

PART 1

During childhood, play is not just a leisure activity but a fundamental human need that contributes to a child's growth, learning, and development (Department of Education, n.d). Play helps children develop their cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and it is a crucial component of their overall well-being (Pope *et al.*, 2023). This view is supported by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which states that play is a meaningful and purposeful activity that facilitates children's growth and development. Vygotsky emphasized that play is not just a recreational activity but a crucial component of children's learning experiences. Through play, children are given opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with their environment and others, which helps them develop their cognitive and social skills (Hong, Shaffer, and Han, 2017).

Furthermore, play allows children to explore and learn about the world around them and develop their creativity, imagination, and problem-solving skills. It also fosters essential social skills, such as sharing, taking turns, and communication (Dennis and Stockall, 2015). Therefore, it is vital to encourage children to engage in various forms of play, such as games, sports, imaginative play, and outdoor activities, as it lays a strong foundation for their future success. This assignment examines potential barriers to developing a play-based curriculum in early childhood and recommends effective implementation strategies.

Recently, there has been a change in the early childhood curriculum, with a focus on play-based learning as the recommended approach. Play-based learning is an educational approach that utilizes play to facilitate learning (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). This approach is widely used in early childhood education because it promotes the holistic development of children by fostering their cognitive, social, emotional, psychological, and physical growth (Welsh Government, n.d). During play-based learning, children engage in exploration, discovery, and learning through trial and error (Beisly, 2023). Furthermore, through play, children develop a deeper understanding of the world by investigating and constructing their learning experiences (Helm, Katz and Wilson, 2023). While play-based learning is a balance between practitioner-initiated

learning and child-initiated learning, practitioners, however, play a supportive role and may encourage children to learn by asking open-ended questions. For example, if a child were to build a box using blocks, the practitioner would ask what might happen if the box was placed in a particular location.

Furthermore, when a child constructs a box from blocks, a skilled practitioner would engage with the child by asking open-ended questions to prompt critical thinking and enhance learning. The practitioner would inquire about the potential outcomes of placing the box in different locations, encouraging the child to consider the effects of their actions and decisions. Therefore, while the practitioner is using this approach, it aims to foster creativity, problem-solving skills, and independent thinking in the child.

Recent developments in the curriculum have heightened the need to allow children to play freely, and most schools have adopted a play-based curriculum. A play-based curriculum places play at its core (Pistorova and Slutsky, 2018; Wong, Wang, and Cheng, 2011). Play is essential because it helps children develop foundational knowledge and skills (Sahlberg and Doyle, 2019). However, it is usually only offered to children in the early years of school. It is important to note that inclusive learning environments that foster the holistic development of children must be thoughtfully planned and executed.

On the other hand, understanding educational practices during the early years and the essence of a play-based curriculum is vital for its successful implementation. With global standards and outcomes for learning becoming more comprehensive, the curriculum has become more demanding for teachers (Shawer, 2017). Therefore, practitioners may acquire knowledge about pedagogical strategies to help achieve broader educational objectives efficiently. Studies suggest a play-based curriculum is a promising pedagogy with overall learning objectives and outcomes.

The idea of play is multifaceted and can be challenging to fully comprehend and define due to its intricate nature. This is one of the current challenges practitioners face when

looking at a play-based curriculum. Play involves various factors such as imagination, creativity, and enjoyment and can take on different forms depending on the unique child. Thus, understanding the concept of play requires a nuanced approach considering its many aspects. The concept of play is complex and difficult to define (Lynch, 2014). However, practitioners should note that it is vital to understand that learning and play should not be viewed as two distinct entities (Moyles, 2010). When practitioners separate play and learning, practitioners need to recognize that play can be a meaningful learning experience for children (Moyles, 2010; Samuelsson, 2012). This outlook limits the potential of a play-based curriculum. Therefore, Howard and McInnes (2010) suggest that utilizing children's perceptions to highlight playfulness as an approach can develop practitioners' knowledge of play. Understanding children's perceptions of play can help practitioners create a playful environment that enhances children's development and learning outcomes (Howard and McInnes, 2013). This approach fosters a better understanding of the significance and benefits of play in children's lives, enabling practitioners to design enriching experiences tailored to each child's unique needs and interests.

