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Early Years Curricula

I can confirm that I have not used artificial intelligence during this assignment.

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

Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) states that the implementation of play-based curricula in Wales, particularly through the Foundation Phase Framework and the Curriculum for Wales, represents a significant shift from traditional, formal approaches to early childhood education.

The Foundation Phase framework emphasises experiential learning, active engagement and child-centred development. While research highlights the developmental benefits of play-based learning, implementation has presented several challenges. Whilst there are numerous barriers, two of the most significant are teacher understanding and professional development and balancing play with academic accountability (Thomas, 2021 & Lewis and Thomas, 2021).

Welsh Government (2022) states that the Curriculum for Wales is a flexible, skills-focused curriculum designed to help young people become capable learners, creative thinkers, responsible, healthy and confident individuals. Similarly, despite the developmental benefits of play-based learning identified in research, implementation has highlighted a number of challenges. The two key challenges identified are staffing and budget constraints as well as assessment and evidencing progress through play (Welsh Government 2026).

One major challenge to implementing play-based curricula in regard to the Foundation Phase Framework is ensuring that teachers possess a clear understanding of what constitutes effective play-based learning. Effective play-based learning requires skilled adult intervention, observation and planning. Teachers must understand how to, scaffold learning through play, extend children's thinking through questioning, observe and assess learning within play contexts, design environments that promote developmental progression. Without this expertise, play can become either overly structured losing its child-centred nature or insufficiently purposeful, limiting educational value (Thomas, 2021).

Likewise, Welsh Government (2026) found inconsistencies in access to professional learning and identified gaps in training related to play-based pedagogy, observation skills and learner-led practice. These gaps may hinder practitioners' confidence and ability to effectively facilitate, assess and respond to children's learning through play, leading to variations in the quality and consistency of play-based provision across settings. This suggests that not all practitioners feel equally equipped to implement play-based approaches effectively within the Curriculum for Wales.

However, the Welsh Government (2024) contends that while limited professional learning opportunities may initially present challenges, professional development should not be viewed as a barrier to play-based curriculum implementation. Instead, it is positioned as a key enabler of successful practice. Through high-quality and ongoing professional learning, practitioners can develop the knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical skills required to facilitate meaningful play experiences, assess learning effectively, and align play-based approaches with curriculum expectations.

A further barrier to implementing play-based curricula with the Foundation Phase Framework is balancing play with academic accountability. Although the framework promoted child-centred, experiential learning through play, teachers often faced pressure to provide evidence of pupils' attainment and progress in literacy and numeracy. As a result, some practitioners found it difficult to maintain a genuinely play-based approach while meeting assessment and performance expectations (Welsh Government, 2015). This issue highlights the difficulty of balancing play-based learning with the need to demonstrate academic progress. Although play contributes to children's holistic development and learning, practitioners are often under pressure to provide measurable evidence of attainment. This can encourage a greater emphasis on structured teaching and assessment, which may reduce opportunities for child-led play and exploration.

Equally, Welsh Government (2026) highlights that some schools continued to view Year 3 as a transition to more formal learning, influencing practice in Year 2 and creating tensions with the Curriculum for Wales emphasis on developmentally appropriate, play-based pedagogy. This suggests that implementing a play-based curriculum in Year 2 can

be challenging, as practitioners often feel pressure to prepare learners for the more formal learning environment typically associated with Year 3.

On the other hand, OECD (2018) argues that while schools are required to demonstrate learner progression, accountability demands should not interfere with the implementation of play-based pedagogy. When accountability pressures dominate educational practice, they can restrict innovation and improvement, whereas assessment systems should support learning and pedagogical development. This is particularly relevant to the Curriculum for Wales, where play-based and experiential learning are recognised as important pedagogical approaches.

One significant challenge to implementing play-based learning within the Curriculum for Wales is staffing and budget constraints. Although schools recognise the value of play-based and developmentally appropriate pedagogy, increasing learner needs combined with limited staffing and financial resources can restrict their ability to fully realise inclusive and responsive provision. Welsh Government (2026) research found that staffing and budget pressures were perceived as ongoing barriers to delivering developmentally appropriate foundation learning. These findings suggest that the success of play-based learning depends not only on practitioners' skills and understanding but also on the resources and support available within schools. If staffing levels and funding are insufficient, schools may find it more difficult to provide the high-quality play experiences needed to achieve the aims of play-based pedagogy.

