

EARLY YEARS CURRICULA

Portfolio

I acknowledge the use of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in this work, Grammarly (2026) to assist grammatically, and Google Translate (2026) to support this work as an English as a Second Language.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

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Part 1.**Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki within the play-based curricula****Introduction**

Education is widely understood as a process through which children develop knowledge, skills, values and dispositions (Murray, 2023), whereas curriculum refers to the principles, content, experiences and pedagogical approaches that organise and guide learning (OECD, 2021). In early years education, curriculum is particularly significant because it structures the interactions, opportunities and priorities through which children's experiences of learning are interpreted and enacted in practice (Wood and Hedges, 2016). The quality and nature of this provision have been shown to have lasting consequences for children's cognitive, social and emotional development, making curriculum design and enactment in the early years a matter of considerable educational and societal importance (Sim *et al.*, 2018).

A play-based curriculum positions learning within play as exploratory, socially mediated and responsive to children's interests, with practitioners supporting, extending and co-constructing learning rather than relying on the direct transmission of knowledge (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Rooted in socio-constructivist theory, this approach views children's understanding as developing through active participation, social interaction and culturally situated experience (Daniels, 2017). However, a coherent rationale does not necessarily lead to coherent practice. This paper compares the Foundation Phase in Wales and Te Whāriki in New Zealand before critically analysing a central challenge in implementing play-based learning in Wales, arguing that successful enactment depends not only on curriculum design, but also on practitioner understanding, assessment expectations and the translation of policy into everyday practice.

The Foundation Phase

The Foundation Phase marked a significant and deliberate departure from formal, subject-led teaching in Wales by introducing a statutory play-based curriculum for children aged three to seven, organised across seven Areas of Learning (Welsh Government, 2015b; Thomas and Lewis, 2016). At its core, the curriculum placed active learning, first-hand experience, outdoor provision and play at the centre of

children's development, positioning practitioners as observers, facilitators and co-constructors of learning rather than as transmitters of predetermined content (Welsh Government, 2015b; Pyle and Danniels, 2017). This rationale was grounded in the principle that play is not an unstructured activity but a central medium for supporting cognitive, social and emotional development (MacBlain, 2018; Severino, Cabatic and Molina, 2024). Although the Foundation Phase has since been replaced by the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), its play-based principles continue to inform the new three to sixteen curriculum.

In its earliest years of implementation, the Foundation Phase was associated with important shifts in Welsh early years practice, particularly where leadership and professional learning were sustained (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Waters, 2016). However, the open and interpretive design that gave the Foundation Phase its pedagogical strength also produced its central implementation difficulty, since successful enactment depended on the depth of practitioner pedagogical understanding (Welsh Government, 2015a; Wood and Hedges, 2016). In practice, however, such understanding proved uneven. Fesseha and Pyle (2016) and Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland and Wollscheid (2019) document markedly different conceptions of the relationship between play and learning, with some practitioners treating play as separate from 'real' learning rather than as a legitimate context for it. These divergent conceptions are not random but reflect the persistent perception of play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching as being in tension rather than in dialogue (Edwards, 2017). This difficulty is not confined to Wales. McLachlan (2021) shows that Te Whāriki, despite its design as a locally constructed curriculum shaped through professional interpretation, has not always been enacted consistently, where practitioners lack a strong pedagogical understanding. Read together, these findings expose a structural vulnerability in curricula that devolve interpretive responsibility to practitioners without commensurate investment in pedagogical understanding. The implication for Wales is considerable, since successful enactment depends upon a workforce equipped to recognise, value and extend learning within play, which in turn requires sustained investment in professional learning, leadership and the wider conditions needed to develop such understanding in practice (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Cheung, Keung and Tam, 2022).

