

ECEY6010 - Early Years Curricula

Section 1 – Comparison of curricula

In this section, a comparison of The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS, 2024) and New Zealand's Te Whariki Early childhood curriculum (2017) will be explored, and a critical analysis will be given. Both curricula are play-based, emphasising play as central to a child's learning and development. Through play, based on their own interests, children are able to develop their cognitive and social skills and make sense of their world. According to UNICEF (2018), play encourages lifelong learning and supports development in all areas. At the time of writing, Raising the Nation Play Commission (2025) have just published their final report entitled 'Everything to Play For: A Plan to Ensure Every Child in England Can Play'. Following a long inquiry into the importance of play, this report calls upon the government to establish a National Play Strategy. Figures show that outdoor play has reduced by fifty percent within one generation, with fifty-five percent of parents believing their children play outdoors less than they did when they were young.

Turning now to curricula, the EYFS Statutory Framework (2024) is used in England and sets standards for the care of children from zero to five years. Te Whariki (2017) has a similar purpose and is used by early years settings in New Zealand. Both documents recognise that children within this age group learn more quickly than at any other time and believe quality early years teaching is needed to build foundations for future learning and development. The current version of the EYFS framework has been in use since October 2024 and Te Whariki since 2017.

The EYFS framework has four main principles designed to guide practice, being the unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments and learning and development. Te Whariki also has four main principles, but these differ slightly from

EYFS, being empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships. Whilst the EYFS Framework mentions teaching to ensure school readiness, Te Whariki is more concerned with children's wellbeing and relationships, which Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Maslow, 1943), identifies as essential before children can begin to learn and fulfil their potential. Te Whariki is specific in mentioning theorists such as Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Bruner (1966, 1974) as influencing their curriculum, whilst EYFS does not mention theorists in their document. However, elements of their work are seen in the EYFS Framework, when discussing varying rates of development, and building on children's learning. This relates to the unique child concept, and the theories posed by Piaget (1896-1980), and Bruner (1966, 1974). Given the correct educational support, tools, and opportunities, these theorists believe children can learn even complex concepts. When discussing approaches to teaching and learning, EYFS (2024, Section 1.18) advises observing different rates of development and adjusting the teaching approach accordingly. Te Whariki expands by identifying temperament, health, and people's expectations as possible reasons why children's capabilities can fluctuate from day to day. These factors may affect how children perform in activities and assessments. In practice, the most common way to adapt and personalise teaching is via formative assessment, on the spot whilst teaching. Alternatively notes may be taken, and a different approach developed later on.

The second principle of the EYFS is positive relationships. The Department for Education (2022) states that children should have a key person in their setting. A child may interact with many adults throughout their early years journey, but the key person acts as a point of contact for parents/carers and the child, and as a safe, caring person that the child knows they can turn to for comfort and help (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025). Te Whariki adopts the same view, understanding that children need support from adults who know them well and have their best interests at heart. Both Te Whariki and the EYFS allow for settings to build a curriculum which suits their individual community, reflecting local priorities. Such personalised offers can only be achieved by working

closely with parents and communities and taking on board their views and suggestions (Mpuangnan and Ntombela, 2023). In Te Whariki the concept of such diversity is demonstrated using the analogy of a Whariki woven mat. This traditional craft displays a highly decorative finished pattern on the surface, showing the artistry of the creator and representing mastery of a subject, whereas the underside of the mat shows the foundation and workings of the weaving process. The underside symbolises the foundations of good education, and the planning and techniques needed for it to be successful. Any new colour strands woven into the mat represent new life, growth and potential, which could represent community and parental input.

Enabling environments are discussed as the third principle within the EYFS Framework. Every Child Matters (2003) state that children value being healthy and safe, enjoying life and developing skills to make a positive contribution to society. Also, they hope not to be disadvantaged by poor economic wellbeing. According to Learning Journals (2011-2025), these five priorities are closely linked to an enabling environment which should be safe and regularly risk assessed by practitioners. They must provide support to follow good hygiene practices, give opportunities and resources to stimulate and challenge children's minds, and also provide a voice for parents and carers by listening to them and involving them in decision making. In addition, if essential skills are taught and independent thinking encouraged, this will increase children's chances of success later in life (Qizi and Kobiljanovna, 2021).

The idea of an enabling environment has been questioned in the past. A theory posed by Keevers and Treleaven (2011) suggested that the enabling environments theory could be re-framed as environments that enable. The first scenario considers practitioners as the enablers, who construct their own version of an enabling environment. However, it is suggested that an environment that enables, views the environment itself as giving children autonomy and the chance to make their own decisions. This scenario sees the environment as more of a network of interactions and

relationships, rather than just a physical space. Similarly, Freire (1998) believed that an environment that enables, is made with children, for children. Whether such an environment can be successfully achieved depends on how much trust practitioners have in the children they care for (Kwong, 2019; Milona, 2019). Trust constitutes the belief that a positive outcome can be achieved by taking a risk. If practitioners trust children to take risks, albeit within the confines of safeguarding regulations, it is more likely the children's autonomy will show, and they will learn through their own experimentation.

