



ECEY6010 Early Years Curricula

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Contents

Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use:	2
Part 1 Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki: Play-Based Learning and Cultural Diversity	3
Conclusion.....	8
Part 2: Consideration for the Unique Child within Play-based Assessments. 9	
Conclusion.....	13
Part 3 Blog: Beyond Nose-Wiping: Reclaiming Professional Identity in Early Years Care.....	14
Reference List.....	17

Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use:

I acknowledge the use of AI Tool throughout this study

I used the prompt(s):

1. Co-pilot, Google to find resources.
2. Co-pilot to summarise articles
3. Grammarly to check spelling and grammar, along with plagiarism.
3. Co-pilot to create images for the blog.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work.

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

Part 1 Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki: Play-Based Learning and Cultural Diversity

Introduction

Education enables individuals to develop the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for participation in society and lifelong learning (Werquin, 2010; Biesta, 2015; Verma, Doharey and Yadav, 2023; UNESCO, 2026; Shavkidinova, Suyunova and Kholdarova, 2023; Welsh Government, 2025b). Key to this process is the curriculum, which provides a framework for teaching and learning while reflecting broader social, cultural, and political priorities (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2026).

In early childhood education, play-based learning is widely recognised as a developmentally appropriate approach that supports children in learning through exploration, social interaction and meaningful experiences (UNICEF, 2022; Welsh Government, 2024c). The theoretical perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky, which emphasise the importance of play in fostering cognitive, social and emotional development, directly inform the design of curricula such as the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki. These curricula draw on such theories to promote play as a means of supporting independence, creativity, and problem-solving skills within structured early years frameworks (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013; Saracho, 2020; Alharbi, 2022; McLeod, 2025; Mohammed *et al.*, 2026).

This assignment critically examines the Welsh Foundation Phase and New Zealand's Te Whāriki, focusing on culture, inclusion and culturally responsive practice. It then explores the 'Unique Child' in play-based assessment and concludes with a blog on reclaiming professional identity in early years education and care.

Foundation Phase Overview

The Foundation Phase became statutory in Wales in 2008 following concerns that early childhood education had become overly formal and insufficiently aligned with young children's developmental needs (National Assembly for Wales, 2008; Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Influenced by recommendations from the Early Years Advisory Group and evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education

(EPPE) project, the curriculum sought to replace traditional subject-based teaching with a more holistic and play-based approach (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007).

The Foundation Phase is founded on active, experiential and play-based learning, with practitioners supporting development through observation, scaffolding and a balance of child-initiated and adult-guided activities (Welsh Assembly Government, 2006; 2008a). Outdoor learning is regarded as an important element of children's physical, social and cognitive development (Wainwright, 2021).

The curriculum aims to improve children's cognitive, social and emotional development while promoting literacy, numeracy, Welsh language and Welsh culture (Kingston and Siraj, 2017; Siencyn, 2019; Welsh Government, 2023). Although the Foundation Phase promotes inclusion and cultural awareness, its cultural responsiveness is less explicitly embedded than in Te Whāriki. As a result, it relies heavily on practitioners' interpretation and implementation, which can lead to variation in the integration of culturally relevant learning experiences (Bernstein and Lysniak, 2017; Lewis, 2016; Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

Te Whāriki Overview

Te Whāriki is New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum, first introduced in 1996 and revised in 2017. Meaning "woven mat" in Te Reo Māori, the curriculum conceptualises learning as a collaborative process in which children, families, communities and educators contribute to children's development through interconnected experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Rather than prescribing specific content, Te Whāriki provides a flexible framework organised around four principles: Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, and Relationships, and five strands: Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). The curriculum positions children as competent learners whose development is supported through relationships, participation and play.

A defining characteristic of Te Whāriki is its bicultural foundation, rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori language, values and ways of knowing are embedded throughout the curriculum rather than treated as additional content (May, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017). It also recognises New Zealand's multicultural population and

encourages educators who value children's home languages, cultural identities and family traditions (Ritchie, 2001). As a result, Te Whāriki is often regarded as a strong example of how play-based learning, cultural responsiveness and inclusion can be integrated within a single curriculum framework (May, 2012).

