

Critically analyze the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports.

This essay will explore implementing a play-based curriculum with a detailed consideration of how the outdoor area and lack of trained practitioners can influence this.

According to Tekyi-Arhin (2023), play-based learning is essential to early childhood education. It offers children the opportunity to engage in enjoyable and meaningful experiences and provides them with the freedom to explore the environment and the world around them. When children are exposed to play-based learning activities they are engulfed in hands-on experiences that stimulate and capture their curiosity, creativity, and assist in the development of their problem-solving skills. As opposed to traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on rote learning and other memorization techniques. The Welsh Government (2018, p. 3) agrees with Tekyi-Arhin (2023) and believes that children should learn through practical activities, where imagination is free to flourish, rather than learning through completing workbooks and other classroom table based traditional teaching methods.

In 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government began implementing the Foundation Phase curriculum. This was a play-based, holistic learning continuum for children aged between three to seven. The foundation Phase curriculum adopted a cross-curricular approach with a heavy emphasis on the child at the center of any planned activities (Wainwright *et al.*, 2016, p. 513-524). This approach coincided with article 3 of the UNCRC, where the child's best interests should be at the heart of all decision-making and actions that will affect the child (UNCRC, N.D). According to The Welsh Government (2009) discovery and independence should have been promoted in the foundation phase environment, with a greater emphasis on utilizing the outdoor space as a resource for learning.

There are many ways to implement a play-based curricula, mainly by allowing children to have free flowing access to indoor and outdoor spaces would have been an effective way of achieving this. This would allow for free-flowing imagination and curiosity, that gives room for an enriched learning experience. It is also suggested that children who are provided with more time learning in the outdoor area, can be a

key approach for supporting children's holistic development. (The Welsh Government, N.D and Traynor *et al*, 2022). On the other hand, while free flowing access is most effective, it is recognized that most buildings cannot facilitate this due to the age of the buildings and the lack of funding available, therefore outdoor sessions must be timetabled. This can be problematic when sessions are run this way for many reasons. There may not be enough resources, such as waterproofs when all children are outside for their allocated time slot and child-initiated learning opportunities may not be as frequent or natural (The Welsh Government, 2014, p.18).

Another way to implement play-based curricula in schools is to provide all children, regardless of income and background with the opportunities to access a range of encounters that can promote learning through play, that they may not have access to in their home life. The proposed Outdoor Education (Wales) bill is a way of implementing this and looks to place a statutory duty on each local authority to give all children in maintained education the opportunity to not just access to the outdoors, but also to experience a residential stay for at least a week during their school years. Unfortunately, in recent years, schools in wealthier areas were twice as likely to offer children these opportunities, however this legislation will address this inequity and allow children from lower-income families experience these types of outdoor opportunities to help enhance their educations (Estyn, 2023, p. 2 and Senedd Cymru, 2023).

Although The Foundation Phase argued that there was no specific guidance for the pedagogy and approach, it was clear however, that for effective outcomes and experiences for children, trained practitioners were required to take a participatory role in children's activity and play. They should create and facilitate indoor and outdoor environments that help support children's exploration and to seek to build on children's individual interests. Practitioners were encouraged to actively get to know the children in their settings so that their prior experiences can be considered when planning, as opposed to assuming age-related performance (Waters, 2016, p. 179-198). The Welsh Government (2023, p. 27-28) believe that with the introduction and implementation of The New Curriculum for Wales, practitioners should be given updated guidance on what outdoor learning is and how it can enhance the children's educational experiences. Practitioners should be trained in understanding how

outdoor education can maintain wellbeing, and how regular outdoor sessions can even strengthen their own teaching practices.

