

ECEY6010

Early Years Curricula

I have not used any AI in this assignment.

Contents

Section one

Critically analyse the challenges of implementing play-based curricula.

Section Two

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.

Section Three

Write a blog suitable for a professional publication (for example, Nursery World, Small Talk) linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum/curriculum changes.

References

Section One

According to the Welsh Government (2007; 2024) education in Wales is a publicly funded system in which schooling is compulsory and free for children between the ages of 3 and 16 and highlights that education enables children to develop the knowledge, skills, values and understanding needed to participate effectively in society. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2024) explains that the Curriculum for Wales refers to the planned learning experiences, teaching approaches and objectives that shape children's development and learning outcomes and points out that within early years education the Curriculum is particularly significant as it supports children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development during their early years. The Welsh Government (2024) set out framework for early childhood play, learning and care that focuses on supporting children's holistic development and suggests the approach promotes children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development through play based experiences that support wellbeing and lifelong learning. The Welsh Government (2024) recognises that early childhood is a key stage of growth and development and is shaped by children's experiences, environments and relationships and offer children in Wales a play based curriculum that adopts a child centred approach that promotes learning through exploration, creativity and interaction. Influenced by theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (cited Veraska and Samuelsson, 2022) play-based learning recognises play as an essential aspect of child development rather than simply recreation. The Welsh Government (2024) emphasises that practitioners should support learning through purposeful play experiences that encourage children to actively engage with their environment, develop problem solving skills and construct knowledge through meaningful interactions. The framework is also underpinned by children's rights and aligns with UNICEF (1992) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [hereafter UNCRC], particularly Article 28 that states children have the right to an education and Article 31 that states children have the right to play.

This assignment will critically analyse the challenges of implementing play based curricula in early years settings. Section one will examine early years curricula and the theoretical principles underpinning play based learning exploring the

Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales, comparing and analysing the strengths and limitations of each. Section two will discuss assessment and accountability challenges within play-based approaches. Finally, Section three will present a reflective blog exploring screen time and debates surrounding play based practice.

According to the Welsh Government (2015) the Foundation Phase was introduced in Wales in 2010 and was a statutory Curriculum for children aged three to seven that promoted creative, enjoyable and effective learning. The framework was underpinned by the UNCRC (1992) and the Welsh Government's seven core aims which aimed to ensure that all children had the best start in life, access to education, good health, opportunities for play and a safe and supportive environment. Similarly, Waters (2015) states the Foundation Phase was a formal approach to early years education for children under seven that promoted a play based approach to learning and points out the emphasis of the role of practitioners as facilitators of learning and focused on meeting individual children's needs, supporting personal development, wellbeing, self-esteem and learning through first hand experiences and play.

The Donaldson (2015) report highlighted challenges within the Foundation Phase framework and pointed out that schools should do more than simply pass on knowledge and should instead help learners develop a broad range of skills and values. The report highlighted concerns that the Foundation Phase was outdated and no longer adequately prepared learners for the demands of modern society. It also argued that schools should do more than simply pass on knowledge and should instead help learners develop a broad range of skills and values. Similarly, Evans (2022) article highlights concerns that the previous Curriculum was outdated and no longer adequately prepared learners for the demands of modern society. However, pointed out that there were real foundational strengths that helped build the New Curriculum for Wales. Donaldson (2015) and Wrightwick (2016) suggest that international comparisons played an important role in the decision to introduce the Curriculum for Wales and point out that studies such as the OECD's programme for international student assessment [hereafter PISA] which compares student achievement across different countries and suggests results from Wales raised concerns about educational standards. As a result, improving these outcomes

became a key reason for educational reform and the development of the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022).

The Curriculum for Wales places the learner at the centre of the educational process and promotes authentic, meaningful learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). It recognises that young children learn most effectively through active hands on experiences that are meaningful and enjoyable. The framework emphasises the importance of child led exploration and curiosity and points out that practitioners should aim to support learning interactions in carefully planned and stimulating environments. According to the Welsh Government (2024) a key feature of the Curriculum for Wales is its holistic child-centred approach which acknowledges that children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive development are interconnected and states that learning experiences should be designed to support the whole child with well being, relationships and a sense of belonging seen as fundamental foundations for learning. This aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory which emphasises that a child's development is influenced by the interactions between the individual and the various environmental systems that surround them including family, school and the wider community.

