

Portfolio of 4 Parts:

1. Critical analysis of challenges that implement play-based curricula.
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.
3. Blog linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum/curricula changes.
4. Reference List

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

Part 1

Education is a process through which individuals develop knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that enable them to participate effectively in society. It is essential for personal growth, social development, and preparing learners for future opportunities. The curriculum plays a central role within education, providing a framework for teaching and learning. According to the Welsh Government (2022), the Curriculum for Wales encompasses all the learning experiences and opportunities provided to learners, supporting the development of the four purposes: ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. A key feature of early childhood education in Wales is the play-based curriculum. Play-based learning recognises play as a fundamental way in which children learn, develop, and make sense of the world around them. Through play, children can develop cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and communication skills in meaningful and engaging ways (Welsh Government, 2021). Within the Curriculum for Wales, play-based approaches are particularly important in supporting young children's holistic development and fostering curiosity, creativity, and independence. This assignment will explore the importance of education and curriculum and examine how play-based learning supports children's development and learning within the Welsh educational context. This assignment is going to focus on the Curriculum for Wales.

The Curriculum for Wales was introduced following recommendations made in Donaldson's (2015) independent review, *Successful Futures*, which called for a curriculum that better prepares children and young people for life in the twenty-first century. The curriculum became statutory for learners aged 3 to 16 in September 2022 and aims to provide a broad, balanced, and inclusive education that supports all learners to reach their full potential (Welsh Government, 2021). At the heart of the Curriculum for Wales are the Four Purposes, which form the foundation of all teaching and learning. These purposes aim to develop children and young people as ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors who can play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens who understand and engage with the world around them; and healthy, confident individuals who are prepared to lead fulfilling lives (Welsh

Government, 2021). The Four Purposes guide schools in designing learning experiences and are intended to support the holistic development of every learner.

Another key feature of the curriculum is the six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), which organise learning into broad and interconnected areas. These are: Expressive Arts; Health and Well-being; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology (Hwb, 2022). The AoLEs encourage learners to make connections across different subjects and promote a more integrated approach to learning. The curriculum also includes Cross-Curricular Responsibilities, which ensure that literacy, numeracy, and digital competence are developed across all areas of learning. Rather than being taught in isolation, these skills are embedded throughout the curriculum to help learners apply them in meaningful contexts (Welsh Government, 2021). Progression is another important aspect of the Curriculum for Wales. Instead of traditional key stages and levels, learning is organised into progression steps at ages 5, 8, 11, 14, and 16. These provide broad descriptions of learners' development and help teachers plan learning that meets individual needs and abilities (Hwb, 2022). Assessment is viewed as an ongoing process that supports learner progress and informs future teaching.

Overall, the Curriculum for Wales represents a significant shift towards a learner-centred approach that emphasises skills, knowledge, well-being, and lifelong learning. Through the Four Purposes, Areas of Learning and Experience, Cross-Curricular Responsibilities, and progression framework, the curriculum aims to equip learners with the skills and understanding needed to thrive in an increasingly complex and changing world.

A notable strength of the Curriculum for Wales is its emphasis on learner-centred and experiential approaches to education, particularly within the early years. The curriculum recognises that children learn most effectively when they are actively engaged in meaningful experiences that reflect their interests and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2021). This aligns closely with constructivist theories of learning, particularly those of Piaget (1952), who argued that children construct knowledge through active exploration, and Vygotsky (1978), who emphasised the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. The curriculum's focus on the Four Purposes and holistic development supports play-based pedagogies by

valuing creativity, problem-solving, communication, and well-being alongside academic achievement. Furthermore, the integration of Areas of Learning and Experience encourages interdisciplinary learning, allowing children to develop skills and knowledge in authentic contexts. However, some researchers have questioned whether the flexibility offered by the Curriculum for Wales may lead to inconsistencies in implementation between schools, particularly where practitioners have varying levels of confidence and understanding of play-based approaches (Power and Newton, 2020). Despite these challenges, the curriculum provides a strong framework for supporting child-centred learning and reflects contemporary research that identifies play as a fundamental component of children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Wood, 2014). Therefore, the Curriculum for Wales can be viewed as a progressive educational framework that seeks to balance academic learning with the broader developmental needs of children.

