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Part 1: Comparison of the Non-Maintained Nursery Curriculum (Wales) and Te Whāriki (New Zealand)

Introduction

Early childhood education is widely recognised as a critical period in shaping children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development. Curriculum frameworks play a central role in structuring these early experiences by defining what knowledge, skills and values are prioritised (Kelly, 2009). In contemporary early childhood education discourse, play-based learning has become increasingly influential, reflecting an emphasis on child-centred, experiential approaches to education (Wood, 2014; Fler, 2010).

Play-based curriculum is grounded in developmental and sociocultural theories which position children as active constructors of knowledge through interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). However, the translation of these theories into practice is shaped by national policy contexts, cultural values and accountability pressures. Consequently, despite shared theoretical foundations, the implementation of play-based learning varies significantly across countries (Moyle, 2015; Wood and Hedges, 2016).

Play-Based Curriculum: Theoretical Foundations and Critiques

Play-based learning is widely endorsed within early childhood education due to its role in supporting holistic development. Piaget (1962) emphasised that children develop cognitively through active exploration, while Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in extending learning. These perspectives underpin contemporary pedagogies which position play as a primary mode through which children develop language, problem-solving abilities and social competence (Whitebread *et al.*, 2017; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

However, play-based learning is not without critique. A significant concern is the conceptual ambiguity surrounding play, which can lead to inconsistent interpretations in practice (Moyle, 2015; Wood, 2014). Without clear guidance, practitioners may conflate unstructured activity with meaningful learning, resulting in pedagogical inconsistency (Hedges and Cooper, 2018).

Furthermore, play has increasingly been subject to instrumental within policy contexts, where it is used to achieve predefined learning outcomes rather than valued intrinsically (Bradbury, 2013; Wood and Hedges, 2016). This reflects broader tensions between developmental pedagogy and performative educational systems driven by accountability and assessment (OECD, 2020). These tensions are particularly evident within both the Welsh and New Zealand contexts.

Curriculum: comparison and critic

The Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) and Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 2017) are both internationally recognised examples of play-based frameworks in early childhood education. Each prioritises holistic development, child-centred learning and experiential engagement, reflecting sociocultural and developmental theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, 2014). However, despite these shared principles, critical analysis reveals that their effectiveness is constrained by issues relating to implementation, cultural interpretation and the wider policy environment.

The Welsh curriculum demonstrates a clear commitment to holistic development, foregrounding wellbeing, relationships and experiential learning as central to children's early experiences (Welsh Government, 2021). This represents a significant shift away from traditional, outcome driven models towards a more developmentally appropriate approach. By promoting play as a primary mode of learning, the framework aligns with research which highlights the importance of active exploration in supporting cognitive and social development (Moyles, 2015; Wood, 2014). Furthermore, its alignment with the broader Curriculum for Wales ensures greater continuity between early childhood and primary education, supporting smoother transitions for learners (Taylor *et al.*, 2020).

However, this emphasis on flexibility simultaneously exposes a fundamental limitation. The curriculum's lack of explicit pedagogical and assessment guidance creates ambiguity for practitioners, often leading to inconsistent interpretations of play-based learning (Jones, 2021). While flexibility is intended to encourage responsive practice, it can result in uncertainty regarding progression and expectations, particularly for less experienced educators. As a result, the quality of

provision may vary significantly across settings, raising concerns about equity and consistency (Taylor *et al.*, 2020). This reflects a broader critique of play-based curricula, whereby insufficient structure can undermine rather than support effective practice (Moyles, 2015).

In addition, the Welsh curriculum operates within a policy context shaped by global accountability frameworks, particularly the influence of OECD comparisons and PISA rankings (OECD, 2020). Although these measures are not directly applied to early years education, they exert indirect pressure on policymakers and practitioners to prioritise measurable attainment. This creates an inherent contradiction between the curriculum's developmental ethos and the broader emphasis on academic performance. Evidence suggests that such pressures can lead to the premature formalisation of literacy and numeracy, potentially limiting opportunities for meaningful play (Roberts and Harrison, 2022). In this context, play risks becoming instrumentalised, serving as a vehicle for achieving predetermined outcomes rather than supporting genuine exploration (Bradbury, 2013).