In the same way, Taylor, Waldron and Rhys (2014) evaluation noted that the successful implementation of the Foundation Phase depended heavily on adequate staffing levels and funding and that variations in staffing affected the extent to which schools could deliver high-quality play-based learning. Insufficient staffing can reduce opportunities for practitioners to observe, scaffold and extend children's learning through play, while limited funding may restrict access to appropriate resources and training. Consequently, variations in staffing and financial support can lead to inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of play-based provision across schools (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Alternatively, UNICEF (2018) maintains that while inadequate funding, limited resources and large class sizes can present challenges for practitioners, these issues should be

addressed through policy and organisational support rather than by compromising play-based pedagogical practices, which are considered essential for young children's holistic development. As play is viewed as fundamental to children's holistic development, UNICEF argues that efforts should focus on strengthening the conditions needed to implement play-based pedagogy effectively, rather than compromising its role within early childhood education.

Another significant barrier to the effective implementation of play-based curricula under the Curriculum for Wales is the difficulty of assessing and evidencing children's learning and developmental progress within play-based contexts (Welsh Government, 2025).

Unlike more traditional teacher-directed approaches, where learning outcomes can often be measured through formal tasks and written evidence, play-based learning frequently results in less tangible forms of assessment. Children's learning is demonstrated through interactions, problem-solving, communication, creativity and exploration, which can be challenging for practitioners to observe, record and interpret consistently.

Although assessment within play-based learning has always presented challenges, many practitioners found the process more straightforward under the Foundation Phase Framework due to its clearer developmental outcomes and assessment criteria. The Foundation Phase Outcomes provided practitioners with explicit criteria against which observations could be matched, while the Foundation Phase Profile enabled evidence of learning to be gathered largely through observation of children's play and everyday activities (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022).

This offered a more structured approach to evidencing progress than the Curriculum for Wales, which places greater emphasis on practitioner judgement and holistic progression. The Curriculum for Wales relies heavily on practitioner judgement to assess holistic learner progression, which can make it challenging to consistently evidence learning within play-based contexts where progress is often less visible and more difficult to document (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2025).

In conclusion, both the Foundation Phase Framework and the Curriculum for Wales recognise play-based learning as a valuable approach to supporting children's holistic development, engagement and learning. Research consistently highlights the benefits of

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play-based pedagogy; however, its successful implementation is influenced by a range of practical and professional challenges. Under the Foundation Phase Framework, key barriers included practitioners' understanding of play-based learning and the tension between play and academic accountability. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales faces challenges relating to professional learning, staffing and budget constraints, and the assessment and evidencing of learning within play-based contexts.

2. **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**

The concept of the Unique Child is a fundamental principle of early years education, recognising that every child develops, learns and progresses in different ways and at different rates. Within play-based curricula, assessment practices are designed to support children's individual learning journeys while informing future planning and provision. This essay will explore and critically evaluate different methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage-related developmental models within play-based learning. It will also compare the assessment arrangements used in funded non-maintained nursery settings and the Foundation Phase Framework in Wales, considering how well they support the needs of each unique child while meeting accountability requirements.

Both funded non-maintained nursery settings and the Foundation Phase Framework aim to support children's learning through observation and child-centred assessment, reflecting the principle of the Unique Child. However, there are notable differences in how assessment is implemented.

In funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales, assessment is primarily observation-based and embedded within children's everyday play and learning experiences. Practitioners use observations to inform child-centred planning, monitor developmental progression and identify individual learning needs rather than measuring attainment against fixed targets. This approach reflects the principle of the Unique Child by recognising that children develop at different rates and in different ways. Assessment information is also shared with parents and schools to support continuity of learning and smooth transitions. The Welsh Government emphasises that assessment in early years settings should be ongoing, formative and used to support children's holistic development rather than to compare children against standardised outcomes (Welsh Government, 2021). Furthermore, guidance for funded non-maintained nursery settings highlights the importance of practitioner observations and professional judgement in

understanding children's progress across developmental pathways (Welsh Government, 2022).

Within the Foundation Phase Framework, assessment is viewed as an ongoing process that is integrated into children's play and experiential learning. Practitioners use continuous observation and professional judgement to assess children's progress across developmental pathways, enabling learning experiences to be tailored to individual needs and stages of development. This approach supports formative assessment by focusing on how children learn rather than solely on what they achieve. However, compared with non-maintained nursery settings, schools operating within the Foundation Phase are often subject to greater accountability requirements, resulting in more formal systems for recording, tracking and reporting children's progress. While these processes can support consistency and progression monitoring, critics argue that increased documentation may sometimes reduce opportunities for spontaneous, child-led learning (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022).