While The Curriculum for Wales is based on The Foundation Phase, outdoor learning is now being held at such a high standard now that it is even being recommended that all PGCE curricula and other teacher training practices should now include it as a core part of pedagogical practices (The Welsh Government, 2023, p.28). Bangor University (2023) agrees with The Welsh Government and argues that the experiential learning approach and learning in the outdoors can add value to the curriculum as a whole. They believe that by encompassing outdoor learning and pedagogy into their program, practitioners are able to ensure that their practice is relevant and contemporary, which is critical to promoting long-term understanding for learners Education Scotland (2022).

There are many examples of good practice around the world that could be beneficial to implementing a play based early years curricula that can link in and promote learning and playing in the outdoors. In Sweden there are forest schools known as “Skogs Förskola”. Children are encouraged to follow their own curiosities and interests during fully child-led, holistic, and hands-on learning, that is facilitated by experienced and qualified practitioners. By allowing children to take their learning where they want to take it and at their own pace, practitioners allow children to develop a deep sense of belonging and connection with their natural world, which helps to create ethically informed citizens (Europass, 2023).

However, Whincup, Allin and Greer (2021, p. 3-4) suggest that throughout the UK there are many settings who are running these sessions without qualified practitioners. Children may not be getting the best possible experiences when sessions are facilitated by unqualified practitioners and according to one of the six principles to good practice, the Forest School Association, also known as The FSA, believe that in order for children to receive the best possible outcomes, forest school sessions should be run by qualified practitioners who regularly develop their professional practice (The Forest School Association, N.D). Furthermore, Whincup, Allin and Greer (2021, p. 21) also believes that it is not only practitioners that need training to provide the best possible education for children, but also for the forest

school trainers to be aware of all the challenges that practitioners may face when implementing these forms of play-based curriculars within their own settings.

The role of the practitioner is pivotal when it comes to the early years. Lifelong learning is happening at this critical time of their lives and their young minds are easily shaped. Unfortunately, when practitioners are untrained, they are at risk of not understanding children and their development, leading to unrealistic expectations and the possibility of missed opportunities for potential interventions that may be needed to support their learning journey (Almonte, 2023). Audit Wales (2022, p. 9-10) announced that The Welsh Government needed to invest more funding into the training of school workers to help implement the new curriculum. They suggested that teachers needed to be monitored and supported more effectively to help deliver bespoke training in each school. However, Shipton (2023) and UNISON Wales (2023) revealed that in a recent survey 66% of teaching assistants had not received enough adequate training to help deliver the new curriculum. They argue that for the New Curriculum for Wales to be successful and for the implementation of this play-based curricular, the role and learning needs of teaching assistants should be addressed.

In conclusion, for successful implementation of play based early years curricula, children should have free-flowing access to not just indoor but also outdoor environments. Children should be exposed to play-based learning activities and should be engulfed in hands-on experiences that will stimulate and capture their curiosity. The Foundation Phase Wales did many positive things to help successful implementation, including encouraging practitioners to get to know the children in their settings so that their prior experiences can be considered when planning bespoke child-led activities for them. However, with the Foundation Phase now moving forward and The New Curriculum for Wales taking many positives from this play-based Curricula, it is becoming clear that across Wales there are many untrained practitioners being responsible for delivering this, which is leading to the possibility of missed opportunities for potential interventions and unrealistic expectations of children due to the lack of understanding of their development (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023, The Welsh Government, 2023, p. 27-28, Shipton, 2023, and UNISON Wales, 2023).

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.

Each individual child in early years education is referred to as ‘The Unique child’. A unique child is the child that is always learning and has the ability to be capable, confident, resilient, and self-assured (Children in Wales, N.D and Worcestershire Children First, N.D). Every area of a child’s growth and learning is developed at their own pace and in their own specific ways. Every child has a unique history, which also includes their past experiences, that can affect a child’s development, therefore understanding each child and supporting what the children are able to do as opposed to what they are unable to do yet can be beneficial to them (Birth to 5 matters, 2021, p. 18-19). Brandao and Theodotou (2020, p. 2), agrees and adds that in order to holistically support each unique child, they need every opportunity to build positive relationships and interact with their peers in enabling environments.

