

I acknowledge using Grammarly (<https://grammarly.com/>) on 18/06/2025 to check my already completed work. This program was installed on my computer and automatically provided suggestions in Microsoft Word.

I acknowledge using Copilot (Microsoft Copilot in Bing) on the following dates with the following prompts. AI Prompts on 28/05/2025 and 29/05/2025

- Montessori evidence that shares negative views.
- Criticism of the Curriculum for Wales

I acknowledge using Microsoft Copilot in Bing (also known as Copilot) on the following dates with the following prompts. AI Prompts on 08/06/2025

- Barriers to Documentation: Challenges with early years observation assessments

I acknowledge using Microsoft Copilot in Bing (also known as Copilot) on the following dates with the following prompts. AI Prompts on 09/06/2025

- Children and disengagement within the early years assessments

I do not hold any drafts of my work before using AI, as I did not write anything before these prompts. AI prompts allowed me to access alternative resources. I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my work.

Early Years Curricula

Section one – Two play-based curriculum approaches.

The Curriculum for Wales approach called Foundation Learning replaced the Foundation Phase and changed the concept from traditional key stages, and moved towards a continuum of learning for children aged 3 to 16. Effective education fosters curiosity, hands-on discovery, and meaningful engagement while supporting adaptable progression, ensuring continuous growth academically, socially, and emotionally (Welsh Government, 2021). Foundation Learning is built on pedagogical approaches that nurture early development, providing structured support for young children and those with similar developmental needs (Welsh Government, no date). Wainwright *et al*, (2016) say that in 2008, the Foundation Phase was implemented in Wales as a play-based curriculum designed to allow children active learning, movement and play to enhance more hands-on experiences, increasing the early development of motor skills, coordination and physical competence. John Dewey viewed learning habits as evolving

patterns shaped by experiences, with emotion playing a key role in transformation, reinforcing that children learn best through active engagement and real-world experiences (Petit and Ballet, 2021). In respect to this, PACEY Cymru (2025) states that The Curriculum for Wales, launched in 2022, shared an ethos to extend play-based opportunities that are more flexible and holistic around the six areas of learning and experience. Furthermore, Swift (2017) states that teachers should integrate learning strategies that are play-based, allowing children's learning to enhance their well-being, cognitive development, and social skills. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021) now serves as the key legislation shaping education in Wales, introducing a more holistic, adaptable, and learner-focused framework that replaces previous curriculum structures (Welsh Government, 2021).

Whilst the Welsh new curriculum was implemented in recent years, curricula such as the Montessori approach has been around for over 100 years. Maria Montessori (1912) developed a learning approach that emphasises that children learn best when they are given freedom in prepared environments that are enriching, allowing them to experience independence and hands-on learning (Maunz, 2022). Similarly, the Welsh Government (2025) shares the same view, saying that learners should be given experience in education that is child-centred learning and allows the children to take active roles in their learning journey by problem solving, being creative and developing independence. One could say that this represents Lev Vygotsky's theory, which highlights that children learn best when their educational setting encourages active participation, independent exploration, and hands-on engagement with their surroundings. In addition, guided and collaborative participation in play-based learning fosters greater social interaction and improves learning outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978). Montessori, however, does suggest that play should be carefully prepared by the leading educator, which then allows the child to engage in self-directed play using their natural curiosity in exploring their own learning. Effectively, the educator acts as only a facilitator whilst observing and only allows gentle guidance with no imposing and structured instructions (Care Learning, 2025). Whereas the Curriculum for Wales integrates a play-based learning approach, educator-led facilitation ensuring that the children engage in a balance of guided exploration and independent curiosity, enhancing collaborative learning and individual growth (Welsh Government, 2025b).

Waters (2016) suggests that there needs to be a level of government assistance through funding, adequate training and resources to ensure the success of implementing a curriculum to help children flourish. The restriction, however, is that the structure between the two curricula differs and therefore, the number of resources and

staff can vary to be able to achieve a play-based curriculum effectively (Chartered College of Teaching, 2024). Equally, Schull *et al* (no date) agree and believe that environments need to have intentional design, open freedom spaces with educator guidance to encourage child-led exploration, impacting the financial support and accessibility of numbers of staff to allow successful learning opportunities.

