

Contents page

- AI Guidance
- Part 1
- Part 2
- Part 3

AI Cover Sheet

I acknowledge the use of Copilot and ChatGPT to search for references and research in relation to this module, including creating a logo and images on my PowerPoint

I used the prompts:

- Please find me references for the last 10 years in relation to curriculum for Wales focusing on the implementation
- Please find me references for the last 10 years for Te Whariki curriculum focusing on its implementation.
- Please find references in the last 10 years based on forest school provision and why it's important in schools

Section 1

Education is a process of developing knowledge and skills so that individuals can have a greater understanding of the world around them and can participate in that world with confidence. Alongside this, a plan is needed to help learners gain experience and knowledge to further develop in life. This is called a curriculum. Both matter because they shape children's opportunities, ensure equity, and provide purposeful learning that supports holistic development and enables the learner to achieve better chances in life.

Play-based curriculum is a primary method through which young children learn. This is further supported by adult interactions, child-led play, and rich environments that enhance exploration and social development. Mohammed *et al* (2026) state that recent research shows how play-based learning plays a vital role in supporting independence, problem-solving skills and social competence as well as holistic development in children. Further research conducted in the UK demonstrates support for play-based learning, allowing children to build relationships with their peers, particularly when they adopt child-centred teaching strategies (Ang *et al.*, 2025). A study carried out by Goodacre *et al* (2025), Children's Relationship with Peers through Play (CHiRPP) studied the progression of play and relationships both with teachers and with peers. The study found that important emphasis should be placed on recognising children's perspectives and focusing on the play that reflects their interests and identities. This aligns with the UNCRC, which emphasises children's entitlement to express their views and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting them. The above evidence positions a play-based curriculum as a developmentally appropriate, rich approach that supports holistic learning in early childhood.

In Wales, the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan (2024-2026) places a core focus on emphasising the importance that early years' provisions offer creativity, enjoyment, exploration and opportunities to develop their social skills. Recognising the rapid developmental changes in early childhood and the importance of play in supporting them (Welsh Government, 2026).

In Section One of this assignment, the play-based teaching foundations of the Curriculum for Wales (hereafter CfW) and the Te Whariki New Zealand early childhood curriculum will be critically examined and compared. The CfW builds on the principles of the former Foundation Phase, maintaining a strong emphasis on play-based, child-centred learning. Welsh Government research highlights that foundation learning is designed to support children's wellbeing and holistic development through rich, meaningful play experiences and responsive adult interactions (Welsh Government, 2024). A play-based approach is positioned as a means of exploration, curiosity, and

problem-solving, allowing children to make sense of their surroundings through active interactions with people, objects, and the environment. It is the role of the practitioner to provide engaging indoor and outdoor learning environments that encourage self-reliance, creativity, and well-being. The CfW provides a continuum of learning for children aged 3-16 years, with early years forming the foundations for children aged 0-5 years. The Early Years emphasises five developmental pathways:

Belonging – understanding self, others, and community roles.

Communication – developing language, social interaction, and expression.

Exploration – investigating interests and learning through discovery.

Physical Development – enhancing motor skills, coordination, and balance.

Well-being (*Daynurseries, 2026*).

New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum Te Whariki is a play-based sociocultural framework that shows children as capable, competent learners who build knowledge through exploration, relationships, and purposeful interactions with their environments. The curriculum is structured around a woven mat of principles and strands which emphasise holistic development, belonging, construction, communication, and exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). Play is interpreted as a culturally situated activity in which children understand the world around them. Hedges and Cooper (2018) states that Te Whariki play-based teaching supports well-being and learning by valuing child-led exploration alongside responsive teaching.

Both the CfW and Te Whariki share a commitment to holistic, child-centred, play-based learning, yet they differ in structure, cultural experiences and policies. In Wales, the curriculum spans from ages 3 -16, meaning that early years' teaching is closely tied to progression (Welsh Government, 2023). However, Te Whāriki functions as an independent early childhood curriculum with a purposefully open structure that enables

teachers to design environments that respond to children's identities, relationships and cultural worlds (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Similarly, the use of outdoor environments is viewed as an essential part of a child's developmental progress. Te Whariki has a strong focus on local landscapes and cultural ideas and values within its outdoor learning provisions. While CfW emphasises outdoor learning as part of holistic development and rights-based practice.