Both frameworks are influenced by the theorists such as Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (cited Veraksa and Samuelsson, 2022) whose ideas are reflected throughout their emphasis on play, exploration and child centred learning. Piaget's influence can be seen in the focus on children actively constructing knowledge through hands on experiences and discovery, while Vygotsky's theories are evident in the importance placed on social interaction, collaboration and the supportive role of practitioners in extending learning. Together, their theories underpin the holistic approach adopted by both Curriculum recognising that children learn most effectively through meaningful experiences, positive relationships and active engagement with their environment (Welsh Government, 2022).

According to a study conducted by the Welsh Government (2026) one of the key similarities between the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales is their shared pedagogical approach and point out that practitioners reported that Curriculum development has continued to build upon the principles underpinning the Foundation Phase with many also drawing upon the non-maintained curriculum to

inform practice within early years settings. They state that both frameworks aim to support a child centred approach to education with hands on learning experiences for the children. Furthermore, they both promote the holistic development of children rather than focusing solely on academic attainment (Welsh Government, 2022). The Welsh Government (2015) Foundation Phase placed significant emphasis on learning through play as a means of exploration, creativity and problem solving. Similarly, the Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales continues to recognise the importance of play for development and states practitioners must support children's natural curiosity and promote deeper engagement with learning. Furthermore, both Welsh Government (2015) and Welsh Government (2022) frameworks position practitioners as facilitators of learning using natural teachable moments rather than direct teaching. The Government point out that practitioners should aim to create rich learning environments that encourage children to investigate, explore and construct their own understanding through interaction with others and the world around them.

However, there are notable differences. According to the Welsh Government (2018) Foundation Phase was specifically designed for children aged three to seven and centred predominantly on play based learning. In contrast, according to the Welsh Government (2022) and Evans (2022) the Curriculum for Wales provides a continuum of learning from ages three to sixteen and places greater emphasis on progression across six areas of learning and experience. The Government point out that while play remains important particularly in the early years the Curriculum for Wales adopts a broader approach that incorporates cross curricular skills and the development of the four purposes (Welsh Government, 2022). Furthermore, the Curriculum for Wales gives schools greater flexibility over curriculum design enabling them to develop learning experiences that support progression towards the Four Purposes (Welsh Government, 2022). Schools are expected to design their own curriculum and assessment arrangements in collaboration with learners, parents, carers and the wider community (Welsh Government, 2026).

The use of the environment is another key similarity between the two frameworks. The Welsh Government (2015) Foundation Phase strongly advocated the use of both indoor and outdoor environments as valuable resources for learning encouraging children to engage with their surroundings through exploration and

investigation. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales promotes outdoor learning and authentic experiences that help children connect with their environment and the wider world (Welsh Government, 2022). This reflects the principles of the Reggio Emilia (cited Rinaldi, 2021) approach which views the environment as the third teacher and highlights the importance of rich and meaningful learning spaces in supporting children's development.

The Welsh Government (2014) highlight challenges including practitioner confidence and understanding and point out that successful implementation requires practitioners to move away from traditional teacher-led approach towards more child-centred and led pedagogies. Similarly, an evaluation of the Foundation Phase found that the quality and implementation of outdoor learning varied considerably between classrooms and schools (Welsh Government, 2014). In the same vein, research by Walsh, McGuinness and Sproule (2017) early years practitioners vary in how they support children's play, with some showing uncertainty about their role. As a result, some practitioners take a largely passive approach, while others become overly involved and direct children's play. The authors therefore propose a framework to help practitioners adopt a more balanced approach to supporting learning through play. Recognising the uncertainty surrounding practitioners roles within play based learning the Welsh Government (2023) introduced a quality framework for practice to provide clearer guidance on how learning through play can be effectively implemented in early years settings. The framework states that practitioners should act as facilitators of learning creating and maintaining carefully planned, stimulating and child centred environments that enable children to play, explore and learn. They point out that rather than directing children's activities practitioners are encouraged to support learning through thoughtful planning, observation and responsive interactions. However, ESTYN (2017) reported that inconsistencies in the implementation of play-based learning still exist and suggested that schools in Wales adopt a more systematic approach to professional development to ensure that all staff have a consistent understanding of effective play-based practice.

