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Early Years Curricula

Section 1

The Foundation Phase in Wales is an early years curriculum that emphasizes play-based child-centred learning, fostering holistic growth and essential skill development (Welsh Government, 2015). It is structured around seven areas of learning, which is used as a framework for guiding early childhood education.

According to the Department for Education (2014), play is vital to children's development, promoting confidence, problem-solving, and social skills through a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities. The EYFS (2012, p.6) highlights the significance of play; however, it does not define specific pedagogic practices to support it within the statutory framework. Furthermore, as academic expectations continue to rise, practitioners must integrate key standards while ensuring developmentally appropriate learning (Taylor and Boyer, 2020).

The Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales assessed its implementation, highlighting both strengths and challenges in integrating play-based learning. The review identified inconsistencies in quality across schools, revealing disparities in leadership and staff training. The way information was shared influenced differing practices and understandings of the Foundation Phase, affecting implementation (Welsh Government, 2014). This concern was further emphasized in the Independent Evaluation of the Foundation Phase conducted by WISERD (2015). The article *The Foundation Phase in Wales—Time to Grow Up?* underscores the necessity of strong professional development to ensure effective practice. The Foundation Phase enjoys widespread support, but ongoing improvements remain crucial to sustaining its success (Waters, 2016). However, the Welsh Government

(2022a) confirms that practitioner training is available through the Foundation Phase Professional Learning Hwb. While training has previously been provided, additional learning opportunities are now accessible (Early Years Wales, 2018), *Foundation Phase Professional Learning Modules* (Welsh Government, 2022). Moreover, Waters and Payler (2015) stress professional learning and development in early years education should encompass educators with diverse qualification levels.

Despite the introduction of the Foundation Phase, some schools had not fully embraced it, with formal teaching methods still prevalent, impacting children's educational experiences (Welsh Government, 2014). Reed (2012) notes that change is not always readily accepted, as practitioners may resist new approaches and revert to familiar established practices.

The Foundation Phase faced challenges due to discrepancies between formal teacher-led education, and informal play-based learning, affecting the curriculum's effectiveness (Welsh Government, 2014). Ochoa (2023) defines formal education as structured and goal-oriented, whereas informal learning is self-directed and driven by personal interests. The Independent Evaluation highlighted significant variations in inspection outcomes, as some inspectors struggled to grasp the play-based approach. Existing assessment structures were misaligned with learning through play, consequently making inspections inadequate (WIZERD, 2015; Estyn, n.d.; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025).

The Foundation Phase Framework emphasizes the importance of effective implementation, requiring practitioners to develop a deep understanding of its pedagogy, for consistent enriched provision across schools (Welsh Government, 2008, 2015a). High-quality early education fosters children's social and intellectual development, supported by skilled educators and engaging teaching methods (Kingston & Siraj, 2017; Welsh Government, 2022). Ongoing professional development is vital for improving play-based learning approaches both indoors and outdoors (Froebel Trust, 2025). Well-designed indoor and outdoor environments enhance play-based learning through diverse experiences and child-led exploration (Welsh Government, 2024b). This aligns with UNCRC Article 31, affirming every child's right to play and cultural participation (UNCRC, 2017), and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (Welsh Government, 2015).

The Curriculum for Wales for funded non-maintained nursery settings is designed to provide a high-quality developmentally appropriate learning experience for young children (Welsh Government, 2022b). It emphasizes a holistic approach, providing children with essential skills while aligning with the four purposes of education in Wales. Developing ambitious learners, creative thinkers, confident individuals, and responsible citizens. The curriculum is adaptable to children's diverse needs and ensures meaningful progression across six areas of learning and experience, following the principles of progression (Welsh Government, 2022b).

