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Part one

To begin, education is a process that begins from birth and continues throughout life, it supports personal, social, emotional and intellectual growth. Education helps individuals gain knowledge, skills, values and understanding that enable them to develop and participate in society (Unesco, 2026). Education can take place from various environments, these may be home, school and within the wider community to support development and gain skills to prepare for everyday life.

Furthermore, within education there is something called a curriculum. A curriculum is a framework that helps practitioners and learners understand what knowledge, skills, experiences and learning outcomes are expected to be achieved. It is a guidance for teachers and practitioners to follow so they are aware of what needs to be taught and how best to support everyone. The curriculum also provides guidance on what is appropriate for each age to enable teaching staff to plan and deliver sessions that will support the development of each age and ability (Welsh Government, no date). The curriculum ensures different areas of learning are covered, this enables everyone to develop in various areas and provides many opportunities for different interests.

Equally both education and curriculum are important, they both link together to scaffold learning and development. Education focuses on personal, economic and

social development and it enables individuals to gain further knowledge, skills and values to reach their full potential. Education provides guidance and opportunities for individuals to develop academically and personally for future success and independence to make informed decisions. Furthermore, curriculum is important as it provides professionals and learners with what is expected of them and how it should be taught. The framework ensures that the learning opportunities that are provided are relevant and taught at all levels to ensure smooth transition of development. A curriculum framework ensures consistency in both teaching and learning; this ensures that there is equality for all to access the same learning opportunities to reach targets and be successful (Welsh Government, no date).

An approach that supports the aims of education and curriculum is play-based curriculum. A play-based curriculum is an approach that supports learning and development through play, using this approach supports the development of the children's knowledge, skills and understanding of their world. This approach recognises that children learn best by following their interests and meaningful experiences by exploring and investigating through new and open opportunities (Structural Learning, 2026). During play-based learning, practitioners are there to support and extend the children's learning, this can be done by providing open-ended resources, asking open-ended questions, encouraging curiosity and creating and engaging environment that can be adjusted when necessary. The play-based approach is believed to promote holistic development and helps children to become confident and independent (Department for Education, 2023).

This assignment will now explore two play-based curricula, Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia to begin in section one, in section 2 assessment will be discussed and section 3 will feature a blog on the importance of play and implementing a play-based curriculum.

The first play-based curriculum that will be explored is the Curriculum for Wales, it is a national curriculum framework that supports children and young people. The curriculum is designed to support the needs and various abilities by following interests of the learners to create learning opportunities. The Curriculum for Wales has four purposes, these promote children to develop to be ambitious and capable learners, enterprising and creative contributors, ethical and informed citizens and healthy and confident individuals (Cwlwm, 2016). The learning is focused around the

six areas of learning and experience (AoLEs), this way of learning is through a holistic approach rather than a structured one focusing on individual subjects (Welsh Government, 2020). Within early years in Wales, the Curriculum for Wales promotes child-led learning, active engagement, exploration time and meaningful experiences to support the children's development and wellbeing (Education Wales, 2025).

The second play-based curriculum that is going to be explored is the Reggio Emilia approach. This approach is a child-centred play-based curriculum that was founded in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The theorist that created this approach is Loris Malaguzzi, the approach is based around how children are capable, curious and active when engrossed in their own learning opportunities (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2022).

Instead of children being seen as passive learners that simply follow instructions, the Reggio Emilia approach views children as independent learners that get meaningful experiences and develop most through play, exploration, creativity whilst building positive relationships with others around them (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2022).

One important idea within the Reggio Emilia approach is the "hundred languages of children". This means that children can express their thoughts, emotions and ideas in various ways (Reggio Emilia, 2015), some may do it through art, music, construction, role-play, movement and more activities. Practitioners should support this approach for children to open opportunities for them to be creative and communicate ideas in a way that feels natural to them.

Furthermore, for this approach to be successful it is essential that the environment is enabling and encouraging curiosity, independence and support socialising opportunities. The environment could have natural resources, loose parts, and many inviting play areas that support curiosity, exploration and creativity. Staff should implement their findings from observations into the environment, the interests, areas of development and open new opportunities for learning and development (Edwards et al., 1998).