In summary, both the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales strongly support play-based, child centred learning. However, challenges remain in how they are implemented. Research shows that practitioners often have different understandings of play-based pedagogy, uncertainty about their role in children's

play and variation in the quality of learning environments and outdoor provision. While guidance and professional frameworks exist differences in interpretation and confidence still affect consistency in practice.

Section Two

According to Teachers TV (2015) the term unique child means that every child is different and has their own individual personality. Similarly, Birth to 5 Matters (2026) states that each child has unique strengths, interests, backgrounds and learning needs and points out that children develop at different rates and in different ways. The Welsh Government (2023) supports this concept by recognising and valuing the uniqueness of every child and providing engaging experiences that allow children to be themselves. They claim this approach promotes child centred play based learning that is shaped by children's individual interests and experiences. It is underpinned by the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1992) specifically Article 8 which recognises children's right to their own identity and Article 13 which supports their right to freely express themselves.

According to the Department for Education (2024) assessment in early years education refers to the processes used to observe, record and understand children's learning and development and suggests assessment helps practitioners identify any gaps in learning early and provide appropriate support for the child. Becker, Rigaud and Epstein (2022) agree and state assessment can be used to inform planning and support progression. However, point out that children develop at different rates and may not follow a typical pattern of development. Furthermore, the authors state that assessment should be seen as a way of understanding each child's unique learning and development and should consider the unique child. The Welsh Government (2022) support this and state that considering the unique child in assessment is essential because it ensures that children are not judged against rigid expectations but instead are supported according to their individual developmental journey.

The Welsh Government (2022) states that the Curriculum for Wales strongly reflects the principle of the unique child through its emphasis on progression, inclusion and child centred learning and promotes the idea that assessment should

support individual development rather than measure children against fixed age related expectations. Furthermore, they claim the Curriculum encourages practitioners to observe children in authentic contexts and use observations to inform personalised learning pathways. This is echoed in the Welsh Government (2023) assessment for settings that states the Curriculum aims to support holistic development by placing the needs of all children at the centre of pedagogical practice and provide high quality early learning experiences that nurture each child's development and enable them to achieve their full potential. This approach aligns with theorist Piaget (cited Veraksa and Samuelsson, 2022) who suggests that children construct knowledge through active hands on exploration and experience. It also reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (cited Smidt, 2009) which emphasises the importance of social interaction and the Zone of Proximal Development [hereafter ZPD] where children learn best with appropriate adult or peer support. Both theorists recognise that children develop in different ways and at different rates and note that progress cannot be accurately measured using the same standard for everyone. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (cited Haves, Toole and Halpenny, 2017) reinforces the idea of the unique child by highlighting how development is influenced by multiple environmental systems including family, school and wider society. This links to progression and assessment in the Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales that state practitioners must consider the whole child and the factors that may affect their learning and development and suggests ongoing assessment helps identify each child's individual progress and ensures that learning experiences are adapted to meet their unique needs and circumstances.

According to the Welsh Government (2022) assessment report the Foundation Phase is supported by the Foundation Phase Profile which helps practitioners track children's development and establish a baseline of their abilities when they enter reception and state the Curriculum was designed as a progressive framework that meets the individual needs of all learners allowing children to progress through their learning at their own pace. The Welsh Government (2015) Curriculum for Wales Foundation Phase framework states that one key assessment method is through observation and suggests practitioners observe children during play and record evidence of learning through notes, photographs and learning

stories using a structured framework to allow the practitioner to track the children's progress over time and inform future planning. Estyn (2017) would agree and claims that successful schools in Wales use a range of assessment including observations and points out that practitioners should provide regular opportunities for pupils to improve their work through responsive oral and age appropriate written feedback using a range of assessment for learning strategies to engage pupils, check understanding and encourage self assessment. This runs in the veins of the Welsh Government (2015) Foundation Phase framework which aims to capture children's learning in an authentic context rather than through formal testing and points out that it allows practitioners to see how children interact, problem-solve, communicate and develop skills in real-time. This also aligns with the theorist Maria Montessori who suggests children learn through their senses and environment during play and claims that free movement in child led play allows children to become more engaged (Maria Montessori approach, 2026).

