

AI Statement

I can confirm that I have not used any AI in this assignment.

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Critically analyse the challenges of implementing play-based curricula.

A curriculum refers to the full range of learning experiences, knowledge, skills, and opportunities a school provides to help learners work towards the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales. It includes not only the content taught, but also the methods, principles, and intentions that shape how learning happens (Welsh Government, 2021a). Welsh Government, (2022b) also adds that the Curriculum for Wales is important because it provides a framework for developing the knowledge, skills, and experiences that learners need to succeed in education, employment, and society. Its central aim is to support all children and young people to become ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. In Wales, a play-based curriculum is an approach to teaching and learning in which play, exploration, and authentic experiences form the foundation of children's learning and development. Within the Curriculum for Wales, foundation learning emphasises learner-centred, developmentally appropriate experiences that support holistic development through play-based and experiential learning (Welsh Government, 2026).

In section 1 the curriculum for Wales and the Montessori approach will be discussed, in section 2 methods of assessments will be discussed and section 3 will feature a blog on Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum and what Early Years Practitioners Need to Know.

The Curriculum for Wales came into force in September 2022, following the enactment of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (Law Wales, 2021). Its introduction began with nursery settings, primary schools and Year 7, before being phased in across the remaining secondary year groups. The Welsh Government positions the Curriculum for Wales as a unified framework for learners aged 3–16, emphasising a seamless continuum of learning rather than discrete educational stages (Welsh Government, 2022a).

The Curriculum for Wales was introduced with the aim of establishing a more adaptable and learner-focused education system, one that better equips young people for the realities of contemporary life. Its development was shaped by Donaldson (2015) independent review, which highlighted that the former curriculum no longer aligned with the needs of learners in a fast-changing world. In response, the new curriculum places emphasis on nurturing skills, knowledge, creativity, wellbeing and lifelong learning, rather than concentrating solely on traditional subject coverage. The Welsh Government emphasises that the curriculum should enable every learner to realise their potential and make a positive contribution to society (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022c).

A key objective of the Curriculum for Wales is to realise the four purposes, which set out the overarching aspirations for every learner in Wales. These purposes aim to develop ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. The Welsh Government

emphasises that education should extend beyond academic outcomes to nurture well-rounded individuals who can succeed in work, participate in their communities and contribute to society more broadly. The curriculum is therefore designed to promote both personal growth and academic progress, supporting wellbeing, citizenship and lifelong learning (Welsh Government 2021a; Welsh Government, 2022d).

The Curriculum for Wales was designed to be introduced gradually and through collective effort. Schools were given increased freedom to create their own curricula within a national framework, enabling them to shape learning in ways that reflect the needs of their pupils and local communities. Instead of setting out detailed programmes of study, the curriculum offers direction through the six Areas of Learning and Experience and the Statements of What Matters. Its rollout began in September 2022, with additional year groups adopting it each year until it covered all learners aged 3–16. The Welsh Government stressed that curriculum design should remain an ongoing cycle of review, evaluation and refinement, supported by professional learning and collaboration across schools and wider educational partners (Welsh Government, 2022e; Senedd Research, 2022).

The Montessori approach was introduced and developed as an educational philosophy through observations of children's learning and development (Montessori, George and Holmes, 2021). Standing and Havis, (1998) adds that Montessori believed that traditional teacher led methods often underestimated children's capabilities. Standing and Havis, (1998) also explain that education should support children's natural desire to learn.

The main intention of the Montessori approach was to foster children's independence, self-discipline, confidence and motivation to learn. Montessori believed that children have a natural tendency towards self-development and that education should facilitate rather than direct this process (Montessori, George and Holmes, 2021). This view has been supported by numerous researchers who argue that Montessori's education promotes autonomy, self-regulation and active engagement in learning through child centred experiences and prepared environments (Lillard, 2017; Isaacs, 2018). Montessori's approach was intended not only to promote academic learning, but also to develop capable and self-reliant individuals who can contribute positively to society (Marhsall, 2017).

This approach was intended to be implemented through prepared environments that are carefully designed to meet children's needs and encourage independent learning (Montessori, George and Holmes, 2021). Isaacs, (2018) indicates that classrooms should be organised with accessible, developmentally appropriate materials that enable children to make autonomous choices. Lillard, (2017) explains that teachers act as guides who observe children's interests and readiness before introducing new materials or offering support.

