpose of providing them with personalised learning environments and additional support to allow them the opportunity to thrive (Grenier, 2025). For example, Bahar and Maker (2025) advocate for assessment approaches that recognise children's originality and individual thinking, rather than relying solely on standardised norms. Bahar and Maker (2025) highlight the importance of valuing each child's unique learning profile to ensure assessments are meaningful. Viewing children as uniform data points overlooks their distinct ways of thinking, reinforcing the need for assessment to reflect individual capabilities rather than comparative performance.

As stated by Blackham *et al* (2023), the phrase "Friluftsliv" (Free Air Living) is used by Scandinavians, who identify as nature lovers and strongly associate it with freedom of movement and access to the natural world. Through experiential learning in a natural setting, Forest School is an inspiring process that regularly provides opportunities for people of all ages to succeed and gain confidence. Siegfrendsen (2017) explains that within the Forest School approach, assessment emphasises children's holistic development and learning progress rather than conventional academic measures. This process is primarily carried out through continuous observation of everyday activities, with educators actively engaging in the learning experience, as they regard participation alongside the children as a vital element of effective assessment. Friluftsliv strongly aligns with the concept of the unique child. As opposed to using formal methods, they employ primary and holistic observation, which is founded on risk-benefit analysis, self-led learning, and a child's unique development (UNESCO, 2024). Observation of the unique child will be conducted across multiple areas, including social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development (Greenglade, No Date). According to research by Mackinder (2025), teachers also frequently scaffold students' learning in Forest School environments by offering

suitable challenges and guidance, promoting skill development, and fostering individual curiosity. When carrying out assessment while considering the unique child, Friluftsliv also reflects children with additional learning needs (ALN). Dybkær (No Date) suggests that they do this by modifying educational experiences to fit each student's particular requirements while making sure that activities are in line with their interests and zone of proximal development and they emphasize partnership between educators, parents, and pedagogues to establish a supportive and integrated learning environment for students with ALN. As stated by Bullard (2024) forest schools do not use any of the four; categorisation of children, age and stage tracking, specific detailed step or standardised progression meaning that children are not expected to carry out the same level of understanding as every child progresses differently and those of a lower ability are not separated from those of a higher ability, ensuring equality for all. In result, Forest Schools offer many strengths, through experiential, nature-based learning, Forest Schools support children in developing their self-esteem, independence, and general well-being. They foster creativity and resilience while improving motivation, physical coordination, and social and communication skills. Forest Schools provide an inclusive, all-encompassing approach that promotes academic and emotional development by fostering children's natural curiosity and fostering a connection with the natural world (Sella *et al*, 2023). Although some may argue that there are weaknesses to this approach, for example, Bamboo Children (2023) highlights that Forest Schools exhibit several limitations. Participation may reduce time allocated to core academic competencies, such as literacy and numeracy, and the flexible, unstructured format may not accommodate all learners. Implementation is often constrained by limited resources, insufficient planning time, and inadequate staff support. Moreover, parental misunderstandings of the pedagogical approach, safety considerations, and reliance on parental involvement can further restrict accessibility and overall effectiveness.

The Curriculum for Wales represents a major reform for learners aged 3 to 16, emphasising holistic development, progression, and the central role of play in early years of learning. Structured around six areas of learning and experience, it allows schools to prioritise literacy, numeracy, digital competence, and the development of ambitious, ethical, healthy, and creative

learners (Welsh Government, 2025). The Welsh Government (2025) implies that within the new Curriculum for Wales, assessment aims to facilitate the progression of every child by being an ongoing part of teaching and learning. It involves active involvement from learners, collaboration with parents and educators, the use of varied assessment strategies, and continuous professional discussions to improve curriculum and student growth. However, Welsh Government (2025) states that the Curriculum for Wales represents a major change in how assessment is used, to illustrate, it acknowledges the importance of continuously supporting individual learners, monitoring and evaluating their progress over time, and assessing group performance to inform and improve teaching practices. Whilst the idea of the unique child is not specifically mentioned throughout the curriculum, by addressing the importance of comprehending the unique needs, learning preferences, and developmental phases of every learner, it acknowledges the idea. The curriculum promotes inclusive learning settings, facilitates progression, and guarantees that education is responsive to each child's areas of strength and growth through individualised teaching methods and customised assessments (Welsh Government, 2023). To add to this, the curriculum also considers ALN throughout their approach. Carmarthenshire County Council (2021) suggests that by offering realistic expectations and solutions for assisting students with ALN, the guidelines they follow support the Curriculum for Wales' objective to create an inclusive educational system and guarantee that every student can thrive and engage fully in their education. The Welsh Government (2025) portrays that the curriculum no longer uses age and stage tracking in the way the foundation stage did as the assessment now facilitates each learner's growth along this continuum at a suitable pace. It too describes how they have aimed to come away from categorisation of children, specific detailed steps and standardised progression after the recognition of the importance of a more holistic and individualised model (Welsh Government, 2022). Overall, ESTYN (2023) argues that the Curriculum for Wales offers learners a strong, coherent foundation of subject understanding. It helps them build knowledge progressively, supports equity by providing all pupils with access to powerful ideas, and enhances teaching quality through deliberate curriculum design. By focusing on structured, meaningful learning rather than isolated activities, this approach leads to deeper understanding, better engagement, and improved learner outcomes. That said, the Audit Wales

report (2022) notes that the Curriculum for Wales has a strong vision but faces challenges in implementation. It highlights unclear costs, limited teacher training impact, and uneven school readiness, especially after the pandemic. Concerns also remain about future assessments and consistency across schools. Without enough support and resources, its goals may not be fully achieved.