Pacey (2017, p.31) defines the word “assess” as measuring, evaluating, and judging what is being observed. They suggest that when assessing in the early years, many believe that it has official and formal intentions. However, it is stressed that assessment methods such as observation can highlight potential support that each unique child may require. For example, if a practitioner observes a child unable to put their coat on independently, they are then able to provide support to ensure the child is actively making progress, helping them to achieve and become capable learners. This is also shown in the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 where it is stated that assessment arrangements should be made in accordance to the relevant curriculum to ensure that positive progress is being made by each individual child, it is also fundamental to the teaching styles needed to achieve this progress.

By assessing and tracking a child’s development within a play-based curricula The Welsh Government’s (2023a, p. 3-4) curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, believes that it helps enable practitioners to support and challenge the children within the settings according to their strengths and in the ways they learn best. They also suggest that these arrangements were developed to acknowledge that each child is individual from their identity, ability, and background before they

begin on their learning journey. Practitioners are also reminded that these assessments are not a tool to create a snap judgement on their overall achievements. The Welsh Government (N.D, p. 15) proposed that the main purpose of the Foundation Phase Profile was to provide consistent baseline assessments that would enable practitioners to develop an appropriate curriculum for every child.

However, there are many barriers to assessing and tracking the unique child's development within a play-based curricula. ESTYN (2011) found that play-based approaches such as forest schools and outdoor learning put pressure on many practitioners as they felt that assessing became increasingly difficult in the outside areas. It was also reported that in most schools, in many instances, when assessing children, practitioners were unable to do so through play in spaces such as outdoor environments, due to the particular skills that the foundation phase were asking them to observe and assess. These assessments were then having to be undertaken at a desk and specific activities were having to be set up to achieve this outcome. By assessing this way, practitioners are not gaining a true reflection of the abilities of the children they are assessing, also this method of assessing does not support the unique child's growth and learning that should developed in their own specific ways and at their own pace (Welsh Government, 2022, and Birth to 5 matters, 2021, p. 18-19).

Furthermore, it is now becoming clear to not only practitioners but also to children, that ethos's within settings are becoming more assessment-driven where there is a feel of 'top-down' pressure to achieve certain targets. Many practitioners also feel that assessments are becoming more of an outcome for inspection procedures rather than for its main purpose of holding the unique child at the heart of all decision making. It is suggested that with the reform of The New Curriculum for Wales, assessments will have an increasing view of learner achievements, rather than the outcomes for data purposes (Titley, Davies, and Atherton, 2020).

Another argument to considering the unique child during the assessment and tracking process is ability grouping. There has been a long history in the United Kingdom of grouping children within settings according to their abilities. This is also known as attainment-grouping or tracking. Practitioners use a tracking approach to then group the children in order of academic abilities, so that differentiated work can be offered to each group. However, it is argued that this approach to grouping does

not support the unique child and does not improve overall achievement. This approach has attracted much research and debate over its duration. There are two types of grouping that are mainly practiced, these are “Setting” and “Streaming”. Setting children are placed in an ability group only for certain lessons, while streaming pupils stay within a group of children with similar abilities for all lessons (Vivar, N.D and Papachristou *et al*, 2021).

However, in support of assessing the unique child within a play-based curricula it has been suggested that formative assessments, which are activities set out and freely chosen by the children to obtain evidence of their learning and understanding, has also been recognized as a fundamental facilitator for effective learning and teaching, and can also develop and support a growth mindset, which for example is when an individual believes that their intelligence or talent is able to be developed, has found to be linked to high learning outcomes such as improved academic achievements. It is believed that growth mindset and formative assessment focuses on enhancing learning performance. While the growth mindset emphasizes on the internal process, formative assessment focuses on the external (Dweck, 2016 and Yan, King and Haw, 2021, p. 676-702).