Montessori is divided into developmental age stages that guide the expected learning outcomes to be accomplished within a specific age range. The aim is to ensure that the educational purpose aligns with the child's natural developmental stage (Peck, 2024). NDNA Cymru (2025) highlights that the Curriculum for Wales integrates play-based learning through a continuum of learning and progression steps, rather than adhering to the strict age range and phases of typical developmental milestones. The Curriculum for Wales centres its aim around the four purposes: ambitious, enterprising, ethical, and healthy students. It is designed to adopt a holistic approach to education, facilitating learning that supports children's development in various ways as they progress through academic year groups, rather than focusing solely on age groups (Equal Education Partners, 2023).

The role of the adult within the Curriculum for Wales allows the educator to create their curriculum following three fundamental guidelines, emphasising the importance of enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments. In addition, when creating their own curriculum, the leading educator needs to have clear knowledge and understanding of the child's development stage (Hwb, 2025). The enabling adults provide scaffolding for learning, offering guidance and support to help the progression of a child's existing knowledge and skills. The support given should be temporary help for the child to understand the concept and skill (De Florio, 2016). Arguably, Frey *et al*. (2023) point out that if leading adults over scaffold activities, this can result in children's frustration, which may hinder skill development. Therefore, they suggest an interactive approach to tasks that fosters children's resilience and problem-solving abilities. However, Vygotsky believed that children progress beyond their capacities by having temporary, scaffolding support that involves interactions with other peers and educators, as it helps gain their confidence to later master a new skill (Samanta and Mudi, 2024).

When we look deeper into a Montessori classroom, Jones (2024) suggests that the leading adult guides learners rather than the traditional way of instructing tasks. The educator similarly creates learning opportunities that are facilitated by a leading adult, promoting independent learning, giving learners trust in themselves to be curious in different environments. Additionally, educators are to carefully observe children, taking

note of their key interests, high engagement in activities and developmental progression. Whilst observing, it offers opportunities for the educator to offer necessary guidance (Montessori Action, 2025). Williams (2022) also supports this, stating that the Montessori belief is that educators should always facilitate learning opportunities rather than directly instruct, providing gentle encouragement to self-directed exploration. Therefore, engaging with children is a primary role, ensuring the educator can capture children's active interest and motivation towards tasks, enhancing practice and delving deeper into prepared and purposeful learning environments (Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child, 2019).

Preparing enabling environments is something that both curricula support. The Curriculum for Wales supports holistic development through play-based indoor and outdoor learning to enhance creativity, exploration and physical movement. Additionally, the activities should aim to be meaningful and challenging, offering children the opportunity to become critical thinkers and build resilience (Early Years Wales, 2023). Furthermore, Jean Piaget's theory suggests that the learning environments should challenge a child but not to be fully achievable, however, appropriate for the child's cognitive stage of learning (Alhabib, 2021). Through the progression steps of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2025) and the developmental stages set out in the Montessori curriculum (Peck, 2024), this theorist's approach is achievable in both educational settings when building enabling environments. Outdoor learning provides children with natural environments that support children's imaginative play and peer relationships, encouraging collaborative learning with others (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). Tinney (2023) agrees with this and, in addition, emphasises that the curriculum for Wales draws on Forest school principles, increasing independence, resilience and awareness of environmental surroundings and seasonal changes. It is also evident that Montessori encourages children to respect nature and actively involves sustainability and forest school principles in their curriculum (Montessori Job, 2025).

The Welsh Curriculum highlights additional benefits of outdoor play, particularly in improving children's mental health and well-being. By engaging in outdoor activities, children can develop essential skills and techniques that enhance their mood and boost their confidence (Learning through Landscapes, 2025). Creating these opportunities links with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), which focuses on supporting children's mental health and encouraging a healthy Wales. In summary, both curricula share similar holistic aims to provide play-based environments for children that are diverse, cultural, natural, and social (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2015).

Whilst there is a crossover of similarities between curriculum sharing benefits, there are some drawbacks. The British Educational Research Association (BERA) shares concerns regarding the Curriculum for Wales, expressing that the child-led approach could lead to inequalities in education, with the varying levels of flexibility towards the curriculum making it harder to observe consistent progress measures (Power *et al*, 2020). Additionally, Estyn (2025) recognises that the curriculum offers flexibility and it may highlight the lack of benchmarking for assessments and comparisons. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2022) shares that Audit Wales mentions challenges with the Curriculum for Wales in measuring individual progress and ensuring consistency is managed across all schools in Wales. There is also the limitation shared by Liliana (2023) regarding teacher's interventions within the Montessori curriculum, and that children may struggle with not receiving direct instruction or structured support in line with educational aims. As we know, Montessori uses age range progression steps and rarely uses traditional grading, therefore making it difficult to track progress in the national educational system (CoolerLearning, 2023).