Through the Reggio Emilia approach, practitioners should take notes and observe the children's play, listen to their ideas and extend their learning through discussion, open-ended questions and shared experiences. This approach requires evidence of learning, this is done through photographs, learning journey booklets and displays ensuring that the children's learning is always visible and a celebration for children and their families (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Overall the Reggio Emilia approach encourages independence, creativity and curiosity through play. The approach supports children to explore the world around them to make meaningful experiences and connections.

Whilst both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approaches offer significant benefits for children's learning and development, their implementation within educational settings in Wales comes with both opportunities and challenges. One strength of implementing a play-based Curriculum for Wales approach is that it supports holistic development. Both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach identifies that children learn most through exploration, socialisation and meaningful experiences. Through play children can develop their cognitive, social, emotional, physical and communication skills (Care Learning, 2025), this meets the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, especially as the children become ambitious, capable learners and healthy confident individuals. Play-based learning invites practitioners to observe what interests the children have, following their interests allows high volume of engagement, motivation and positive well-being. In addition, another advantage to implementing the play-based approach is encouragement of inclusion and allowing various abilities to explore the various areas, this ensures each unique child is provided the opportunity to learn and develop in their own way, open-ended activities provide opportunities for all children at their own level (Early Childhood Education and Care, no date). The play-based approach can be beneficial in Welsh settings where practitioners have a high volume and range of children with individual needs, including additional learning needs (ALN).

However, although there are many strengths, there are also some challenges that can affect the ability of implementing the play-based approach into settings. A significant challenge is the staffing levels, practitioner experience and training. For the play-based approach to be successful and effective it requires staff to be highly skilled, who can observe children's interests, assess learning outcomes, ask open-ended meaningful questions and extend learning opportunities by providing further resources (birthto5matters,2010). A further challenge can be the size of the class, this can make it difficult for the assessment side of the play-based approach for practitioners observe the individual progress and personalised learning experiences, this then may cause less opportunity for meaningful experiences and interactions between practitioners and children, gaps missing within progress tracker and

essentially limiting the quality of practice and effectiveness of the approach. In addition, for the play-based approach to be effective, funding is important. Reggio Emilia inspired environments often require high quality resources, these include natural materials and flexible learning spaces that encourage creativity and exploration. Furthermore, although many resources can be collected through sustainable methods and natural materials, creating and maintaining an environment that supports the Reggio Emilia approach can be expensive. Some settings may have limited funding budgets, which could make it more difficult to provide the resources and learning opportunities needed. As a result, schools in a more advantaged area may be able to implement this approach more effectively and successfully than schools in disadvantaged areas, this could lead to differences in the experiences and opportunities the children have available to them.

To conclude, part one of this assignment has explored the importance of education and curriculum in supporting children's learning and development. It has explored the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia play-based approaches and how they promote the children's creativity, independence, curiosity and holistic development. It has also stated that there are many benefits to the approach but also challenges that may impact the effectiveness of the approach.

Part two

In early years and education a 'unique child' refers to the idea that one child is different from another. Every child has their own identity, personality, ability, background, interests and experiences and this results in children developing and learning at different stages (Hammersmith and Fulham, 2026).

The term 'unique child' is often used to promote the importance of treating everyone equally and as an individual, this way practitioners are able to identify their individual strengths and needs and how best to support them. Recognising the child for their uniqueness supports positive relationships, boosts confidence and provides opportunities for the children to reach their full potential (Birthto5matters, no date).

In order for a practitioner to recognise the child's unique abilities they will use assessment tools, the term 'assessment' in early years means an ongoing process of gathering information about a child's learning, development and achievements to identify areas of support and to help future planning to ensure needs are met.

In addition to recognising a child's uniqueness, assessment is important because it is a process of where practitioners are able to observe the child's learning and development and review their findings. The assessment then enables them to understand how they can best support the child, identify their needs and areas that they may need support and plan activities to meet their individual needs and ability. Assessments can be done by observations, discussions, written work and physical activities.

The unique child means that each child is different and develops in a way that is right for them. Although children have developmental milestones that they are expected to reach, not all children meet these at the same age or achieve this in the same way (Department for Education, 2024). There are many factors that may affect the child's learning and development, these could include, culture, family background, trauma, additional learning needs, experiences and interests. This promotes why practitioners must always treat each child as an individual and not have the same expectations for all children.