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursey settings now has many similarities with New Zealand’s early years curriculum Te Whāriki. Practitioners, also known as Kaiako, assess children ultimately so that they gain an understanding of the children and what they are able to do, they being to understand how they are progressing and what possible intervention may be needed, as opposed to being assessment-driven to hit specific targets. There are formal and informal ways of assessing children. Informal assessments take place in the moment, when children are engaged in play and learning, by assessing this way practitioners can adapt their own teaching styles and environments to suit the children. Formal methods of assessments are when practitioners write observations and take photos of children’s engagement. As time goes on with this type of assessment, practitioners can track progress and changes in the children’s own capabilities, leading to possible plans to scaffold their learning (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63).

Te Whāriki honors the unique child through a sociocultural perspective, as its purpose is to nurture the identities, languages, and cultures whilst capturing their learning. One-way practitioners do this is by completing learning stories for each

child. Learning stories focus less on the 'gaps' within each individual child's development and more on how well the children engaged and contribute towards their own identities as confident and competent learners. Children, practitioners, and parents all play a role in developing learning stories, and children can revisit these when they feel the need to. Learning stories build connections to places, people, and things within the children's communities. Over time this method of tracking and assessment has been proven to enhance children's self-esteem. (Sands and McChesney, 2023, p. 183-195).

To conclude, A child that is always learning and can be capable, confident, resilient, and self-assured is also referred to as the unique child. To holistically support the unique child, they need every opportunity to build positive relationships and interact with their peers in enabling environments. (Children in Wales, N.D and Worcestershire Children First, N.D, and Brandao and Theodotou, 2020, p. 2). By tracking and assessing the unique child it ensures that practitioners understand each individual and their strengths, and they will also have an understanding on how they learn best. However, many practitioners feel pressured to assess as part of an outcome based for inspections and by ability-grouping practitioners are not supporting the unique child or their over-all achievements. This is influencing the children's mindsets and not allowing room for growth mindsets (Titley, Davies, and Atherton, 2020, Vivar, N.D and Papachristou *et al*, 2021, and Deweck, 2016 and Yan, King and Haw, 2021, p. 676-702).

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings has made links with New Zealand's early years curriculum Te Whāriki and has adopted informal styles of assessments, such as planning in the moment, when children are engaged in play and learning. By assessing this way practitioners can adapt their own teaching styles and environments to suit the children. Another method Te Whāriki use as a form of assessment and progress tracking whilst considering the unique child are through learning stories. This is a sociocultural approach that helps build connections to places, people, and things within the children's communities (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 63 and Sands and McChesney, 2023, p. 183-195).

Write a blog suitable for a professional publication, linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curricula/curriculum change.

When implementing a play-based curriculum, there are many factors that need to be considered. One in particular is the use of loose parts. According to Casey and Robertson (2019, p. 5), loose parts provide children with enriched learning environments, which allows them to take their learning where they decide. Loose parts stimulate curiosity and allow children to discover the world around them. This type of play provision also blurs the line between playing and learning, which can help to support natural experiment whilst having fun. When children have the opportunity to access a play-based curriculum through the use of loose parts their play and learning become infinite. Referring to theorist and architect Simon Nicholson's 1971 article, "How NOT to cheat children: The theory of loose parts" where he describes the play as open-ended and accessible to learners of all ages. Loose parts are proposed to have a multiple range of outcomes rather than a singular. There are no set of specific rules or instructions on how to play with loose parts. For example, a box can be a car, a rocket, or a café. Nicholson also proposed that a range of materials which can be carried, moved, stacked, and redesigned should be offered to help children develop confidence and independence (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015, p.15-16 and NDNA, 2022).