The curriculum for Wales and the Montessori approach both promote learner centred education, but they differ in structure. The curriculum for Wales provides schools with flexibility to design their own curriculum within national frameworks (Welsh Government, 2022c). In contrast, the Montessori approach is an educational philosophy rather than a curriculum (Isaacs, 2018).

In terms of pedagogy, both approaches emphasise active learning and the development of the whole child. The curriculum for Wales is organised around the four core purposes which aim to develop ambitious, capable learners who are ready for lifelong learning, employment and citizenship (Welsh Government, 2022b). It encourages interdisciplinary, hands-on learning while giving teachers the autonomy to design meaningful learning experiences (Welsh government, 2021c; Furlong, 2015). Similarly, Montessori's pedagogy emphasises self-directed learning with the teacher acting as a "guide" who supports children's independence and intrinsic motivation rather than directly transmitting knowledge (Lillard, 2017; Murray, 2026). However, while the curriculum for Wales allows flexibility, Montessori's pedagogy is more prescriptive, based on principles such as developmental windows, structured independence and self-directed learning, which must be consistently applied for alignment with the pedagogical principles (Lillard, 2017; Isaacs, 2018).

The learning environment is central to both approaches but is understood differently. In Montessori's approach, it takes the form of a highly structured prepared environment with specialised materials that promote independence, self-correction and progressive skill development (Montessori, George and Holmes, 2021; Standing and Havis, 1998). These classrooms are intentionally calm, ordered and designed to support sustained concentration. In contrast, the curriculum for Wales does not prescribe a fixed classroom model, instead it encourages flexible, responsive environments that may include indoor, outdoor, digital and community-based spaces (Welsh Government, 2022e; OECD, 2024).

A key strength of the curriculum for Wales is its clear prioritisation of wellbeing as a core organising principle. The health and wellbeing area of learning embeds emotional, social and physical development across all learning areas rather than treating it as a separate subject (Welsh Government, 2022a). OECD, (2024) implies that this aligns with international evidence showing that integrated wellbeing curricula can enhance engagement, behaviour and long-term outcomes. In practice, this approach enables schools to design a wellbeing provision that reflects their learners needs, community values and local contexts.

A limitation of this approach is that wellbeing is broadly defined which leads to variation in how schools interpret and deliver it. Research on the curriculum shows that high levels of teacher autonomy can create inconsistencies especially during early implementation (OECD, 2024). Furlong, (2015) explains that embedding wellbeing across all learning areas also increases demands on teachers, requiring strong curriculum design skills and confidence in addressing emotional and social

development alongside subject content. Without sustained professional learning and leadership support, the quality of wellbeing is likely to remain uneven.

On the other hand, the Montessori approach supports wellbeing through a child centred environment (Lillard, 2017). Marshall, (2017) adds that through this child centred approach, it improves emotional regulation, confidence and self-motivation. The prepared environment helps to reduce anxiety and enhances children's sense of security (Isaacs, 2018). Through sustained observations, practitioners can respond sensitively to individual developmental needs enabling personalised emotional and social support (Standing and Havis, 1998).

A limitation of Montessori's implementation is that it relies on highly trained specialist practitioners, which restricts potential in mainstream settings. Maintaining alignment with Montessori principles depends on consistent training on its philosophy, materials and methods as variation in training quality can influence outcomes for children (Edwards, 2002). Additionally, although the structured environment supports many learners' wellbeing, critics argue that the strong emphasis on independence may not meet the needs of all children, particularly those requiring more direct adult support or with additional learning needs (ALN) (Ansari and Winsler, 2014).

In conclusion, both the curriculum for Wales and the Montessori approach support play based curricula. However, their implementation and presents key challenges. The curriculum for Wales offers flexibility and encourages teachers to design play-based learning, but this can lead to inconsistencies and places high demand on teacher expertise and confidence. Moreover, Montessori's approach offers a structured model with carefully prepared environments but depends on specialist training and may not suit all learners. Overall, the main challenge in play-based learning is ensuring consistent, high-quality implementation through effective training, support and a shared understanding of practice.

Considering the concept of the 'unique child', critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking or age and stage related development models within play-based curricula.

