

Section One:

Play-based learning has become a crucial asset in early childhood education, it has been positively acknowledged for its effectiveness in promoting holistic development in early years. Play based approaches are child led learning routes in which children choose their methods of play and learn through play. The various frameworks and pedagogical strategies of both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in Wales stand out for their commitment to child led learning. The Reggio Emilia approach is an approach that is considered child centred where children experience learning through play to allow children to explore and express through a play based approach, (Rianldi, 2021). The Reggio Emilia approach encourages independence in children, encouraging children to be competent individuals who are aware of their rights, (Senent, Kelley, and Abo-Zena, 2022). Reggio approach is centred around children becoming creative through their learning, encouraging individuals to express themselves in multiple ways, through drama, storytelling, drawing, using imagination and creativity within their minds to see the world as they see it. Reggio record their evidence through mainly pictures and artwork to make learning a visual for both children and parents with a holistic understanding of their progress, (Thornton and Brunton, 2015). However, critics such as (Aljabreen, 2020) question the ability of statistically recording the developmental progress of children. Although (Aljabreen, 2020) discusses the links between other similar approaches within the education system they have different observation approaches of how they record and although they are very similar in that the children are leading the way of their own education freely, they also discuss that Montessori and Waldof agree with some of the child centred approach. Play-based learning has become a fundamental principle of early childhood education across many countries because of its recognised contribution to children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework positions play as central to children's learning, encouraging practitioners to provide rich, stimulating environments where children actively explore, investigate and construct knowledge (Department for Education (DfE), 2024). Theoretical perspectives from Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner further support the view that children learn most effectively through meaningful interactions with people, materials and their environment. Despite widespread recognition of its benefits, implementing a

play-based curriculum presents significant challenges. Early years practitioners frequently encounter tensions between policy expectations, accountability measures, parental perceptions, limited resources, workforce competence and children's diverse learning needs. These barriers can reduce opportunities for high-quality play and encourage more formal approaches to teaching. Understanding Play-Based Curricula Play-based curricula use play as the primary vehicle through which children develop knowledge, skills and understanding. Rather than relying on direct instruction, practitioners carefully design environments that promote exploration, creativity, communication and problem-solving. According to Piaget (1962), children actively construct knowledge through interactions with their surroundings, while Vygotsky (1978) argued that social interaction and adult scaffolding support learning within the zone of proximal development. These theories underpin contemporary early years practice, where adults facilitate rather than dominate children's learning. The EYFS framework reflects these principles by encouraging practitioners to balance child-initiated play with purposeful adult-guided experiences (DfE, 2024). However, translating these ideals into everyday practice is considerably more complex than policy documents suggest. Policy pressures and school readiness one of the most significant barriers to implementing play-based curricula is increasing pressure for school readiness. Governments seek measurable educational outcomes, resulting in greater emphasis on literacy, numeracy and assessment from an early age. While school readiness is intended to support successful transitions into formal education, critics argue that it has narrowed the curriculum and reduced opportunities for exploratory play. Wood (2014) argues that accountability systems often prioritise measurable academic outcomes over holistic development. Practitioners may therefore feel compelled to introduce structured teaching activities rather than allowing children sufficient time for sustained play. This creates tension between developmental theory and educational policy. Furthermore, Ofsted inspections can influence pedagogical decisions. Although inspection frameworks acknowledge the importance of play, practitioners may perceive pressure to demonstrate visible learning outcomes, leading to increased adult direction. Brooker (2011) suggests that practitioners frequently experience conflict between supporting children's interests and meeting external expectations. Critically, supporters of school readiness argue that structured teaching can reduce educational inequalities by ensuring children develop essential literacy and numeracy skills before entering

primary school. However, evidence indicates that excessive formal instruction may undermine children's motivation, creativity and independent thinking (Whitebread et al., 2017). Therefore, balancing academic preparation with meaningful play remains a significant implementation challenge. Practitioner knowledge and professional confidence successful implementation depends heavily upon practitioners' knowledge and understanding of play pedagogy. While many educators value play, research suggests that confidence in facilitating high-quality play varies considerably. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) argues that effective play-based learning requires sophisticated pedagogical skills. Practitioners must know when to observe, when to intervene and when to extend children's thinking without dominating their play. Assessment and accountability assessment represents another major challenge for play-based curricula. Traditional assessment methods are often incompatible with child-led learning because developmental progress occurs gradually and differs between individual children. The EYFS promotes observational assessment, enabling practitioners to document children's learning during everyday activities (DfE, 2024). However, collecting meaningful observations requires considerable time and professional judgement. Wood (2014) argues that excessive documentation can distract practitioners from engaging directly with children. Instead of supporting learning, assessment may become an administrative exercise driven by accountability requirements. Furthermore, children's learning through play often involves complex skills such as creativity, collaboration, resilience and problem solving. These outcomes are difficult to measure using standardised approaches. Consequently, practitioners may prioritise observable academic skills over broader developmental outcomes. Parental perceptions and expectations parents play a vital role in supporting early years education, yet misunderstandings about play frequently create barriers to implementation. Many parents associate learning with formal teaching methods, worksheets and direct instruction. Consequently, they may perceive play as recreational rather than educational. Pyle, DeLuca and Danniels (2017) found that some parents express concern when children spend significant time playing rather than completing traditional academic tasks. These perceptions can place practitioners under pressure to demonstrate academic progress through more structured activities. This is particularly evident among parents concerned about school readiness and future educational achievement. However, effective communication can strengthen parental understanding. Sharing observations,