For funded non-maintained nursery settings, a responsive pedagogy will form strong understanding of essential child development. Delivered through a play-based child-centred approach, the curriculum significantly supports the whole child (Welsh Government, 2022c). PACEY Cymru (n.d.) highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability in shaping learning experiences to meet children's needs. The curriculum is tailored specifically for non-maintained nursery settings that receive funding for early education (Meithrin Cymru, n.d.). The curricula policy was established and developed fully by child development specialists and experienced practitioners; it is designed to support young learners as they begin their educational journey. This construction shows real strength and ultimately has had a positive impact on curriculum implementation, significantly improving engagement and adaptability (Early Years Wales, 2020). However, the Foundation Phase policy was primarily shaped by Welsh government initiatives, integrating insights from educational professionals. While its framework was grounded in research and best practices, direct stakeholder engagement in policy development was guided by governmental priorities rather than a fully co-constructed model. This greatly differs from the Curriculum for funded non-maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2015; Department for Education, 2023).

According to the Welsh Government (2021), statutory guidance outlines that non-maintained nursery settings for early education have the option to fully adopt this play-based curriculum, ensuring a learning experience that is both developmentally appropriate and tailored to young children's needs. Moreover, Early Years Wales (n.d.) highlights that the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales is designed to align with the Curriculum for Wales. It is specifically developed

for early childhood education and includes core transferable skills to support a smooth transition into school education, (Early Years Wales, n.d.).

Welsh Government (2021) states in the Consultation Document: *A Curriculum for Non-Maintained Nursery Settings* that professional learning modules are available to support practitioners in delivering high-quality education. These modules focus on key areas such as child development, outdoor learning, play-based learning, and observation. The curriculum is built around five essential developmental pathways: Belonging, Communication, Exploration, Physical Development, and Well-being, which establish a strong foundation for guiding children's learning experiences in these settings (Early Years Wales, n.d.).

WISERD (2015), in the *Evaluating the Foundation Phase: Final Report for the Welsh Government*, presents findings that highlight conflict in the approach, particularly regarding experiential learning and age-based assessment methods. Inconsistencies in terminology and definitions created confusion, as distinctions were not clearly established or understood. Additionally, WISERD (2015) identified concerns about the balance between pedagogy and outcomes. While the Foundation Phase recognises the importance of play-based learning, its integration within the existing assessment and outcomes, the framework lacked cohesion.

Professor Graham Donaldson's (2015) report: *Successful Futures*, highlights that schools should go beyond simply passing on knowledge, prioritising skill development, creativity, and critical thinking to equip learners for modern challenges. He highlighted that the existing curriculum was outdated and in need of reform but acknowledged the Foundation Phase as one of the strongest aspects of Welsh education, providing a solid base for developing a new curriculum. This perspective influenced the creation of the Curriculum for Wales (Senedd Cymru, 2021; Welsh Government, 2014). However, the Curriculum for Wales recognises that the curriculum is not appropriate for all children, though elements are incorporated to support those with profound and additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2021, 2022; Snap Cymru, n.d.; Additional Learning Needs (Wales) Act 2018). This links to Ken Robinson's perspective, as he emphasizes the importance of institutional habits, including a shared vision, a deep understanding of the curricula ethos, and clarity on what practitioners aim to achieve and what children will benefit from (Robinson, 2010).

Education 2030 (OECD) points out that genuine reform requires transforming the entire system, not just individual aspects (OECD, n.d.). Similarly, Mourshed et al. (2010) suggests that meaningful educational reform must address the entire system rather than making specific adjustments.

Welsh Government (n.d.) highlights that enabling environments foster exploration indoors and outdoors, enhancing a child's sense of belonging. They stimulate learning, curiosity, and skill development over time. Enabling adults support, scaffold, and extend learning, promoting independence and inquiry. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where practitioners temporarily guide learners, gradually reducing assistance as confidence and proficiency grow (Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) evaluates student performance while highlighting the importance of well-being in education. The 2022 findings show declining life satisfaction, emphasizing the need for supportive school environments (OECD, 2022). A strong sense of belonging and positive school climate enhance learning, yet socio-economic disparities and bullying remain challenges (Piacentini, 2024). Stress and anxiety, particularly in mathematics, negatively affect academic achievement. Prioritising well-being improves student engagement and long-term success (OECD, 2023).

