

Student Name: Vicky Morris-Evans

Student Number: 2405866

Module: Early Years Curricula

Module code: ECEY6010

Part 1: Critical Analysis of a Curriculum

Part 2: The Concept of the 'Unique Child'

Part 3: Blog

AI Cover Sheet

I acknowledge my use of Grammarly to help with grammar and spelling.

I acknowledge my use of Co-pilot to check for repetition, and help condense my word count while keeping all references and words I have used.

I acknowledge my use of Co-Pilot to help with research supporting my work, using prompts such as find me sources to help with research on the Welsh foundation phase, explaining the benefits, challenges, and guidelines. What theories are linked with the foundation phase.

Links between the foundation phase and the new curriculum for Wales.

Find me research, theories, and information that link to the assessment in the early years and the foundation phase.

Find me sources on what to explain what is meant by the term 'unique child'

Find me sources I can use to support my blog on funding in early years, the difference between childcare settings and mainstream education nurseries.

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

Part 1

Critical Analysis of the Foundation Phase Curriculum in Wales

Education is a continuous process through which individuals develop essential knowledge, skills, values and attitudes across formal, non-formal and informal contexts, including schooling, community participation and independent study (UNESCO). It shapes children's cognitive, emotional, physical and social development, laying foundations for lifelong learning and active citizenship (OECD, 2018). Within this, the curriculum provides a structured, standards-based framework that organises learning. An effective curriculum sets clear goals, pedagogical approaches, materials, and assessments to ensure that all learners have access to high-quality experiences (RIDE, n.d.), while also reflecting wider social, political, and cultural priorities (Welsh Government, 2022). This is especially important in early years settings, where curriculum design directly influences children's engagement, development and readiness for future learning.

The Foundation Phase, introduced across Wales between 2008 and 2011 for children aged 3–7, marked a shift from formal, subject-led instruction to a developmental, experiential and play-based model. It responded to concerns that early years provision had become overly formal and misaligned with how young children learn (Welsh Government, 2014). Evaluation evidence supported this shift, with Taylor *et al.*, (2013) noting its aim to strengthen child-centred, play-rich pedagogy. Research consistently shows that play-based approaches enhance language, problem-solving, executive function and social competence (Pyle & Danniels, 2016; Weisberg *et al.*, 2016), while international evidence highlights the benefits of active, exploratory environments (OECD, 2017; Zosh *et al.*, 2018; UNICEF, 2018). Reflecting this, the Foundation Phase placed play, active learning and first-hand experience at the core of early education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2008).

A play-based curriculum enables children to investigate, experiment and construct understanding through meaningful play, exploration and social interaction. Evidence shows it enhances language, creativity, independence, collaboration, emotional well-being, and engagement (Pyle, DeLuca and Danniels, 2017; Wainwright *et al.*, 2019). This essay critically analyses the Foundation Phase by examining its theoretical foundations, strengths, limitations and implementation challenges including time, funding, staffing, class size and professional development, and compares it with the Curriculum for Wales to consider what has changed and what remains valuable.

The Foundation Phase is grounded in the principle that children learn best through active exploration and play. Piaget emphasised that children construct knowledge through interaction with their environment (Piaget, 1952), aligning with the Phase's focus on hands-on learning (Welsh Government, 2017). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the role of social interaction and adult guidance within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), reflected in the centrality of practitioner questioning, modelling and scaffolding (Welsh Government, 2017). Bruner's discovery learning supports the emphasis on curiosity and active engagement (Bruner, 1966), while Froebel's influence is evident in the value placed on play, outdoor learning and holistic development. Together, these theories position the child as an active learner and the practitioner as a facilitator.

The Foundation Phase was widely recognised for its strong child-centred ethos, prioritising experiential, play-based learning over formal instruction (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2026). It marked a clear shift toward developmentally appropriate pedagogy in Wales (Jones, 2024), promoting six areas of learning rather than rigid subjects and emphasising creativity, wellbeing, independence, problem-solving, physical development and outdoor learning (Welsh Government, 2017). Research shows that play-based learning increases motivation, involvement and enjoyment, while supporting communication, language and self-regulation (Howard, Miles and Rees Davies, 2017). Wainwright *et al.*, (2019) found that playful pedagogy supported deeper learning through sustained engagement and child-led exploration. Outdoor learning was another strength, with daily access to outdoor environments supporting physical wellbeing, confidence, risk-taking and experiential learning (Welsh Government, 2009).