explaining learning intentions and involving families in play-based activities can increase appreciation of play as a legitimate educational approach. The challenge therefore lies not only in implementing play-based pedagogy but also in educating families about its developmental value. Balancing child led and adult led learning perhaps the greatest pedagogical challenge involves achieving an appropriate balance between child-led and adult-led learning. Purely child-led play may not always provide opportunities for developing specific knowledge or addressing misconceptions. Conversely, excessive adult direction can reduce children's autonomy, creativity and intrinsic motivation. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) introduced the concept of sustained shared thinking, whereby adults extend children's understanding through carefully timed interactions. This approach requires practitioners to possess high levels of professional expertise. Critics of exclusively play-based curricula argue that some children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, benefit from more explicit teaching of language and early literacy skills. Research by Sylva et al. (2010) suggests that high-quality settings successfully integrate purposeful adult guidance within child-centred learning environments. Therefore, implementation should not be viewed as a choice between play and teaching but as an informed balance between both approaches. Play based curricula remain one of the most effective approaches to supporting holistic development during the early years. Strong theoretical foundations and extensive research demonstrate that play enhances children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development while fostering creativity, resilience and lifelong learning dispositions. However, implementing play based curricula present substantial challenges. Policy pressures surrounding school readiness, practitioner knowledge, workforce shortages, limited resources, assessment demands, parental expectations and inclusion all influence the quality of implementation. These barriers often create tensions between educational ideals and everyday practice. Critically, many of these challenges arise not from play itself but from systemic factors within education. Successful implementation therefore requires sustained investment in practitioner training, improved funding, supportive policy frameworks and stronger partnerships with families. Rather than replacing play with formal instruction, policymakers and practitioners should seek balanced approaches that preserve children's right to learn through meaningful play while ensuring they are well prepared for future education.

Section Two.

The EYFS identifies the Unique Child as one who is "constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured" (DfE, 2024). This principle draws upon developmental theories from Piaget, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, recognising that learning occurs through interactions with people, environments and experiences. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) emphasises that children's development is influenced by multiple environmental systems, including family, community and wider society. Likewise, Vygotsky (1978) argues that social interaction and adult support within the zone of proximal development enable children to achieve beyond their independent capabilities. These perspectives reinforce the need for assessment approaches that consider children's social and cultural contexts rather than focusing solely on developmental milestones. The Unique Child principle therefore challenges practitioners to recognise diversity in learning trajectories. Children develop unevenly across developmental domains, and factors such as disability, language acquisition, adverse childhood experiences and cultural expectations influence development (Nutbrown, 2021). Consequently, assessment systems should support individual learning journeys rather than comparing children against rigid developmental expectations. Assessment in early childhood education aims to understand children's learning, inform planning and identify additional support needs. Within play based curricula, assessment is intended to occur naturally through observation rather than formal testing. Observation remains the cornerstone of assessment within the EYFS. Practitioners observe children during self-initiated and adult guided play to understand their interests, abilities and developmental progress (DfE, 2024). Observation allows practitioners to gather authentic evidence of children's learning within meaningful contexts. Carr's (2001) learning stories approach illustrates a strengths-based method of assessment. Rather than focusing upon deficits, Learning Stories document children's dispositions towards learning, such as curiosity, perseverance and confidence. This approach aligns closely with the concept of the Unique Child by recognising individual achievements and valuing children's voices. Similarly, formative assessment enables practitioners to adapt provision according to children's emerging interests (Black and Wiliam, 2009). Responsive planning ensures learning experiences remain child-centred rather than predetermined by assessment