Comparative Analysis of Culture and Inclusivity

Both the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki are underpinned by play-based, child-centred approaches that reject highly formal, teacher-directed models of early childhood education (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008a; Ministry of Education, 2017; Wainwright *et al.*, 2016; Hearfield, 2024; Jones, 2026). They adopt holistic views of development, position children as active participants in learning, and emphasise relationships with families and communities. Both also promote inclusive educational opportunities consistent with contemporary understandings of children's rights and equity (Hall *et al.*, 2025; UNESCO, 2012). However, they differ in the extent to which cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness are embedded in their curriculum structures.

The Foundation Phase promotes Welsh language, heritage and cultural identity through bilingual learning opportunities and engagement with Welsh traditions. It also encourages practitioners to adopt inclusive and anti-discriminatory approaches that recognise diversity among children and families (Welsh Government, 2015; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). However, cultural diversity is addressed mainly through broad curriculum principles and Areas of Learning rather than being embedded throughout the curriculum structure itself (Welsh Government, 2015). Consequently, the extent to which diverse cultures are represented often depends on practitioners' interpretations, experiences and confidence in delivering culturally responsive pedagogy (Kingston and Siraj, 2017; Ciampa and Reisboard, 2024; My-Progression, 2024).

In contrast, Te Whāriki positions culture as a central organising principle rather than a supplementary consideration. Biculturalism is embedded across curriculum principles, learning outcomes, assessment practices and practitioner expectations (Ministry of Education, 2017; Williams, Fletcher and Ma, 2023). Māori concepts such as whānau, mana and whakapapa are integrated throughout educational practice, ensuring that Māori perspectives are recognised as foundational to children's

learning experiences. The curriculum also encourages educators to value multiple cultural identities and support children's home languages and cultural practices (Ritchie, 2001; Rameka, 2011).

This distinction is significant because it highlights different approaches to cultural responsiveness. Within the Foundation Phase, cultural inclusion is encouraged but not systematically embedded and implementation may vary considerably between settings (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Murphy *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, Te Whāriki provides clearer expectations regarding cultural responsiveness, increasing the likelihood of consistent practice across educational settings. This suggests that cultural responsiveness is treated as a core educational principle rather than an optional enhancement (Ministry of Education, 2023b).

However, it would be simplistic to conclude that Te Whāriki automatically achieves culturally responsive practice more effectively. Although the curriculum provides stronger structural support, research indicates that practitioners' confidence and understanding remain critical factors in successful implementation (Ritchie, 2021). Therefore, both curricula show that curriculum frameworks alone cannot guarantee inclusive practice.

From a critical perspective, culturally responsive education extends beyond celebrating diversity or displaying multicultural resources. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to build on learners' lived experiences whilst challenging social inequalities. Similarly, Freire's emphasis on critical pedagogy as a means of social transformation is reflected in the culturally responsive education literature (Talení and Surtees, 2024). Viewed through this lens, Te Whāriki moves closer to a culturally responsive model because culture is embedded within the curriculum's fundamental structure. Nevertheless, both curricula still depend on practitioners' ability to translate policy aspirations into meaningful educational experiences.

Critical Analysis of Implementation in Wales

While both curricula offer valuable approaches to play-based learning and inclusion, their implementation raises important practical considerations within the Welsh context.

One strength of the Foundation Phase is its strong alignment with Welsh educational policy and cultural priorities, as it integrates the promotion of Welsh language and identity within the cultural context of Wales (Welsh Government, 2008b; Rhys, 2018). Furthermore, its emphasis on active learning and child-centred pedagogy aligns with contemporary understandings of effective early childhood education (Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

Despite these strengths, research has identified significant implementation challenges. Effective play-based learning requires practitioners who can skilfully balance child-led exploration with purposeful adult interaction. Studies have shown that practitioners often interpret play-based pedagogy differently, resulting in variations in quality across settings (Lewis, 2016; Kingston and Siraj, 2017). This inconsistency may weaken children's experiences of inclusion and cultural responsiveness and suggests that the Foundation Phase's aims are not always realised in practice.

Practical constraints also influence implementation. Time pressures, staff shortages, large class sizes and limited funding can restrict opportunities for observation, planning and individualised support (Welsh Government, 2024b). Professional development remains essential for culturally responsive practice, requiring practitioners critically reflect on assumptions and adapt learning to diverse needs. Where training opportunities are limited, practitioners may struggle to move beyond superficial representations of culture.