The Curriculum for Wales supports the idea of the Unique Child by always putting the child at the centre of education. It shows that children learn and make progress at different rates and that there is no timeframe for the child to reach their milestone. The Curriculum for Wales encourages practitioners to make adaptations to the child's learning to suit their individual needs and interests (Department for Education, 2024). There are some early years theorists that support the concept of the Unique Child. Jean Piaget believed that children will learn most when exploring and experiencing the world around them. He also believed that children develop differently and this could be recognised because children develop in different stages and rates. Another theorist that supports the concept of the Unique Child is Lev Vygotsky he focused closely on social interactions during the child's learning experiences. Vygotsky had an idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, this is where it is believed children develop better and most when supported by a more knowledgeable other or adult, because of this it is important that the practitioner is aware of the individual's abilities and needs and provide the right level of support. However, many believe that some developmental theories focus too heavily on age expectations and milestones instead of treating the individual for who they are and recognising their differences and individual needs. Furthermore, some children may be more advanced in some areas than in others therefore may need extra support in

certain areas to support development. Because of this, practitioners should use developmental theories alongside observations and assessments of each child. An assessment type that is going to be explored in this assignment is observational assessment, this type of assessment is commonly used within the Curriculum for Wales. Observational assessment is where practitioners observe children whilst they explore, play, socialise and participate in everyday learning activities, the observation is done for the practitioner to build an understanding of the child's rate of development, interest, skills and knowledge (Essex County Council, 2026). These observations are done instead of formal assessments, the observations allow practitioners to build an holistic picture of the child through natural day to day experiences. Within the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is viewed as a key part of learning and teaching and it is used to support the children's progression. The observational assessment helps practitioners to identify needs of each child, their strengths, areas of development and their interests, this then helps the practitioner to understand what they need to implement into their future planning to support and ensure that the children are accessing meaningful experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). This type of assessment links back closely to the concept of the 'unique child' because it recognises that children can learn and develop in different ways and at different rates.

Although observational assessment is commonly used and valued within the early years practice, it is important to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of this type of assessment especially when supporting children with additional learning needs (ALN) and Neurodiversity. The observational assessment is often valued by early years due to it taking place in natural environments whilst focusing on the child's everyday interactions, play and learning experiences. This enables children to explore in ways that suit them, whilst displaying their abilities and interests rather than being restricted by formal assessments, this makes this approach inclusive for all children. Children with additional learning needs (ALN) such as autism or ADHD, this approach could be effective due to there being less pressures and allow for the practitioner to observe the child's unique behaviours, interests and social skills, which allows a more holistic picture for the practitioner to plan personalised support strategies or activities. However, although there are many benefits for this type of assessment, there are also some challenges. A key issue that may occur whilst using this approach is practitioners observing behaviours and perceiving them

differently. This then leads to inconsistencies in the assessments on the children, which can then affect the child's development by misjudgement and not providing the correct learning resources and opportunities needed to support them. In relation to children with ALN or Neurodiversity observations, the children's traits may be misunderstood during observation. For example, children with Autism often avoid eye contact and prefer to play alone, sometimes this is misunderstood by practitioners observing the child and viewed as disengagement rather than a different way of communicating or socialising. This promotes the importance of practitioner training and awareness to ensure they support and observe children fairly and without making assumptions. Another challenge using this assessment type is it can sometimes lack structure, this meaning that the important developmental areas can be missed if they do not naturally occur during the observational timings. This may then lead to practitioners may miss the child's abilities and what areas they need to improve, this may already be difficult to recognise due to the children not easily showing their skills in open ended play environments. In addition, although the observational method has challenges, it is still a valued and effective tool used alongside other assessment approaches and professional judgement.

To conclude, this part of the assignment has explored the concept of the unique child and how it promotes the importance of recognising and valuing each child's strengths, needs and personal experiences. It has also explored the importance of assessment and how it plays a key role in supporting the children's development and enabling the practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of children's learning and development and make adaptations to the environment or learning experiences when needed. It has explored both benefits and challenges of the observational assessment and how these affect the child's development positively and negatively.

Part 3

The Importance of Play – implementing a play-based curriculum.

To begin, many people suggest that when they see children engrossed in play, they label it as "they are just playing", this is a common phrase practitioners hear from those who do not work within the educational or care profession.