To conclude, both Forest School and the Curriculum for Wales support the unique child by emphasising holistic, individualised learning. Forest School fosters curiosity and resilience through child-led, nature-based activities, while the Curriculum for Wales promotes personalised progression and inclusive practice. Both approaches recognise each child's pace, strengths, and needs, valuing autonomy, equity, and the development of each learner comprehensively.

Part 3 - Blog

From Scheduled to Enduring:

The Revival of Outdoor Play as a Component of Recent Pedagogy

This blog was created with one goal in mind: to highlight the value of being outside and to promote the early years relationship with the world of nature.

Why Does it Matter?

According to the Welsh Government (2023), throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, learning outdoors significantly improved children's and adolescents' overall health and wellbeing. Not only that but learning outdoors has become required throughout many curriculums globally as it is believed that outdoor play supports a child in many ways, such as:

- Academically
- Socially
- Emotionally
- Physically
- Enhances connection to nature

- School readiness

To illustrate, Ministry of Education (2017) tells us that the curriculum for New Zealand (Te Whariki) points out that children's learning and overall development require outdoor play as it promotes self-esteem and creation of practical worldviews. With a focus on choice, agency, and a connection to nature, outdoor settings are regarded as being just as effective in promoting learning as indoor settings.



(Source: Pinterest, 2021)

In result, this blog will explore the key considerations that must be addressed when implementing changes to incorporate outdoor play within a play-based curriculum.

Concerns

There is a strong reason to believe that there are few experiences that can compare to first-hand experiences with the real world. Ouvry and Furtado (2020) believe that outdoor play exposes children to sunlight and fresh air, supporting bone growth, immunity, and physical activity. Not only that, but a child's movement experiences will have a significant impact on their personality, emotions, and accomplishments.

However, as expressed by Ouvry and Furtado (2020) there is a rising awareness of the importance of outdoor play, matched by widespread concern over its decreasing presence in children's lives, both in the United Kingdom and around the world.

Ouvry and Furtado (2020) maintain that only 1 in 4 boys and 1 in 5 girls in England engage in the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity each day, making children of today the least active generation in history. Consequently, inactive children are more likely to suffer adverse health consequences during adulthood due to lack of motor activity, for example, obesity.

Why is this happening? What is driving it?

Considerations needed when implementing play-based curriculum changes:

- Practitioners
- Parents
- Environment
- Support (Additional learning needs)

As a means of meeting children's needs and providing them with the correct opportunities to flourish, the above factors play a vital role. Although, it is not always quite that simple.

To expand this, UNICEF (2025) implies that there are many factors that prevent children from getting the necessary amount of outdoor playtime that they require, the reasons being;

- Children from metropolitan regions and members of racial or ethnic minorities are potentially less likely to spend time outside
- Parents may contribute unintentionally, it is simple to believe that a more academic activity is more beneficial to a child's development than unstructured/risky outdoor play
- Worries about the weather or the child becoming wet and dirty hold many practitioners and parents/caregivers back

- Not everyone is fortunate enough to have a backyard, a forest close by, or a secure outdoor space where children can play, as more children grow up in urban areas, fewer of them have access to green spaces

Evidence

A study was carried out to explore how parents' and practitioners' views the risks and benefits of outdoor risky play relate to young children's outdoor play experiences in Scotland, and whether these views differ based on their role as a parent or practitioner. In result, perceived risks were adversely correlated with children's experiences from both parents and practitioners. Although, a factor that impacted opportunities for outdoor risky play, mainly practitioners, is the amount of time and support they have to offer (McCrorie, 2025).

Moreover, another paper investigates how urban residential environments, particularly play space characteristics, affect children's perceived influences, and their aim was to increase children's unstructured play in urban areas. Accordingly, the findings guide child-friendly urban planning since the data showed the interrelated impacts and routes of space and safety for children in urban locations and provided quantitative evidence for understanding this connection (Gao, 2024).

Forest Schools

Dean (2019) suggests that a pedagogical approach to outdoor education that emphasises holistic development is known as "forest school." There are many advantages to Forest School, including the possibility it gives young children to interact with nature and learn in a natural setting.

For example, the Forest School Association (No Date) implies that the Scandinavian educational system serves as the foundation for Forest School pedagogy. Its six guiding principles support experiential learning driven by children through play in a natural setting, these include:

- Long-term process
- Natural environment
- Holistic development

- Supported risks
- Qualified Practitioners
- Learner-centered process

Furthermore, countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Norway often have greater opportunity for forest schools because of greater access to forests and outdoor environments.

To build on this, Mackinder (2020) looks at forest schools and the difference between Scandinavia and England. Mackinder (2020) found that in England, education begins at age 5 with a structured approach that limits outdoor activities, whereas children in Denmark begin at age 6, promoting free play and outdoor learning through a more flexible and child-led system.



(Source: Rfi, 2023)

Theory

According to Froebel Trust (2023), Froebel stated that playing in the outdoors is the most ideal way to provide children with the chance to interact with living things as well as the opportunity of learning universal principles of nature including motion gravity, light and sound.

On the other hand, Piaget theory focusses more on the belief that children arrange their knowledge and comprehension of the world into schemas, or cognitive structures by:

- Transporting- Shifting objects and themselves from one spot to another
- Enclosing- Placing items inside containers and enclosing objects with barriers
- Transforming- Adjusting materials

What can YOU do to make a difference?

Beyond simply being enjoyable, outdoor play is an essential component of early childhood development that molds a child's social skills, creativity, emotional stability, and physical health. But it takes everyone to work together to truly support children. Creating outdoor spaces that are safe, accessible, and engaging requires the collaboration of parents, educators, caregivers, and community leaders. Every effort count, from fostering natural discovery to creating inviting playgrounds. Encouraging outdoor play together offers children the flexibility to develop, explore, and flourish in their environment rather than merely providing them with a space to run and laugh.

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