In early years settings, the term 'unique child' means that every child is an individual with their own personality, experiences, abilities, interests, cultural background, learning style, strengths and needs. The idea of the unique child is strongly supported by the United Nations convention on the rights of a child (UNCRC), (UNICEF, 2026). The concept is a key principle of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) which states that every child is a unique child who is continually learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured (Department for education, 2024).

Assessment is the process of gathering and evaluating information about a child's learning, development, skills and achievements. Black and Wiliam, (1998) adds that assessment helps practitioners understand what a child knows, can do and what support they may need to make further progress.

Assessment is closely linked to the concept of the unique child, which recognises that every child develops at their own pace (Department for education, 2024). The EYFS identifies the unique child as a key principle, emphasising that assessments should focus on understanding each child's individual learning journey rather than comparing them with others (Department for education, 2024). This is also reflected in the UNCRC. Article 29 states that education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential, while article 12 recognises children's rights to express their views and participate in decisions affecting them (UNICEF, 2026). Wood, (2013) explains that assessments should be child centred, inclusive and responsive to the individual characteristics of each unique child.

Under the curriculum for Wales, assessment is no longer focused on giving children levels or grades, instead schools use progress tracking to monitor how learners develop their knowledge, skills and understanding over time. It has an emphasis on progression rather than performance at a fixed point (Welsh Government, 2022d).

Welsh Government, (2022c) states that the progress tracking involves teachers to gather evidence from everyday learning activities, observations, discussions and class work to build a picture of each learner's development. this information is used to identify strengths, areas for improvement and next steps in learning. This approach reflects the principle of the unique child by recognising that learners progress at different rates and require personalised support to achieve their potential (Welsh Government, 2022d; Hwb, 2022).

Moreover, the foundation phase uses a continuous observation-based approach for assessment that focusses on understanding children's individual development and learning (Welsh Government, 2019). Welsh Government, (2022c) adds that the foundation phase was used to establish children's starting points and monitor

progress, while teacher assessments are used to make professional judgements about achievements at the end of the phase. This approach supported the principle of the unique child by recognising that children learn and develop at different rates and require personalised support to achieve their potential (Bruce, 2021).

Observational assessment supports the principle of the unique child by allowing practitioners to identify individual strengths, interests and developmental needs without disrupting learning (Department for education, 2024). Research by Black and Wiliam, (1998) suggests that ongoing assessments including observation, can improve learning outcomes by informing teaching and planning. Nutbrown, (2011) argues that skilled practitioners can develop rich and holistic understandings of children through observation. Wood, (2013) contends that observations may be influenced by practitioners' personal interpretations and expectations, potentially affecting reliability. Similarly, Harlen, (2007) notes that observations can be inconsistent when different practitioners assess the same child, raising concerns about validity. In contrast, advocates of more formal assessment methods argue that standardised assessments provide greater consistency and comparability across learners (Harlen, 2007). Furthermore, Bruce, (2021) states that formal assessments may fail to capture the complexity of children's learning and can overlook important aspects of social, emotional and creative development.

Observation is often considered an inclusive assessment method because it enables practitioners to assess children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and neurodiverse learners within their everyday learning environment. Unlike formal tests, observation does not rely solely on verbal communication, literacy skills or standardised responses, allowing practitioners to gain a broader understanding of a child's strengths, interests and developmental needs (Palaiologou, 2021). This aligns with the principle of the unique child, which recognises that children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates (Department for Education, 2024).

However, some researchers question whether observation always provides an accurate representation of neurodiverse children. Nutbrown (2011) argues that observation can reveal aspects of learning that standardised assessments may overlook, whereas Harlen (2007) suggests that observations can be subjective and influenced by the practitioner's interpretation. Similarly, Blaiklock (2008) criticises observation-based assessments for lacking reliability when practitioners are insufficiently trained. Although observation has the potential to support children with ALN and neurodiversity, its effectiveness depends on practitioner expertise, awareness of neurodiverse behaviours and the use of multiple sources of assessment evidence.

The Curriculum for Wales uses a progression-based approach to assessment, often referred to as progress tracking. Rather than assigning levels or grades, assessment focuses on how learners develop knowledge, skills and understanding over time. The purpose is to support learner progression, identify next steps in learning and

inform teaching practices (Welsh Government, 2021a). Progress tracking is carried out continuously by teachers through observations, discussions, learner work, self-assessment and feedback. Evidence is gathered from everyday classroom activities to build a holistic picture of each learner's progress across the Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) (Welsh Government, 2022d).