In conclusion, both play-based curricula share similarities, benefits, and drawbacks. Their play-based approach allows children to explore and learn through curiosity and learn at their own pace (Welsh Government, 2025b and Peck, 2024). They both are clear with their ethos in ensuring they promote creative skills, social and emotional development through collaborative groups learning amongst peers (Welsh Government, 2024) and (Montessori Foundation, 2025). Fundamentally, the educators should base their enabling environments around what will enhance a child's progress whilst promoting engagement (Welsh Government, 2025). However, their structures differ, The Curriculum for Wales integrates educator-led facilitation, balancing guided and independent exploration to ensure holistic development through progression steps (Welsh Government, 2021). By comparison, Montessori focuses on self-directed learning, where the educator acts as a facilitator, minimising direct instruction to promote independence (Montessori, 1912). Both approaches seek to inspire curiosity and active engagement, yet their success relies on thoughtful execution, skilled educators, and strong support systems to maintain progression without compromising educational standards.

Section 2 – The ‘Unique Child’ and assessment within play-based curricula.

Every child deserves to and has the right to receive care and support to have the best start to life. Each child is unique, and is always learning to be capable, confident,

resilient and self-assured learners (Department for Education, 2025). Welsh Government (2025a) recognises that the Curriculum for Wales is driven with the unique child in mind, understanding that each child develops at their own pace and in their way. It is therefore central to the framework in ensuring learning is tailored to children's strengths, interests, and individual needs. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework has four principles, one of which is the unique child and practitioners are expected to support, value and respect each child to develop their sense of identity and culture (Early Years Coalition, 2021). In line with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), respecting the child's right to express their views and wishes on decisions that affect them (UNICEF, 2010). Additionally, the Education Endowment Foundation (2025) explains that every child is unique and develops at their own pace, experiencing life differently, showing varied abilities, differing cultural backgrounds and emotional needs. Furthermore, Allingham (2020) argues that parents, carers, and educators should not adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality, as children's skills and progress should be viewed as part of a positive learning journey.

Worcestershire County Council (2025) states that the EYFS has clear assessment guidance for practitioners to follow and recognise the importance of sharing a child's progress with parents in the aim to help them understand their child's needs and consider these when planning their learning environment. Assessments in the early years need to be inclusive, ensuring that every child, no matter their ability, learning style, culture or background, has an equal opportunity to thrive. A play-based learning model using thorough assessment is important and responsive in the evaluation that considers the whole child (Care Learning, 2025b).

The Foundation Phase Profile Handbook outlines the Welsh Government's aim towards assessing children's learning and development in the early years. One of the key approaches is observation-based assessment, which applies to all practitioners in the setting to assess children through their natural curiosity and interactions rather than formally testing them (Welsh Government, 2017). Birth to 5 Matters (2025) agrees with this and advocates that observation-based assessment helps practitioners tune into children's curiosity, and these observations can help them to understand their development and improve hands-on evaluations of children's true development. Through observation-based assessment, which is continuous, individual learners will develop skills at an unpredictable pace. Therefore, practitioners need to be mindful of cross-curricular planning to ensure learners individual progression is effective and

develops children's skills across different subjects (Welsh Government, 2015). The Welsh Government (2017) highlights that there is no set method for recording observations. However, evidence of children's skills should be sourced from all areas of learning. Neaum (2016) suggests that practitioners may face barriers in effectively recording and interpreting children's observations, as staff may vary in expertise and experience. Moreover, detailed observation record keeping can be a challenge due to time constraints with daily demands and efficient systems to store and analyse collected data.

The Te Whāriki curriculum in New Zealand is well known for using narrative assessment, specifically Learning Stories, which document a child's learning experiences through storytelling. This approach captures a child's development in a meaningful and contextual way, reflecting their progress in a holistic way (Escamilla, 2021). Similarly, this assessment also focuses on observations, reflections, and interactions with children, ensuring there is a holistic view of the child's progress (The Education Hub, 2020). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education New Zealand (2025) also highlights a crossover in similarities, being child-led, focusing on the child's interests and exploring their strength across different curriculum areas. However, a difference noted is that parents are involved in contributing to the learning stories in the hope of strengthening the home-school connections. Looking back at the Montessori approach discussed earlier, they also hold a similar assessment approach called Montessori stories. The aim again contributed through observational assessment, telling a story relating to the child's learning journey (Montessori Stories, 2025).