Another key strength of the Foundation Phase was the level of investment during implementation. The Welsh Government funded extensive professional development to support practitioners in adopting play-based pedagogy. The 2014 Independent Stocktake reported that significant national training had been delivered, helping practitioners understand both the principles and practical application of the approach (Welsh Government, 2014), and the 2015 evaluation similarly concluded that workforce development was central to successful implementation (Welsh Government, 2015). Waters (2016) also notes that the Foundation Phase "enjoys warm support locally and the envious attention of external observers," but stresses that its long-term success depended on "serious attention to high-quality professional learning." Her analysis reinforces that ambitious pedagogical reform requires sustained investment and structural support.

Despite its strengths, implementation of the Foundation Phase was inconsistent across Wales. A major challenge was the varied interpretation of play-based learning: while some settings embedded purposeful, high-quality play, others struggled to balance

child-led learning with curriculum outcomes and accountability demands (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). This tension often required practitioners to evidence literacy and numeracy progress while maintaining play-rich provision, leading in some cases to adult-directed tasks being presented as “play” (Estyn, 2017). Wood (2022) similarly argues that accountability pressures can push practice toward more structured, adult-led approaches, even when framed as play.

Time was another significant issue. High-quality play pedagogy requires sustained observation, assessment, planning and adaptation, making it demanding professional work despite appearing less formal (Estyn, 2017; Wood, 2022). Research shows that effective play-based learning depends on practitioner expertise, intentional decision-making and substantial behind-the-scenes preparation (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Fleeer, 2021). Practitioners frequently report difficulty balancing these demands alongside wider administrative and curriculum expectations, with workload intensifying when maintaining responsive, child-centred practice (Jay & Knaus, 2018).

Funding also created challenges. Although the Welsh Government invested heavily in the early rollout, sustaining resources proved difficult, and the 2014 stocktake identified variation between local authorities in funding, resources and learning environments (Welsh Government, 2014).

Staffing was a critical enabling factor. The Foundation Phase promoted lower adult-to-child ratios 1:8 for nursery and 1:15 for ages 5–7, supported by teachers and teaching assistants working together (Welsh Government, 2015). These ratios made observation, interaction and differentiated support more manageable and enabled practitioners to scaffold play effectively. Research shows that when adults have the capacity to engage in sustained shared thinking, children’s learning outcomes improve significantly (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011). Adequate staffing is therefore essential to high-quality provision (Welsh Government, 2015).

A clear point of contrast with the Curriculum for Wales is the practical conditions surrounding implementation. Although Curriculum for Wales continues to emphasise progression, child-centred learning and holistic development, many schools report growing pressures linked to budgets, staffing shortages and workload. Reduced access to support staff makes it harder to sustain high-quality play-based practice, particularly in larger classes. Research shows that adequate staffing is essential for effective observation, scaffolding and sustained shared thinking, core features of high-quality early years pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011). Class size also remains influential, smaller groups enable richer adult–child interactions, while larger classes limit opportunities for responsive engagement, a challenge noted in wider studies of play-based implementation (Jay & Knaus, 2018).

There are strong continuities between the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales, particularly their shared commitment to child-centred learning, progression, wellbeing and developing ambitious, capable learners. However, key differences remain. The Foundation Phase was designed specifically for early years and placed play-based pedagogy at its core, whereas Curriculum for Wales spans ages 3–16 and offers broader flexibility for schools to design local curricula. While this flexibility can be empowering, it also creates variation in interpretation and practice. Donaldson's *Successful Futures* (2015) extended many strengths of the Foundation Phase across the wider curriculum, yet implementation under Curriculum for Wales has relied more heavily on schools constructing and interpreting curriculum themselves, increasing workload and inconsistency. A further distinction lies in implementation support: the Foundation Phase benefitted from substantial national investment in professional learning, staffing and rollout structures, whereas Curriculum for Wales has been introduced under tighter financial constraints and with less dedicated staffing support. As a result, although the philosophy of child-centred learning remains, the practical conditions required to deliver it, time, staffing and manageable class sizes are increasingly difficult to sustain.

The Foundation Phase represents one of Wales's most ambitious early years reforms, placing children's developmental needs at the centre of curriculum design. Its emphasis on play, exploration, wellbeing and holistic development aligned strongly with contemporary research and repositioned early education around how children learn rather than formal academic outcomes. However, implementation showed that the effectiveness of play-based pedagogy depends heavily on surrounding conditions. Time, staffing, practitioner knowledge, training and resources shaped the quality of practice; where these were strong, provision was highly effective, but where they were limited, implementation became inconsistent.