The Welsh Government (2022e) argues that this approach better reflects the complexity of learning and recognises that children progress at different rates. This aligns with the concept of the unique child, as learners are assessed against their own progression rather than being compared with their peers. Black and Wiliam (1998) support this approach, suggesting that formative assessments can improve learning by providing feedback that informs future teaching and learning.

However, some researchers question the reliability of teacher-led assessment. Harlen (2007) argues that professional judgement can be subjective and may vary between practitioners, potentially reducing consistency. Similarly, Priestley and Biesta (2013) caution that curriculum flexibility can lead to differing interpretations of progression, making it difficult to ensure equitable assessment practices across schools. In contrast, Donaldson (2015) argues that progression-focused assessment provides a more meaningful understanding of learning than standardised testing, which often measures attainment at a single point in time.

The progression-based assessment approach in the Curriculum for Wales has several key advantages. It prioritises learner development over fixed levels or grades, supporting the principle of the unique child by recognising that children progress at different rates and in different ways (Welsh Government, 2021a). This approach encourages teachers to focus on individual strengths, needs and next steps in learning. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that formative assessment improves learning outcomes because feedback helps learners make progress, while Donaldson (2015) suggests that progression-focused assessment provides a more meaningful picture of learning than traditional standardised testing.

However, there are also limitations. Harlen (2007) argues that teacher-based assessment can lack consistency due to subjectivity in professional judgement. This means different teachers may interpret the same evidence differently, which can affect reliability. Priestley and Biesta (2013) also criticise flexible curriculum models, suggesting that varying interpretations of progression can make it difficult to ensure fairness and consistency across schools. In addition, Bennett (2011) questions the strength of evidence supporting formative assessment in all contexts, particularly where teachers have limited training in assessment practices.

Progression-based assessment in the Curriculum for Wales is generally considered more inclusive for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and neurodiverse learners because it focuses on individual development rather than fixed age-related expectations. This approach allows teachers to track small steps of progress over time and recognise a wider range of achievements, including communication,

engagement and social development, rather than relying solely on academic outcomes (Welsh Government, 2021a).

The Welsh Government (2021a) emphasises that assessment should be flexible and responsive, enabling teachers to adapt learning to meet individual needs. This aligns with Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who argue that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to assume that all learners can participate and progress, if barriers to learning are reduced. Similarly, Florian (2013) suggests that inclusive assessment should focus on “what children can do” rather than highlighting deficits, which supports the principles behind progression tracking.

However, Hodgkinson (2011) cautions that inclusion is not guaranteed simply through policy change, arguing that teacher beliefs and practices can still reinforce traditional notions of ability. In addition, Norwich (2013) notes that assessing progress in diverse learners can be complex, as development may not follow direct progression steps, making interpretation of evidence challenging.

In conclusion, both observation and progression-based assessment in the Curriculum for Wales support the idea of the unique child by focusing on individual development rather than comparing children to fixed standards. Observation allows practitioners to understand children’s learning in everyday situations, helping them identify strengths, needs and interests in a holistic way. Progress tracking builds on this by monitoring development over time and recognising that children progress at different rates. However, both approaches rely heavily on professional judgement, which can lead to differences in interpretation. Overall, they promote inclusion and personalised learning but depend on skilled, consistent practice to be effective.

Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum: What Early Years Practitioners Need to Know

Can children really learn everything they need through play? This is a question often asked by parents, policymakers and even some practitioners. When children are building dens, dressing up as superheroes or digging in mud kitchens, it may not look like traditional learning. However, research continues to show that play is one of the most effective ways young children develop communication, problem-solving, creativity and social skills. As early years education increasingly focuses on child-centred approaches, understanding how to implement a play-based curriculum has never been more important.

A play-based curriculum places play at the centre of children's learning and development. Rather than separating learning from play, practitioners use play as the vehicle through which children explore ideas, build relationships and develop new skills. Children learn through hands-on experiences, experimentation and interaction with others.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states that children learn most effectively through play and active learning, supported by positive relationships and enabling environments (Department for Education, 2024). Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales encourages experiential learning, curiosity and learner-centred approaches that reflect children's interests and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2021a).

