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I confirm no AI tools have been used to contribute to this assignment.

Critically Analysing the Challenges of Implementing the Play-Based Curriculum for Wales

Introduction

Play is considered a fundamental factor in the early stages of children's learning and development within early childhood education. Research has found that taking a play-based learning approach helps support children develop their cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills while also encouraging creativity, ambition and problem-solving skills (Bruce, 2021; Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2014). To reflect these aims, Curriculum for Wales (CFW) states that play is the centre of learning for children in early years, to allow a child-led approach and a holistic approach that understands the importance of exploration and having authentic relationships and experiences (Welsh Government, 2022a).

However, even though there has been a great effort across Wales to support a play-based education, having settings implement play-based curricula has seen its challenges. Allowing practitioners time to understand the curriculum policies and having time to effectively incorporate these into practice requires good professional understanding, consistency, access to resources and having meaningful assessment purposes. Furthermore, there can be challenges between child-led learning and inclusive practice. This essay critically analyses the challenges that arise when implementing the Curriculum for Wales, focusing on pedagogy and professional learning and inclusion practices. T

Pedagogy

One of the main principles that stand out from the Curriculum for Wales is the commitment to a child-centred and play based pedagogy approach. The framework allows children to explore through experiments, curiosity and being an active member of the experience, this closely correlates with the theories from Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner (Welsh Government, 2022a). Through play experiences children have opportunity to explore their environment, develop their independence and begin to gain understanding through their exploration and experiences. This aligns with the early years frameworks including the Birth to 5 Matters and Early Years Foundation Stage, which both heavily emphasise how play is the centre of learning (Early Education, 2021; Department for Education, 2024).

However, a challenge that could arise is how play-based learning is how this can be interpreted in practice. Research suggests that from one practitioner to the next, often the idea of play is understood and interpreted in different ways, this then may lead to a varied attempt at implementing play across settings (Wood, 2014; Howard and McInnes, 2013; Brooker, 2011; Moyles, 2015). While some settings and practitioners lead their settings with a sole child-led experiences, some settings will encourage structured activities that limit the openness to play. The Curriculum for Wales provides

flexibility, this can result in inconsistency in practise especially if practitioners have different level of understanding and confidence (Welsh Government, 2022a).

The stigma that exists when discussing play-based learning and school readiness plays a vital part in implementing play-based learning. Critics argue that having a set need for assessment and to measure outcomes of children and their early education can taint and reduce the importance of play (Moss, 2016; Robert's-Holmes, 2022; Whitehead, 2019; Wood and Hedges, 2016). The Curriculum for Wales promotes a holistic approach to development; practitioners may still feel pressure to provide evidence and to live up to expectations from parents.

Assessment and Observation

Assessments are another challenge when on the topic of Play-based learning. Standard assessment systems have focused on clear evidence and standard signs of progress. However, play based learning is a complex and difficult to measure, thus making it difficult to allow assessments in everyday methods (Carr, 2001; Drummond, 2003; Dunphy, 2010; Pascal and Bertram, 2021).

The CFW suggests that assessment be used as an ongoing evidence-based assessment so that it can see a learner's progress rather than having a learner meet standard checklists (Welsh Government, 2022b). Observations play a vital role to allow practitioners to understand the child, their strengths, interests and what skills they need to develop. This reflects the sociocultural theories that recognised learning as something developed through relationships, interactions and rich experiences (Vygotsky, 1978; Fleet, 2015; Sarah-Blatchford, 2009).

Even with these strengths, practitioners may find it difficult and confusing with the expectations around assessments. Having less pressure on age related skills can allow opportunity to be open about what should be added and what should be documented (Fisher, 2008; OECD, 2017). Furthermore, practitioners need to find a balance when observing children while scaffolding children's play and to record the evidence of progressions. While the framework centres a child focused practise, it can also be a heavy burden of workload for practitioners and could lead to inconsistent assessments being completed from one setting to another.

Another challenge is for practitioners finding a balance of purposeful assessments but while also providing safe and high-quality care. Practitioners are responsible to show improvements of the children's development in their care to show progress to families, schools and for inspection evidence (Estyn, 2023; OECD, 2020; Welsh Government, 2022b). This leads to assessments being too focused on documenting rather than understanding the individual child's learning needs and experiences, which then goes against the frameworks play-based guidance.