While documentation and progress-tracking systems can help ensure consistency and demonstrate children's progress, some researchers argue that too much emphasis on assessment can take practitioners' focus away from children's spontaneous play and interests. Palaiologou (2017) suggests that formal assessment can be difficult to combine with child-led play because learning through play is often complex and does not fit neatly into measurable outcomes. Similarly, Wood (2020) highlights that assessment systems focused on outcomes may encourage children to be measured against predetermined developmental expectations, which can limit more flexible and responsive approaches to learning.

Funded non-maintained nursery settings tend to use more informal, practitioner-led assessment, which supports a holistic understanding of the child and minimises pressure on young learners (Welsh Government, 2022). This flexibility allows practitioners to respond to individual developmental needs but can also lead to variation between settings and inconsistencies in assessment judgements. In contrast, the Foundation Phase Framework provides greater consistency and continuity through more structured

progress tracking and recording processes, supporting communication between practitioners, schools and external agencies (Welsh Government, 2015).

However, increased accountability requirements can create pressure to demonstrate measurable progress, which may shift practitioners' focus from children's interests towards evidence gathering. Researchers such as Palaiologou (2017) and Basford and Bath (2014) argue that excessive documentation can conflict with child-led learning and play-based pedagogy. Therefore, while the Foundation Phase offers greater consistency, funded non-maintained settings may be better positioned to fully embrace the principles of the Unique Child through their more flexible and individualised approach to assessment.

Due to the largely practitioner-led nature of assessment in funded non-maintained nursery settings, there can be considerable variation between settings and limited consistency in assessment judgements. However, this flexibility can support the principle of the Unique Child by allowing practitioners to respond to children's individual interests, strengths and developmental pathways. In contrast, while the Foundation Phase Framework provides more structured approaches to assessment and progress tracking, it has been criticised for creating a risk of curriculum narrowing when assessment requirements begin to drive practice. This can create tensions between supporting each child as a unique learner and meeting accountability demands, as practitioners may feel pressured to focus on evidencing progress against developmental expectations rather than responding to children's spontaneous interests and learning through play (Palaiologou, 2017; Basford and Bath, 2014). Therefore, while both approaches aim to support children's development, funded non-maintained nursery settings may offer greater opportunities to fully embrace the concept of the Unique Child through their more flexible and individualised assessment practices.

A further challenge of assessment within funded non-maintained nursery settings is that reliability depends heavily on practitioners' knowledge, skills and professional judgement. Because assessment is largely observation-based and individualised, practitioners need a strong understanding of child development, play-based learning and assessment practices to accurately identify and support children's progress (Carr, 2001).

This can place additional pressure on practitioners, as ongoing professional development is often required to ensure assessments are consistent, meaningful and responsive to each individual child. However, this flexibility also supports the principle of the Unique Child, as practitioners can adapt assessment to reflect children's individual interests, abilities and developmental pathways rather than relying on standardised measures (Welsh Government, 2022).

In comparison, the Foundation Phase Framework provides practitioners with a more structured approach to assessment through clearer progression pathways and recording processes. This can increase consistency and make assessment easier to implement, particularly for less experienced practitioners. The framework also supports continuity of learning and communication between settings. However, while structure can improve reliability, there is a risk that practitioners become more focused on tracking progress against expected outcomes than responding to the individual child (Broadhead, 2006). As a result, tensions can arise between meeting assessment requirements and fully embracing the concept of the Unique Child, which emphasises that children develop at different rates and in different ways (Palaiologou, 2017; Wood, 2020).

When considering all of the points discussed, it is evident that funded non-maintained nursery settings place a particularly strong emphasis on individual development, which closely reflects the principle of the Unique Child. Their flexible, play-based approach allows practitioners to focus on children's interests, strengths and individual learning journeys, recognising that development does not occur in a uniform or linear way. Nutbrown (2011) argues that early year's practice should value children's individuality and avoid viewing development solely through predetermined milestones. Similarly, Roberts-Holmes (2015) suggests that child-centred assessment is most effective when it prioritises understanding children's unique experiences and ways of learning rather than measuring them against standardised expectations. This approach reflects the belief that every child develops differently and should be supported accordingly.