Despite the progressive vision underpinning the Curriculum for Wales, its implementation presents several challenges for schools and practitioners. While the curriculum promotes flexibility, creativity, and learner-centred approaches, successful implementation requires adequate resources, workforce capacity, and sufficient time. These factors can significantly influence the extent to which schools are able to realise the curriculum's intended outcomes.

One significant challenge is funding and resource availability. The Curriculum for Wales encourages schools to design bespoke curricula that meet the needs of their learners, requiring investment in learning materials, digital technologies, and professional learning opportunities (Welsh Government, 2021). However, schools across Wales continue to face significant financial pressures that may affect their ability to fully implement curriculum reforms. Estyn (2026) highlights that rising costs, demographic changes and increasing pressures on school budgets have created challenges for schools attempting to prioritise resources to meet learners' needs. Furthermore, strategic financial support varies across local authorities, with many schools focusing on balancing annual budgets rather than long-term curriculum planning (Estyn, 2026). These challenges may be particularly acute in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage, where schools often require additional resources to address barriers to learning. Although the Curriculum for Wales aims to promote equity and improve outcomes for all learners, variations in funding and resource

allocation can result in inconsistencies in educational experiences between schools (Welsh Government, 2025). Consequently, the success of curriculum reform may be influenced by financial factors that extend beyond the control of individual schools. (Estyn, 2026; Welsh Government, 2025).

A second challenge concerns workforce capacity, including staffing levels, workload, and professional development. The Curriculum for Wales requires practitioners to adopt new approaches to planning, assessment, and pedagogy. While this professional autonomy can be empowering, it also places considerable responsibility on teachers to interpret curriculum guidance and design meaningful learning experiences (Donaldson, 2015). Research has suggested that curriculum reform is most effective when accompanied by sustained professional learning and support (Priestley and Biesta, 2013). However, teacher recruitment and retention difficulties within Wales have increased workload pressures, potentially limiting opportunities for collaborative curriculum development. Furthermore, differences in practitioners' confidence and expertise may result in variations in curriculum delivery between schools.

A third challenge is the time required for effective implementation. Curriculum reform represents a substantial cultural and organisational change that cannot be achieved immediately. Teachers require time to engage with guidance, develop new resources, collaborate with colleagues, and evaluate practice. Estyn (2023) reported that many schools continue to be at different stages of curriculum development, highlighting the ongoing nature of implementation. The introduction of the curriculum alongside other educational pressures, including post-pandemic recovery, has further increased demands on practitioners. As Fullan (2007) argues, meaningful educational change is a long-term process that requires sustained commitment and support. Therefore, expectations regarding the impact of the Curriculum for Wales must acknowledge the significant time needed for successful implementation and embedding of practice.

Overall, while the Curriculum for Wales offers considerable opportunities for innovation and learner-centred education, challenges relating to funding, workforce capacity, and implementation time may hinder its effectiveness. Addressing these

issues is essential if the curriculum is to achieve its ambition of providing high-quality educational experiences for all learners across Wales.

To support the successful implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, a multifaceted approach is required. Firstly, greater and more equitable funding would enable schools to invest in resources, learning environments, and staff development, particularly in areas experiencing higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. However, increased funding alone is unlikely to guarantee successful implementation; how resources are allocated and utilised within schools is equally important (Estyn, 2026). Secondly, sustained professional learning opportunities should be provided to ensure that practitioners have the knowledge and confidence to design and deliver curricula that reflect the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. Collaborative professional learning communities, where teachers share effective practice and curriculum design strategies, have been identified as an important factor in supporting educational reform (Priestley and Biesta, 2013). Furthermore, policymakers and school leaders should recognise that meaningful curriculum change requires time. Reducing administrative workload and providing protected time for planning, collaboration, and reflection would allow practitioners to engage more effectively with curriculum development. Nevertheless, achieving these improvements may be challenging within the context of ongoing financial pressures and workforce shortages. Therefore, whilst funding, professional learning, and protected planning time offer potential solutions, their effectiveness depends on sustained commitment from both government and educational leaders. Successful implementation requires not only structural support but also a long-term investment in the capacity and well-being of the teaching workforce.