This highlights a central lesson curriculum policy alone cannot guarantee high-quality practice. Sustained investment in workforce development, manageable class sizes, adequate staffing and long-term funding is essential for delivering child-centred, play-based pedagogy with fidelity. Waters (2016) reinforces this, noting that although the Foundation Phase "enjoys warm support locally and the envious attention of external observers," its long-term success depends on "serious attention to high-quality professional learning." Her analysis underscores that ambitious pedagogical reform must be matched by equally ambitious, ongoing professional development and system-level support.

Although the Foundation Phase introduced a distinctive, research-informed approach grounded in developmental theory, its success was closely tied to substantial national support through professional learning, higher staffing ratios, and structured rollout support many practitioners argue, has been less evident under Curriculum for Wales. Overall, while no curriculum is without limitations, the Foundation Phase made a lasting

contribution to early childhood education in Wales. Its principles continue to shape current debates on curriculum, pedagogy and early years practice, highlighting the need to align educational philosophy with the practical conditions required to enact it effectively.

Part 2

The concept of the ‘Unique Child’

The concept of the unique child is a core principle in early years education, recognising that every learner develops along an individual pathway shaped by their experiences, interests, dispositions and cultural backgrounds. The EYFS emphasises that every child is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable and self-assured (Department for Education, 2025). This essay explores how this principle underpins effective, equitable and developmentally appropriate assessment within early years practice, requiring practitioners to understand children holistically and avoid narrow or standardised developmental expectations.

Within this context, assessment is viewed as a continuous, observation-led process through which practitioners gather and analyse evidence of children’s learning to guide responsive teaching and ensure meaningful progression (Early Years Coalition, 2021). In early childhood, this is widely recognised as an ongoing, observation-based process through which practitioners interpret children’s development to inform responsive and developmentally appropriate teaching (NAEYC, 2020). Guidance further emphasises that assessment should be primarily formative, observation-led and embedded within everyday play and interactions, enabling practitioners to notice learning as it naturally occurs (Early Years Coalition, 2021). UNICEF adds that meaningful assessment must integrate developmental theory with the lived realities of individual children, ensuring practitioners respond to each child’s unique developmental pathway rather than relying solely on age-related expectations (UNICEF, 2022).

Attending to the unique child is also essential for ensuring fairness. Tierney (2013) argues that fairness in classroom assessment depends on recognising diverse ways of demonstrating competence and ensuring practices do not disadvantage particular groups. This aligns with the ethos of Wales’ play-based Foundation Phase, where tools such as the Foundation Phase Profile support practitioners to build holistic, equitable pictures of progress (Welsh Government, 2017; 2016). When assessment honours individuality and fairness, it becomes more inclusive, developmentally appropriate and capable of supporting all children to thrive.

The concept of the unique child is deeply embedded within early years pedagogy in Wales. It is central to the Curriculum for Wales, which recognises that children develop along individual pathways shaped by their experiences, interests, dispositions and cultural identities (Welsh Government, 2022). This child-centred perspective aligns with contemporary developmental theory, including Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises that development is shaped by interactions across multiple environmental systems, from family and culture to community and policy (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). UNICEF (2022) similarly highlights that children's developmental trajectories vary widely and are influenced by biological, relational and contextual factors, reinforcing the need for assessment approaches that are flexible, holistic and responsive. The Curriculum for Wales positions children as capable, active learners whose voices and agency shape their learning experiences, echoing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which argues that learning emerges through social interaction and shared meaning-making. This requires practitioners to view each child holistically, acknowledging that development is non-linear and influenced by a complex interplay of factors. As a result, assessment must begin with the child rather than predetermined expectations and must recognise the diverse ways in which children demonstrate competence.

Within the Welsh Foundation Phase, one of the key assessment methods used to support this principle is the Foundation Phase Profile (FPP). The Profile was introduced to provide practitioners with a structured yet developmentally appropriate way of observing and understanding children's progress at the point of entry (Welsh Government, 2017). It emerged from the 2015 evaluation of the Foundation Phase, which highlighted the need for assessment approaches that reflect the curriculum's experiential, play-based ethos (Welsh Government, 2015). The FPP uses a series of developmental checkpoints across key areas, including language, personal and social development, and physical skills. These checkpoints are designed to be observed through naturalistic interactions, continuous provision and child-initiated play, rather than through formal testing. This aligns with Rogoff's recent work on guided participation, which emphasises that children learn and demonstrate competence through active involvement in meaningful, everyday cultural activities (Rogoff, 2025). The intention of the Profile is to build a holistic picture of each child's starting point, supporting early identification of needs and informing planning that builds on existing strengths. Because the Profile is grounded in observation and everyday interactions, it aligns strongly with the principle of the unique child, allowing practitioners to see what children can do in familiar, meaningful contexts.