Another issue lies in the reliance on practitioner expertise. High quality play-based learning requires skilled educators who can effectively scaffold children's experiences and extend learning opportunities (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). However, disparities in training, funding and professional development across Wales create uneven capacity within the workforce (Jones, 2021). This reliance on practitioner competence represents a structural weakness, as the curriculum assumes a level of expertise that is not universally supported. Without sustained investment in workforce development, the potential benefits of the framework may not be realised.

Although the Welsh curriculum promotes Welsh language and national identity, its approach to cultural inclusion remains relatively limited in depth. While it recognises the importance of cultural context, it does not embed diverse perspectives as systematically as some international curricula. This may restrict opportunities to develop truly inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies, particularly within increasingly diverse communities.

In contrast, Te Whāriki is widely regarded as a pioneering curriculum due to its holistic, flexible and bicultural design (Ministry of Education, 2017). Its

conceptualisation as a “woven mat” reflects the integration of children, families and cultural contexts within learning experiences, aligning closely with sociocultural theories of development (Vygotsky, 1978; Ritchie, 2013). A key strength of Te Whāriki is its explicit commitment to biculturalism, embedding Māori values, language and perspectives throughout the curriculum. This represents a significant advancement in recognising Indigenous knowledge within formal education.

Furthermore, the curriculum’s flexibility allows practitioners to adapt learning experiences to local contexts, supporting meaningful engagement with children’s interests and communities (Nuttall, 2013). This responsiveness is widely viewed as a strength, as it enables educators to construct relevant and authentic learning environments. However, this same flexibility also generates challenges. The absence of clearly defined outcomes and assessment criteria can lead to variability in implementation and difficulties in evaluating children’s progress (Mitchell, 2008). As a result, educational experiences may differ considerably between settings, raising concerns about consistency and quality assurance.

A further limitation of Te Whāriki relates to the complexity of implementing bicultural practice. While the curriculum foregrounds Māori perspectives, research indicates that many practitioners lack the necessary knowledge and confidence to enact these principles in meaningful ways (Chan and Ritchie, 2016; Ritchie, 2013). In some cases, bicultural elements are incorporated superficially, leading to tokenistic practices rather than genuine cultural integration. Additionally, the increasing multicultural diversity of New Zealand complicates this framework, as educators must balance bicultural commitments with the inclusion of a wide range of cultural identities.

As with the Welsh curriculum, the effectiveness of Te Whāriki is heavily dependent on practitioner capability. The framework requires educators to possess advanced pedagogical knowledge, cultural competence and reflective skills in order to translate its principles into practice (Nuttall, 2013). Where professional development is insufficient, this can result in unstructured or low-quality play experiences that fail to achieve intended learning outcomes (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). This highlights a broader issue within play-based curricula: the reliance on highly skilled practitioners without consistently providing the necessary support.

Moreover, Te Whāriki is increasingly influenced by global educational trends, including a growing emphasis on school readiness and measurable outcomes (Mitchell, 2008; OECD, 2020). Although the curriculum resists formal assessment frameworks, these external pressures can shape practice, encouraging more structured approaches that may conflict with its holistic philosophy.

Comparatively, despite their shared commitment to play-based learning, both are constrained by similar structural tensions. Firstly, both frameworks rely heavily on practitioner interpretation, resulting in variability and inconsistency (Hedges and Cooper, 2018; Taylor *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, both operate within policy environments influenced by accountability and performance measures, which can undermine their developmental aims (OECD, 2020; Bradbury, 2013). Thirdly, each struggle to balance flexibility with clarity, leading to ambiguity in relation to assessment and progression (Moyles, 2015).

A key distinction, however, lies in their treatment of culture. Te Whāriki integrates biculturalism at a foundational level, reflecting New Zealand's sociopolitical context, whereas the Welsh curriculum takes a more limited approach to cultural inclusion. Nevertheless, even Te Whāriki demonstrates that embedding cultural principles within curriculum frameworks does not guarantee effective implementation. This reinforces the argument that curriculum design alone is insufficient; meaningful practice depends on practitioner understanding, systemic support and broader policy alignment.