Te Whāriki

Te Whāriki, New Zealand's nationally mandated early childhood curriculum, is widely regarded as a pioneering model of play-based, holistic and culturally responsive early years provision (Ministry of Education, 2017). Rather than prescribing a fixed sequence of knowledge or skills, it positions curriculum as a locally meaningful and relational process shaped by children's interests, identities and cultural contexts, while foregrounding children's agency within co-constructed learning relationships (Ministry of Education, 2017; Te One and Ewens, 2019). A defining feature of the curriculum is its bicultural foundation, which brings together te ao Māori (the Māori worldview), the commitments embedded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi), and non-Māori knowledge traditions within a shared curricular framework (Jenkin, 2016; Xu and Ritchie, 2024). This bicultural commitment is constitutive of Te Whāriki rather than supplementary to it, meaning that the curriculum cannot be separated from its Aotearoa New Zealand foundations without compromising its coherence. However, even within New Zealand, the enactment of this bicultural framework has been uneven, with research suggesting that practitioners do not always possess the cultural knowledge, confidence or preparation required to engage meaningfully with te ao Māori principles (Skerrett, 2018; Jenkin, 2016). This suggests that even constitutive design features cannot guarantee equitable enactment without sustained workforce development.

Internationally, Te Whāriki has been widely regarded as a distinctive and influential early childhood curriculum, particularly for its holistic, bicultural and relational orientation (Carr and Lee, 2019; Te One and Ewens, 2019). In New Zealand, it has also supported important developments in relational practice, child-led learning, and family partnership, with settings engaging with it deeply (Hedges and Cooper, 2018; Probine *et al.*, 2023). In this respect, as with the Foundation Phase, the very feature that gives Te Whāriki its pedagogical strength, namely its openness to local interpretation rather than prescribed content, has also generated a significant challenge in practice (McLachlan, 2018; Te One and Ewens, 2019). Evaluation by Education Review Office (2019, 2021) found marked variation in practitioner confidence in curriculum design, assessment and partnership with families, with weaker enactment in settings where pedagogical leadership and professional

understanding are limited. McLachlan (2018) similarly notes that its non-prescriptive design places substantial professional demands on the workforce, particularly in making valued learning visible through informed pedagogical and assessment decisions. This is significant because it suggests that practitioner understanding is not simply a function of curriculum maturity. For Wales, the implication is not that Te Whāriki should be adopted directly, since such an approach would detach the curriculum from the bicultural and indigenous foundations that give it coherence. Rather, what Te Whāriki demonstrates is that even decades of refinement cannot substitute for the conditions through which practitioner understanding is sustained. This insight should fundamentally shape how Wales approaches the implementation of its own play-based reforms (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016).

Implementing Play-Based Curricula in Wales

A central challenge in implementing play-based curricula in Wales lies in the extent to which practitioners share a clear and robust understanding of what play-based pedagogy requires in practice, since such understanding cannot be assumed to develop automatically from curriculum design alone (Wood, 2019; Power, Newton and Taylor, 2020). In the Welsh context, this challenge requires further critical examination because the conditions that support or undermine practitioner understanding are themselves shaped by the wider policy environment. Welsh Government (2022) research into Foundation Phase assessment found that many practitioners did not regard the Foundation Phase Profile and associated personalised assessments as fully aligned with Foundation Phase pedagogy. This is significant because it indicates that profiling, recording and evidencing progress were not external to pedagogy, but part of the conditions through which it was shaped and, at times, constrained. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) describe this wider phenomenon as the datafication of early years education, whereby the demands of measurable accountability gradually reshape what practitioners attend to and value, narrowing the interpretive and responsive work on which play-based pedagogy depends. This phenomenon is also part of a broader neoliberal trend in which early years education is increasingly governed through measurable outputs rather than developmental processes, thereby redefining what counts as valuable practitioner work (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2019). Wainwright *et al.* (2019) similarly