Alongside the Profile, the Foundation Phase places significant emphasis on ongoing formative assessment, often referred to as continuous observation or assessment for learning. This approach is rooted in the belief that young children demonstrate their learning most authentically through play, exploration and social interaction (Early Years

Coalition, 2021). Formative observation involves practitioners noticing, documenting and interpreting learning as it naturally occurs, using this information to scaffold development, adapt provision and plan next steps. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where practitioners identify what a child can do independently and what they can achieve with sensitive support. International guidance reinforces this approach, emphasising that assessment should be woven into everyday experiences and used to support learning rather than disrupt it (NAEYC, 2020; Early Years Coalition, 2021). UNICEF (2022) notes that formative assessment is most effective when it is integrated into everyday experiences and used to guide responsive teaching. By recognising multiple modes of expression, it enables children to demonstrate learning in ways that reflect their individual interests, communication styles and cultural backgrounds, supporting the diverse needs of learners in the Foundation Phase.

A critical analysis of these assessment methods reveals both strengths and challenges, particularly when considering Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and neurodiversity. The Foundation Phase Profile offers structure and consistency, supporting early identification of developmental delays or emerging needs. This is especially valuable for children with ALN, as early recognition enables timely intervention, targeted support and multi-agency collaboration (Welsh Government, 2021). The Profile's developmental checkpoints can help practitioners identify patterns that may indicate speech and language needs, sensory processing differences or social communication challenges. However, the structured nature of the Profile also presents limitations. Developmental descriptors may risk oversimplifying complex trajectories, particularly for neurodivergent children whose progress may be uneven, spiky or atypical. Pellicano and den Houting (2020) argue that neurodivergent development should not be judged against neurotypical norms, as this can pathologise difference rather than recognise strengths. For example, an autistic child may demonstrate advanced cognitive skills while finding social communication checkpoints challenging, while a child with ADHD may show strong creativity and problem-solving abilities but struggle with sustained attention during adult-led tasks. In such cases, there is a risk that practitioners may feel pressured to "fit" children into descriptors that do not fully capture their strengths, learning styles or developmental profiles.

In contrast, ongoing formative observation is highly flexible and inclusive, allowing children to demonstrate learning in diverse ways and reducing the demand for performance in artificial assessment situations. This approach is particularly supportive for autistic children, children with ADHD and those with sensory or communication differences, as it enables practitioners to observe learning in contexts where the child feels safe, regulated and engaged (UNICEF, 2022). The Early Years Coalition emphasises that observation-led assessment is essential for recognising the learning of children who communicate non-verbally or express themselves through movement, sensory

exploration or symbolic play (Early Years Coalition, 2021). However, this method relies heavily on practitioner expertise, time and reflective judgement. Without sufficient training or staffing issues highlighted in Welsh reviews, there is a risk of inconsistency or unconscious bias in how observations are interpreted (Estyn, 2019). Research by Campbell (2015) suggests that practitioner bias can unintentionally influence assessment outcomes, particularly for children from minority backgrounds or those with communication differences. This reinforces the need for ongoing professional learning and reflective practice to ensure that formative assessment remains equitable and child-centred.

Despite these challenges, both assessment approaches support the concept of the unique child, though in different but complementary ways. The Foundation Phase Profile provides a structured baseline that helps practitioners understand each child's developmental starting point, while ongoing formative observation ensures that assessment remains dynamic, responsive and embedded in real experiences. When used together, these approaches honour individuality by recognising that children learn at different rates, express competence in varied ways and require personalised support. This aligns with the ethos of the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales, both of which emphasise holistic development, learner agency and inclusive practice. Their effectiveness, however, depends on practitioner expertise, reflective practice and a commitment to bias-aware, child-centred assessment, particularly for children with ALN or neurodivergent profiles. When these conditions are met, assessment within the Foundation Phase can meaningfully uphold the principle of the unique child and support all learners to thrive.

These strengths and limitations highlight the need for assessment practices that are both structured and flexible, recognising children's diverse developmental pathways without reducing them to narrow expectations. When practitioners combine professional judgement with reflective, bias-aware practice, assessment becomes more equitable and responsive to all learners, including those with ALN and neurodivergent profiles.