Using play as an instrument for early childhood education remains a contentious issue among practitioners and parents (Rogers, 2011). Some educators advocate for play-based learning as they believe it has a positive impact on young learners' cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, some voices in the field express opposition to the incorporation of play into the curriculum (Brock, 2019). Parents often perceive play and learning as separate and incompatible activities. This rejection of play-based learning is frequently due to insufficient knowledge of progressive pedagogical approaches and concerns about being discredited by those who need to comprehend developmentally appropriate activities (Rogers, 2023). They believe children must be taught in a more structured and formal environment to achieve optimal academic outcomes. This approach is often based on the assumption that play and learning are mutually exclusive activities and that children cannot learn while engaged in playful activities (Whitton, 2018). Educators who advocate for play-based learning argue that it can be a highly effective teaching tool when used appropriately.

They emphasize the importance of creating a safe and nurturing environment that encourages children to explore, experiment, and learn through play (Ginner, Selenius and Björck, 2023). They also stress the need for teachers to be skilled facilitators who can guide children's play in a way that promotes optimal learning outcomes (Tam, 2023).

Despite its many benefits, there are significant challenges to implementing play-based pedagogies in early childhood education, and professional development is one of the most significant hurdles (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016). Many practitioners still need to be fully aware of the value that play can bring to the classroom (Baker, 2014; Vong, 2012). Many practitioners need more training to apply play-based pedagogy effectively. Furthermore, with introducing a new curriculum and expectations to adopt new pedagogical practices, it is becoming increasingly more work for teachers to use play meaningfully (Yin, Keung, and Tam, 2022). However, this is why it is crucial to provide teachers with more professional development opportunities where they can share their beliefs and conceptions of play-based pedagogy with others. Doing so can help practitioners genuinely understand the definition and value of play and apply it in a way that benefits their children within the early years setting.

However, the implementation of play-based curricula can be challenging. Teachers need to be trained in how to facilitate play-based learning effectively and how to evaluate children's progress using appropriate methods. They also need to have access to appropriate resources and materials to support play-based learning activities. Siraj (2013 - 2014), in his independent stocktake, recommended that it is essential that all modules and training are based on theory and research, emphasizing the value of early education. The connections between theory and practice, as well as the critical role of adults, should be made explicit. Similarly, Walsh et al. (2019) supported the idea that play-based learning may become the standard method of teaching in early years practices in the UK and beyond. However, to achieve this, specific critical steps must be taken. Firstly, he believed it was crucial to provide professional development courses

that could enhance the skills of the early years workforce. These courses should focus on teaching techniques that encourage playfulness and creativity in the classroom. Additionally, they should teach practitioners how to adapt to the individual needs of each child and create a safe and stimulating learning environment. Secondly, he believed that it is necessary to re-evaluate the content of practitioner-child education programs. These programs should include modules on play-based learning to ensure that future practitioners are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to implement this method in their classrooms. The modules should cover child development, learning through play, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. These steps can lay a solid foundation for play-based learning to become the standard teaching method in early childhood practices. This will benefit not only the children, who will receive a more engaging and practical education but also the practitioners, who will be empowered to create a positive impact on the lives of their children.

Overall, the implementation of play-based early years curricula requires careful consideration and evaluation. While there are challenges to overcome, the benefits of this approach can be significant for young children's development and future academic success. A curriculum based on play is an essential aspect of early childhood education, as it offers numerous opportunities for interactive learning and hands-on exploration. Such settings encourage children to engage in conversations with adults, who provide guidance and support as they navigate various experiences. While adult-led activities may not necessarily be classified as play, they can be highly effective when they incorporate elements of choice, hands-on experiences, and connections to the children's interests, ultimately enhancing engagement and motivation. By using this approach, children are more likely to develop essential skills such as problem-solving, creativity, and critical thinking, which are crucial for their overall development and future success. Furthermore, a play-based curriculum promotes social-emotional development as children learn to communicate, negotiate, and collaborate with their peers, fostering positive relationships and a sense of community. In summary, a play-based curriculum is a practical and holistic approach to early childhood education that supports children's overall growth and development.