found that practitioners often struggled to sustain genuinely play-based experiences while ensuring that intended learning could be demonstrated, suggesting that accountability pressures and pedagogical principles can pull practitioners in opposing directions. These dynamic forms part of a longer trajectory in which ambitious Welsh reform has repeatedly outpaced the structural support available to the workforce (Evans, 2022; Power, Newton and Taylor, 2020), with workforce capacity, training, and leadership consistently identified as critical yet under-invested conditions for successful implementation. What emerges, therefore, is not simply a matter of practitioner commitment or individual deficit, but a structural contradiction in which beliefs about what counts as valuable learning and accountability systems that privilege standardisation, documentation and demonstrable outcomes reinforce one another, drawing practice away from the observation-rich and child-responsive pedagogy that play-based curricula require (Bradbury, 2019; Cheung, Keung and Tam, 2022). The significance of this for Wales, as it continues to embed the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), is considerable. If the new framework is to avoid repeating the implementation challenges associated with the Foundation Phase, the task is not merely to strengthen workforce capacity, but to create a policy and accountability environment in which deep practitioner understanding can be developed, sustained and protected from the standardising pressures that have historically undermined it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has shown that the principal challenge of implementing play-based curricula in Wales lies not in securing formal commitment to play, but in creating the pedagogical and institutional conditions necessary for its consistent enactment. Comparison between the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki suggests that the successful implementation of play-based curricula depends less on curriculum design alone than on the extent to which practitioners' roles are clearly understood, supported and sustained in practice. In Wales, this process has been complicated by uneven professional learning, assessment pressures and a pattern of ambitious reform outpacing structural support for the workforce (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Evans, 2022). Ultimately, the effectiveness of play-based curricula depends upon whether policy is matched by the professional expertise, structural

capacity and cultural coherence required to support it meaningfully within classrooms and settings. The extent to which the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a) succeeds in moving beyond this tension will depend upon whether the policy environment can provide the sustained professional, structural and cultural support that play-based pedagogy requires.

Part 2.**The Unique Child and Play-Based Assessment****Introduction**

The principle of the Unique Child asserts that every child is individual, continually developing, and capable of learning within their own social, cultural and developmental context (Department for Education, 2021). More than a descriptive statement, this concept represents a pedagogical commitment to recognising that each child enters an early years setting with their own biography, family culture, language repertoire, interests, dispositions and pace of development (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). Consequently, children should not be understood through a single normative standard, but through approaches that acknowledge individual pathways of learning and development (MacBlain, 2021). This principle is also reflected across early years frameworks, including Te Whāriki, which conceptualises children as competent and confident learners whose development is inseparable from family and community contexts (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Assessment, in this context, can be understood as the process through which practitioners gather, interpret and use evidence of children's learning to inform provision, identify next steps and support progression (MacDonald and Waters, 2016). However, this process is not neutral or purely technical, as it is shaped by assumptions about what counts as worthwhile knowledge, visible progress and appropriate development (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). Without sufficient attention to individuality, assessment may privilege dominant assumptions about progress and obscure children's strengths within standardised models (Bradbury, 2019). This is particularly problematic for bilingual, neurodivergent and other children whose development may be misread when assessment is shaped by monolingual or normative assumptions rather than responsive and inclusive practice (Cook, 2024; Leung and Molnar, 2025). Considering the Unique Child within assessment is therefore crucial if children's learning is to be represented fairly and meaningfully within play-based curricula. This paper critically evaluates two assessment approaches, Assessment for Progression within the Curriculum for Wales and Learning Stories within Te Whāriki, using the experiences of bilingual children in the

Welsh context as a basis for evaluating cultural fairness and equity within early years assessment.

The concept of the Unique Child in the Welsh context

While the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a) positions the Unique Child as a foundational principle grounded in constructivist and sociocultural traditions, these theoretical foundations warrant closer scrutiny than is often acknowledged in policy rhetoric (Lewis, 2021; Wood and Hedges, 2025). Vygotskian theory, as discussed by Daniels (2017), is particularly relevant, since learning is understood to take place within each child's Zone of Proximal Development, meaning that the same activity may carry quite different developmental significance depending on the child's prior experiences, language and the support available to them. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, as discussed by Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny (2017), extends this argument by demonstrating that development is shaped through interactions across family, setting, community and wider cultural systems, so that each child brings a distinct ecological and biographical history into the early years environment. These perspectives have important implications for assessment, since any framework that claims to track progression must recognise the situated, biographical and cultural specificity of each learner rather than measuring children against a single expected developmental pathway (Pyle and DeLuca, 2017). Although this aligns with the learner-centred orientation of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), it also exposes a significant tension. As Wood and Hedges (2016) observe, child-centred principles within early years curricula frequently sit alongside more standardised expectations of readiness and progress, while Lewis (2021) further argues that such tensions are reinforced by policy frameworks that continue to embed developmental judgement within rhetorically inclusive language. The Unique Child, therefore, functions not merely as a values statement, but as a critical lens through which approaches to assessment, progress tracking and age-related models must be examined, particularly where apparently inclusive practices continue to privilege dominant constructions of development (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016).