In comparison, the Foundation Phase Framework also recognises the importance of individual development and child-centred learning. However, this is balanced alongside progression requirements and the need to demonstrate measurable progress. While this

can provide greater consistency and continuity across settings, Moss (2013) argues that increased accountability within early years education can create tensions between supporting children's individual needs and meeting externally driven expectations. Likewise, Anning, Cullen and Flear (2009) highlight that structured assessment frameworks may encourage practitioners to focus on documenting progress against curriculum outcomes, potentially reducing opportunities to respond flexibly to children's emerging interests. Therefore, although both approaches value individual development, funded non-maintained nursery settings arguably place greater emphasis on the Unique Child, whereas the Foundation Phase Framework must balance individualised learning with broader assessment and progression requirements.

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

Beyond the Playground Fence: Outdoor Learning as a Foundation for Play-Based Curricula

In recent years, outdoor learning has shifted from being viewed as an added extra to early years provision to being recognised as a fundamental component of high-quality play-based practice. As settings across the country continue to embrace child-centred approaches, outdoor environments provide valuable opportunities for children to explore, be creative, solve problems and build relationships in ways that are often difficult to replicate indoors (Learning through Landscapes, 2021).

However, effective outdoor learning involves much more than simply opening the door to the garden. To make the most of outdoor spaces within a play-based curriculum, practitioners need to carefully consider factors such as pedagogy, the learning environment, risk, inclusion and staff confidence (Bilton, 2010).

Outdoor Learning and Play-Based Pedagogy

At the heart of a play-based curriculum lies the belief that children learn best through active engagement with their environment. Outdoor spaces naturally support this principle. The freedom to move, manipulate materials, take managed risks and follow personal interests creates rich opportunities for holistic development (Gill, 2007). Bilton (2010) and Ouvry (2018) support this statement by highlighting that outdoor environments support children's holistic development.

Unlike many indoor environments, outdoor spaces encourage children to engage their whole bodies in learning. Climbing, transporting, constructing, digging and exploring provide meaningful contexts for developing physical coordination, communication skills, mathematical thinking and scientific enquiry. Children often demonstrate greater levels of concentration, creativity and collaboration when given time and space to direct their own learning outdoors (Maynard and Waters, 2007; Bilton, 2010).

For practitioners, outdoor learning should not be viewed as a separate curriculum area but as an extension of the play-based approach. The focus remains on observing children's interests, responding sensitively and creating opportunities that deepen learning through play. Louv (2008) and National Trust (2012) underline that play-based learning enable children to be active participants in their learning, with practitioners acting as responsive facilitators rather than instructors.

Designing Enabling Environments

For outdoor learning to be successful, the outdoor environment must be planned and organised thoughtfully. Effective outdoor spaces do not have to be large or costly, provided they offer flexible, open-ended opportunities that enable children to explore, experiment and learn through their own experiences (White, 2011).

White (2011) and Bilton (2010) emphasise that natural materials such as logs, stones, sticks, sand and water invite creativity and problem-solving. Loose parts allow children to become designers, engineers and storytellers as they transform resources according to their own ideas. Access to varied environments, planting areas and spaces for both energetic and quiet play helps support diverse learning experiences.

Practitioners must also consider how outdoor environments reflect the principles of child-led learning. Are resources accessible? Can children make independent choices? Is there sufficient opportunity for sustained play? These questions are critical when evaluating whether the environment truly supports a play-based curriculum.

Risk, Challenge and Resilience

One of the most significant considerations in outdoor learning is the role of risk. In many settings, concerns around safety can mistakeably limit children's opportunities for exploration and challenge. Yet research consistently highlights the developmental benefits of managed risk. Gill (2009) and Waller (2006) point out that opportunities for managed risk are recognised as important for developing resilience, confidence and decision-making skills. This suggests that although some practitioners may initially feel uncomfortable with certain aspects of outdoor learning, it is essential that they develop the confidence and skills needed to support high-quality outdoor experiences.

A play-based curriculum recognises that children need opportunities to test their capabilities, make decisions and learn from experience. Outdoor environments provide natural contexts for developing resilience, judgement and confidence. Climbing trees, balancing on uneven surfaces or using tools under supervision can help children assess risk while building self-esteem. Research implies that outdoor environments support children's physical, cognitive and social development through active, self-directed play (Bilton, 2010; Ouvry, 2018).