Practitioners Understanding

Successfully implementing the CFW framework into practise relies heavily on the practitioner's knowledge and professional understanding. The framework encourages

practitioners and allows settings to shape the curricula to be based on the learners' needs in their care (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Research has highlighted the great importance of knowledge from practitioners and how it can determine the quality of early childhood education (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016; OECD, 2020). Implementing play-based learning requires a practitioner to make an informed decision about assessments, planning, interactions and inclusion. Without professional learning opportunities the risk of misunderstanding the principles of the curriculum or using it wrongly.

Although the Welsh Government has supported the curriculum by investing in professional learning, there may be a lack of opportunity to access training across settings (Welsh Government, 2022c). Research has suggested that having impactful changes in practice is when professional learning is an ongoing theme, working together and being reflective rather than rigid training sessions (Timperley, 2011; Fullan, 2016; Campbell-Barr, 2018; OECD, 2020). Furthermore, the powerful language used when documenting can be understood differently by practitioners and settings using child-centred approaches (Moss, 2016; Wood, 2014; Roberts-Holmes, 2022).

Inclusion

Inclusion and wellbeing are key principles within the CFW. The framework heavily emphasises the need for participation, belonging, recognising equal opportunities between the children to be able to succeed regardless of their background, ability or circumstances (Welsh Government, 2022a). This aligns with the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales, which promotes the individual and inclusive approaches when in education (Welsh Government, 2012).

A significant strength in the curriculum is the understanding of the holistic approach and understanding an individual's wellbeing. Viewing that learning, emotional security, positive relationships and a sense of belonging all work together to ensure learning is achievable (UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 2021). This reflects the attachment theory which states that secure relationships are the foundation for building on children's confidence, exploration and learning (Bowlby, 1988; Page, 2018).

However, implementing inclusive play-based practice faces challenges. While the curriculum encourages flexibility practitioners may need additional support when working with children with complex ALN or other learning needs (Lindsay, 2016; Webster and Blatchford, 2019; Welsh Government, 2021; Estyn, 2023). Similarly, the framework may promote cultural diversity and inclusion but making sure these principles are worked into everyday practice required practitioners to work reflectively on bias opinions (Gay, 2018; Banks, 2019). Inclusion cannot be achieved just through policy alone, but through professional reflection on delivery and how this can be adapted into practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Curriculum for Wales shows practitioners an ambitious idea for the outcome of early childhood education by seeing play, wellbeing and child-centred learning as the main goal of practise. However, implementing a play-based curriculum can present as a challenge. In this essay it has highlighted the key challenges relating to pedagogy, assessment, professional learning and inclusion, all intertwined. While the curriculums flexibility can provide support for enriched and meaningful experiences, it can also be a factor in inconsistent interpretations of practise. Similarly, difficulties continue between assessment and accountability, while practitioners' knowledge and confidence when delivering may differ depending in their professional practise and if settings have the resources to be fully trained on play centred approaches. Addressing these challenges is still if the curriculums main target to have consistently across settings in delivering the best practise for positive development and outcomes.

The Concept of the 'Unique Child'

Introduction

The concept of the Unique child is a key principle within early childhood education as it recognised that all children develop, learn and have experiences differently. This is why having the concept of the unique child in a main priority in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and is reflected within the Curriculum for Wales (CFW), this is where children are seen as capable individuals with having a range of strengths, interests and individual identities and their own way of developing (Department of education, 2024; Welsh Government, 2022a). Embedded in child-centred approaches, the unique child concept challenges the general idea of development and understands how important understanding the individual child and how different they can be from the next child, to support learning and to aid progress.

Assessments are seen as the most common process of gathering information and evidence on a child's learning and development to help determine the future of the support and teaching they will need (Drummond, 2003; Carr, 2001). Within play-based learning, assessments are incorporated into everyday interactions, observations and relationships rather than just relying on formal testing or standard baselines. To have effective and meaningful use of assessments they need to have a purposeful understanding into what experiences the children are being supported with to help their individual learning journeys.

Having the understanding that the Unique Child is an important aspect of assessment because children develop at different rates and may demonstrate learning in various ways. Factors such as culture, language and additional learning needs (ALN), disability, or different family dynamics or circumstances can be a major influence on a child's learning development (Lindsay, 2016; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2020). Therefore, assessments must have a balance of developmental expectations with an understanding of the individual child's needs. This essay will evaluate the approaches

within the CFW, EYFS and Birth to 5 Matters frameworks, understanding why they support the concept of the unique child in education.