Play, as emphasized by Waters-Davies (2022), is initiated by the child, driven by personal interest, and unfolds naturally without external incentives or predetermined goals. Perry (2014) stresses that play is not a singular action but an evolving process. Louis (2021) agrees, highlighting the diverse ways children express emotions, test theories, and draw conclusions through play. She affirms that play is fundamental to independent learning, skill development, and practice, ultimately fostering growth.

Evaluation

Play-based learning is widely supported, but inconsistencies in teaching, training, and assessment can hinder its effectiveness. Greater collaboration between policymakers and educators could improve implementation. Differences in teaching methods impact engagement, and evaluation frameworks often fail to align with play-

based approaches. Student well-being is vital to academic success yet rising anxiety and declining life satisfaction highlight the need for more supportive learning environments. Strengthening professional development will help ensure play remains central to early education, enhancing cognitive and social growth through an effective Pedagogy.

The Unique Child

Section 2

Recognising children as individuals is a fundamental principle in early years education. Each child has unique interests, preferences, and developmental needs. Acknowledging and respecting these differences is crucial for fostering confidence and self-esteem, creating an environment where children feel valued and supported (Care Learning, 2024). Flying Start (2023) reinforces this by emphasizing that each child has distinct experiences and developmental needs, highlighting the importance of tailoring learning to their abilities, interests, and requirements. The Education Endowment Foundation (2025) supports the unique child principle in the Early Years Foundation Stage, while also stressing the need to identify and support children requiring additional help to ensure steady progress in their learning. As Jeannie Fulbright (2020) encapsulates, "Every child is UNIQUE, therefore their EDUCATION should be also."

The concept of integration in early years education builds upon educational theories and frameworks that emphasize holistic development, such as the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF)—*Belonging, Being and Becoming* (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). This approach aligns with Rudolf Steiner's advocacy for an education that nurtures the whole child, fostering physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth (Steiner, 1997). Steiner's model follows age-appropriate learning, creative play, and a connection to nature, mirroring the EYLF's vision of comprehensive early childhood development. Similarly, Te Whāriki, New Zealand's early years framework, integrates individuality and communal learning, recognising children's unique pathways while fostering shared experiences (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017).

A balanced approach to learning integrates intellectual, social, and motor development (Kenny et al., 2016). However, ensuring equal opportunities for all children necessitates addressing systemic inequalities and challenging underlying biases (UNICEF, 2022). UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report further underscores the importance of inclusive education policies, in expanding access for marginalised communities (UNESCO, 2020), reinforcing the commitment to equity in early childhood education.

The Early Intervention Foundation (2018) highlight that funding policies and structural frameworks do not always facilitate seamless integration, often posing challenges for disadvantaged families and children with special educational needs. However, the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme suggest that strategic funding, allocation and localised services, can enhance integration by mitigation, through multi-agency collaboration and targeted support (GOV.UK, 2025). Morton and Guerin (2017) stress culturally responsive learning acknowledges education as a sociocultural process, emphasizing shared knowledge construction through diverse interactions and inclusive pedagogical practices. This approach values multiple perspectives, promoting impartial learning environments where students and educators engage in reciprocal learning (Samuels, 2018). Culturally responsive learning recognises education as a sociocultural process, emphasizing shared knowledge through diverse interactions and inclusive pedagogical practices (Kuwari, 2023). For linguistic and cultural translations, the early years team should include members fluent in the target language and deeply familiar with the culture (Bornman et al., 2010: 117).