Assessment within the Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales is guided by progression Steps and descriptions of learning rather than predetermined outcomes. The framework emphasises assessment as an ongoing process that focuses on individual learner progression and claim it encourages practitioners to draw upon professional judgement, observations, learner voice and a range of evidence to evaluate progress across the six areas of learning and experience. The Welsh Government (2022) states that the Curriculum for Wales recognises that children learn and develop at different rates and states that it encourages practitioners to use their professional judgement to support each child's individual learning journey. Furthermore, it points out that children should be given time to revisit, practise and strengthen their learning helping them to build secure foundations and develop confidence and independence and suggest progress is seen when children increase their knowledge and understanding and when they are able to apply their learning in both familiar and new situations. The Welsh Government (2023) assessment framework states that learner progression is supported by five key principles which aims to increase effectiveness, broaden the breadth and depth of knowledge, deepen understanding, refine and apply skills and make connections between learning experiences in different contexts.

Although both the Welsh Government (2015) Foundation Phase and the Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales aim to support individual learner progression concerns remain about the fairness of assessment practices for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Tierney (2015) argues that fairness in assessment remains a challenge because children learn, develop and demonstrate their abilities in different ways. The author highlights that although assessment aims to be fair interpretations of fairness can vary particularly when meeting the diverse needs of learners including those with ALN.

A key strength of the Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales assessment approach is its emphasis on formative assessment for learning where ongoing observation and feedback are used to identify next steps in learning rather than relying heavily on summative testing. Estyn (2017) states that assessment should inform teaching and support learner progress and add that it can particularly benefit learners with ALN by providing more flexible and individual ways to demonstrate their achievements. However, Estyn (2017) highlights several challenges with assessment systems in schools and states that they can become overly complex and time consuming with many observations providing limited evidence of learning or progress and point out that this is particularly significant for learners with ALN as inconsistent assessment practices may result in unreliable judgements about their progress and needs. In the same vein, the UK Government (2024) adds that practitioners can lose sight of the purpose of assessment and can become more about collecting the data than improving outcomes.

Waters (2016) highlights that practitioners often struggle to develop a clear understanding of key educational concepts such as structured play, active learning and the difference between child led and practitioner led learning and points out that this lack of shared understanding can lead to inconsistencies in assessment practices. Similarly, Dweck's (2017) research shows that learners' beliefs about their abilities can affect how well they learn and achieve. When assessment relies mainly on teacher observations and judgements, feedback may sometimes make learners feel that they cannot improve. This is particularly important for learners with ALN, who may already have low confidence because of the difficulties they experience and comparisons with other learners. These concerns are reinforced by Welsh Government (2023) research found that placing learners into ability groups can have

a negative impact on those in lower attaining groups and suggest to make learning more inclusive the research suggests using flexible groups involving learners in decisions about their placement and reducing the use of fixed ability groups. It also recommends that teachers have a better understanding of the research on attainment grouping and that more studies are carried out to explore its effects on learners

Both the Welsh Government (2023) Curriculum for Wales and the Welsh Government (2015) Foundation Phase support the concept of the unique child. The Curriculum for Wales reflects this by placing the learner at the centre of education and encourages schools to provide learning experiences that meet individual needs and supports progression rather than expecting all children to achieve the same outcomes at the same time. Furthermore, assessment is designed to help practitioners understand each learner's progress and next steps rather than compare them with others. Similarly, the Foundation Phase uses observation based assessment allowing practitioners to build a picture of each child's learning through everyday activities and play. This approach values children's individual interests, abilities and stages of development recognising that learning is not always linear.

In conclusion, both the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales support the concept of the unique child by recognising that children develop at different rates and have individual strengths, needs and experiences. However, challenges remain particularly regarding consistency, fairness and the assessment of learners with ALN. Therefore, while these approaches promote inclusive and child centred practice, effective implementation depends on practitioners having a clear understanding of assessment and using it consistently to support all learners.

Section three

Are screens replacing play? Did we even see this happening?

Have we become so connected to technology that children are losing the opportunity to simply play?

In today's digital world screens have become a normal part of childhood. From smartphones and tablets to televisions and gaming devices children are spending more time than ever engaged with technology. According to the UK Parliament (2024) and the Department for Education (2026) children's screen use increased by 52% between 2020 and 2022 with many children being introduced to screens before their first birthday and claim that while technology can provide educational and entertainment benefits state concerns are growing about the impact excessive screen time is having on children's wellbeing, behaviour and opportunities for play.

The World Health Organisation (2019) recommends that children aged two to four spend no more than one hour a day using screens. However, point out that this can be difficult to achieve in today's digital world. They say that one in five children aged three to four already own their own mobile device and add that children get older their time online continues to rise with those aged five to fifteen spending significantly more time using screens. These trends show just how quickly screens have become woven into everyday childhood experiences.