Part 2

The concept of the 'Unique Child' is a fundamental principle within early childhood education and recognises that every child develops, learns, and experiences the world in different ways. Children are influenced by a range of biological, social, cultural, and environmental factors, meaning that development does not always occur in a uniform or predictable manner (Nutbrown, 2011). The Curriculum for Wales reflects this principle through its learner-centred approach, emphasising that all children should be supported to progress according to their individual needs, strengths, and interests rather than against a fixed set of expectations (Welsh Government, 2021). This perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of child development, which acknowledge that learning is complex, dynamic, and shaped by children's unique experiences and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978).

Assessment is the process of gathering, interpreting, and using information about children's learning, development, and achievement to inform future teaching and support progression. Within the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is viewed as an integral part of the learning process rather than a separate activity used solely to measure attainment (Welsh Government, 2022). Effective assessment enables practitioners to identify children's strengths, recognise areas for further development, and plan learning experiences that build upon children's existing knowledge and skills. In play-based curricula, assessment often involves observation, documentation, and reflection, allowing practitioners to gain a holistic understanding of children's learning within meaningful contexts (Wood and Hedges, 2016).

Considering the Unique Child within assessment is particularly important because standardised approaches to assessment may fail to capture the diverse ways in which children learn and develop. Developmental theories and age-related models can provide useful guidance for understanding typical patterns of development; however, critics argue that an overreliance on developmental milestones may overlook individual differences and potentially label children whose development does not conform to expected norms (Burman, 2017). Within play-based curricula, assessment should therefore be responsive, inclusive, and sensitive to children's individual circumstances. By recognising each child as unique, practitioners can avoid deficit-based perspectives and instead focus on children's capabilities,

interests, and potential for growth. This assignment will critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking, and age- and stage-related developmental models within play-based curricula, considering the extent to which they support or challenge the principle of the Unique Child.

The principle of 'unique child' is central to contemporary early childhood education and is reflected within the Curriculum for Wales, which promotes a learner-centred approach to education. Rather than focusing solely on age-related expectations, the curriculum emphasises progression, recognising that learners follow individual developmental pathways influenced by their experiences, abilities, interests, and personal circumstances (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach is consistent with social constructivist theories of learning, particularly those of Vygotsky (1978), who argued that learning occurs through social interaction and is shaped by the cultural and environmental contexts in which children develop. Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the influence of family, school, community, and wider societal factors on children's development, reinforcing the importance of understanding each child as unique.

Within the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is intended to support learner progression rather than measure attainment against fixed standards. One commonly used assessment method within play-based learning environments is observation-based assessment. Observation involves practitioners watching, listening to, and documenting children's learning and behaviour as they engage in everyday activities and play. Assessment guidance within the Curriculum for Wales emphasises the importance of practitioners gathering a broad range of evidence about learners' progress through day-to-day interactions and observations (Welsh Government, 2022). This approach enables practitioners to develop a holistic understanding of children's strengths, interests, and developmental needs while maintaining the integrity of play-based learning experiences.

A key strength of observation-based assessment is its ability to capture learning in authentic contexts. Traditional forms of assessment often require children to demonstrate knowledge through structured tasks or formal testing, which may not accurately reflect their abilities. In contrast, observation allows practitioners to assess children's learning as it naturally occurs during play. Wood and Hedges

(2016) argue that play-based assessment can provide richer and more meaningful insights into children's thinking, problem-solving, communication, and social interactions than standardised assessment methods. Consequently, observation aligns strongly with the principle of the Unique Child by recognising diverse ways of learning and demonstrating achievement. Observation-based assessment may be particularly beneficial for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 promotes a person-centred approach that focuses on identifying and responding to individual strengths and needs. Through observation, practitioners can identify barriers to learning and adapt provision accordingly. This enables a more inclusive approach to assessment that recognises children's individual developmental trajectories rather than comparing them directly with peers. Furthermore, observations can provide valuable evidence when developing Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and collaborating with families and external professionals. Similarly, observation-based assessment can support neurodivergent learners, including children with autism spectrum condition (ASC), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and other forms of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity perspectives argue that differences in thinking, communication, and behaviour should be viewed as natural variations rather than deficits (Armstrong, 2010). Formal assessments often privilege particular ways of demonstrating knowledge and may disadvantage neurodivergent learners who experience difficulties with language processing, attention, or social communication. Observation-based assessment allows practitioners to recognise strengths that may not be evident through more traditional assessment approaches. For example, a child with autism may demonstrate advanced problem-solving abilities or deep subject knowledge through play, despite experiencing challenges in verbal communication.