objectives. However, observational assessment has limitations. Subjectivity may influence practitioners' interpretations, particularly where unconscious bias exists regarding gender, behaviour or cultural expectations (Basford and Bath, 2014). Children who are quieter or less verbally expressive may also receive fewer recorded observations, resulting in incomplete assessments. The EYFS profile represents the principal statutory summative assessment at the end of the reception year (DfE, 2024). Practitioners judge whether children have achieved expected levels across the early learning goals. Summative assessment provides valuable information for transition into key stage one and enables schools to identify children requiring additional support. However, critics argue that summative assessment risks narrowing the curriculum by encouraging practitioners to prioritise measurable outcomes rather than rich play experiences (Roberts-Holmes, 2015). Furthermore, assigning children to expected standards may conflict with the Unique Child principle by encouraging comparison rather than recognising diverse developmental pathways. Dynamic assessment, where practitioners evaluate children's learning potential with adult support, reflects Vygotsky's theories more effectively than static assessment (Lidz and Peña, 2009). This approach avoids underestimating children's abilities and better supports inclusive practice. Many early years settings use learning journals containing observations, photographs and children's work. Digital platforms such as Tapestry facilitate collaboration between practitioners and families, allowing parents to contribute observations from home. Learning journals promote holistic assessment by capturing children's interests across multiple contexts. They strengthen partnerships with parents, supporting the EYFS principle of positive relationships. The statutory Progress Check at Age Two identifies strengths and areas requiring support before children enter preschool education (DfE, 2024). Early identification enables timely intervention, particularly for speech, language and communication difficulties. However, developmental variability during toddlerhood means many children naturally progress at different rates. Overemphasis on identifying delays may label normal developmental variation, potentially conflicting with recognition of the Unique Child. Piaget (1952) proposed universal stages of cognitive development. His work has profoundly influenced play-based learning by highlighting children's active construction of knowledge. However, Piaget's stage theory has been criticised for underestimating children's abilities and assuming universal developmental sequences (Donaldson, 1978). Contemporary research

suggests children's learning is more flexible and influenced by social interaction than Piaget proposed. Consequently, rigid application of stage theories may overlook individual strengths and cultural diversity. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) emphasised learning through social interaction. The zone of proximal development highlights children's potential rather than current performance. This perspective aligns strongly with the Unique Child because assessment focuses upon what children can achieve with support rather than comparing independent performance against fixed milestones. Assessment, progress tracking and developmental models all contribute valuable information about children's learning. Nevertheless, tensions arise between individualised practice and accountability. On one hand, developmental frameworks provide practitioners with useful reference points for identifying additional needs and planning appropriate experiences. Without assessment, children requiring early intervention may remain unidentified. Therefore, the reliance upon developmental checklists risks promoting a deficit perspective in which children's differences become viewed as problems requiring correction. Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that increasing performativity within early years education has shifted practice towards data production rather than child-centred learning. Practitioners may feel pressured to collect evidence that satisfies inspection requirements instead of observing children naturally. Furthermore, developmental norms often reflect Western assumptions regarding childhood. Rogoff (2003) highlights considerable cross-cultural variation in children's learning experiences, suggesting universal developmental expectations may disadvantage children from diverse backgrounds. The principle of the Unique Child remains fundamental to effective early years practice. Assessment, progress tracking and developmental models should enhance understanding of children's individual learning journeys rather than constrain them within predetermined expectations. Observation based assessment, Learning Stories and the Leuven Scales (Laevers, 2005) demonstrate approaches that align closely with play based curricula by valuing children's interests, wellbeing and strengths. In contrast, overly data-driven tracking systems and rigid developmental models risk conflicting with child-centred philosophy by encouraging comparison and standardisation.

Section Three.

Play-Based Curriculum Change - Getting It Right for Every Child

The early years sector has seen significant changes in recent years, from the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to increasing expectations around school readiness and accountability. Amid these developments, one principle remains unchanged: young children learn best through play. Yet implementing or revising a play-based curriculum is not simply about providing toys or free-choice activities. It requires thoughtful planning, reflective practice and a shared commitment to understanding how children learn. So, what should early years leaders and practitioners consider when implementing a play-based curriculum?

Start with the Child, Not the Curriculum - A successful play-based curriculum begins with the children, rather than a predetermined list of activities. The EYFS (Department for Education (DfE), 2024) identifies the *Unique Child* as central to effective practice, recognising that every child develops at their own pace and brings individual experiences, interests and strengths into the learning environment. This means practitioners need to spend time observing children, listening to their ideas and understanding what motivates them. Rather than asking, "What activity should we plan next week?", practitioners might instead ask, "What are the children curious about?" or "How can we extend the learning already happening in their play?" Observation should therefore drive curriculum decisions, ensuring learning remains meaningful and responsive.