PART 2

The concept of the 'Unique Child' is an essential aspect of play-based curricula. In order to ensure that each child's individual needs are met, it is crucial to critically evaluate the methods of assessment, progress tracking, and age or stage related development models that are used. Early years foundation stage (2023) states that every child is born with an innate capacity for learning, and has the potential to be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured. The foundation of inclusive early years practice lies in identifying and understanding what each child knows and can do (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). This involves careful observation, documentation, and reflection on the child's development and progress. Children learn and grow at different rates and it is important to let children develop at their own pace (McMahon and Dyer, 2018). As children acquire new skills, it is necessary to provide children with diverse opportunities to practice and utilize them in different situations. This allows them to reflect on their work and evaluate their own progress. It is essential to respect, value, and encourage children's original and honest work in all aspects of their development (Foundation Phase, 2015).

Inclusive early years practice involves anticipating, paying attention to, and responding to the needs and interests of all children (Hoskins, 2018). It is crucial that educators and caregivers take a proactive and thoughtful approach to ensure that every child feels valued, respected, and included. This means creating a safe and welcoming environment that is designed to meet the diverse needs of all children, including those with disabilities, developmental delays, or social and emotional challenges. A commitment to inclusion should permeate all aspects of educational programs, including the design of environments, the selection of materials and resources, and the interactions with children, parents, and other professionals. Educators and caregivers must be mindful of their own biases and assumptions, and work to create a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding.

In the early years setting if practitioners is to truly understand inclusion, it is necessary to comprehend individuals, families, cultures, societies, settings, and practitioners. It

also involves working respectfully to eliminate discriminatory and exclusionary practices. Inclusion involves active listening to young children and being sensitive to their needs and interests. It is about developing an intimate knowledge of each child and their unique ways of communication. Developing inclusive pedagogies involves learning about and working with the children's own knowledge and past experiences which they bring to the setting (Nutbrown, Atherton and Clough, 1958). This knowledge is naturally developed from birth, from interactions in homes, communities, and group settings. This approach also necessitates accepting each child as a unique individual and understanding their abilities and knowledge to inform our teaching.

Assessment is a vital part of early years settings, where it plays a crucial role in recognizing the progress of children, identifying their individual needs, and planning appropriate activities and support for each unique child (Glazzard *et al.*, 2010). The EYFS (2023) recognizes the importance of assessment, understanding that it is not just about testing children's knowledge but rather about recognizing their developmental progress. By doing so, practitioners can identify areas in which children need support and provide them with appropriate activities to help them progress further. This links with article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasizes the importance of education in enabling children to maximize their potential by fostering the development of their personality and talents. Education should also instill respect for one's parents and appreciation for one's own culture and the cultures of others. Practitioners have a primary responsibility with the children they work with as they are responsible for monitoring and assessing the children's developmental progress (Wood and Attfield, 1996). Practitioners are required to have a deep understanding of each child's needs, interests, and abilities, which enables practitioners to determine whether the child is developing at the expected level (Rodger, 2012). By doing so, practitioners can provide tailored support and activities that meet the child's individual needs. Assessment should be ongoing, recognizing and celebrating children's progress rather than solely focusing on attainment against prescribed learning outcomes (University of Plymouth, 2023).

Donaldson (2014) suggests that learning should be continuous and described through progression steps. This led to the development of progression steps in the new curriculum for Wales. The progression steps in the Curriculum for Wales can be used as an assessment tool to monitor student progress and identify areas for improvement. By tracking students' progress through the different stages of the curriculum, teachers can gain a comprehensive understanding of each student's strengths and weaknesses and tailor their teaching approach accordingly.

Assessment in the Curriculum for Wales is based on formative and summative assessments. Teachers use formative assessments to keep track of students' progress and pinpoint areas where they may require further assistance. These assessments are conducted regularly and are designed to provide ongoing feedback to teachers (Oo, *et al.* 2023). Summative assessments are more formal assessments used to measure student achievement at critical points in their education. The progression steps in the Curriculum for Wales provide a framework for both formative and summative assessments (Welsh Government, n.d). Teachers can use the progression steps to identify the knowledge, skills, and experiences students should have at different stages of their education and track their progress toward achieving these goals.

For example, a teacher might use the progression steps to assess a student's literacy skills in Progression Step 2. They might look at the student's ability to read and understand a range of texts and their ability to communicate their ideas effectively in writing. Based on this assessment, the teacher might identify areas where the student needs additional support, such as developing their vocabulary or improving sentence structure.