Assessment for Progression

Within the play-based pedagogy of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), Assessment for Progression is positioned as the principal framework through which the Unique Child principle is intended to be operationalised in practice. Rather than treating assessment as a separate event of measurement, it is embedded within teaching and learning, relying on ongoing observation, learner dialogue and professional judgement to recognise each child's distinctive learning trajectory (Welsh Government, 2020b; Estyn, 2022). This formative orientation, rooted in traditions of assessment for learning (Fletcher-Wood, 2018), treats evidence of understanding as a basis for responsive pedagogy rather than for comparative judgement. Progression Steps are intended to function as reference points along a continuum rather than as fixed age-related expectations, reflecting the curriculum's framing of progression as multidimensional, contextual and non-linear (Welsh Government, 2020b). This design is broadly compatible with play-based practice, in which children's interests, cultures and dispositions actively shape both what is learned and how it is made visible (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). In principle, therefore, Assessment for Progression aligns broadly with the concept of the Unique Child, positioning diverse developmental pathways and situated experience as central to the recognition of learning (Power, Newton and Taylor, 2020).

Learning Stories

Within the play-based pedagogy of Te Whāriki, the bicultural early childhood curriculum of Aotearoa New Zealand, Learning Stories function as a central assessment approach through which each child's unique identity is intended to be made visible (Ministry of Education, 2017). Carr and Lee (2019) explain that Learning Stories are narrative-based assessments in which practitioners document moments of learning through written accounts, photographs and other forms of evidence, articulating not only what a child has done but also the dispositions, interests and meaning-making that the learning reveals. Unlike checklist-based models that compare children against standardised expectations, the approach is credit-based, foregrounding what each child knows, demonstrates and engages with rather than what is absent (Sands and McChesney, 2022). Stories are also co-

constructed with whānau, parents and children themselves, ensuring that multiple voices and cultural perspectives contribute to the recognition of learning (Ministry of Education, 2017). Embedded within Te Whāriki's strands of wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration, Learning Stories frame development as relational, dispositional and identity-shaping rather than as a sequence of measurable milestones (Educational Leadership Project Ltd, 2019; Mitchell and Bateman, 2016). In principle, therefore, Learning Stories align closely with the concept of the Unique Child, positioning children's identities, cultures and dispositions as central to how learning is understood and made visible (Carr and Lee, 2019).

Assessment of Bilingual Children

Bilingual children offer a particularly revealing lens for evaluating whether Assessment for Progression and Learning Stories genuinely support the concept of the Unique Child. This is especially relevant in Wales, where early years provision operates across both Welsh-medium and English-medium settings and where Cymraeg 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017) sets out a national commitment to expanding the use of the Welsh language. Although both approaches appear compatible with the Unique Child in design, their fairness in practice depends on whether linguistic diversity is recognised as a legitimate dimension of learning or filtered through dominant monolingual expectations. Inclusion scholarship is useful here. Devarakonda (2021) frames inclusive early years practice as a rights-based response to educational diversity, in which children's identities, languages and cultural backgrounds are recognised as foundational to fair pedagogy. Nutbrown and Clough (2019) extend this argument by suggesting that inclusion requires flexible, enabling processes through which all children can participate and be acknowledged as capable learners rather than measured against narrow definitions of competence. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that assessment can only honour the Unique Child when it protects identity while also recognising the cognitive and cultural assets children bring.