While both curricula represent important developments in play-based early childhood education, their implementation is shaped by complex and often contradictory factors. Their strengths lie in their commitment to holistic, child-centred learning, but their limitations highlight the challenges of translating theory into practice. Ultimately, achieving effective play-based education requires not only well-designed curricula but also sustained investment in professional development, clearer guidance and alignment with wider educational priorities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales and Te Whāriki exemplify strong commitments to play-based, child-centred early childhood education. While each framework promotes holistic development, wellbeing and experiential learning, their effectiveness is significantly shaped by challenges related to implementation, practitioner expertise and external policy pressures. The Welsh curriculum is constrained by ambiguity and accountability demands, whereas Te Whāriki faces issues of consistency and the practical enactment of bicultural principles. Critically, both illustrate the tension between flexible, developmental pedagogy and performance driven systems. Ultimately, the success of play-based curricula depends not only on design, but on sustained professional support, clarity of guidance and alignment with broader educational priorities.

Part 2: The Unique Child and Assessment

Introduction

The concept of the unique child is a foundational principle of contemporary early childhood education, reflecting a shift away from universal developmental models towards recognition of children's diverse identities, experiences and ways of learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). This paradigm positions children as active, capable participants in their own learning, rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Malaguzzi, 1998; Wood, 2013). Such perspectives have significantly influenced curriculum development internationally, including the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017). Assessment plays a central role in operationalising the unique child, as it shapes how practitioners interpret, respond to and support children's development (Drummond, 2003; Black & Wiliam, 2009). Increasingly, assessment in early childhood has moved towards holistic, strengths-based approaches that prioritise meaning making over measurement (Carr, 2001; Fler & Hedegaard, 2010). Learning Stories, developed within the context of *Te Whāriki*, exemplify this shift by documenting children's learning in rich, narrative forms (Carr, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2013).

This essay critically analyses how the concept of the unique child is embedded within both curricula and examines the role of Learning Stories in supporting individualised assessment (Carr, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2013). It argues that while both frameworks are underpinned by sociocultural and child-centred principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003), *Te Whāriki* provides a more conceptually coherent and operationalised approach to assessment (Ministry of Education, 2017; Carr, 2001). In contrast, the Welsh curriculum, although flexible and inclusive (Welsh Government, 2021), reveals tensions between its philosophical commitments and the practical realities of assessment and accountability (Drummond, 2003; Black and Wiliam, 2009).

The Unique Child in Early Childhood Education

The notion of the unique child is rooted in sociocultural and ecological theories of development (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised learning as a socially mediated process, shaped by language, culture and interaction, while Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised the complex interplay between the child and multiple environmental systems. These perspectives challenge reductionist developmental models by recognising that learning is context dependent and inherently diverse (Rogoff, 2003).

Contemporary early childhood discourse further extends this view, positioning children as competent, meaning-making individuals whose identities are shaped through relationships and cultural participation (Wood, 2020; Rogoff, 2003). This aligns with post-structural critiques of normative development, which argue that standardised expectations risk marginalising children whose experiences fall outside dominant frameworks (Moss, 2017). Within this context, assessment becomes a contested space (Drummond, 2003). While it has the potential to illuminate individual learning trajectories, it can also reinforce deficit perspectives if narrowly focused on measurable outcomes (Black and Wiliam, 2009; Moss, 2017). Nutbrown (2019) argues that assessment should be understood as a dialogic and interpretive process, requiring practitioners to engage with children's perspectives and lived experiences. Thus, effective assessment must balance the need for insight into development with respect for individuality and diversity (Nutbrown, 2019; Carr, 2001).

Learning Stories as a Pedagogy of Assessment

Learning Stories represent a significant departure from traditional assessment models, offering a narrative, strengths-based approach that foregrounds children's competencies and dispositions (Carr, 2001; Carr and Lee, 2012). Rather than isolating discrete skills, they capture learning as it unfolds within meaningful contexts, emphasising relationships, agency and participation (Ministry of Education, 2017; Carr, 2001). A key strength of Learning Stories lies in their alignment with sociocultural theory. By documenting learning within social interactions, they reflect Vygotsky's emphasis on co-construction and shared meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, their focus on dispositions such as curiosity, resilience and persistence supports a broader conception of learning that extends beyond academic attainment (Carr and Claxton, 2002).