In conclusion, the principle of the unique child is central to meaningful, equitable assessment in the early years, yet its effectiveness relies on balancing structured frameworks with flexible, observation-led approaches. The Foundation Phase Profile offers consistency and supports early identification (Welsh Government, 2017; 2021), but its developmental checkpoints can oversimplify the complex, uneven trajectories often seen in neurodivergent learners (Pellicano & den Houting, 2020). If applied too strictly, the descriptors may uphold neurotypical expectations rather than children's unique strengths.

In contrast, formative, observation-led assessment aligns closely with the ethos of the unique child, enabling practitioners to recognise varied communication styles, cultural

identities and learning pathways (Early Years Coalition, 2021; UNICEF, 2022). Yet this approach depends heavily on practitioner expertise and is vulnerable to inconsistency and unconscious bias without sustained professional learning (Campbell, 2015; Estyn, 2019).

The Curriculum for Wales positions assessment as relational and contextual (Welsh Government, 2022), reflecting ecological and sociocultural theories that view development as socially and culturally mediated (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). When structured tools and responsive observation are integrated effectively, assessment can genuinely uphold the principle of the unique child and support inclusive, equitable early years practice.

Part 3

What's Really Happening in School Nurseries and Why It Matters for Families.

Written by: Vicky Morris-Evans 2nd of June 2026

Across Wales, little ones are starting nursery younger, with bigger needs yet with less help available. At the same time, the funding and staffing meant to support early years simply haven't kept up with how childhood has changed. This blog looks at the growing gap between school nurseries and childcare settings, why rising 3s are struggling, and what needs to change so every child gets the start they deserve.

School vs Childcare: Two Different Realities

Many parents understandably assume that school nurseries and childcare settings offer similar support, both care for 3-year-olds, follow the Curriculum for Wales or non-maintained curriculum and want the best for children. But behind the scenes, the two systems work very differently.



(English Martyrs Catholic Primary school, 2025)

Childcare settings offering the 30-hour Childcare Offer receive funded places for eligible 3–4 year olds, staffing ratios supported by this funding, and the flexibility to provide wraparound developmental support or employ extra staff when needs rise (Welsh Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2025).

School nurseries, however, receive no Childcare Offer funding. This means no additional staffing for rising 3s, no extra support for toileting, speech or ALN needs, and a standard school budget that must stretch further every year (Welsh Government, 2025). As a result, two children of the same age and with the same needs may receive very different levels of support.

Starting Nursery Younger: Why Many Rising 3s Still Need Extra Support

In some Welsh schools, rising 3s now attend full-time nursery. While this seems positive earlier relationships, earlier routines, and earlier support many are simply not developmentally ready for a school environment.

Practitioners across Wales report the same challenges:

- * Children arriving not toilet trained, toileting regression and frequent accidents
- * Limited independence with dressing, wiping and handwashing
- * Speech and language delays
- * Reduced attention, listening and social readiness
- * Higher emotional needs and difficulty separating from parents

These are not isolated issues but part of a wider national pattern. Emmerson (2023) notes rising developmental vulnerabilities in 3–4-year-olds, especially in communication and social development, while UK research highlights growing needs in children’s communication, emotional regulation and self-care following the pandemic (Bakopoulou, 2022).

In short, children’s needs are rising, but the support available in school nurseries is not.

What’s Changing in Our Children’s Early Development?

Children’s development in Wales has been shaped by several pressures that have intensified in recent years. Reduced play, social interaction and routine during the pandemic have contributed to delays in communication, emotional development and school readiness (Bakopoulou, 2022). Cost-of-living pressures and widening inequalities mean many children, especially in deprived areas, have unmet speech, language and communication needs (Emmerson, 2023). Stretched early years services limit access to timely support, while increased screen use reduces opportunities for language-rich interaction (OECD, 2021a). With fewer informal support networks available, children are entering nursery with greater needs, yet school nurseries are not funded or staffed to meet this rising demand.

Funded Ratios for Childcare, Not Schools

This is the heart of the issue.

Childcare settings offering the 30-hour Childcare Offer receive funding that supports:

- * Higher staffing ratios



(NDNA, 2021)

- * More time for toileting and self-care
- * Targeted support for speech and language
- * Flexibility to meet individual needs

School nurseries, however, must meet the needs of rising 3s with:

- * The same staffing as older nursery pupils
- * No additional funding
- * No access to Childcare Offer resources
- * Increasing numbers of children with ALN indicators

This creates a structural inequality that parents rarely see, but practitioners feel every single day.