Why Play Matters

According to Save the Children (2024) the early years of a child's life are a unique and critical period of growth, exploration and development and state during this time the brain develops at an extraordinary pace forming the foundations for future learning, behaviour and wellbeing. They claim that every interaction and playful moment helps shape a child's understanding of the world.

The Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for Wales states the importance of nurturing early learning and development and puts emphasis on play based learning and suggests children learn most effectively when they are actively engaged with their environment and have opportunities to explore through hands-on experiences.

This view is supported by Friedrich Froebel who states play is the purest form of childhood development and allows children to freely express their thoughts and feelings. Froebel argued that children make sense of the world through direct experiences and interactions with people and their environment (Froebel trust, no date). Similarly, Piaget (cited in Veraska and Samuelsson, 2022) believed that children learn best through active exploration and hands on experiences rather than simply watching and observing. From this perspective spending too much time on screens may reduce opportunities for the meaningful play and real world experiences that support children's thinking and learning.

Outdoor play is particularly important within a play based Curriculum and activities such as climbing, running, building dens and imaginative role play encourage children to take risks, solve problems and develop confidence (Welsh Government, 2022). However, as screen use continues to increase, concerns are growing that children are spending less time engaging in these valuable experiences.

The Impact of Screen Time on Children's Wellbeing

According to the UK Government (2026) research suggests that excessive screen time can have a negative impact on children's overall wellbeing and point out that while screens can provide entertainment and access to information, prolonged use has been associated with a range of physical, emotional and developmental concerns.

The UK Government (2026) has introduced clear and practical guidance to help parents manage their children's screen time and suggest research shows that 24% of parents of 3 to 5 year olds struggle to control screen time while 98% of two year olds use screens every day highlighting the need for guidance. Massaroni *et al.* (2024) argue that excessive screen exposure during the early years can negatively affect children's cognitive and language development. Their findings suggest that prolonged passive screen use particularly watching television can reduce children's verbal interactions and increase the risk of language delays and point out that children who spend significant amounts of time engaged with screens may have fewer opportunities to participate in conversations ask questions and develop communication skills through social interaction.

Muppalla and Vuppalapati (2023) would agree and suggest that too much screen time can reduce the amount and quality of time children spend interacting with parents and caregivers and suggest this matters because strong relationships and regular communication help children learn and develop. In addition, the Mental Health Foundation (2018) found that too much screen time can be linked to sleep problems, obesity, anxiety, depression and behavioural difficulties. These issues can affect children's wellbeing and make it harder for them to learn, play and take part in everyday activities and shows that the effects of excessive screen time can impact not only children's physical health but also their overall development. Another concern is that some children can become very attached to screens and may become upset or display challenging behaviour when devices are taken away. Although researchers continue to debate whether this should be described as an addiction, studies suggest that some digital content is designed to keep children engaged for long periods of time encouraging increased screen use (Muppalla, 2023).

Finding a Healthy Balance

The Welsh Government (no date) guidance highlights key signs that a child may be spending too much time on screens and state these can include children losing interest in other activities, preferring screens over play, ignoring others while using devices and showing upset or unusual behaviour when screens are taken away. The guidance states that if these signs appear parents should use positive language, replace screen time with other activities and involve children in the process.

Countries such as Australia have already introduced social media restrictions for children under the age of 16. In addition, according to The Intentional Parent (2026) Sweden has announced plans to reduce the use of screens in schools and instead invest in traditional learning resources such as books and pens following concerns about the negative impact that excessive screen use can have on children's development and learning.

Parents, carers and educators have a responsibility to ensure that technology complements rather than replaces play. By prioritising outdoor experiences, creative activities and social interactions, adults can create opportunities for children to

develop the skills and knowledge that emerge naturally through play (Welsh Government, 2022).

Conclusion

Technology is now a normal part of everyday life and can be helpful for children's learning when used well. However, the main issue is not technology itself but how much time children spend on screens and what they miss out on.

Research shows too much screen time can affect children's wellbeing, behaviour and development. It may reduce opportunities for talking, socialising and play and can also lead to physical and emotional health problems.

Therefore, parents, carers and educators should encourage a healthy balance by setting appropriate limits on screen use and providing regular opportunities for outdoor play, creativity and face to face interactions.

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