Create an Enabling Environment - The environment is often described as the "third teacher", reflecting its powerful influence on children's learning. A well-designed play environment encourages exploration, independence and creativity while supporting all areas of development. When reviewing a play-based curriculum, practitioners should consider whether their environment - encourages child-initiated play that it provides open-ended resources to reflects children's cultures and identities. Ensure that it supports children with additional needs and promotes risk-taking in safe and appropriate ways. Open-ended resources such as blocks, loose parts, natural materials and roleplay equipment encourage problem solving and imaginative thinking because they can be used in multiple ways. In contrast, highly structured resources often limit creativity by having only one intended purpose. Outdoor

provision should receive equal attention. Research consistently demonstrates that outdoor play supports physical development, wellbeing, communication and resilience (Bruce, 2021). Curriculum change should therefore consider how outdoor environments can become an extension of indoor learning rather than simply a break from it.

Supporting Practitioner Confidence - One of the greatest challenges when implementing curriculum change is ensuring practitioners understand why changes are taking place? Play based learning is sometimes misunderstood as "just playing", particularly when external pressures focus on measurable academic outcomes. Professional development is therefore essential to build confidence in explaining the educational value of play. Practitioners should understand how sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), careful questioning and sensitive interactions extend children's learning during play. Adults are not passive observers but active partners who scaffold learning without taking control. Ongoing training, opportunities for reflection and collaborative discussions allow teams to develop a shared understanding of high quality play pedagogy. Balancing child initiated and adult led learning one misconception surrounding play-based curricula is that there is no place for adult-led teaching. Effective early years practice involves a balance between child-initiated experiences and carefully planned adult interactions. Adult-led experiences can introduce new vocabulary, model skills and provide experiences children may not access independently. However, these experiences should complement not replace extended periods of uninterrupted play. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development reminds practitioners that children learn most effectively when adults provide appropriate support while allowing children to remain active participants in their own learning. Curriculum reviews should therefore ask whether the daily routine allows enough uninterrupted time for deep engagement in play.

Assessment Should Support, Not Drive, the Curriculum - Assessment is an important aspect of early years practice, but it should inform learning rather than dictate it. The revised *Development Matters* guidance (DfE, 2023) encourages practitioners to move away from extensive tracking systems and instead use professional judgement informed by meaningful observation. When implementing curriculum changes, settings should consider whether current assessment practices genuinely benefit

children or simply generate unnecessary paperwork. Learning stories, photographs, conversations with families and observational notes often provide richer evidence than lengthy checklists or excessive documentation. Reducing unnecessary recording also allows practitioners to spend more time interacting with children which is a key factor in improving learning outcomes.

Working in Partnership with Families - Families are children's first educators and remain central partners throughout early childhood. Changes to curriculum can sometimes cause anxiety for parents, particularly where play-based approaches appear less formal than traditional teaching methods. Clear communication is therefore essential. Practitioners can share observations, photographs and explanations that demonstrate the learning taking place during play. For example, a child building with blocks may simultaneously be developing mathematical reasoning, language, problem solving, collaboration and perseverance. Inviting parents to contribute children's interests, achievements and experiences from home creates continuity between home and setting while strengthening relationships.

Inclusive Practice Must Remain Central - A play-based curriculum should be accessible to every child regardless of ability, language, culture or background. Universal design, flexible environments and responsive teaching enable children with SEND, English as an Additional Language (EAL) and differing learning needs to participate fully. Practitioners should avoid assuming that all children will engage with resources in the same way. Instead, they should adapt provision, provide alternative communication methods where appropriate and recognise that children demonstrate learning differently. Inclusion is not achieved through separate activities but by ensuring every child can participate meaningfully in shared experiences.

Reflecting on Success - Implementing curriculum change is an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Regular reflection allows practitioners to consider questions such as - Are children deeply engaged in their learning? Are practitioners confident in supporting play? Does assessment genuinely improve teaching? Are children's voices influencing curriculum planning? Are families actively involved? These reflective questions help ensure that curriculum development remains focused on children's needs rather than external pressures.

To conclude - A high-quality play-based curriculum is much more than free play. It is an intentional, carefully considered approach that values children's curiosity, relationships and individual development. Successful implementation depends on confident practitioners, enabling environments, meaningful assessment and strong partnerships with families. Above all, curriculum decisions should remain rooted in the understanding that children are active, capable learners whose development cannot always be measured through standardised outcomes. In an increasingly accountability-driven education system, protecting children's right to learn through play remains one of the most important responsibilities of early years professionals. By placing children's wellbeing, interests and voices at the centre of curriculum change, settings can create learning experiences that are not only enjoyable but also deeply meaningful and developmentally appropriate.

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