The Concept of the Unique Child

The understanding of the unique child is embedded in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) which explains that all children are constantly learning while being resilient, capable and confident learners (Department of Education, 2024). The CFW emphasises a learner-centred approach that understands individual progress, wellbeing and personal identity (Welsh Government, 2022a). These frameworks both see a wider picture on theories of child development and that children are active participants in their own learning journey.

Constructivist theories such as Jean Piaget argued that children actively build their knowledge through being able to explore and interact in their environments (Piaget, 1952; Celinska, 2023). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky stated that the social nature to learning is important for the understanding of each child's individual development (Vygotsky, 1978). More recently sociocultural perspectives suggest learning cannot be separate from the experience a child has lived, relationships or cultural backgrounds (Rogoff, 2003; Fler, 2015).

The unique child concept challenges the understanding of traditional development theories that believe a child's progress through their fixed stages and ages. While a child develops through their milestones that offer guidance, however critics argue that the interpretations of set milestones can negatively change how children are seen to progress at different stages and viewing this as a problem rather than seeing that developments can happen differently (Moss, 2016; Whitebread, 2019; Bruce, 2021). This is particularly relevant when understanding neurodivergent children or children with ALN, whose development milestones may not align with the standard expectations.

Assessment for Progression within the Curriculum for Wales

The CFW has an assessment approach to focus on progression rather than attainment. Assessment is an ongoing process that aids learning and helps practitioners understand where a learner may be in their learning journey (Welsh Government, 2022b) rather than having a child conform with fixed age expectations, practitioners should encourage at the child's speed and allow for individual progress over time.

Observation is a key component when assessing children and their day-to-day learning within the standards of the CFW. Through observing children during play and interactions, practitioners can gather evidence about a child's learning and identity (Welsh Government, 2022b; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). This approach works through allowing assessment to naturally occur from the children's interests and their own personal experiences.

A strength to this concept is it understands and recognises that progression is not at one pace. The Progression Code emphasises that children can develop in different way and at different rates, this reflects the principles of the Unique Child (Welsh Government, 2022b). This flexibility can be beneficial for children with ALN or those from cultural backgrounds as this avoids children being compared against set standard developmental milestones.

However, the flexibility of the CFW assessment model may have its challenges. Not having age-related expectations can make it difficult for practitioners to have a general mark to follow by (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2021; Estyn, 2023). With professional judgment is often taken and valued, this can create inconsistencies between settings. Furthermore, this can make practitioners feel pressure about evidencing progression without any clear developmental markers, especially when discussing outcomes to families or other agencies.

Observation and Developmental Guidance within EYFS and Birth to 5 Matters

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Birth to 5 Matters framework also understand that observation-based assessments provide developmental guidance. Practitioners are encouraged to observe children during play and everyday experiences while giving the children opportunity to explore while using developmental ranges to support their learning (Early Education, 2021; Department for Education, 2024).

Birth to 5 Matters was created to address concerns about assessment practices and to choose professional judgment rather than conforming to checklists (Early Education, 2021). The guidance states that development is not linear and should not be seen as fixed targets to achieve. Practitioners should use the developmental ranges as a very flexible guide, while still understanding children's individual strengths and interests.

An advantage of this approach is that developmental guidance can be reassuring and consistent for practitioner use. Developmental indicators can help identify children that may need more support and help to show families and professionals clearly what support is needed and why (Dunphy, 2010; Fisher, 2008). Using this guidance can be a great help for practitioners who are inexperienced and are still learning their own skills to develop their understanding of observational skills.

Developmental models have been criticised, research suggest that age and stage frameworks can encourage comparisons between children and allow room for expectation to be considered of what may be normal developments (Moss, 2016; Roberts-Holmes, 2022; Whitebread, 2019). Even though, Birth to 5 Matters is against the use of developmental ranges as a checklist tool, there are risks that practitioners may interpret them differently from one another.

ALN

The concept of the unique Child is significant for children with ALN and neurodiverse learners. Traditional development views have been criticised for viewing ALN children as delayed or behind with their development from the 'normal' perspective (Milton, 2012; Pellicano and den Houting, 2022). In contrast, the CFW promoted a flexible approach for the tracking of progress, allowing practitioners to understand the individual learning rather than age related expectations (Welsh Government, 2022b). This reflects the inclusive education principles that encourage participation, strengths and personalised support (Rouse and Florian, 2012; Lindsay, 2016) while the ALN Code reinforces a person-centred planning that will allow provision to suit the children's needs (Welsh Government, 2021). However, just having flexibility alone will not ensure inclusion, as practitioners need to have a good understanding of neurodiversity, disability and inclusive practice (Webster and Blatchford, 2019; Estyn, 2023).