GL Assessment (2024) conducted a study examining the impact of the WellComm Toolkit on early years practitioners, particularly in speech, language, and communication support. The findings indicate that the toolkit enhances practitioner knowledge, improves referral processes, and strengthens language support for children. While challenges such as time constraints and staffing shortages were noted, the benefits were found to outweigh these difficulties (Dysart and Code, 2024, p. 263). To optimise its effectiveness, practitioners are encouraged to utilise targeted interventions through the *Big Book of Ideas*, which contains over 150 structured, play-based activities designed to support language development. The WellComm Toolkit is widely implemented across nurseries, schools, and early years settings,

frequently integrated with speech and language therapy services to facilitate early identification and intervention for children with communication needs (Welsh Government, 2022d; Welsh Government, 2022e). However, concerns regarding its practical application remain Dysart and Code (2024).

Hub (n.d.) notes that while the WellComm Toolkit is referenced within the Curriculum for Wales, comprehensive evidence detailing its real-world implementation is limited. Dysart and Code (2023) further highlight inconsistencies in its usage, suggesting the need for more systematic evaluation to ensure its effective integration within early years education.

Raise York (n.d.) emphasizes that the WellComm Toolkit aids children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) by identifying language difficulties rather than assessing second-language learning. It recommends screening in the child's strongest language, utilising interpreters where necessary, and adapting interventions to support communication development.

The York Policy Engine (2023) evaluated the WellComm Toolkit within Early Talk For York (ETFY) childcare settings, identifying inconsistencies in implementation primarily due to financial limitations. Many settings struggle to secure funding for training and access to the toolkit. However, the Wellcome Trust (2025) highlights that financial support is available for research and intervention programs focused on speech and language development, allowing early years settings to apply for grants to support the WellComm Toolkit and related initiatives. Similarly, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (2025) provides funding and research opportunities for speech and language therapy projects, which may extend to WellComm-related initiatives through grant funding.

Dysart and Code (2024) examine the impact of the WellComm Toolkit on early years practitioners, highlighting its role in strengthening their knowledge and skills in speech, language, and communication. Their findings suggest that the toolkit enables practitioners to create nurturing communication environments within early years settings. This aligns with *The WellComm Halo Effect Report*, which highlights how practitioners integrate explicit and implicit language practices through small adult-led groups, routine interactions, and guided play. The report further underscores the importance of fostering a WellComm enabling environment and engaging parents in speech and language support (Stronger Practice Hubs, n.d.).

This perspective is also supported by aspects of the Curriculum for Wales, particularly in its emphasis on structured assessment and intervention through observation-based practices. However, despite references to WellComm within the curriculum, comprehensive evidence detailing its full implementation remains limited (Hwb, n.d.).

Both *Te Whāriki* and the *Curriculum for Wales* prioritise holistic child-centered education, yet they differ in structure and approach. *Te Whāriki*, shaped by the woven mat metaphor, integrates diverse learning experiences while emphasizing empowerment, relationships, and community connections (McNerney, 2015). Deeply rooted in Māori and Pasifika cultural perspectives, it embeds native knowledge while offering flexibility in early years settings (Alvestad et al., 2009). In contrast, the *Curriculum for Wales* is structured around four key purposes, cultivating ambitious learners, ethical citizens, healthy individuals, and enterprising contributors, ensuring clear progression throughout a child's education (Welsh Government, n.d.). It strongly incorporates Welsh cultural identity, multilingualism, and play-based learning, alongside a structured assessment strategy to promote continuity (Hwb, n.d.). While both frameworks advocate for inclusive education and child-led learning, *Te Whāriki* fosters a rounded culturally embedded approach, whereas the *Curriculum for Wales* highlights structured progression and assessment to guide learners through their development (Ministry of Education, n.d.; Welsh Government, n.d.).

The responsibility for implementing early years frameworks falls primarily on practitioners who work directly with children, ensuring that policies and guidelines translate into meaningful practice (Reed and Canning, 2009). However, this process is also significantly influenced by colleagues within local authority specifically Early Years Advisory and Support Teams. These professionals play a crucial role in overseeing the implementation, providing guidance, and ensuring that the framework is effectively integrated into everyday educational settings (Early Years Wales, n.d.). Likewise, the Welsh Government's Childcare, Playwork, and Early Years (CPEY) Sector regulates early years education, overseeing policy, funding, and collaboration with local authorities and Social Care Wales to maintain high standards (Welsh Government, n.d.; Social Care Wales, n.d.).