In terms of teaching approaches, Te Whariki uses practitioners and children to create their learning together through interactions, conversations, and shared experiences. Teaching is not predetermined or content-driven; both the teacher and the child are known as the responsive partner. CFW also values responsive teaching, but this is more structured, requiring practitioners to interpret the child's learning in relation to the four purposes and progression steps (Welsh Government, 2024a).

However, the cultural and structural foundations differ; Te Whariki is based on Māori values, building strong relationships, and a sense of belonging. CfW, is shaped by Wales rights-driven policy in line with the United Nations Conventions for the Rights of Children (UNCRC). The CfW can holistically protect, promote, and enable children's human rights (Child Commissioner for Wales, 2026). Stewart (2024) states that teachers are positioned as duty-bearers responsible for enabling children to experience their rights through participation and agency.

Both frameworks encourage rich, play-centred environments, yet they differ in their cultural principles. Their approaches to assessment, and the varying degrees of freedom practitioners have when designing learning experiences.

Both Te Whariki and CfW have progressive frameworks that place an important emphasis on holistic development; however, the implementation of CfW has created structural tensions that shape the consistency and quality of teaching. For example,

Estyn (2023) claims that recent evaluations have shown that practitioners lack time and staffing stability, with some settings stating that they have difficulty balancing observations and planning while also being responsive within busy classrooms. This makes it harder to deliver sustained high-quality interactions (Cadima *et al.*, 2020). To further increase these issues, there are recruitment challenges across the early years sector in Wales. The turnover of staffing levels, along with varied qualification levels, is undermining the continuity of care and teaching (Social Care Wales, 2022; Early Years Wales, 2021). Funding remains a consistent barrier. Although CfW focuses on rich indoor and outdoor learning environments, many provisions lack the financial resources to maintain a high-quality provision (National Education Union, 2025). Evans (2021) maintains that large class sizes also reduce the value of individualised, play-based approaches, creating a barrier between classroom management and policy expectations.

In comparison, Te Whariki's strengths in implementation lie within its professional independence and cultural awareness, which allow teachers to design learning environments that reflect on the child's identity, language and community (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, this also causes restraints. To ensure that implementation is of a high standard, practitioners must possess strong teaching knowledge based on cultural competence and confidence in Mouri worldviews (Mouri ways of understanding people, learning, and community).

Research by Napan *et al.* (2029) suggests that some practitioners experience barriers in embedding authentic bicultural practice, which can result in inconsistencies between settings, especially in under-resourced or high-ratio settings. It must be noted that some children's experiences in the curriculum may differ depending on their cultural backgrounds. Further research also highlights that narrative assessment approaches involve what the child *can* do, what they are trying to do, and how they are growing, and

are a powerful means of assessment but do require significant time and reflection, which can be challenging in pressured environments (Blaiklock *et al.*, 2021).

In conclusion, this analysis shows that while the CfW and Te Whariki share the same commitment to holistic, child-centred and play-rich teaching, the implementation of both curricula is shaped differently in both cultural and structural conditions. As CfW provides a national framework with clear progression expectations, its success relies on skilled practitioners, appropriate staffing levels and having the ability to carry out observations and reflect and plan accordingly. Without these conditions, the curriculum can run the risk of becoming inconsistent and unreliable, especially in settings where financial restraints are paramount (Power *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, Te Whariki offers a highly evidence-based and culturally grounded curriculum because its principles and practices are embedded in Māori and New Zealand, which positions children's identities, languages and communities at the centre of its learning. However, it must be noted that its open-ended design (as it does not have detailed lesson plans or standardised outcomes). Places demand that practitioners provide a strong teaching knowledge and reflective practice to ensure a meaningful learning experience (Nuttall, 2020).

Both frameworks identify the need for curriculum achievement, but this alone is insufficient. Both CfW and Te Whariki's success depend on consistent staffing levels, adequate funding, manageable ratios, and opportunities for professional learning. Linking back to the original assignment question, the comparison indicates that although both curricula have a strong teaching foundation with strong values, this can only reach its true potential when supported by sustained funding, effective professional learning and adequate resources enabling settings to carry out the true vision that both curriculums want to achieve.

Section 2

The idea of the Unique Child recognises that every child develops along their own individual pathway. Which is shaped by their own experiences, relationships, culture, and interests.