The fourth and final principle of the EYFS framework is learning and development. In both EYFS and Te Whariki, all children, including those with special educational needs and disability (SEND), are considered, and equal importance is given to their learning. In EYFS, communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development, are considered prime areas which support children to progress in the specific areas of mathematics, literacy, understanding the world and expressive art and design. Whilst EYFS describes the basic learning that needs to occur within each of the seven areas, there is little suggestion of how this can be achieved. The Te Whariki curriculum contains five strands of learning - wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. Unlike EYFS, no area is given prime status, reinforcing holistic development and appreciating that children do not learn in order of areas. Both curricula discuss the skills used and the attitudes displayed by children towards their learning. Te Whariki identifies these as dispositions, whereas EYFS calls them characteristics of effective learning. Observing these traits in children and understanding which skills they need to develop can help practitioners plan future activities and encourage new ways of thinking.

In conclusion, as a standalone document, the EYFS Statutory Framework gives little guidance in relation to how children learn and what stages they go through. It is stated in section 1.20 that settings may use the Development Matters (2023) document to

support delivery of the EYFS and design their curriculum. Without Development Matters, a practitioner who is unfamiliar with child development may find delivery of the EYFS difficult. Whilst non-statutory, Development Matters provides more clarity on children's development and learning and emphasises that depth of learning is more important than progression. However, checkpoints in this document merely list the expected outcomes for children and do not give suggestions for improving practice. Whilst Te Whariki is designed for use alongside the main New Zealand curriculum, it contains clearer guidance on how to recognise children's attainment and gives suggestions for practice, alongside reflective questions to help practitioners improve their setting. This would benefit new or inexperienced practitioners. In addition, where EYFS focuses on school readiness, Te Whariki prioritises wellbeing and contribution, which can take many forms. Due to the bi-cultural nature of Te Whariki, their curriculum appears more sensitive to cultural expectations and takes its lead from parents/carers, respecting their hopes for their child. Whilst acknowledging the need to appreciate different cultures, it is likely more difficult for EYFS to cover all eventualities due to the diverse multicultural nature of the United Kingdom and the vast array of beliefs they would need to consider.

Disregarding the differences in culture, it seems feasible that both the EYFS and Te Whariki curricula could be implemented quite easily. Neither one requires specific resources or location, and the values appear to mostly align. Lessons surrounding relationships and empathy could be learned from the Maori element of Te Whariki. For children in England, more opportunities to discuss their own relationships and beliefs and those of others would provide increased empathy in the diverse multicultural environment, ultimately leading to more acceptance and understanding.

Section 2 – Assessment methods and their relevance to the unique child concept

During a child's early years, they undergo various forms of assessment. Formative assessment, undertaken by practitioners whilst teaching is the easiest way to adapt teaching to suit a child's level of development or learning style, whilst summative assessments which record a child's achievements at a specified time, take a little more work. Mogboh and Okoye (2021) believe that both forms of assessment are necessary to gather information on a child's development and that the two should not be considered dichotomous. However, Ismail *et al* (2022) found that formative assessment was more effective in helping children self-assess their progress and understand how they think and learn. This section will analyse two assessment processes, namely the Early Years Foundation Stage Progress check at age two and the Reception Baseline Assessment and explore how these relate to the unique child concept.

The concept of unique child recognises that all children are different and learn in different ways, at different rates. Birth to 5 Matters (2025) recognises that children's development is not linear and is dependent upon the experiences and opportunities presented to them, especially in the early years between zero and five years old. All children are curious to learn, but they will approach learning with their own unique style.

The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (2024) places the unique child as one of its four main principles and touches upon the concept in its learning and development requirements (sections 1.12 and 1.18) specifying that practitioners should consider the individual needs and interests of the child when planning their activities. However, when it comes to formal assessment of children's abilities, the narrative changes and documents begin to talk about expected progress, rather than individual progress, therefore immediately placing pressure on children and settings to reach certain levels of attainment (Ortega, 2025). A solution to this would be to implement preparation techniques in readiness for summative assessments, providing emotional support and methods for regulating emotions.

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Progress check at age two

The EYFS Progress check at age two is a non-statutory check utilised by early years providers and carried out with input from parents, healthcare professionals and any other agencies involved with the child. Whilst completion of the check is non-statutory, there are some statutory requirements that must be carried out if the check is completed.