Although Te Whāriki offers a stronger framework for cultural responsiveness, directly transferring its approach to Wales would present challenges. The curriculum is deeply rooted in New Zealand's unique historical, political and cultural context, particularly its relationship with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the status of Māori communities. Consequently, its bicultural framework cannot simply be replicated within Welsh settings. However, Te Whāriki provides valuable lessons on the systematic integration of culture into curriculum design.

A key strength of Te Whāriki is that it provides practitioners with clearer guidance on cultural responsiveness and stronger expectations regarding the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, language and values. This may reduce variability in practice and encourage greater consistency. However, evidence suggests that

implementation still depends upon practitioners' confidence in engaging authentically with Māori concepts and language (Education Review Office, 2013; Ritchie, 2021).

These findings support Ball *et al.*, (2017) argument that educational policies are enacted rather than simply implemented. Curriculum documents establish aspirations and expectations, but their impact is shaped by the contexts in which practitioners work. Research in Wales similarly identifies a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, highlighting inconsistencies and fragmentation in early years provision (Stewart *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, culturally responsive practice depends not only on curriculum design but also on adequate resources, professional development and meaningful engagement with families and communities. Given continuing pressures relating to funding, staffing and workload within Welsh education, sustaining such practice consistently across settings may remain challenging.

Conclusion

The Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki share a commitment to play-based learning, holistic development and child-centred education. However, significant differences emerge in their treatment of culture and inclusivity.

The Foundation Phase promotes Welsh language and culture and encourages inclusive practice, yet cultural responsiveness largely depends on practitioners' interpretation. In contrast, Te Whāriki embeds biculturalism throughout its structure and provides more explicit guidance regarding cultural identity, language and community engagement. As a result, it offers a stronger framework for culturally responsive practice.

Overall, Te Whāriki offers a more explicit model of cultural responsiveness, whereas the Foundation Phase provides greater flexibility but relies more heavily on practitioner interpretation. The comparison highlights that inclusive play-based curricula are shaped not only by policy design but also by the conditions in which they are enacted. Therefore, the effectiveness of either curriculum ultimately depends on educators' capacity to translate curriculum principles into meaningful and culturally responsive experiences for children and families.

Part 2: Consideration for the Unique Child within Play-based Assessments.**Introduction**

The concept of the 'Unique Child' is a fundamental principle of early years education, recognising that children develop in different ways according to their individual experiences, strengths, interests, cultures and additional learning needs (DfE, 2025; Welsh Government, 2022). Supported by ecological and sociocultural theories, the concept questions universal assumptions about development and emphasises the influence of relationships, culture and environment on learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978).

Assessment is the ongoing process of observing, gathering and interpreting information about children's learning to inform planning and progression (Welsh Government, 2022; Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.). It may function as an assessment of learning, for learning or as learning (Carr, 2001; Wiliam, 2011; Aras, 2019).

Considering the 'Unique Child' within assessment is essential because children develop at different rates and in diverse ways (Espinosa, 2005; Gullo, 2005; Becker, Rigaud and Epstein, 2023). Assessment that fails to recognise this diversity risks deficit-based judgements and overlooking children's strengths and contexts (Grenier, 2020; Lucas, 2022; Kleinlein, 2026). Furthermore, tensions exist between child-centred assessment and increasing accountability demands, which may reduce children's learning to measurable outcomes (Stephenson, 2016; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). This essay critically evaluates Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories, examining the extent to which these play-based assessment approaches support the principle of the 'Unique Child', particularly for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes

The Foundation Phase in Wales used Desirable Outcomes as developmental benchmarks across seven areas of learning, including literacy, numeracy, and personal and social development (Welsh Government, 2015). Their purpose was to support planning, observe progress and identify children requiring additional support through practitioner observation and professional judgement (Maynard *et al.*, 2013a; Welsh Government, 2017). Practitioners' knowledge of child development and confidence in making professional judgements are crucial to effective assessment,

as assessment relies on practitioners interpreting and responding to children's learning rather than applying objective measures (Drummond, 2012). Although not intended as statutory testing, they were frequently interpreted as developmental checkpoints (Morgan *et al.*, 2022).