Early years frameworks emphasise that children are active, capable learners who bring their own characteristics and experiences into the setting. The Department for Education (2024) states that every child is a unique child who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, and self-assured, further strengthening the need for practitioners to understand children holistically rather than relying on standardised outcomes. The Convention for the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, also highlights the need for every child in education to be able to fully develop their personalities, talents, and abilities (UNICEF, 2018). Further research shows that a child's engagement in play, problem-solving, and social interaction can vary. Whitebread and Coltman (2015) found that individual differences in self-regulation and curiosity can significantly influence early learning behaviours, which further reinforces the need for personalised and responsive teaching methods.

Assessment plays a vital role in supporting the Unique Child because it enables practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the child's needs. Early Years assessments are observation-based and are embedded in everyday interactions. However, practitioners must observe sensitively and be able to interpret meaningful play. This way, planning becomes responsive, ensuring that the learning experiences are tailored to everyone's developmental pathway.

Furthermore, by considering the Unique Child, it ensures that assessments support equity and celebrate diversity, so as not to run the risk of misinterpreting children's abilities, particularly for those who are multilingual, neurodivergent, or from diverse backgrounds.

The Assessment method within the CfW is designed to be consistent, progress-focused and centred on understanding each learner. Instead of focusing on standardised testing or developmental expectations. CSCJES (n.d) states that assessments should support each learner to make progress by recognising a child's interests, culture, and developmental pathway. This aligns with the principles of the Unique Child by understanding that children develop at various stages. One feature of CfW assessment is the focus on progression steps, which are intended as reference points rather than strict expectations. These steps are flexible, enabling practitioners to assess progress for each child. Taylor and Power (2020) state that this flexibility helps support a holistic understanding of a child's development, enabling assessment to capture all elements, which is essential for recognising the Unique Child. Estyn (2023) highlights that this approach encourages professional judgement and ongoing observational evidence to gain a deeper understanding of how individual children interact and respond to learning experiences. This is further highlighted by Harris *et al* (2018), who argue that the CfW personalised approach requires teachers to understand each learner's interests, learning dispositions, and cultural background to support meaningful progression.

Developmental, observation-based assessment is particularly significant in early years' settings. Evans (2023) points out that CfW encourages practitioners to collate evidence through everyday interactions, conversations, and child-initiated activities. This allows practitioners to understand how children think, solve, and engage with their peers. This aligns with sociocultural perspectives, which highlight learning as co-constructed through relationships and experiences. By observing children in an authentic setting, practitioners can best identify the needs of the child. This is why observational assessments are important, as they enable educators to be responsive to each child's developmental pathway.

CfW also places an important emphasis on learner voice for an assessment tool. This recognises children as active participants in their learning journey. Evans (2021) believes that involving children in discussions about their learning and interests helps practitioners understand how each child views their progress. The Welsh Government's

Supporting Learner Progression: Assessment Guidance highlights the importance of ongoing communication and engagement with learners, parents, carers, and states that learners should understand their progress and make an active contribution to identifying their next steps. This indicates that assessment is not something done to learners but is a collaboration. Children are encouraged to reflect on their learning, what went well and what they think would help the next time they move forward. To reinforce this further, Taylor and Power (2020) state that when children participate in discussions about their learning, they are developing metacognitive skills (the ability to think about their own thinking), which further strengthens independence and self-regulation.

Te Whariki, Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, has similarities to the CfW curriculum. Te Whariki positions its assessment as a holistic, narrative-based process that recognises the child as a competent, capable learner. Te Whariki does not use standardised tests or outcome-driven models. It emphasises the importance of learning stories, observations that capture children's interests, capabilities, and their cultural identities. This approach aligns with sociocultural foundations, where learning is embedded within relationships, community, and context. Carr and Lee (2019) highlight that narrative assessment, in which teachers document and describe children's learning through written stories, is central to Te Whariki as it focuses on the child's strengths and their voice to make choices within their learning pathway. Rather than focusing on benchmarks, Te Whariki recognise that children progress at different levels. Learning stories document how children develop the curriculum strands of Wellbeing, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. This reflects the whole child, including their identity, language, culture, and evolving capabilities.