Many people make assumptions that play is “meaningless” and “unstructured” which means that children do not learn from their play experiences. However, when children are playing, they are not just doing as they are told but they are exploring their world, finding a sense of belonging, building new relationships and developing social and language skills. When children start to develop all these skills and connections, they gain confidence and independence to problem solve within their environment (National Literacy Trust, 2024). Therefore, children’s play has influenced many early years settings to move towards a play-based approach curriculum. Play based curriculum is where children’s interests, creativity and exploration is always at the centre of the children’s learning and development (Avocado, 2025).

Although, play-based curriculum has a positive impact on the children’s development, it’s not simple to implement, it takes time, effort, dedication and patience. When implementing the play-based approach, there will be changes to the classroom environment, staff mindsets and practice.

When the introduction of play based learning begins, what should practitioners consider during this change?

Understanding the purpose of play

Before practitioners introduce a play-based curriculum into their setting it is essential that they understand what the purpose and value of play is during a child’s learning and development. Play may provide a child entertainment and fun experiences; however, it provides so much more than that, it allows opportunities to explore, problem solve and learn through experiences that are of interest and meaningful to them.

There are theorists such as Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget that support how important play is for children to learn and develop. The theorists focus on the children’s cognitive, social and emotional development during their play experiences. These theorists help practitioners to understand that children can express themselves creatively whilst learning how to solve problems and make their own decisions and choices without adult input.

For example, there may be a group of children building “a racing car” outdoors, the children look like they are just having lots of fun and acting out what may be an experience they have observed or just using their own imagination. However, there are many skills and learning opportunities happening at the same time. The children may be, communicating with one another and sharing ideas, developing gross motor skills (balancing, coordination through physical movement), using problem-solving skills, using mathematical language maybe instructing that something needs to be “bigger”, “taller” or “smaller”.

When practitioners are experiencing these play opportunities with the children and can recognise the skills being used and learning that is taking place, they may then become confident in supporting the children through this play-based learning approach. They may begin to follow the children's interests, set up engaging environments and extend learning opportunities where necessary (Welsh Government, 2023). The understanding staff take from these experiences is a key part of implementing the play-based curriculum into settings as staff begin to view play as valuable experiences rather than “the children are just playing”.



(Source: Childcare Network, 2024)

Practitioner confidence and training

A big challenge when implementing a play-based curriculum is lack of confidence practitioners have. Although most practitioners have a good understanding of play, they may still feel they have academic targets and expectations to meet and may feel this needs to be done in a formal, structured approach rather than a play-based approach.

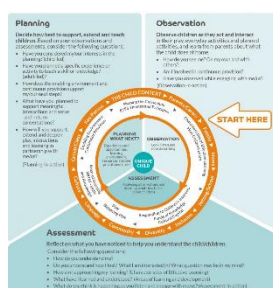
Because of this, many practitioners may overthink and question whether the children are getting the right amount of learning through play. However, practitioners should take these opportunities to learn more about the children and their interests through

observations to take forward and respond by making adaptations to the environment and extending the children's learning through meaningful interactions.

Although many may think “why do I need training for a play-based approach?” It is essential, so that this approach is implemented with a good understanding of what play really is and how it supports the children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Practitioners will also need to have training on how to use the observational cycle, this training will allow them to have an insight to different observation methods, how to assess their findings and respond ensuring it is meaningful and relevant to the child's learning and development (West Sussex County Council, 2015).

Most practitioners will say that their confidence has grown through their experience in settings. This could be through hands on practice, team meetings, observations and feedback, this all supports practitioners to feel comfortable and confident using the play-based teaching approach.

For the play-based curriculum to be successful, practitioners must have a clear understanding on play and how they can create meaningful learning opportunities and experiences for the children.



(Source: Birthto5matters, no date)

Creating an enabling environment

The environment is where learning begins for a child, this means that it is essential that the environment is full of opportunities and resources for the child to access freely to encourage a supportive and successful play-based curriculum.

An enabling environment should have open-ended opportunities for children to explore and learn independently through meaningful play experiences. The environment has an impact on the child's confidence, emotional wellbeing, security

and engagement. Practitioners have the role to prepare, assess and adjust where necessary to the environment ensuring it is always meaningful and supporting the developmental needs of the children (Birthto5matters, no date). Children should be able to access the resources independently and use them as they wish, this encourages decision making and problem solving. Resources may include, loose parts, blocks, natural materials, tools and more!



(Source: Artofit, no date)



(Source: Early Years Careers, 2016)

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