Importantly, Learning Stories also function as a relational tool. They invite contributions from families and children, fostering collaborative assessment practices that strengthen home setting partnerships (Hedges and Cooper, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2017). In doing so, they democratise assessment by valuing multiple perspectives and recognising children's voices (Carr and Lee, 2012). However, their strengths are accompanied by notable limitations. Critics argue that Learning Stories can lack rigour and consistency, as their interpretive nature depends heavily on practitioner judgement (Blaklock, 2008; Mitchell, 2008). There are also concerns that an emphasis on positive narratives may obscure areas where children require targeted support (Mitchell, 2008; Blaklock, 2010). Furthermore, the time intensive nature of producing detailed narratives raises questions about sustainability in practice, particularly within resource constrained settings (Davis and Peters, 2019). These critiques highlight a broader tension within early childhood assessment: the challenge of maintaining authenticity and individuality while ensuring accountability and consistency (Drummond, 2003; Moss, 2017).

The Unique Child within the Welsh Curriculum

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales reflects a strong commitment to child-centred, play-based learning, underpinned by the broader Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2021). It foregrounds wellbeing, belonging and holistic development, positioning children's experiences as central to learning (Welsh Government, 2022; Hwb, 2022). The concept of the unique child is evident in its emphasis on recognising individual identities, languages and developmental pathways (Welsh Government, 2021; Wood, 2013). Practitioners are encouraged to adopt flexible and responsive approaches, using observation to inform planning and support progression (Hwb, 2022; Drummond, 2012). This aligns with research suggesting that authentic, play-based assessment provides a more accurate representation of children's capabilities (Drummond, 2012; Carr, 2001).

However, a critical examination reveals inherent tensions. While the curriculum advocates holistic and individualised assessment, its emphasis on progression introduces an implicit focus on measurable development (Welsh Government, 2022; Bradbury, 2019). Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that such frameworks are

increasingly shaped by performativity pressures, which may prioritise evidence generation over meaningful understanding. Moreover, the absence of a clearly defined assessment methodology creates variability in practice (Bradbury, 2019; Drummond, 2003). While flexibility allows practitioners to tailor assessment to individual contexts, it also risks inconsistency in recognising and supporting the unique child (Bradbury, 2019; Moss, 2017). As a result, the effectiveness of the curriculum depends significantly on practitioner expertise, raising concerns about equity across settings (Roberts-Holmes, 2015; Nutbrown, 2019). Thus, although the Welsh curriculum conceptually supports the unique child, its practical implementation reveals a degree of ambiguity that may limit its impact (Bradbury, 2019; Moss, 2017).

The Unique Child within Te Whāriki

Te Whāriki is widely regarded as a pioneering early childhood curriculum due to its explicit integration of sociocultural theory and its commitment to holistic development (Nuttall, 2003; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). Its structure, based on principles of empowerment, relationships and community, reflects a deeply embedded understanding of children as unique, culturally situated learners (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017; Rogoff, 2003). The curriculum's alignment with Learning Stories provides a coherent approach to assessment that reinforces its philosophical principles (Carr, 2001; Carr and Lee, 2012). Assessment is not an external process but an integral part of teaching and learning, designed to capture children's participation, identities and evolving competencies (Carr and Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017).

A notable strength of *Te Whāriki* is its emphasis on cultural responsiveness. Its bicultural foundation ensures that Māori perspectives are central to the curriculum, promoting inclusive practices that recognise the significance of cultural identity in learning (Ritchie, 2013; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). This represents a more explicit and systemic approach to diversity compared to many other curricula (Nuttall, 2003; Ritchie, 2013). Nevertheless, *Te Whāriki* is not without limitations. The reliance on narrative assessment raises similar concerns regarding subjectivity and practitioner interpretation (Blaiklock, 2008; Mitchell, 2008). Additionally, the demands of producing comprehensive Learning Stories may impact practitioner workload and consistency (Davis and Peters, 2019; Carr and Lee, 2012). Despite these

challenges, *Te Whāriki* demonstrates a high level of conceptual coherence, with clear alignment between its theoretical foundations and assessment practices (Carr, 2001; Nuttall, 2003). This strengthens its capacity to meaningfully support the unique child (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017; Rogoff, 2003).