Another feature of Te Whariki's assessment model is its commitment to cultural responsiveness, especially for Māori learners. To highlight this further, Rameka (2017) believes that assessment must honour Māori worldviews in which the Māori people understand and interpret the world. Including the principles of Te Whariki. Therefore, assessment becomes a collaborative process which includes family voice, community knowledge, and the child's own perspective. Davis and Peters (2023) state that children

are encouraged to revisit their learning stories, and comment on their experiences as well as contributing about their future learning. Furthermore, the Te Whariki assessment model supports equity and inclusion. Mitchell (2015) indicates that narrative assessment enables practitioners to recognise how children develop in different ways and through different experiences, and to avoid focusing on what a child cannot do and focus on what they can do instead. Focusing on the strengths of assessment becomes a way of understanding each child's unique development rather than comparing them to the standard expectations. Overall, Te Whariki adopts a relational approach that recognises that children's development is shaped by interactions with peers, practitioners and families. It places important emphasis on the Unique Child and capturing learning experiences as they unfold. Te Whariki ensures that assessments reflect the richness of the child's lived experiences.

As stated above, both CfW and Te Whariki both promote holistic child-centred assessments, yet their effectiveness to learners with additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Neurodiverse profiles has a dependency to be left to the practitioners to interpret. Although CfW has emphasised that their assessment methods are flexible, research suggests otherwise. Norwich (2024) argues that although the new ALN reform aims to strengthen equity, practitioners can struggle to apply the inclusive assessment, especially for learners whose developmental progress differs from standard developmental expectations. This lack of consistency can disadvantage neurodiverse children whose learning profiles are individual to meet the needs of the child.

Similarly, Gunn *et al* (2004) highlights the need for practitioners to recognise responding to differences in communication and sensory needs and accommodate these diverse ways accordingly to create an inclusive assessment. While CfW encourages this professional judgement, this can produce both opportunities and challenges. It relies heavily on the expertise of practitioners to learn about neurodiversity-inclusive practice. It can run the risk of reinforcing deficit views if practitioners lack the training needed for inclusive assessment.

This differs from the Te Whariki narrative assessment approach, which holds strong advantages for neurodiverse learners. Learning stories focus on interests and context, enabling practitioners to document the learning journey as they see it. This may not be visible if it was through standardised methods. Morton *et al* (2021) state that narrative assessment supports children whose learning occurs through different channels, such as sensory exploration or special interests. However, they also point out that without deep relational knowledge, practitioners can overlook observational signs of learning. Furthermore, Graham (2020) argues that inclusive assessment must challenge standardised expectations about behaviour and cognition. Te Whariki's sociocultural foundations align well with this. However, the success of this relies on practitioners' understanding of neurodiversity and recognising neurological differences as a normal expression of human diversity rather than an abnormality.

Overall, both curricula offer the potential to be fully inclusive, but CfW requires a stronger structural consistency as opposed to Te Whariki, which requires a relational depth and cultural competence. Both curricula' effectiveness relies heavily on practitioners' capability and understanding of neurodiversity and ALN.

To conclude, both CfW and Te Whariki share a strong emphasis on the unique child. The two curricula believe that assessment should highlight individuality rather than constrain it. However, they deliver this in different ways. CfW honours diverse pathways, but its success relies heavily on partitioner interpretation, which can cause insufficient knowledge or an inconsistency in assessments. In contrast, Te Whariki narrative assessment captures children's interests, identities, and ways of being. However, like CfW, this relies heavily on practitioners having a deep relational insight. What becomes clear is that neither assessment model is inherently inclusive on its own. To fully develop and deliver an assessment method that is based on the Unique Child practitioner's confidence, training and consistency across settings, needs to be observed with no assumptions on how learning should look.

Section 3

Mud, Magic and Meaning: Why nature must be every child's teacher"



(Google images, 2026)

Picture a child stepping into a woodland: eyes wide, hands ready to explore, mind racing with questions. Excitement building through every core of their body. This is not just play; it is a deeper learning experience- the kind that shapes curiosity, exploration, and confidence. It is **well-being for life**.

Across Wales and beyond its borders, educators, researchers, parents and policymakers are rediscovering something enduring yet urgent: **Children need the outdoors**. Not now and again. Not as a treat. But a central part of their daily learning experiences.

Forest School and outdoor learning are no longer fresh ideas- they are essential, evidence-based approaches that support children's development in ways indoor classrooms can only dream about.

This blog explores **why outdoor learning matters**, **what** the researchers tell us, and why now is the time to **act**.

Outdoor learning is not something “extra”. It is a powerful teaching tool that supports children’s physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development.