Alma Economics (2024) highlights rising demand, staffing shortages and increasing needs across the early years sector, with school-based provision under strain.

Growing Needs, Shrinking Support

Speech and language difficulties are now one of the most common concerns in school nurseries. Practitioners frequently report:

- * Limited vocabulary
- * Difficulty following instructions
- * Reduced attention and listening
- * Challenges with turn-taking and conversation
- * Frustration that can lead to behaviour difficulties

The Education Policy Institute (2022) warns that early language delays can have long-term impacts on literacy, communication and later attainment. Yet inequalities in early intervention persist. Flying Start settings can use funded hours to boost staffing and provide targeted support, but school nurseries cannot, meaning children with

similar needs may receive very different levels of help depending on their setting (Welsh Government, 2023).

Why Having Enough Adults Makes All the Difference

Nursery teachers and support staff describe workloads that have escalated dramatically. Much of the day is now spent:

- * Supporting toileting and changing
- * Managing emotional regulation
- * Teaching basic communication and social skills
- * Providing one-to-one support for emerging ALN
- * Completing safeguarding and well-being interventions

These responsibilities demand time, expertise and adequate staffing, yet school nurseries are expected to manage them without the funding available to childcare settings.

When staff are stretched, children miss out on:

- * High-quality interactions
- * Rich play experiences
- * Targeted developmental support
- * Opportunities for language-building
- * Consistent emotional co-regulation



(The Hanen Centre, 2023)

Research consistently shows that high-quality early years provision depends not only on access but also on meaningful adult–child interaction and responsive pedagogy (Pascal and Bertram, 2018; OECD, 2021b). OECD (2021b) emphasises that high-quality early years provision depends on strong adult–child interactions, something that becomes harder when staffing is limited.

What Needs to Change?

If Wales is serious about early intervention and equity, school nurseries need funding that reflects children's needs today, not those of a decade ago.

Children deserve:

- * The right support at the right time
- * Adults with the capacity to meet their needs
- * Environments that nurture communication, independence and well-being

Practitioners deserve:

- * Staffing that matches the complexity of rising 3s
- * Access to early intervention and specialist support
- * Recognition of their emotional and physical labour

Parents deserve:

- * Clear information about the differences between settings
- * Confidence that their child will get the support they need
- * A system that works for families, not against them

Let's Build a Fairer Start for Every Child

The challenges facing rising 3s are not the fault of parents, practitioners or children; they stem from a system that hasn't kept pace with the changing needs of early childhood. But change is possible, and it starts with awareness. If you're a parent, practitioner or leader who believes school nurseries deserve the same support as childcare settings, share this message. Because every child's future is shaped by the support they receive today, it's time the system rose to meet them.



(Care for Kids, 2019)

Reference List

Alma Economics (2024) *Mapping the childcare and play workforce in Wales: phase 1 report*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2024-03/mapping-childcare-and-play-workforce-wales-phase-1-report.pdf> (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

Bakopoulou, I. (2022) 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early years transition to school in the UK context', *Education 3-13*, 52(5), pp. 648–661. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2114807>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J.S. (1966) *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Campbell, T. (2015) 'Stereotyped at Seven? Biases in Teacher Judgement of Pupils' Ability and Attainment', *Journal of Social Policy*, 44(3), pp. 517–547. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000227>

Care for Kids (2019) *New resource for boosting inclusion in early childhood services* [Online image] Available at: <https://www.careforkids.com.au/child-care-provider-articles/article/202/new-resource-for-boosting-inclusion-in-early-childhood-services> (Accessed: 2 June 2026).

Department for Education (2025) *Early years foundation stage statutory framework: For group and school-based providers. Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68c024cb8c6d992f23edd79c/Early_years_foundation_stage_statutory_framework_-_for_group_and_school-based_providers.pdf (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Donaldson, G. (2015) *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf> (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Early Years Coalition (2021) *Birth to 5 Matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Birthto5Matters-download.pdf> (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Education Policy Institute (2022) *Blog: Special initiatives to boost early language development and communication*. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and->

[research/blog-special-initiatives-to-boost-early-language-development-and-communication/](#) (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

Emmerson, C. (2023) *Report for the Minister for Health and Social Services: Universal Primary Free School Meals, the Early Years and Childcare Offer and Inequalities*. Available at: <https://publichealthnetwork.cymru/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BaHW-Report-to-Minister-V01.pdf> (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

English Martyrs Catholic Primary School (2025) *Fireworks Art in Nursery B* [Online image]. Available at: <https://englishmartyrs.co.uk/blog/2025-04-04-12-23-00-colourful-painting-in-nursery> (Accessed: 2 June 2026).