Overall, the progression steps in the Curriculum for Wales provide a valuable assessment tool for teachers, helping them to monitor student progress and identify areas for improvement. By using these steps to tailor their teaching approach, teachers can ensure that each student receives the support and guidance they need to achieve their full potential. The progression steps in the Curriculum for Wales can be used as an

assessment tool to monitor student progress and identify areas for improvement. Teachers can customize their teaching approach based on each student's strengths and weaknesses by monitoring their progress in the various stages of the curriculum. By keeping track of how students are faring throughout the curriculum, teachers can gain a thorough comprehension of their individual strengths and weaknesses. However, practitioners expressed concern about the broad scope of the Progression Steps and the need for more guidance material for assessments (Welsh Government, 2022). Therefore, Morgan *et al.* (2022) recommended that it is essential to clarify that Progression Steps in the Curriculum for Wales are not the basis for assessment. They measure learners' progress across all areas of learning and are not intended to be the sole basis for assessment. The new curriculum's assessment will be based on a range of evidence, including learners' application of knowledge and skills in real-world contexts (Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020).

However there has been a development in using learning stories as part of assessment in early years settings. Learning stories are a well-regarded assessment tool in early years settings that can provide a comprehensive and holistic view of a child's progress and development (Sands and McChesney, 2023). The process involves educators observing and documenting a child's learning journey through photographs, videos, anecdotal notes, and family conversations (Wager and Parks, 2016) . It is an approach that values the child's unique learning experiences and includes diverse expressions of learning beyond traditional academic achievements.

Learning stories provide educators with a deeper understanding of a child's strengths, interests, and areas of growth (Carr and Lee, 2012). They can be used to inform future curriculum planning and support individualized learning goals, as they highlight where a child's interests and abilities lie. The stories can also be shared with families, allowing them to gain a better understanding of their child's learning journey and build a stronger partnership with educators (Carr and Lee, 2019).

Furthermore, learning stories can help educators adjust their teaching methods to better suit each child's learning style by identifying which activities they enjoy and engage with the most. By regularly documenting these stories, educators can track a child's progress, identify patterns or trends in their learning, and make informed decisions about how best to support their ongoing development. Learning stories are a valuable assessment tool that can help educators gain a more comprehensive understanding of a child's learning journey and support their ongoing development and growth, especially children of diverse backgrounds. Alsubair (2015) suggests that professional development opportunities should be provided for teachers to learn how to assess, train, teach, and be motivated to use multicultural teaching. By doing so, teachers can effectively assess the development of children from diverse backgrounds and ensure that their cultural values and expectations are taken into account.

The learning and development process of a child is a complex and unique journey that involves various components. These components are integrated holistically to create a comprehensive approach. Observation, assessment, and planning are the key factors that enable professionals, parents, and caregivers to gain a deep understanding of the child's thinking, interests, and knowledge. By having a comprehensive understanding of the child's development path, professionals, parents, and caregivers can collaborate to provide the child with appropriate learning opportunities that match their individual needs. This way, the child's learning and development journey can be effectively nurtured and supported.

Blog: Outdoor Play in Early Childhood: Empowering Learning through Exploration

Early childhood education is a crucial stage where children learn and develop various skills. Play is the center of early childhood education, and it allows children to learn and grow. Outdoor play, in particular, offers unique benefits for children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development (Lund, Ruser and LøndalK, 2023; Welsh Government, n.d). When children engage in outdoor play, they have a chance to explore and learn about their surroundings, build their creativity and imagination, and improve their physical health and well-being.

The Welsh Government (2015) states that the foundation phase should encourage children's discovery, independence, and increased use of the outdoor environment as a learning resource. Moreover, outdoor play supports children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 31 of the convention recognizes the importance of play, leisure, and recreation for children's holistic development. Furthermore, when children engage in outdoor play, they exercise their right to play, enjoy the outdoors, and connect with nature. Over time, outdoor play can help children become more environmentally aware and responsible.