Play supports all areas of development at the same time. While playing, children often use language, mathematics, social skills, creativity and physical coordination at the same time. Research by the Education Endowment Foundation (2024) found that high-quality interactions during play can have a positive impact on children's communication, language and early literacy development.

Play also promotes wellbeing. Following the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have increasingly highlighted the role of play in supporting children's emotional resilience, confidence and mental health (UNICEF, 2018). Through play, children can express emotions, explore relationships and develop self-regulation skills.

One of the biggest misconceptions about play-based learning is that adults simply supervise while children play. In reality, Practitioners play a crucial role in supporting learning.

Effective practitioners observe children's interests, provide stimulating resources and extend learning through thoughtful interactions. This may involve asking open-ended questions, introducing new vocabulary or encouraging children to reflect on their thinking.

The Education Inspection Framework highlights the importance of practitioners understanding child development and using this knowledge to support learning through meaningful experiences rather than relying solely on formal instruction (Ofsted, 2023).

Practitioners must also recognise each child as an individual. The concept of the "unique child" remains central to early years practice, requiring adults to understand children's differing abilities, cultures, experiences and learning styles (Department for Education, 2024).

The learning environment is a vital part of a successful play-based curriculum. Children need spaces that encourage exploration, independence and curiosity.

Effective environments should provide open-ended resources that can be used in multiple ways, encourage choice and independence, support risk-taking and problem-solving, reflect children's interests and cultures and be accessible to all learners.

Recent guidance from the Play matters (2025) article emphasises that flexible environments allow children to become active participants in their own learning rather than passive recipients of information.

Outdoor environments are equally important. Research suggests that outdoor play contributes significantly to physical development, wellbeing and environmental awareness (Natural England, 2024).

Assessment in a play-based curriculum is typically carried out through observation. Practitioners gather information by watching children engage in everyday activities and interactions.

In Wales, progression-based assessment supports this approach by focusing on learners' development over time rather than fixed attainment levels (Welsh Government, 2021b). Similarly, the EYFS encourages ongoing assessment through observation, discussion and professional judgement (Department for Education, 2024).

Observation can provide a rich picture of children's learning because it captures development in natural contexts. However, researchers also caution that observations can be subjective if practitioners lack training or sufficient understanding of child development (Bradbury, 2013). Therefore, ongoing professional development remains essential.

One of the greatest strengths of a play-based curriculum is its potential to support inclusion. Children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and neurodiverse learners can engage in play in ways that suit their individual strengths and preferences.

Recent research suggests that play-based approaches can reduce barriers to participation by offering multiple ways for children to communicate, problem-solve and demonstrate understanding (Florian, 2013). Rather than focusing on what children cannot do, practitioners can build on existing strengths and interests.

However, inclusion requires more than simply providing play opportunities. Practitioners need training in neurodiversity, adaptive teaching and inclusive assessment to ensure all children can participate meaningfully (Education Scotland, 2024).

Despite strong evidence supporting play-based learning, implementation can be challenging. Some practitioners face pressure to demonstrate measurable academic outcomes, leading to more formal teaching approaches and reducing opportunities for child-led play (Wood, 2013). Parents may also question whether children are learning enough through play, particularly when learning outcomes are not immediately visible. This highlights the importance of practitioners communicating the educational value of play and sharing evidence of children's progress with families (UNICEF, 2018). Workload is another challenge. High-quality play-based practice requires careful observation, assessment, planning and reflection. The Early Years Alliance (2025) reports that increasing administrative demands, staffing shortages and limited time can affect practitioners' ability to deliver high-quality play experiences consistently. Without adequate staffing levels, resources and professional development opportunities, maintaining effective play-based practice can be difficult (Ofsted, 2023).

Additionally, some researchers argue that play-based learning can be interpreted differently across settings, resulting in inconsistencies in quality (Wood, 2013). This demonstrates the need for clear guidance and ongoing professional support.

A play-based curriculum is far more than simply allowing children to play. It is a carefully planned approach that recognises play as a powerful tool for learning, development and wellbeing. Through high-quality interactions, effective environments and skilled observation, practitioners can support children's holistic development while recognising each child as a unique individual.

Although challenges exist, particularly around training, workload and accountability, the evidence suggests that play-based learning remains one of the most effective approaches for supporting young children's growth. For early years practitioners, the key is not whether play should be part of the curriculum, but how it can be implemented effectively to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

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