From this standpoint, Learning Stories offer a more conceptually robust framework for bilingual learners, insofar as their bicultural foundations and credit-based orientation position language and cultural identity as central to the recognition of

learning rather than as supplementary considerations within assessment practice (Carr and Lee, 2019). This is significant because bilingual children's learning is shaped by the relationships and linguistic contexts through which they participate in early years settings (Mary and Young, 2017). Research on translanguaging and linguistically responsive assessment, therefore, suggests that multilingual repertoires should be recognised as legitimate indicators of competence, rather than interpreted through monolingual frameworks that risk misrepresenting the nature of children's learning (Conteh, 2019; Baker and Wright, 2026). Escamilla, Alanís and Meier (2024) strengthen this position by demonstrating how Learning Stories, when combined with translanguaging pedagogies, can support bilingual children's language rights and identity formation by treating their full linguistic repertoires as resources rather than barriers.

By contrast, Assessment for Progression offers related potential, since its formative, observation-led orientation creates space for bilingual communication to be recognised in context rather than reduced to standardised testing, thereby offering a more individualised account of learning in principle. However, its inclusivity is more conditional, since it lacks the same explicit structural commitment to bilingual or culturally grounded assessment, leaving recognition of linguistic identity more dependent on practitioner interpretation (Alsubaie, 2015; Lewis, 2021). This creates a significant risk that apparently learner-centred assessment will continue to privilege dominant constructions of normal progress. Critical work on datafication and ability labelling in early childhood reinforces this concern by showing how children whose learning diverges from dominant expectations can be positioned within lower-status categories that flatten complex developmental trajectories into simplified hierarchies of attainment (Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2019; Parekh, 2017). Such practices are incompatible with the Unique Child because they reduce difference to deficiency. Assessment for Progression in Wales can therefore support the Unique Child only where it is underpinned by sustained professional learning and by bilingual, inclusive and critically reflexive assessment practice.

Conclusion

To conclude, this critical evaluation has examined Assessment for Progression in the Curriculum for Wales and Learning Stories within Te Whāriki as two play-based assessment approaches, considered through the principle of the Unique Child and the experiences of bilingual children in the Welsh context. The discussion has shown that assessment is significant precisely because it determines whether children's identities, languages, cultures and dispositions are recognised or obscured within educational practice. Where these dimensions are overlooked, assessment cannot provide a true account of children's learning and development. Instead, it risks reinforcing the very developmental norms that the Unique Child principle seeks to resist. Learning Stories offer a more conceptually robust framework for this work, since identity, language and culture are placed at the centre of how learning is documented. Assessment for Progression, while compatible with the Unique Child in design, supports the principle only conditionally, since its inclusivity depends on the cultural, linguistic and professional capacities of those who enact it within Welsh early years practice. Honouring the Unique Child in Wales, therefore, requires not only appropriate assessment tools, but also an assessment culture capable of recognising complexity, resisting deficit interpretation and sustaining genuinely inclusive practice.

Part 3.**Blog****When Play-Based Learning Becomes Passive Practice**

(Source: Salmon and Barrera, 2021)

Has play-based pedagogy been quietly recast as practitioner non-involvement?

Across many early years settings, the language of ‘child-led’ and ‘hands-off’ learning has the potential to drift away from its original pedagogical intent. I have watched practitioners step back so far that they no longer actively support children’s thinking, communication or development through play. Yet play-based learning was never meant to involve practitioner withdrawal. As Edwards (2017) argues, play-based pedagogy and intentional teaching were never intended to stand in opposition. Rather, they were meant to work together. Pyle and Danniels (2017) similarly contend that this approach is most effective when practitioners provide skilled support and purposeful interaction during children’s play. However, Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland and Wollscheid (2019) suggest that practitioners can still treat play as separate from ‘real’ learning, creating a divide between playful experiences and intentional teaching. The shift from active engagement to passive supervision is not

a sign of respecting children's autonomy. Instead, what is often presented as respect for independence can become a misreading of child-centred pedagogy, where practitioner withdrawal is confused with professional restraint.

But how does this drift happen, and why does it persist?

According to Pyle, DeLuca and Danniels (2017), interpretations of child-led learning are not consistent across settings, and this variation is closely linked to uncertainty surrounding the pedagogical role of the practitioner. When practitioners lack a secure understanding of what skilled pedagogical engagement involves, they may default to minimal involvement. Although this may appear to respect children's autonomy, it quietly removes the interaction that play-based learning depends on. In practice, this may be reflected in children moving between well-resourced areas such as construction, role play or creative provision while practitioners remain at the periphery of the activity, supervising rather than shaping or extending learning.