Te Whāriki Learning Stories

Te Whāriki is New Zealand's play-based curriculum, underpinned by empowerment, holistic development, relationships and family and community partnerships (Ministry of Education, 2017). Learning Stories, developed by Carr (2001), are narrative assessments that document significant learning experiences through a process of noticing, recognising and responding. They focus on children's strengths, learning dispositions and participation, often incorporating children's voices, photographs and family contributions (Hargraves, 2020).

Critical Analysis: Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whariki Learning Stories

The Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories represent contrasting approaches to assessment, reflecting different understandings of child development, progress and the purpose of assessment itself. Whilst both aim to support children's learning, they vary considerably in how they conceptualise the 'Unique Child', assess progress and respond to diversity, including Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Welsh Government, 2015; Jones, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2017; 2026b)

A key strength of the Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes is their provision of developmental benchmarks, creating consistency in assessment and a shared understanding of expected development (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007; Kingston and Siraj, 2017). This can support practitioners in monitoring progress, identifying developmental delays and making referrals for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Developmental frameworks may therefore serve an important safeguarding function by helping practitioners recognise when additional support is required (DfE, 2022; Welsh Government, 2026). In contrast, Learning Stories reject predetermined developmental pathways and instead focus on children's strengths, interests and participation in meaningful experiences (Carr, 2001). This strengths-based approach aligns more closely with the concept of the

'Unique Child' by recognising that children develop in diverse ways and at varying rates (Lee and Alonzo, 2024; Hearfield, 2025).

However, the developmental focus of Desirable Outcomes has been criticised for promoting a normative view of childhood (Waters, 2016). Although intended as guidance rather than a checklist, the framework encouraged comparison against predetermined expectations and was used as a policy tool for quality assurance, enabling practitioners, local authorities and inspectors to track progress and evidence provision (UK Government, 2015; Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Such approaches risk positioning children in relation to what they cannot yet do, rather than recognising their individual strengths (Jones, 2026). Nutbrown (2011) and Dinishak (2016) argue that developmental benchmarks can contribute to deficit-based thinking, particularly for neurodiverse children whose learning may not align with age-related expectations. By contrast, Learning Stories reduce this risk by centring observation on what children can do and how they participate. Whilst benchmarks appear objective, they are underpinned by particular cultural and theoretical assumptions about childhood and may overlook sociocultural, linguistic and neurodiverse ways of learning (Waters, 2016; Cook, 2024).

In contrast, Learning Stories are widely regarded as more inclusive because they assess children's engagement, relationships, communication and learning dispositions rather than measuring attainment against developmental norms (Ministry of Education, 2017; Cengiz and Altındağ, 2022). This is particularly beneficial for neurodiverse children and those with ALN, whose strengths may not be recognised through traditional developmental frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2005; Morton, MacArthur and McIlory, 2024). Learning Stories can also capture multimodal communication, including gestures, movement, visual cues and alternative forms of expression, supporting broader recognition of learning beyond spoken language (Moreno-Núñez and Casla, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2026a). Consequently, practitioners can document achievements such as joint attention, engagement and problem-solving that might otherwise be overlooked (Theodotou, 2020). Furthermore, the involvement of families reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective by recognising the importance of children's wider social and cultural contexts.

Despite these advantages, Learning Stories present different challenges. Whereas Desirable Outcomes are often criticised for over-standardisation, Learning Stories are criticised for excessive subjectivity (Blaiklock, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2015; Wanoa and Johnston, 2020; Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Their narrative nature relies heavily on practitioner interpretation, meaning different practitioners may reach different conclusions from the same observation. Blaiklock (2008) questions their reliability and consistency, particularly when used to demonstrate progress over time. This raises important questions about practitioner confidence and professional judgement. Whilst narrative assessment allows practitioners to develop rich understandings of children's learning, it also increases the risk of cognitive and confirmation biases, whereby observations may be interpreted in ways that reinforce existing assumptions (Blaiklock, 2008; 2013; Betsch *et al.*, 2015).

Both approaches, therefore, raise concerns regarding the reliability of assessment evidence, albeit for different reasons. Desirable Outcomes may appear more reliable because they use common benchmarks; however, Williams (2018) argues that increasing reliability often requires additional assessment time, which can reduce opportunities for meaningful teaching and play. Furthermore, Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that developmental assessment frameworks contribute to the governance of early childhood data, aligning practice with school-readiness agendas and accountability structures rather than holistic child-centred learning. In this sense, assessment serves not only children's development but also wider policy, inspection and accountability purposes.