Bilton (2010) highlights the need for staff discussion, shared understanding and confidence when making decisions about risk in outdoor learning environments. The role of practitioners is not to eliminate risk entirely but to conduct thoughtful risk-benefit assessments that balance safety with developmental opportunities. This shift in mindset often requires professional dialogue and shared understanding among staff, leaders and families.

The Importance of Practitioner Confidence

The quality of outdoor learning is influenced significantly by practitioner attitudes and confidence. Some educators may feel less comfortable facilitating learning outdoors, particularly if their own experiences of outdoor play were limited or if they perceive learning as something that primarily occurs indoors. Bilton (2010) argues that practitioner attitudes and confidence are significant factors in successful outdoor learning.

Professional development is therefore essential. Practitioners need opportunities to reflect on the value of outdoor learning, develop observation skills and understand how curriculum outcomes emerge naturally through play. Training can help staff recognise the learning that occurs during activities such as den building, mud play or bug hunting, ensuring these experiences are valued as meaningful educational opportunities rather than simply recreational activities. Maynard and Waters (2007) highlight the need for professional reflection and a deeper understanding of how learning occurs outdoors.

Leaders also play a crucial role in creating a culture where outdoor learning is prioritised and celebrated. Effective leadership is essential in promoting outdoor learning as a key part of the curriculum. By supporting staff development and providing appropriate resources,

leaders can help create a positive culture where outdoor learning is valued and embedded in practice (Bilton, 2010; Rodd, 2013).

Inclusion and Accessibility

An effective play-based curriculum must ensure that outdoor learning is accessible to all children. Consideration should be given to physical accessibility, sensory needs, cultural perspectives and individual interests. Inclusive outdoor practice recognises that every child should have opportunities to experience challenge, enjoyment and belonging. Bilton (2010) discusses the need for practitioners to consider individual children's needs, interests and abilities when planning outdoor provision, ensuring that all children can access and benefit from outdoor learning opportunities.

Some children may require adapted resources, additional support or gradual introductions to outdoor experiences. Others may thrive in outdoor environments where sensory stimulation feels more manageable than indoor spaces. Practitioners should continually reflect on whose needs are being met and whose participation may be unintentionally restricted. Department for Education (2024) The Early Years Foundation Stage framework emphasises inclusion, stating that practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests and stage of development of each child and support all children to access learning opportunities.

Weather as a Learning Opportunity

A common barrier to outdoor learning remains concern about weather conditions. Yet embracing seasonal and weather-related experiences can significantly enrich a play-based curriculum. Puddles become opportunities for scientific investigation; wind encourages exploration of movement and force. Frost and snow spark curiosity and wonder. Rather than viewing weather as an obstacle, practitioners can use changing conditions as real-life and meaningful learning experiences.

This approach requires some practical planning and support. Children need access to suitable clothing and footwear so they can take part in outdoor activities comfortably and safely throughout the year. Good communication with families is also important, helping parents and carers understand the value of outdoor learning and the need for children to

come prepared for different weather conditions. In addition, settings need a commitment from leaders and staff to make outdoor learning a priority, with clear routines and expectations that encourage regular use of outdoor spaces. When these systems are in place, outdoor learning becomes a natural part of the daily routine rather than something that only happens occasionally or in favourable weather. This allows children to benefit from regular opportunities to explore, play and learn outdoors throughout the year (Bilton, 2010; Learning through Landscapes, 2021).

Moving from Outdoor Provision to Outdoor Pedagogy

One of the most important things to remember when implementing a play-based curriculum is that outdoor learning involves much more than simply providing access to a garden. It is about adopting an approach that values children's curiosity, independence, exploration and relationships (Gill, 2007; Waller 2006).

High-quality outdoor learning develops when practitioners create environments that encourage children to follow their interests, engage in meaningful play and build a connection with the natural world. Achieving this requires careful planning, ongoing reflection and a willingness to learn alongside children, even when outcomes are not always predictable.

Department for Education (2024) The Early Years Foundation stage framework highlights the importance of play-based learning and states that enabling environments such as outdoor spaces should support children's development, independence and learning across all areas. Therefore, as play-based approaches continue to shape early years practice, outdoor learning provides valuable opportunities for children to learn beyond the classroom. By giving careful thought to both the practical and educational aspects of implementation, settings can ensure that outdoor spaces become more than just places for play; they can become environments where children develop skills, confidence and a lifelong love of learning.

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