Similarly, Birth to 5 Matters promotes a holistic approach and inclusive assessment tools, development guidance can be difficult when assessing children based on predetermined developmental stages (Early Education, 2021). Children with neurodiversity may have developmental profiles and strengths that don't align as their strengths may not align with traditional frameworks. Cultural diversity needs further highlighting on assessment due to children may have different learning behaviours and communication due to the style they have been shaped due to different cultural experiences.

Does Assessments Support the Concept of the Unique Child?

Both assessment approaches have demonstrated a commitment to wanting the focus on individuality through observation-based assessment, which enables practitioners to develop a good understanding through building relationships and authentic learning experiences rather than focusing on standard checklists. This reflects research that values the understanding of contextual assessment in early childhood education (Carr, 2001; Drummond, 2003; Pascal and Bertram, 2021). The CFW aligns with the concept of the unique child as it focuses on individual progression and creates opportunities to recognise developmental pathways rather than sticking to age-related expectations.

Similarly, Birth to 5 Matters as this approach allows the child to holistically develop through observational approaches although the ranges can cause tension due to the need of recognising individuality and monitoring development expectations. While this guidance can be useful, it must be used loosely to not group children together in accordance with developmental norms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concept of the unique child understands and recognises that children learn and develop through the experiences in the world in various and diverse ways. Assessment within play-based learning must move past simple measure of age-related standards and support children's individual learning journeys. These approaches have

both shown strengths in promoting a child centred assessment through observation process and having a good professional judgment to understand holistically the developments children can make. However, the challenges within this approach remain. The curriculum for Wales offers flexibility and active involvement in individual progress, it really relies on practitioners' knowledge and consistency. Overall, the use of the assessment tools to support the Unique child solely depends on how practitioners implement it into every day educational experiences.

Why Inclusion Matters When Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum

By Lucie Williams

Are we really creating play environments where every child belongs?

Imagine walking into a nursery setting where children are immersed in play. Some children are creating and building dens, others are creating or reenacting stories through role play, while other children explore natural materials and loose parts to use their imagination and creativity. At a first glance, it seems like an enriched, thriving play-based learning environment. However, should we consider a different question: Could every child equally access these experiences?

Early years practitioners often discuss in detail about inclusion being a core element that is valued in childhood education and care. However, implementing a play-based curriculum that can support all children can become more complex than it originally thought. The Curriculum for Wales has made it a priority to emphasise the importance of wellbeing, belonging and understanding individual progress. Practitioners are being encouraged to think critically about play based learning in the environment can support diverse learners (Welsh Government, 2022; Estyn, 2023).

Play is recognised as a fundamental to young children's learning. Through play children are developing their language skills, social skills, creativity, problem solving skills and their emotional resilience (Bruce, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Research over the years has found that children learn and take the most in when they are engaged in meaningful, enriched play experiences that are tailored to their interests (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Early Education, 2021).

The Curriculum for Wales encourages and promotes a child-centred approach that understands the importance of wellbeing, participation and focus on individual progress milestones as the key to learning (Welsh Government, 2022). Similarly, the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code for Wales emphasises that all children should have equal opportunities to be able to fully take part in educational experiences (Welsh Government, 2021).

However, to be inclusive it involved more than children being physically present. Having genuine inclusion in settings means children feeling valued, respected and able to

engage in any learning opportunity. When implementing a play-based curriculum practitioners may have opportunity for reflection by asking themselves:

- Who can access this activity?
- Who might find it difficult to access this experience?
- How flexible is the environment?

This encourages practitioners to constantly reflect in their practice and help ensure that inclusion remains as an active priority and consideration rather than an afterthought.

Moving past the concept of the 'Typical Child'

One of the main challenges when implementing the curriculum is not making any assumptions of age-related stages on the children. Guidance on development can be very useful as general idea for practitioners, but every practitioner should understand that each individual child's journey will be different. Some children may rely on their communication, while other children can use gestures, or communicate through different means. Some children will thrive socially in groups while other children can prefer sole play and quieter spaces.

The increase in understanding of neurodiversity has helped encourage educators to move past seeing what a child cannot do and recognised the differences in what children are learning, communicating and behaviours that are natural to human diversity (Pellicano and Den Houting, 2022). This aligns closely with the Curriculum for Wales and Birth to 5 Matters objectives. (Early Education, 2021).