Conversely, whilst Learning Stories support inclusion and the 'Unique Child', their strengths-based focus may unintentionally obscure developmental concerns (Hargraves, 2020). By privileging positive narratives, practitioners may under-identify learning difficulties or delays requiring targeted intervention (Hall *et al.*, 2025). Blaiklock (2008) argues that Learning Stories prioritise dispositions and participation over specific knowledge and skills, limiting their usefulness for identifying precise developmental needs. This becomes particularly problematic within statutory assessment, funding and ALN contexts, where measurable evidence is often required to justify support (Fabian, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2023a). Although Learning Stories provide rich qualitative information, their validity as formal

assessment tools remains contested, particularly when demonstrating progression over time (Blaiklock, 2008; Wanoa and Johnston, 2020).

Ultimately, neither assessment approach fully resolves the tension between recognising individuality and evidencing progress. Desirable Outcomes provide structure, comparability and early identification of need but risk reducing children's development to age-related expectations. Learning Stories offer a more holistic and inclusive understanding of learning that aligns closely with the principle of the 'Unique Child', yet concerns remain regarding reliability, consistency and accountability. Therefore, effective assessment may require a balanced approach that combines developmental knowledge with professional judgement, ensuring children's unique identities, abilities and learning pathways are recognised whilst still providing robust evidence to support intervention, funding and educational planning.

Conclusion

Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories reflect contrasting approaches to assessment within play-based curricula. Desirable Outcomes provide developmental benchmarks that support progress monitoring and early identification of need, but may promote normative expectations that conflict with the principle of the 'Unique Child'. Learning Stories offer a more holistic and inclusive approach by recognising children's strengths, identities and diverse ways of learning; however, concerns remain regarding reliability, consistency and their use within accountability and funding systems. Ultimately, neither approach fully resolves the tension between recognising individuality and evidencing progress. Effective assessment, therefore, requires a balance among developmental knowledge, professional judgement, and meaningful recognition of children's unique learning pathways to support both accountability requirements and the principle of the 'Unique Child'.

Part 3 Blog: Beyond Nose-Wiping: Reclaiming Professional Identity in Early Years Care.

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Beyond Nose Wiping: Reclaiming Professional Identity in Early Years Care

The early years sector is the backbone of society, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood and undervalued professions in the UK. Every day, childcare practitioners nurture, educate, safeguard, and support children through the most critical stage of their development. We are early educators, in partnership with parents, the emotional anchors, the observers who spot early needs, and the professionals who hold families together when life becomes complicated.

And yet, despite the depth of skill and responsibility involved, we are still too often dismissed as "babysitters" or "nose wipers." A quiet hierarchy persists between daycare practitioners and school based nursery staff, shaping how parents, agencies, and even policymakers perceive our work. This hierarchy is not only outdated but also damaging. It undermines professional identity, weakens recruitment, and contributes to the workforce crisis now threatening the entire sector (Childcare & Education Expo, 2026).

Why are childcare practitioners still fighting to be recognised as professionals, and what must change to fix it?

Despite the years of training, qualifications, and hands on expertise required to become a childcare practitioner, our profession continues to sit at the bottom of an invisible hierarchy. Daycare practitioners are routinely viewed as "less professional" than school based nursery teachers, even when many practitioners in daycare settings hold higher level qualifications (British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2025).



This divide is felt daily. Parents often share more detailed information with school nurseries than with daycare settings, even though expectations for care, safeguarding, and holistic support are often higher in daycare settings. Some daycare practitioners report that referrals from daycare settings to multi agency partners may be perceived differently to those originating from schools, raising questions about professional credibility across sectors (Feinstein et al., 2024; Spinks, 2025).

To complicate matters further, not all school nursery teachers hold a full teaching qualification. Yet degree level daycare practitioners remain overlooked. This is not to diminish the skill or value of school nursery teachers, but to highlight the persistent "them and us" culture that shapes professional identity in the early years sector.

So where does this hierarchy come from?