Albin-Clark (2020) draws upon challenges with documentation and maintaining detailed records, and the effect this has on the demands of practitioners finding additional time to write, review notes and reflect on learning stories. In overcoming these challenges, the UK Government Report on Eliminating Unnecessary Workload focuses on reducing excessive planning and advocates for shared resources and greater educator autonomy. It emphasises the need to encourage collaborative practice to enhance efficiency and minimise excessive documentation (UK Government, 2016). Escamilla (2021) suggests that creating accurate and effective written observation reports requires a significant amount of time and skill, and they are often written solely by one educator. This lack of multiple viewpoints may lead to a biased interpretation, as the report reflects only a single person's perspective. Kamini (2019) advocates for a collaborative approach in gathering a child's diverse perspectives and developmental insights,

ensuring a richer and more comprehensive understanding of their progression and uniqueness.

This Foundation Phase assessment framework consists of two profiles, a compact profile, simplified and a quick reference version and a full profile containing comprehensive information highlighting developmental areas. These profiles contain children's personal and social development, well-being, culture and academic language, and mathematical progress. The assessment begins with a baseline criterion at the start of their education that continues throughout the foundation phase to track the children's growth (Welsh Government, 2009). It means the framework is not rigid and steps away from the traditional, standardised assessments by having a greater focus on continuous observation and formative information to track children's progress (Welsh Government, 2015). The Curriculum for Wales also moves away from rigid assessment structures and instead focuses on progression-based learning through holistic assessments that are formative and ongoing and embedded in everyday learning experiences (Early Years Wales, no date). Welsh Government (2021) promotes continuous growth using the progression code in the early years rather than fixed benchmarks, recognising that children develop at different stages. The progression code allows flexibility, individual learning pathways that are aligned with the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales. This approach is like the Te Whāriki, Ministry of Education, New Zealand (2017) emphasises individualised learning journeys and contextual assessment rather than rigid benchmarks. In addition, it also shares that learning is seen as a woven journey, being flexible to the children's experiences that shape their development rather than predetermined milestones.

Although various sources like the Welsh Government (2021), Ministry of Education New Zealand (2017) and Welsh Government (2009) point out that assessments are to be child-led capturing the hands-on curiosity, the assessment methods do not consider the children's emotional and social well-being. Therefore, this may lead to children becoming disengaged and impact the accuracy of evaluations when recording and reviewing collected data (Welsh Government, no date b). A Welsh Government study was carried out with a focus on children's disengagement from learning, affecting their educational outcomes. The outcome of the study shared the importance of responsive assessment approaches that consider motivation, well-being, and contextual factors to improve engagement and ensure reliable assessments (Welsh Government, 2010). Ministry of Education New Zealand (no date) acknowledge Te Whāriki share the same experience with children's disengagement in the curriculum and encourages that the

educator is responsive to disengagements and adapts the learning approach to move towards more meaningful learning for the children.

Learning stories are a narrative-based assessment approach used in early childhood with a focus on capturing the complexities of children's learning and development whilst a child interacts with people, places and different environmental opportunities. They provide qualitative insights into children's learning, gathering reports on a child's growth over time, helping educators recognise patterns and provide a holistic view of development needs (Hargraves, 2020). In contrast, the Curriculum for Wales Progression Code ensures a structured yet holistic approach, aligning with the four purposes while utilising benchmarking to guide progression steps across different stages (Welsh Government, 2021).

When assessing learning within a play-based curriculum, it requires a balance of observations and progress tracking so that practitioners can capture how children interact with their environment. Learning stories help with this however, the stories are created from people's perspectives, and sometimes this may miss the area where the children may need support (McGuinness *et al*, 2014). The practitioners' skills need to allow time and flexibility to account for individual growth and establish grading of activities to meet the needs of the child (Welsh Government, 2022).

To conclude, for effective outcomes from play-based learning using both assessment approaches, children can receive balanced and responsive learning environments, offering experiences to nurture and build on their development and identified interests. The Curriculum for Wales and alternative assessment models like Learning Stories offer strengths in fostering child-led, holistic development, yet both face challenges in documentation and implementation. The progression-based framework in Wales promotes flexibility and individualised learning (Welsh Government, 2021), but concerns arise over maintaining consistent measures and ensuring emotional engagement (Power *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, Learning Stories provide rich developmental insights (Hargraves, 2020), yet the time demands on educators and risks of single-perspective reporting pose limitations (Escamilla, 2021 and Kamini, 2019). Addressing these challenges through collaborative educator approaches and balanced workload management (UK Government, 2016) could enhance the effectiveness of both frameworks, ensuring meaningful progression and engagement in early education.