However, observation-based assessment is not without limitations. One significant criticism concerns subjectivity. Observations rely heavily on practitioners' interpretations of children's behaviour and learning, meaning that personal assumptions, expectations, and unconscious biases may influence assessment outcomes (Drummond, 2012). This issue may be particularly relevant when assessing children from diverse cultural, linguistic, or neurodivergent backgrounds, where behaviours may be misunderstood or interpreted through a deficit lens.

Consequently, two practitioners observing the same child may reach different conclusions about their development and progress. Another challenge relates to reliability and consistency. Because observation-based assessment is often informal and context-dependent, it can be difficult to ensure consistency between practitioners and educational settings. While the Curriculum for Wales encourages professional judgement, critics argue that excessive reliance on practitioner interpretation may lead to variations in assessment quality and accuracy (Priestley and Biesta, 2013). Furthermore, meaningful observation requires significant time for recording, analysing, and reflecting on evidence. Given the increasing workload pressures experienced by educators in Wales, practitioners may struggle to conduct detailed observations consistently.

Despite these limitations, observation-based assessment remains highly compatible with the concept of the Unique Child. Unlike standardised approaches that compare children against predetermined benchmarks, observation enables practitioners to focus on individual progress, strengths, and learning dispositions. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises progression rather than performance, allowing assessment to be responsive to individual learners' needs and circumstances (Welsh Government, 2022). Nevertheless, observation should not be viewed as a flawless assessment method. To ensure fairness and accuracy, practitioners require appropriate training, opportunities for moderation, and an awareness of potential bias. When implemented effectively, observation-based assessment can support inclusive practice and provide a holistic understanding of children's learning within play-based curricula.

In conclusion, observation-based assessment largely supports the principle of the Unique Child by enabling practitioners to recognise and respond to individual differences in children's learning, development, and experiences. Its emphasis on authentic, play-based contexts aligns closely with the learner-centred philosophy of the Curriculum for Wales and allows for a more holistic understanding of children's strengths and needs. This is particularly beneficial for children with ALN and neurodivergent learners, whose abilities may not be fully captured through standardised forms of assessment. However, the effectiveness of observation-based assessment depends heavily on practitioners' professional judgement, skills, and awareness of potential bias. Whilst it offers a more inclusive and flexible alternative

to traditional assessment methods, challenges relating to subjectivity, consistency, and workload cannot be ignored. Therefore, observation-based assessment can be considered a valuable tool for supporting the Unique Child, but its success relies upon high-quality practitioner training, reflective practice, and robust moderation processes to ensure that all children are assessed fairly and accurately.

Part 3

Outdoor Play in Practice: Opportunities and Barriers for Early Years Settings

"It's raining. Should we stay inside?"

For many early years practitioners, this simple question can spark a debate. Concerns about weather, safety, staffing, and resources often influence decisions about outdoor provision. Yet increasing evidence suggests that outdoor play is not simply an optional extra; it is a vital component of children's learning, development, and well-being.

The Curriculum for Wales places children's experiences at the heart of learning and encourages practitioners to provide meaningful opportunities for exploration, creativity, and active engagement (Welsh Government, 2021). Outdoor play offers a unique environment in which these opportunities can flourish. However, despite its recognised benefits, many settings continue to face barriers when trying to implement high-quality outdoor provision.

So, how can practitioners balance the opportunities and challenges of outdoor play in practice?

Why Outdoor Play Matters

Outdoor environments provide experiences that are difficult to replicate indoors. Whether children are building dens, climbing trees, digging in mud, or investigating insects, they are actively constructing knowledge through first-hand experiences.

Research suggests that outdoor play supports multiple aspects of development, including:

- Physical health and gross motor development.
- Communication and language skills.
- Problem-solving and critical thinking.
- Social and emotional development.
- Well-being and resilience (Bilton, 2010).

Outdoor environments also encourage children to take ownership of their learning. Unlike some indoor spaces, outdoor areas often provide fewer restrictions and greater opportunities for child-led exploration.

For children in Wales, outdoor learning aligns closely with the Four Purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, helping learners become healthy, confident individuals and enterprising, creative contributors (Welsh Government, 2021).

The Power of Risk and Challenge

One of the most valuable aspects of outdoor play is the opportunity for children to experience manageable risk.