The devaluation of early years work can also be understood through theories of professional identity and emotional labour. Historically, caring professions have been associated with feminine and nurturing qualities, leading society to view relational work as natural rather than skilled. As a result, the complex knowledge, decision-making, and pedagogical expertise required in early years settings can become invisible, contributing to lower professional status and pay despite increasing qualification requirements.

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Where Does This Perception Originate?

Several systemic factors contribute:

1. Local Authority Structures

School based early years provision is embedded within the education system, while daycare sits within childcare and social care frameworks. This creates different expectations, inspections, funding models, and professional status. (Estyn, n.d; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2026)

2. Training Pathways

Training routes into early years vary widely. Some are rigorous and practice based; others are inconsistent. Welsh Government research shows significant variation in qualification levels across the sector, with many practitioners holding Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications, while others progress to degree level. (Lightfoot, 2019; Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025)

3. Low Pay and Poor Conditions

Nursery managers in the UK often earn significantly less than school teachers, despite comparable responsibility for safeguarding, learning, and well-being. Workforce surveys repeatedly highlight low pay as a major barrier to recruitment and retention (National Education Union, 2025; Commission Low Pay, 2026; Social Care Wales, 2026).

4. Confusion Over "Care" vs "Education"

Daycare settings are expected to deliver holistic care, emotional, physical, developmental, and educational, often going far beyond regulated national minimum standards. Meanwhile, school nurseries are framed primarily as learning environments. Yet the children are the same age.

Why, then, are expectations and professional recognition so different?

The Workforce Crisis: A Perfect Storm

Plaid Cymru has proposed expanding funded childcare from nine months onward, following England's recent rollout. But the workforce is shrinking, not growing. Welsh Government research estimates over 16,000 workers are currently in the childcare and play sector, and predicts a 24% increase in staffing will be required by 2027/28 to meet demand. That's around 4,000 additional staff needed (Welsh Government, 2024a).

At the same time, colleges continue to funnel uncertain 16 year olds into "care or hair," reflecting a longstanding, outdated stereotype that positions childcare as a low-status career option requiring limited expertise.

Training Quality: Quantity Over Quality?

Welsh Government incentivises training providers based on learner completion, not necessarily competence. Many CCPLD learners report that providers focus heavily on core skills rather than on high-quality early-years pedagogy. According to workforce mapping research, settings, rather than training providers, often bear the burden of ensuring that learners gain real world experience and meet qualification criteria (Welsh Government, 2023; Mikuska et al., 2025).

Are we prioritising the number of practitioners entering the sector over the quality of their preparation?



ECEY6010

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Settings are closing, and the sector is under strain

Workforce shortages, rising costs, and inconsistent funding models have contributed to the closure of settings across Wales and the UK. Welsh Government mapping reports show fluctuating numbers of childcare settings by local authority and ongoing pressure on capacity. (Welsh Government, 2024a; Talbot, 2025)

If the sector continues to be undervalued, underpaid, and misunderstood, closures will only accelerate.



Why Professional Recognition Matters for Play-Based Curricula



Successful implementation of play-based approaches depends on practitioners having the confidence, autonomy, and professional status to make informed pedagogical decisions. Observation, assessment, planning through children's interests, supporting risk-taking, and developing enabling environments are complex professional skills. When practitioners are viewed merely as carers, the expertise required to deliver a play-based curriculum is overlooked. If Wales is committed to child-centred learning, it must also be committed to valuing the professionals who make that learning possible (Irvine et al., 2024; Vitaud, 2026).

Professional identity matters

If society sees us as "nose wipers" or "babysitters," how can we expect new practitioners to enter the sector with passion, professionalism, and pride?

The "halo effect" surrounding teachers, where parents automatically view them as more authoritative, reinforces the divide. This can lead to poor information sharing between schools and daycare settings, even when both are responsible for the same child's safety and well-being.

What needs to change?

- A unified professional identity across early years education and care.
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- Parity of esteem between daycare practitioners and school-based staff.
-
- Improved pay and conditions to reflect the complexity of the role.
-
- High quality, practice embedded training with strong provider accountability.
-
- Public awareness campaigns to challenge outdated stereotypes.
-
- Better multi agency recognition of daycare practitioners' expertise.

Conclusion

Childcare practitioners are not "less than." We are educators, carers, safeguarding leads, developmental specialists, and emotional anchors for the youngest children in society.

It's time the system and the public recognised that.

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