Comparison and Critical Evaluation

Both curricula share a commitment to recognising children as unique individuals and promoting holistic, play-based learning (Welsh Government, 2022; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). Each rejects deficit models of assessment and emphasises observation and responsiveness (Carr, 2001; Drummond, 2012). However, their approaches diverge significantly in terms of implementation and coherence (Bradbury, 2019; Nuttall, 2003).

Te Whāriki offers a more integrated and theoretically grounded approach to assessment. The use of Learning Stories provides a consistent framework that operationalises the concept of the unique child, ensuring that assessment practices align closely with curriculum principles (Carr and Lee, 2012; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). In contrast, the Welsh curriculum adopts a more flexible approach, which, while potentially empowering, risks fragmentation in practice (Welsh Government, 2022; Bradbury, 2019). The lack of explicit guidance may lead to variability in how effectively the unique child is recognised and supported, particularly in contexts where practitioners require clearer frameworks (Bradbury, 2019; Drummond, 2003).

Furthermore, *Te Whāriki*'s strong emphasis on cultural identity and biculturalism represents a more comprehensive approach to inclusion (Ritchie, 2013; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2017). While the Welsh curriculum acknowledges diversity, it does not embed cultural responsiveness as systematically, limiting its capacity to fully realise the unique child in practice (Welsh Government, 2022; Moss, 2017). Ultimately, this comparison highlights a key distinction: *Te Whāriki* demonstrates conceptual alignment, whereas the Welsh curriculum reflects a degree of practical ambiguity (Carr, 2001; Bradbury, 2019).

Conclusion

The concept of the unique child is central to both the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales and *Te Whāriki*, reflecting a shared commitment to child-centred and holistic education. Learning Stories exemplify an assessment approach that aligns closely with this principle, offering a narrative, strengths-based method of understanding children's learning.

However, this analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness of such approaches depends on the coherence between curriculum philosophy and assessment practice. While the Welsh curriculum provides flexibility and promotes responsive teaching, its lack of explicit assessment structures may limit consistency. In contrast, *Te Whāriki* offers a more integrated model, ensuring that the unique child remains central across both curriculum and assessment.

Supporting the unique child ultimately requires more than philosophical commitment; it demands assessment practices that are coherent, inclusive and critically reflective. Learning Stories provide a valuable model for achieving this, but their successful implementation depends on careful consideration of both their strengths and limitations.

Part 3:

Supporting Wellbeing in Early Years Settings in Wales

Introduction

The wellbeing of young children has become a central priority within early years education across Wales. Increasingly, practitioners, policymakers and families recognise that emotional, social and physical wellbeing are fundamental to children's learning, resilience and long-term development. Early years settings are uniquely positioned to nurture secure relationships, positive mental health and inclusive experiences that support children during the most formative stage of life. Welsh education policy, including the Curriculum for Wales and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, places wellbeing at the heart of practice, encouraging settings to create environments where children feel safe, valued and empowered (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2022a).

Importance of Early Childhood Wellbeing

Research consistently demonstrates that early childhood experiences shape cognitive, emotional and social outcomes throughout life (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Positive wellbeing during the early years supports language acquisition, confidence, emotional regulation and healthy relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). Conversely, adverse childhood experiences, poverty and emotional neglect can negatively affect development and educational attainment (Felitti *et al.*, 1998). In Wales, where child poverty remains a significant concern, early years settings play a crucial role in reducing inequalities and promoting resilience.

Policy and Curriculum Frameworks in Wales

Curriculum for Wales

The Welsh Government's approach to child wellbeing is strongly influenced by children's rights and holistic development. The *Curriculum for Wales* identifies "Health and Well-being" as one of six Areas of Learning and Experience, emphasising emotional, physical and social health from the earliest years (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Foundation Phase Approach

Similarly, the Foundation Phase framework encourages experiential learning through play, relationships and active exploration (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). These approaches reflect evidence that play-based learning enhances emotional security and supports children's self-expression (Bruce, 2011).