Speech and Language (2024) state that Children with speech and language difficulties often face significant barriers in education, with many struggling to engage in classroom activities and social interactions. Nearly half of affected children have refused to attend school, while 80% experience negative consequences due to communication challenges. Early interventions, including tailored support and specialist training for educators, are essential in improving outcomes and ensuring children receive the assistance they need to thrive (Speech and Language, 2024). The Department for Education (2025) supports this, highlighting the necessity of early identification and intervention to prevent long-term educational and social challenges, ensuring children receive timely and effective support.

Assessment methods within play-based curricula must align with the Unique Child principle, ensuring that each child's communication and speech development is evaluated holistically. Observational assessments enable practitioners to capture authentic interactions, though they may introduce subjectivity and variability in interpretation (Dunlop, 2024). Structured progress tracking tools, such as Speech & Language UK's Progress Checker, provide standardised benchmarks for monitoring development, yet they may not fully accommodate individual variations in speech and language acquisition (Speech & Language UK, n.d.). Age-related developmental models, including SEND assessment frameworks, facilitate the identification of children requiring additional support, though their rigid criteria may overlook the diverse trajectories of language development (Teach Early Years, n.d.). Curriculum-based assessments, such as those advocated in the Curriculum and Assessment Review, integrate speech and language development within broader educational experiences, though their effectiveness depends on systemic implementation and practitioner engagement (Speech & Language UK, 2024). A comprehensive approach that combines observational methods, structured assessment tools, and inclusive practices ensures that evaluations reflect the diverse communication styles of children, including non-verbal and multilingual learners (Devon County Council, n.d.).

Conclusion

Effective speech and language provision in early years settings rests on practitioner expertise, equitable resource access, and inclusive, child-led pedagogy. The WellComm Toolkit has proven valuable in creating language-rich environments, yet the impact is often constrained by financial limitations. Strategic funding from organisations such as the Wellcome Trust and RCSLT offers a viable pathway to broader implementation. While Te Whāriki and the Curriculum for Wales differ culturally and structurally, both emphasise practitioner agency and responsive, relationship-based learning. Both curriculums similarly have emphasis on holistic development which embeds communication as deeply as emotional, social and cognitive growth. However, integrating observational and structured assessment methods remains essential to identifying diverse communication profiles and ensuring inclusive, developmentally appropriate intervention.

From Mess to Mastery: Understanding Schemas in the Early Years



Schemas are recurring patterns of behaviour that help children explore, experiment, and make sense of their surroundings. These instinctive actions, often linked to their interests, support learning by reinforcing concepts like cause and effect, problem-solving, and spatial awareness. Through repetition, children refine their understanding and actively build knowledge, progressing through different schemas from infancy as part of their cognitive and physical development (Louis, 2019).

How can practitioners support schemas in early childhood development?

Schemas provide insight into how children perceive and explore the world. Behaviours that might initially seem disruptive such as transporting objects or creating a mess are often key components of children's natural learning and development. When schemas are overlooked, behavioural patterns can become challenging. However, by facilitating schematic play, practitioners can offer children repeated opportunities to refine their understanding and skills. After all schemas are typical behaviours, children explore as they develop and grow!

Practitioners can integrate schema theory into play-based learning, ensuring that children have opportunities to explore, repeat, and refine their understanding of the world. This approach aligns with Article 29 of the UNCRC, which emphasizes education that respects children's cultural identity and personal development (United Nations, 1989). By embedding schematic learning into practice, enabling adults uphold children's rights to meaningful, responsive, and developmentally appropriate education (Long, 2022; Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, n.d.). Prioritising social and emotional well-being is essential for supporting neurodivergent children in schematic play. Many experience difficulties with peer interactions, which can affect their ability to engage in collaborative exploration. Practitioners can facilitate a more inclusive and responsive learning atmosphere by integrating self-regulation strategies, such as structured play invitations that align with specific schemas. Providing play opportunities tailored to schematic interests enables children to process information in a way that feels natural and intuitive, rather than constrained by rigid academic expectations (Penton, 2024). Embedding schema-based play within Additional Learning Needs (ALN) support ensures that learning remains child-led and responsive, recognising the unique ways neurodivergent children engage with the world around them.