This drift is further reinforced by the conditions under which practitioners work. Estyn (2018) reported that the quality of teaching in the Foundation Phase remained inconsistent, with practitioners often uncertain about how to balance child-initiated experiences with intentional teaching. Brock (2019) similarly notes that early years practitioners can experience tension between the principles of play-based pedagogy, and the planning, documentation and inspection demands that surround it. In this context, stepping back may reflect less a pedagogical decision than a response to professional uncertainty. What emerges, then, is not always a principled commitment to child autonomy, but a distortion of it, shaped by pressure, ambiguity and workload rather than pedagogical confidence.

Why does practitioner presence matter in children's play?

If passive practice is the problem, then purposeful practitioner involvement is the answer. It is fair to ask whether deeper involvement risks crowding children out of their own play. It can, when poorly judged. High-quality play-based learning requires practitioners who recognise when to enter children's play, how to extend it sensitively, and when to step back without abandoning learning. Skene *et al.* (2022)

describe the strongest practice as a balance between child autonomy and practitioner guidance, rather than a choice between freedom and instruction.

This matters because some of the richest learning in the early years happens through interaction. According to Birth to 5 Matters (2021), sustained shared thinking involves practitioners and children engaging together in problem-solving, idea development and the extension of understanding. For example, when children are building with blocks, a practitioner can introduce language linked to size, balance, shape or prediction, turning a familiar activity into an opportunity for mathematical thinking and dialogue. This reflects the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a), which presents play-based learning as central to effective practice and reinforces the view that professional interaction is not optional, but fundamental.

When practitioners remain actively and intentionally involved, children are more likely to encounter new vocabulary, sustain ideas for longer, and move beyond repetition into deeper thinking. The issue, therefore, is not whether children should lead their own play. They should. The question I continue to return to, however, is whether practitioners are sufficiently confident to support that play in ways that preserve children's agency while also extending learning. Without that confidence, play may remain busy and enjoyable, but not always cognitively enriching. It may appear productive on the surface while offering only limited conceptual challenge beneath it.

If the case for active engagement is clear, why does it remain so difficult to embed in everyday practice?

The answer lies less in individual practitioners and more in the conditions in which they work. As the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a) becomes more firmly established across early years settings, the central question is whether the workforce is being provided with the professional learning, leadership and time required to enact the play-based pedagogy the curriculum envisages.

The Welsh Government's National Approach to Professional Learning (Welsh Government, 2018) identifies sustained, collaborative professional learning as central to curriculum change. Yet, as Korthagen (2017) argues, practitioner confidence in pedagogy depends on sustained and integrated professional learning

that connects pedagogical knowledge with the realities of everyday practice. Such confidence is unlikely to be developed through short training sessions alone. Without protected time for reflection, accessible continuing professional development on high-quality interaction, and leadership cultures that explicitly value practitioner engagement within play, the drift towards passive practice is likely to continue. This suggests that the problem lies not simply in individual misunderstanding, but in a system that expects sophisticated pedagogy without consistently providing the conditions necessary to sustain it.

The question for Wales is not whether play-based pedagogy is the right approach. It is. The more pressing question is whether the conditions are being created in which it can genuinely thrive.

Moving forward

Play-based learning has never been a hands-off pedagogy. At its strongest, it is a highly skilled and intentional practice in which the practitioner is not absent, but present in pedagogically meaningful ways. The drift towards passive practice should not be understood as a failure of individual practitioners. Rather, it reflects the conditions in which they work. If Wales is serious about play-based reform, it must invest in the professional learning, leadership and reflective time that make active engagement possible. Yet practitioners need not wait passively for that investment. Choosing curiosity over supervision, even within a single interaction, can itself constitute a small act of pedagogical reclamation. Without both systemic investment and everyday professional agency, play-based learning risks remaining a persuasive policy language while becoming an increasingly fragile classroom reality.

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