In many settings, there can be a temptation to remove all potential hazards. However, research suggests that risk-taking is an important part of development. Climbing, balancing, exploring uneven surfaces, and testing physical limits help children develop confidence, resilience, and decision-making skills (Gill, 2014).

When children are allowed to assess risks for themselves, they learn valuable life skills that cannot be taught through direct instruction alone.

This does not mean ignoring safety requirements. Instead, practitioners should aim to balance risk and benefit, recognising that some level of challenge is necessary for learning and growth.

Supporting Inclusion Through Outdoor Play

Outdoor play can also be a powerful tool for inclusion.

For some children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), outdoor environments provide opportunities to engage in ways that may not be possible in more structured indoor settings. Open spaces can reduce sensory overload, while hands-on experiences may support children who find traditional classroom-based learning challenging.

Similarly, neurodivergent children may benefit from the flexibility and sensory richness of outdoor environments. Natural materials, movement opportunities, and reduced expectations around sitting still can support engagement and participation.

However, inclusion does not happen automatically. Practitioners must carefully consider:

- Accessibility of outdoor spaces.
- Physical barriers.
- Sensory needs.
- Communication support.
- Individual preferences and interests.

A truly inclusive outdoor environment should be designed with all learners in mind rather than expecting children to adapt to the environment.

The Reality: Barriers to Outdoor Play

Despite the benefits, many settings encounter significant barriers when implementing outdoor provision.

Weather Concerns

Perhaps the most common challenge is the weather.

The Welsh climate can be unpredictable, and some practitioners may feel pressure from parents or colleagues to limit outdoor play during wet or cold conditions.

However, countries such as Denmark and Norway have demonstrated that outdoor learning can occur successfully throughout the year.

The issue is often not the weather itself but whether settings have appropriate clothing, shelter, and resources available.

As the Scandinavian saying suggests, "There is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."

Funding and Resources

Creating high-quality outdoor environments requires investment.

Many settings face financial constraints that limit their ability to purchase equipment, improve outdoor spaces, or provide weatherproof clothing. Practitioners may feel

frustrated when curriculum expectations promote outdoor learning, but resources remain limited.

However, effective outdoor provision does not always require expensive equipment. Natural materials such as logs, sticks, stones, mud, and loose parts can provide rich learning opportunities at relatively low cost.

Staffing and Confidence

Another significant barrier is practitioner confidence.

Some educators have received limited training in outdoor learning and may feel uncertain about how to support learning outdoors. Others may worry that outdoor play appears less structured than traditional teaching approaches.

Research suggests that high-quality outdoor learning depends not only on the environment itself but also on knowledgeable adults who understand when to intervene, when to extend learning, and when to step back (Waite, 2017).

Professional development therefore plays a crucial role in successful implementation.

Balancing Curriculum Expectations

Practitioners may also experience tension between play-based learning and accountability measures.

There can be pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes, record observations, and evidence progression. As a result, some educators may feel compelled to direct children's activities rather than allowing genuine child-led exploration.

The Curriculum for Wales promotes progression through meaningful experiences rather than narrow attainment measures (Welsh Government, 2022). However, embedding this philosophy in practice requires confidence, support, and a shared understanding across settings.

Start with Small Changes

Outdoor learning does not require a complete redesign of the environment. Small additions such as loose parts, gardening areas, or den-building materials can have a significant impact.

Invest in Practitioner Development

Providing training opportunities can help practitioners develop confidence and understand the educational value of outdoor experiences.

Involve Children

Children should have a voice in shaping outdoor environments. Their interests often provide valuable insights into how spaces can be improved.

Engage Families

Parents may not always understand the benefits of outdoor play. Sharing photographs, observations, and research can help build support and challenge misconceptions.

Looking Forward

Outdoor play is far more than a break from indoor learning. It provides opportunities for creativity, problem-solving, physical development, inclusion, and well-being. In a curriculum that seeks to develop ambitious, capable learners and healthy, confident individuals, outdoor learning has an important role to play.

Yet successful implementation requires more than enthusiasm. Practitioners need access to resources, professional learning, supportive leadership, and environments that enable all children to participate.

As the Curriculum for Wales continues to evolve, perhaps the question is no longer whether outdoor play is valuable. Instead, we should ask ourselves:

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