Estyn (2017) *Active and experiential learning: effective foundation phase practice in delivering literacy and numeracy in Year 1 and Year 2*. . Available at: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/30826/1/Estyn%20Active%20and%20experiential%20learning_E_Accessible_0_Redacted.pdf (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Estyn (2019) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2018–2019*. Available at: https://estyn.gov.wales/app/uploads/2024/08/ESTYN-Annual-Report-2020_ENG.pdf?utm_source=copilot.com (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Fleer, M. (2021) *Conceptual PlayWorlds: The Role of Imagination in Play and Learning*. London: Routledge

Howard, J., Miles, G.E., Rees-Davies, L. and Bertenshaw, E.J. (2017) 'Play in Middle Childhood: Everyday Play Behaviour and Associated Emotions', *Children & Society*, 31(5), pp. 378–389. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12208>

Jay, J. A. & Knaus, M. (2018) 'Embedding play-based learning into junior primary (Year 1 and 2) curriculum in WA', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 112–126. Available at: DOI: 10.14221/ajte.2018v43n1.7

Jones, N. (2024) *Context matters? Exploring barriers to equitable enactment of progressive early-years curriculum reform in socio-economically disadvantaged schools in Wales*. Available at: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/178778/1/Preprint%20ORCA%20and%20Socarxiv%20Context%20of%20Practice%20Paper%20PDF.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

NAEYC (2020) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Position Statement*. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents> (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

NDNA (2021) *Nursery and early years funding* [Online image]. Available at: <https://ndna.org.uk/news/fewer-children-in-nursery-so-government-must-reverse-funding-decision/> (Accessed: 2 June 2026).

OECD (2017) *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*. Available at:

https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2017/06/starting-strong-v_g1g7a972/9789264276253-en.pdf (Accessed: 27 May 2026)

OECD (2018) *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030*. Available at:

<https://d15k2d11r6t6rl.cloudfront.net/public/users/Integrators/5eb55a21-9496-46ce-8161-f092fc9def23/aaie/OECD%202030%20Position%20Paper%20SUMMARY%20%2805.04.2018%29.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026)

OECD (2021a) *Children in the digital environment: Revised typology of risks*. OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 302. Available at:

https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/01/children-in-the-digital-environment_9d454872/9b8f222e-en.pdf (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

OECD (2021b) *Starting Strong VI: Supporting meaningful interactions in early childhood education and care*. Available at:

https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/06/starting-strong-vi_0a304435/f47a06ae-en.pdf (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

Pascal, C. and Bertram, T. (2018) 'Effective early learning: A praxeological and participatory approach to evaluating and improving quality in early childhood education', *Revista da FAEBA: Educação e Contemporaneidade*, 27(51), pp. 105–120. Available at: DOI:10.21879/faeaba2358-0194.2018.v27.n51.p105-120

Pellicano, E. and den Houting, J. (2022) 'Annual Research Review: Shifting from “normal science” to neurodiversity in autism science', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 63(4), pp. 381–396. Available at: DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.13534.

Piaget, J. (1952) *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*. New York: International Universities Press.

Pyle, A. and Danniels, E. (2016) 'A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in play-based pedagogy', *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), pp. 274–289. Available at: DOI <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>

Pyle, A., DeLuca, C. and Danniels, E. (2017) 'A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education', *Review of Education*, 5(3), pp. 311–326. Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3097>

Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) (n.d.) *Curriculum definition*. Available at: <https://ride.ri.gov/instruction-assessment/curriculum/curriculum-definition> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Rogoff, B. (2025) 'Transforming by Participating', in Kessel, F. (ed.) *Pillars of Developmental Psychology: Recollections and Reflections*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 278–291.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P. & Melhuish, E. (2011) *Performing against the odds: developmental trajectories of children in the EPPSE 3–16 study*.

Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258120158_Performing_against_the_odds_developmental_trajectories_of_children_in_the_EPPSE_3_to_16_study (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Taylor, C., Maynard, T., Davies, R., Waldron, S., Rhys, M., Power, S., Moore, L., Blackaby, D. and Plewis, I. (2013) *Evaluating the Foundation Phase: Annual report 2011/12*.

Available at: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/89002/1/130717-evaluating-foundation-phase-annual-report-2011-12-en.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Taylor, C., Rhys, M. and Waldron, S. (2016) 'Implementing curriculum reform in Wales: the case of the Foundation Phase', *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(3), pp. 299–315.

Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1184872>

The Hanen Centre (2023) *How to Support Peer Interaction in Early Childhood Settings* [Online image]. Available at: <https://www.hanen.org/information-tips/how-to-support-peer-interaction-in-early-childhood-settings> (Accessed: 2 June 2026).

Tierney, R.D. (2013) 'Fairness in classroom assessment', in McMillan, J.H. (ed.) *SAGE Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, pp. 125–144.

UNICEF (2022) *Early Childhood Development: The Evidence Base*. New York: UNICEF.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2018) *Learning through play: Strengthening learning through play in early childhood education programmes*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (n.d.) *Education transforms lives*. Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/query-list/e/education> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wainwright, N., Goodway, J., Whitehead, M., Williams, A. and Kirk, D. (2019) 'Playful pedagogy for deeper learning: exploring the implementation of the play-based Foundation Phase in Wales', *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(1), pp. 43–53.

Available at: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1653551>

Waters, J. (2016) 'The Foundation Phase in Wales: time to grow?', *Welsh Journal of Education*, 18(1), pp. 41–60. Available at: DOI: 10.16922/wje.18.1.11

Weisberg, D.S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., Kittredge, A.K. and Klahr, D. (2016) 'Guided play: Principles and practices', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(3), pp. 177–182. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/0963721416645512

Welsh Government (2008) *Play/Active Learning: Overview for the Foundation Phase*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/52aae98d-65ed-4065-9222-1a7876e150de/play-active-learning-overview-for-3-to-7-year-olds.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2009) *Foundation Phase outdoor learning handbook*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/fcb8539c-9be7-4883-8542-35d7b54b56f2/foundation-phase-outdoor-learning-handbook.pdf> (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2014) *Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/an-independent-stocktake-of-the-foundation-phase-in-wales-final-report.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2015) *Evaluation of the Foundation Phase: Final Report*. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/150514-foundation-phase-final-en_0.pdf (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Welsh Government (2015) *Evaluation of the Foundation Phase: Final Report*. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/150514-foundation-phase-final-en_0.pdf (Accessed: 27 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2016) *Foundation Phase Action Plan*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/foundation-phase-action-plan.pdf> (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Welsh Government (2017) *Foundation Phase Profile handbook*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/f9d85dba-85a4-4e87-bb58-a24730ad7e57/foundation-phase-profile-handbook-revised-september-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026)

Welsh Government (2017) *Foundation Phase Profile handbook*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/f9d85dba-85a4-4e87-bb58-a24730ad7e57/foundation-phase-profile-handbook-revised-september-2017.pdf> (Accessed: 27 May 2026)

Welsh Government (2021) *The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021*. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2026-04/the-additional-learning-needs-code-for-wales-2021_0.pdf (Accessed: 6 June 2026).

Welsh Government (2022) *Curriculum for Wales Framework*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction-to-curriculum-for-wales-guidance/#the-curriculum-for-wales-framework> (Accessed: 6 June 2026)

Welsh Government (2022) *Curriculum for Wales Framework*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/introduction-to-curriculum-for-wales-guidance/#the-curriculum-for-wales-framework> (Accessed: 27 May 2026)

Welsh Government (2024) *Flying Start outreach: guidance for local authorities*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/flying-start-guidance#Localauthorities> (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2025) *Childcare offer for Wales: local authority guidance*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-04/childcare-offer-for-wales-local-authority-guidance-7-april-2025-english.pdf> (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2025) *Formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales: survey of senior leaders and practitioners*. Cardiff: Welsh Government (GSR report number 126/2025). Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2025-12/formative-evaluation-of-the-curriculum-for-wales-survey-of-senior-leaders-and-practitioners-668201.pdf> (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Welsh Government (2026) *Foundation learning in the Curriculum for Wales: a qualitative study*. Social Research Number: 54/2026. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2026-03/foundation-learning-curriculum-wales-qualitative-study-999750.pdf> (Accessed: 29 May 2026)

Wood, E.A. (2022) 'Play and learning in early childhood education: tensions and challenges', *Child Studies*, (1), pp. 15–26. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21814/childstudies.4124> (Accessed: 29 May 2026).

Zosh, J.M., Hopkins, E.J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S.L. and Whitebread, D. (2017) *Learning through play: a review of the evidence* (White paper). Available at: https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/wmtlmbe0/learning-through-play_web.pdf (Accessed: 27 May 2026).