It is essential to recognize that both indoor and outdoor play areas are valuable learning settings in early childhood education. Indoor play areas can offer children opportunities to engage in imaginative and creative play, develop their social skills, and enhance their problem-solving abilities (Sandseter, Storli and Sando, 2022). However, outdoor play areas provide a unique and stimulating environment for children to learn and grow (Maynard and Waters, 2014). As such, early childhood education should ensure that children have access to indoor and outdoor play spaces to learn and develop holistically.

As practitioners who care about children's development, they want to ensure they have the best possible start in life. Outdoor activities can be vital in developing your child's motor skills, especially during early childhood (White, 2013). However, some practitioners put barriers to children's outdoor movements because they believe there are risks involved during outdoor play (Sandseter, Kleppe, and Sando, 2021). As practitioners, they should allow children to be capable learners and be their support system. For instance, if a child wants to walk over an uneven balance beam, the practitioner should guide the child across instead of saying, "Come down from there, you can get hurt." Adults have the power to inspire children's learning beyond the confines of the classroom. By fostering an environment responsive to children's interests while allowing them to maintain control of their activities, adults may help them discover the joy of learning outdoors (Waters and Rekers, 2019). Several studies have revealed that physical exploration and movement through outdoor play can make a significant difference in enhancing children's motor skills (Archer and Siraj, 2015; Lindon, 2015). Running, jumping, climbing, and playing with balls are outdoor activities that help children develop balance, coordination, and spatial awareness. Furthermore, outdoor play encourages the development of gross motor skills (Duncombe, 2019), which are essential for everyday activities such as walking, running, and jumping. Adults can help children flourish and achieve their maximum potential by encouraging them to engage in outdoor activities.

On the other hand, Johnson and Watts (2018) believe that playing outdoors in all kinds of weather sparks children's natural curiosity, encourages their love for learning, and ignites a lifelong passion for exploration. It is essential to provide young children with opportunities beyond the confines of a classroom to enhance their abilities, including emotional regulation, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-esteem (Wilson, 2012). Encouraging children to connect with nature and cultivate their spirituality can be highly beneficial, as recent research has indicated that dedicating time to nature can significantly impact all aspects of a child's growth and development (Bilton et al. 2005; White, 2020). Apart from promoting relaxation, concentration, and environmental awareness, it may also help children develop better communication skills and instill a

sense of responsibility towards the world around them (Bilton, 2002).

Therefore, introducing children to nature can inspire them to lead a wholesome life while nurturing their overall well-being and development.

Furthermore, Froebel (1782-1852 cited in Pound, 2006) believed in teaching children about all aspects of nature, not just plants and animals. He thought that letting children play outside in gardens and other outdoor spaces was one of the best ways for them to learn about nature (Garrick, 2004; Garrick, 2009). Outdoor environments would provide a rich and immersive learning experience, allowing children to observe and interact with nature firsthand (Tovey, 2013). Children need to have the presence of capable and driven practitioners, which is paramount in harnessing the full potential of the great outdoors and adapting to the unique requirements of those who partake in it. The natural world offers a wealth of stimuli that spark curiosity, foster exploration, fuel creativity, and encourage a healthy dose of disorder that is impossible to recreate indoors. With practitioners who genuinely appreciate nature and inspire children to learn by following their lead, optimal learning outcomes are achieved.

One effective way of improving children's learning experience during outdoor play is by practitioners providing them with loose parts. Loose parts refer to materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart, and put back together in various ways. These materials could include sticks, stones, cardboard boxes, fabric, and other natural and man-made resources. By incorporating loose parts into children's play, practitioners can encourage creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015). Additionally, loose parts can help children develop social skills such as cooperation and communication as they work together to build and design structures. Therefore, providing loose parts during outdoor play can significantly enhance children's overall experience and promote holistic development.

Our cherished memories of outdoor experiences as adults remind us of the power of connection and discovery they offer. Unfortunately, many children today are missing out on this magic, overburdened by indoor activities like computer games and movies. Let's

do our best to inspire the next generation to embrace the outdoors and all the joy it brings. The great outdoors holds the key to unlocking a world of possibilities for children in their early years of learning. By providing them with ample space to explore, experiment, imagine, and participate, we can genuinely ignite their curiosity and passion for knowledge. So, what are you waiting for? Take your child outdoors and watch them grow and develop in ways you never thought possible.

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