How do schemas influence learning and development?

Schemas play a foundational role in children's learning and development, shaping how they process, categorise, and respond to new experiences. These repeated patterns of thought and behaviour enable children to form cognitive connections and deepen their understanding of the world. In early years education, schemas influence both exploration and problem-solving. For example, a child engaged in a rotational schema—spinning objects, twirling, or drawing circles—develops spatial awareness and coordination. Likewise, a child demonstrating an enclosing schema—placing objects within containers—builds an early understanding of boundaries and organisation. Recognizing and supporting schematic play allows practitioners to create engaging, child-led environments that promote meaningful learning. Encouraging repetition and variation strengthens cognitive development, helping children refine skills such as reasoning, classification, and prediction (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021; The Curiosity Approach, n.d.).

The Curriculum for Wales recognises the role of schemas in early childhood education, particularly within the Foundation Phase, which prioritises play-based learning and child-led exploration. Research has examined how schemas support cognitive and developmental growth, reinforcing their relevance in early years practice (Thomas, 2019). Amanda Thomas, from the University of South Wales, has developed a toolkit designed to help practitioners incorporate schemas into the curriculum, linking them to key areas of learning and experience (Thomas & Boulton, 2022). Additionally, resources from the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) emphasize how schemas enhance children's ability to process and make sense of their surroundings, highlighting their significance in fostering early cognitive development (NDNA, 2022).

The concept of schemas was first introduced by Jean Piaget in 1923 as part of his stage theory of cognitive development, identifying them as fundamental units of knowledge that help individuals process and interact with the world (Piaget, 1923). These schematic patterns also align with the Reggio Emilia approach, developed by Loris Malaguzzi, which positions children as active co-constructors of knowledge, learning through exploration, collaboration, and interaction with their environment (Education Scotland, 2006). Emerging from open-ended, inquiry-driven play, Reggio Emilia settings naturally foster schema development, allowing children to engage in behaviours such as connecting, positioning, and transforming (Krechevsky et al., 2013). This is further supported through loose parts play, natural materials, and collaborative projects, providing children with rich opportunities to investigate, experiment, and refine their schematic interests in meaningful ways (Reggio Emilia Australia, n.d.).



IDEAS for practitioners!

Most Common Schemas in the Early Years

Connecting – Children explore how objects fit together by building with Lego or connecting train tracks.

Enclosing – They create boundaries by placing items inside boxes or building houses.

Enveloping – Covering objects or themselves, like wrapping toys in fabric or playing peep-po.

Orientation – Investigating different viewpoints, such as looking through magnifying glasses or hanging upside down.

Positioning – Arranging items in a structured way, like lining up toys by size or colour.

Rotational – Exploring circular movement by spinning objects or twirling around.

Trajectory – Observing movement patterns through rolling balls or throwing leaves into the air.

Transforming – Experimenting with change, such as mixing paints or playing with sand and water.

Transporting – Moving objects from one place to another, like pushing a wheelbarrow or carrying items in a container.

Key Strategies for Support

Observe children's play to identify and support schematic behaviours.

Provide open-ended materials like loose parts and sensory experiences to encourage exploration.

Create flexible spaces that support movement and schematic play, ensuring inclusivity.

Adapt activities based on children's schematic interests, fostering autonomy.

Engage with families to create community and extend learning beyond the classroom.

Practitioners should embrace Schematic Play. As play is the work of childhood.....

Michelle Evans / June 2025.

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