Non-maintained Curriculum (Wales)

In addition, the *Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales* provides guidance specifically for early years providers outside of maintained schools. This framework aligns with the principles of the *Curriculum for Wales*, with a strong emphasis on child-centred, play-based learning and wellbeing. It highlights the importance of fostering secure relationships, supporting emotional development and creating nurturing environments that enable children to feel safe, valued and included (Welsh Government, 2022c). The curriculum reinforces the role of practitioners in observing, responding to and supporting individual children's wellbeing needs as the foundation for all learning.

The Role of Attachment and Relationships

Attachment theory remains particularly relevant within early years practice. Bowlby (1988) argued that secure relationships with trusted adults are essential for healthy emotional development. Practitioners who provide consistent, nurturing interactions can help children develop a sense of belonging and emotional safety.

This is especially important for children experiencing family stress, trauma or transitions. Responsive caregiving, emotional coaching and predictable routines contribute significantly to positive wellbeing outcomes (Perry and Szalavitz, 2017).

Trauma-Informed Practice in Early Years

The role of practitioners in supporting wellbeing extends beyond emotional care. Early years professionals in Wales are increasingly expected to adopt trauma-informed and inclusive approaches. Trauma-informed practice recognises the impact of adverse experiences on children's behaviour and learning (Bath, 2008).

Instead of viewing challenging behaviour as deliberate misconduct, practitioners are encouraged to understand behaviour as communication. This perspective promotes empathy, relationship-building and restorative approaches within settings.

Inclusion, Diversity and Bilingualism

Inclusion is another critical aspect of wellbeing. Children thrive when their identities, languages and cultures are respected. Wales has made substantial efforts to promote bilingualism and cultural inclusion within early years environments. Supporting children to develop confidence in both Welsh and English can strengthen identity, belonging and self-esteem (Welsh Government, 2021).

Inclusive environments must also support children with additional learning needs through personalised interventions, collaborative planning and family engagement.

Partnership with Families

Partnerships with families are essential for promoting wellbeing effectively. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights how children's development is shaped by interactions between home, school and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Early years settings that establish trusting relationships with parents and carers can better understand children's emotional needs and provide consistent support. Open communication, shared decision-making and accessible family services strengthen protective factors for children and improve outcomes.

Outdoor Learning and Wellbeing

Outdoor learning has also become increasingly recognised as beneficial for wellbeing in Wales. Natural environments encourage curiosity, physical activity and emotional regulation (Louv, 2005).

Forest school approaches and outdoor play opportunities support confidence, independence and resilience while reducing stress and anxiety. The Welsh Government has encouraged settings to utilise outdoor spaces to support holistic learning and wellbeing, particularly following the social isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Welsh Government, 2022b).

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic significantly affected the wellbeing of young children and families across Wales. Lockdowns reduced social interaction and family stress disrupted routines and emotional security (UNICEF, 2021).

Early years practitioners faced unprecedented challenges in supporting children's emotional recovery and social development. Many settings responded by prioritising nurturing relationships, wellbeing-focused activities and trauma-sensitive practices. This experience reinforced the importance of emotional wellbeing as the foundation for learning.

Professional Development and Staff Wellbeing

Professional development is vital if practitioners are to meet children's increasingly complex wellbeing needs. Ongoing training in child development, mental health awareness, safeguarding and inclusive practice enables practitioners to respond effectively and confidently.

Reflective practice also supports staff wellbeing, which directly influences the quality of care provided to children. Research suggests that emotionally supported practitioners are more capable of building positive relationships and sustaining nurturing environments (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). Guidance such as school and health service frameworks further emphasises the importance of supporting wellbeing in educational environments (World Health Organization, 2021).

Conclusion

Moving forward, early years settings in Wales must continue to prioritise holistic wellbeing within all aspects of practice. This includes embedding children's rights as outlined in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), strengthening family partnerships, promoting inclusion and investing in workforce development. Wellbeing should not be viewed as an additional responsibility but as the foundation upon which all learning and development depend.

Ultimately, supporting wellbeing in early years settings is an investment in Wales' future. Children who feel secure, valued and connected are more likely to become confident learners, healthy individuals and active citizens. By placing wellbeing at the centre of early years provision, Wales is taking meaningful steps towards creating equitable and nurturing environments where every child can thrive.

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