Instead of expecting children to adapt to the systems, practitioners can create and encourage environments that will help a range of strengths and needs to allow children to express themselves freely how they choose.

Environment

When encouraging change with the curriculum, the learning environment needs to be taken into consideration for a positive outcome. Children will struggle to participate if the learning environment has barriers affecting their involvement.

Sensory Processing -

Many early years settings are busy, stimulating environments, while this can be a positive for some children, for others it can cause a sensory overload where they may become distressed. Some adjustments can be made such as: -

- Quiet dedicated areas for regulation
- Soft comforting furniture and seating
- Making areas clearly marked for learning spaces
- Opportunity to use the outdoors for learning.

Research suggests that environments that have had thought, care and understanding can support children's wellbeing and positive engagement (UNICEF, 2019; Estyn, 2023).

Accessibility and independence

Having an inclusive environment helps to promote independence by making sure the resources are accessible to all children so that they can use them in a meaningful and useful way. Practitioners should consider: -

- Are the resources available at a child's height?
- Can all the children access the outdoors if they freely choose?
- Are there visuals to help children when they are needed?

It is vital to have designed strategies in place especially if there are children with specific needs that all the children are planned for when providing children with provision.

Relationships

With environments being a key contributor to practise, relationships can be the foundation in early years practise. Children learn best when they feel safe and secure and understood (Bowlby, 1988). Having positive relationships and interactions can support children's confidence, wellbeing and willingness to participate in new experiences (Page, 2018).

This is an important aspect when working with children with ALN or Neurodivergence. Before interventions can take place, it is up to the practitioners to get to know the children so that it can be tailored to what the child's interest may be and work with their strengths to improve the outcomes.

The curriculum for Wales emphasises the importance of having a sense of belonging and meaningful relationships can determine learning and progression outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022).

In practice, this means even with all the effective provision and planning, it is also equally important to create an everyday atmosphere that every child feels seen, valued and understood.

Observation and intervention

When a child presents as disengaged, practitioners will feel the need to act quickly out of pressure. However, observation is a valuable tool when carrying out play-based learning. When a practitioner notices a change in behaviour they might consider asking:

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- What is the child trying to communicate in their way?
- What interests may the child be presenting?
- What way does the child learn best?

Birth to 5 Matters states that it is important to observe children when children are in the middle of their meaningful states of play and engagement rather than focusing on a tick sheet for developmental outcomes (Early Education, 2021).

Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales assessment guidance strives to focus on understanding individual progression and from that data, supporting future learning opportunities rather than fixed milestones (Welsh Government, 2022). Observation gives practitioners the ability to see children's strengths and help to find opportunities to provide support where needed without the heavy attraction to what a child does not know.

Professional learning matters

To be capable of implementing Play-Based Curriculum effectively, consistent and frequent professional learning is essential. Practitioners have reported having more positive attitudes with the principle of inclusion, but they understand that this can sometimes be difficult when supporting individuals with complex needs from time to time (Lindsay, 2016).

Effective professional learning may include:

- Collaboration with other practitioners for new perspectives.
- Having access to expertise when in need of support.
- Having up to date information
- Having close relationships with families to understand the whole picture and build trusting relationships.

Research has found that when professionals continue to develop their skills as an ongoing process, this has a far greater impact on practise than one off events (Estyn, 2023). Importantly family is a vital role. Parents or carers have a greater knowledge about a child's strengths and interests and what support may need which can provide practitioners with the information to help a child when they are being exposed to a new learning environment.

Play does not always have to be with set or expensive equipment; often simple and small resources can make a great difference. This may look like: -

- Following with the child's interests
- Visual supports
- Open-ended resources
- Opportunities for calm spaces

The setting should not have a set goal of every child to play and engage in the exact same way. The only goal that should want to be achieved by practitioners is that every child can have meaningful experiences to engage and learn in their environment.

Play-based curricula will continue to grow and evolve and at the centre and inclusion must remain a priority during implementation. The curriculum for Wales gives practitioners an opportunity to move past the basic and baseline levels of measuring progression and learning to understand holistically the development of children (Welsh Government, 2022).

However, policy alone is not enough to ensure inclusion is in everyday practise. Provision and meaningful play opportunities with relegation practitioners, ongoing professional learning and environments that have taken into consideration diversity and designed appropriately based of the need. There is great emphasis on remembering that there is not such a thing as a typical child. Every child has their own unique strengths and experiences to reflect how they view the world. If play is for every child that inclusion must reflect and influence the decisions practitioners make.

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