According to Play Wales (2017, p. 9), the benefits to loose parts are plentiful. There has been a growing body of evidence to show that there are increased levels of imaginative and creative play when engaged in this play type, and it facilitates natural communication which helps support and develop children's social skills. Physical coordination is promoted through the use of loose parts as children become more physically active. Spencer *et al.* (2019) agrees that this type of play promotes children's physical development and adds that when settings introduce a play-based curriculum such as loose parts, socio-emotional and cognitive benefits are found, these include, being happier within the setting, enhanced creative, dramatic and exploratory play. It has also been noted that most children, rather than play with traditional, structured toys, would prefer to play with loose parts.

Pacey (2019) advise practitioners that loose parts should be at the children's level and easily accessible for them. They also need to be risk assessed so that they are

age and stage appropriate for them. Anything can be used for loose part play.

Household items such as, curtain rings, buttons, balls, pots, and tins to name a few.

Natural resources that can be found outside are also an effective and free loose part too. Materials such as pinecones, stones, shells, leaves, and sticks, can be collected as resources.

(Frost, 2019)



(Caldwell, 2016)

According to Sustainable Play Preschool (2020) by offering children the opportunity to play with natural loose parts from the outside area, it provides them with sensory benefits and can allow them to explore different textures, enabling stimulation, connection, and self-regulation. Also, by using natural materials this has the lowest impact on the environment. It is also suggested that natural loose parts give children the opportunity to have direct contact with nature, which helps them form a relationship and respect the world they live in. By experiencing this it can contribute to children's well-being and spiritual development, this helps them develop a sense of belonging and place which is referred to as Cynhefin in the Curriculum for Wales (Alfresco Learning, 2020 and The Welsh Government, 2021, p.8).

For successful implementation of this type of play-based curricula the role of the practitioner is pivotal. Firstly, it is helpful to remember that loose parts are hard to link with specific topics or themes due to them being open-ended, this can often result in practitioners lacking in confidence and not wanting to introduce this play type. However due to them being an open-ended resource they can be used to aid development. For example, if a class theme was Local wildlife, children may use sticks and leaves to create nests or homes for different animals.

However, Spencer *et al.* (2019) suggests that practitioner apprehension is often associated with loose parts, even more so when they are first introduced, therefore to ensure practitioners become inspired and understand this play type, leaders would benefit from creating displays on staff notice boards with a variety of examples and providing CPD training. Working together as practitioners and engaging in each

other's reflective practices are key to implementation of all play-based curriculums, and to provide excellent provision staff should be committed to ongoing training and development. It is also advisory for practitioners to model, challenge, evaluate and reflect alongside the children to help sustain and extend shared thinking and understanding (Early Years Careers, 2018 and Mountain, 2017, p.6).

When practitioners allow children to have the freedom to use loose parts in a way, they see fit, children are often said to 'hold the power' and this allows them to begin to use these objects symbolically. Practitioners are encouraged not to be detached from children's play, but to instead explore with them and learn with them. Whilst it is important to observe children from a distance, being in the moment with the children can allow them to gain confidence and allow practitioners to get to know the children individually (Fox and Wirth, 2019). The Education Hub (2020) agrees and suggests that when practitioners discreetly model play for those children who may be finding it difficult, it can support children to develop their own ideas and imaginations.

To summarize, when implementing a play-based curricula, loose parts is an approach that can be used to help stimulate curiosity and exploration (Casey and Robertson, 2019, p. 5). Play Wales (2017, p. 9) suggests that loose parts help increase levels of imaginative and creative play when engaging in this play type. It facilitates natural communication which helps support and develop children's social skills. Natural loose parts play offers children direct contact with nature, which forms connections to the world around them, this helps contribute to children's holistic development and helps them develop a sense of belonging and place which the Curriculum for Wales refers to as 'Cynhefin' (Alfresco Learning, 2020 and The Welsh Government, 2021, p.8). Practitioners are encouraged to be open-minded, model play and continuously develop their own teaching practices to help this play type be implemented successfully within a play-based curricula (Fox and Wirth, 2019, Spencer *et al.* 2019, and Early Years Careers, 2018 and Mountain, 2017, p.6).

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