Section 3 – Blog

Does experience out way Curriculum Guidance?

In September 2023, my third child stepped out into the world of education and started his first full-time school placement. I experienced the first day of school for the third time—an exciting moment for both him and me. However, I didn't yet realise how different this journey would be. Luckily for him, he knew no different. It was the second year of the Curriculum for Wales, a play-based curriculum introduced across all areas of learning (Welsh Government, 2022). His teacher was a newly qualified teacher, who graduated last summer at 25 years of age.

It began so positively with lots of shared communication from teachers around him, his enthusiasm towards playing outside, loving messy play experiences and building dens with his friends. That hands-on learning Friedrich Froebel emphasised, drawing upon the importance of play-based learning, exploring messy play and den building experiences (Froebel Trust, 2017). As a child, I have no memories of outdoor play being a significant focus, nor do I recall it being a strongly encouraged opportunity in early years education at the time. This communication from the school allowed me to interact with him at home about his learning experience and the things he enjoyed so much. The Welsh Government (2024) recognised the importance of effective home and school communication, enhancing the experience and helping the children engage with their education in a more meaningful way.

However, as the months passed, our conversations took an unexpected turn. He began coming home unsettled, repeatedly asking if he had to go back to school the next day—something completely out of character for him. To help him express his feelings without pressure, I asked open-ended questions, allowing him to share his worries freely. It soon became clear he found school boring. He described his days as repetitive, telling me, *"I do the same thing all the time, Mum."* He longed to spend more time drawing and painting like his classmates, rather than attending reading groups so frequently.

The Curriculum for Wales emphasises developing ambition in children, encouraging learners to communicate and express their ideas about their learning with confidence (Welsh Government, 2025). Yet, despite his exceptional creative skills and passion for drawing, he felt he wasn't given the opportunity to explore his strengths.

When I spoke to the teacher about my son's experience, it was explained that because he had exceeded his progression steps so confidently and was flourishing in his

learning, he was given more focused time to enhance his skills. Meanwhile, other groups were often split between outdoor and indoor creative play to support their progression towards his level. From this, I gathered that because my son was exceeding his expected progression steps, he was expected to work harder, while those at earlier progression stages had more opportunities for free play to develop their creative skills. The Progression Code outlines how teachers can design their own curriculum based on progression steps guidance within the new curriculum (Welsh Government, no date b).

Creating a play-based curriculum that is effective, adaptable, and truly child-led (Hwb, 2025) comes with its challenges. While I understand these difficulties, experienced teachers may find implementing such an approach more achievable due to their deeper understanding of balancing structured learning with child-initiated exploration. However, in this case, the teacher was not only new to teaching but also new to implementing curriculum objectives within a teacher-led framework (Teacher's Guide, 2025). I believe that without a strong foundation in managing both child-led curiosity and curricular goals—alongside extensive training and experience, the challenge of delivering a play-based curriculum in a way that nurtures engagement becomes more complex. Ultimately impacting the quality of a child's early years' experience.

The Welsh Government (2025) states that teachers must take responsibility for continuous professional development (CPD) to effectively implement the curriculum and adapt to children's evolving educational needs. A teacher with extensive experience and a strong CPD portfolio is better equipped to create fair, engaging, and learner-centred environments. In contrast, a teacher who relies solely on curriculum guidance due to limited teaching experience and a limited CPD profile may struggle to apply the curriculum in a way that truly meets children's diverse needs (Department for Education, 2025b). Real-world teaching demands adaptability, responsiveness, and a deep understanding of how to tailor learning experiences—skills that experienced educators develop over time (Parsons *et al*, 2018).

My concern is whether my son truly thrived in his early years' education, having started with a new curriculum under a newly qualified teacher. A teacher who followed curriculum guidance rigidly rather than using intuition and the insights gained from years of hands-on experience. My other children have always experienced teachers in their early years, ones who understood their individual interests, developmental stages, and the balance between structured learning and creative exploration. These teachers

recognised the importance of adapting learning experiences to children's unique strengths, rather than treating curriculum guidance as a strict formula.

Early childhood education plays an important role in a child's natural development, shaping their confidence, creativity, and love for learning (Aspire Early Education, 2025). Young learners should be encouraged to explore their unique skills and interests alongside subject-based curriculum topics and not as an afterthought, but as an essential part of their growth. Without this balance, the richness of early learning is lost, reducing education to rigid expectations rather than fostering engagement, curiosity, and lifelong skills (Welsh Government, 2021).

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