Behind the research

- Outdoor learning boosts exploration, curiosity, and holistic development.
- It improves well-being, resilience, and independence, especially for children who are struggling with the old-fashioned concept of indoor-only classrooms (nwall4, 2026).
- Outdoor play supports all areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) within the Curriculum for Wales (Muddy Faces, 2024).
- It strengthens problem-solving, communication, and teamwork.
- Room to move; it supports physical development and coordination.
- Making manageable risks, helping children learn what their bodies can do (Muddy Faces, 2024).
- Sensory experiences, which strengthen attention, memory and emotional well-being.
- Opportunities to collaborate with peers as children share ideas, negotiate roles, and work together.

These key components are the executive functions that children need to plan, stay focused, and solve problems. Diamond (2016) explains that these abilities grow through hands-on experiences, making outdoor learning an essential part of a holistic curriculum.

A Curriculum Rooted in Curiosity and Connection

The Curriculum for Wales places an important emphasis on children’s wellbeing, autonomy and engagement at the heart of their learning. Outdoor learning aligns

naturally with these principles by offering a dynamic environment in which children can explore, question, and discover the world around them. Nature supports emotional regulation and reduces stress, helping children become more engaged in their learning journey. Play Wales (2023) highlights the importance of outdoor play for children's physical and emotional health. Forest school builds on these principles by offering long-term child-led experiences that nurture a child's confidence, independence and resilience. The Forest School Association (2023) describes the approach as an empowering process; it is not simply "playing outside". It is a teaching method grounded in respect and meaningful engagement with the natural world around us.

Where it all began

Forest school has its roots in the outdoor early year's movement in Scandinavia, especially Denmark, where early years settings have long embraced **friluftsliv** – a cultural tradition centred on open-air living and learning. The love for forest school in the UK began when practitioners in the 1990s visited Denmark and brought the approach back to Somerset, where the first forest school programmes were developed (Forest School Association, 2023).

Forest schools are now well established across Wales and beyond. Each session is designed to support holistic development- physical, emotional, social, and cognitive – through meaningful learning. Each child who participates in Forest School is encouraged to follow their own interests, take appropriate risks, and develop a sense of belonging for themselves and their environment.

Knight (2016) states that Forest School's expansion has been strengthened further by the increasing benefits that nature-based learning has on holistic development. Waite and Goodenough (2018) add that Forest School's focus on autonomy, exploration and experiential learning continues to hold a strong bond with practitioners throughout the UK.

Closer to home, Forest School is widely embedded across Wales, supported by local authorities and organisations who recognise the true value that it holds for children's learning (Natural Resources Wales, 2020).

Organisations such as Muddy Faces (2024) and Play Wales (2023) provide guidance that further highlights the value of outdoor learning. Local authorities across Wales- including Cardiff Council, Outdoor Cardiff (2023) and Swansea and Neath and Port Talbot Council, Forest School NSPT (2023) all emphasise the positive impact of Forest School on children's engagement, well-being and sense of belonging.

(The Education Hub, 2023)



Natures Classroom

One important aspect of outdoor learning is how naturally it supports children's curiosity and enhances their engagement. For example, when a child begins to build a shelter, or creates an imaginative world, they are using key skills communication, problem-solving and teamwork. These skills develop naturally because the environment invites them. Children are in their own wilderness; they do not need approval from adults; they are responding to the challenges in that moment.



Where Every Child Can Shine

(Googleimages, 2026)

Outdoor learning is inherently inclusive. Many children who struggle within the traditional classroom setting thrive better outside. The open space, sensory variety, and the freedom to move and explore. Outdoor learning supports children with additional needs by offering:

- A reduction in sensory overload (compared to busy, overstimulating classroom environments).
- Opportunities for movement help support self-regulation and engagement in activities.
- Flexible, hands-on learning, which helps support children with diverse learning needs. Chang *et al* (2018) found that Forest School participation improved overall engagement and confidence among children with additional learning needs; this further highlights the significance and the potential that outdoor learning provides.

So, What's Next?

Our children deserve the chance to **explore, imagine, and discover** the natural world. As adults, we have a responsibility to protect and promote these opportunities. Outdoor learning is not a reward; it is a necessity for healthy, lifelong learning.

We must commit to giving children freedom, space, and time to explore the outdoors. We have a duty to make the push for Forest School to become a vital part of a rich, balanced curriculum. Let us all work together to ensure that every child in Wales – and beyond- can experience the **delight, challenge and wonder** of learning in nature.

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