The check should be led by the child's key person and is focused on celebrating children's achievements, as well as identifying any potential difficulties they may be experiencing. There is no expected level of success, meaning this type of check is responsive to children's individual learning styles and the unique child concept. The progress check focuses mainly on the prime areas of the EYFS Statutory Framework, although there is room to comment on the other areas also, allowing for the fact that children do not learn in a linear fashion. The check is based on the parental and professional knowledge of the child, rather than paper evidence, and therefore allows all involved to focus on the individual traits of the child and to use their own judgment to talk about what they have observed. According to Birth to 5 Matters (2025), one in three parents are unaware that a child's brain development is at its peak between the ages of birth to two years. Meeting for the Progress check is a good opportunity to make them aware of this and suggest ideas for them to support their child at home. This supports a child's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which states that they have the right to live healthily and grow as a person. Such suggestions can again be tailored to fit each child, therefore providing a unique experience for them. The importance of communication at home can also be promoted, emphasising that good communication helps children feel free to discuss their feelings. This, in turn, will improve their mental health and wellbeing (Dall, Fellingner and Holzinger, 2022) and support their rights under Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989).

The progress check meeting provides a good opportunity for the child and parents/carers to talk about unique family and cultural values. This gives practitioners

an insight into the child's background and could enable them to provide suitable resources to further the child's development.

Barriers to successful completion of the Progress check could be the long-term absence of a key person, a parent/carer refusing to join the meeting for fear of being judged, or a child being unwilling or too unwell to take part. These difficulties can be counteracted by delaying the check until the return of the key person (if possible), or until the child is willing/well enough to partake and by providing the parent/carer with information about the check prior to their appointment, making them aware of what is involved to put them at ease. Additionally, the check is supposed to be carried out at the setting where the child spends most of their time. If the child attends more than one setting, it is possible that they do not enjoy the one where they spend the most time and therefore the check results may not be favourable. Whilst information from the other settings can be obtained and included in the progress report, this may delay the check. Consideration should also be given as to when the child joined the setting. Have they been there for long enough to form a good relationship with their key person, or is their attendance poor, leading to them not being settled enough to get an accurate picture of their achievements?

In summary, the Progress check at two years seems a good method of assessment to use in line with the unique child concept. It allows for differences in children's rates of development, without scoring them in any way that may cause distress or disadvantage them in any way.

Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)

The Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) is a short assessment which must be completed at any time within the first six weeks after a child starts Reception and is a statutory requirement. Key Stage Two data is then compared with the RBA results, to

form the progress measure of the school. The RBA assessment tests a child's abilities in mathematics, literacy and communication and language, therefore overlooking their knowledge of other curriculum areas. The unique child concept recognises that children do not learn in subject areas and therefore a lot of their talent may lie in other areas than those tested. In addition, the RBA does not take account of the differing stages of development a child may be at, posing the same questions to every child, no matter what their ability. In some cases, even after six weeks a child may not have fully settled into Reception, especially if they have come straight from the home environment and never been to a nursery or childminder. Poor attendance may also affect how settled they are. In these circumstances, practitioners have no choice but to deliver the assessment, as there is a requirement to do so within the first six weeks. The scores from the RBA are not shared with any other bodies, including the school that performed the assessment, and are simply kept on the National Pupil Database until required, seven years later. Whilst schools do receive a short statement confirming how each child performed on the day of the test, these are not accurate indicators of a child's true ability and are unlikely to be of any use in planning an individualised learning journey for them. Most teaching staff agree that the RBA is of no benefit to them or their pupils and has a negative impact on children and practice (Meechan, Williams-Brown, Whatmore and Halfhead, 2022).

The EYFS Statutory Framework (2024) states that the RBA should not be used as a formative assessment. It seems unavoidable, however, that an experienced practitioner would deliver this assessment without making mental notes of children's perceived capabilities, possibly informing future next steps for that child. Whilst a child cannot pass or fail the RBA, they may still feel pressure to perform well, as the test is administered under strict conditions. Whilst there is an option to pause the test and continue it later, this could also cause a child to worry unnecessarily, anticipating what is to come and possibly impacting their mental health. Brown (2016) comments that the RBA strips away any chance of equality, instead introducing children to a concept of winners and losers. One aspect of the RBA which does align with the unique child

concept, however, is that the test may be administered by any trained education professional who is familiar with the child. This allows the child to feel at ease and not have the added pressure of working with an unknown member of staff. The RBA is also an inclusive assessment, designed to be accessed by children with special educational needs, disability or who have English as an additional language.

In conclusion, the Reception Baseline Assessment serves very little purpose and is not particularly relatable to the unique child concept. The RBA takes no consideration of the child's development levels and could prove quite stressful for them to undertake. Also, the time span in which the test must be completed is very short and it may distress some children to be tested so soon after their starting date.

Section 3 – Blog for a professional publication

For centuries and more, our ancestors have honed their skills in arts and crafts, both for enjoyment and through necessity. But where are our future artists and makers coming from, when their school art experiences are shoehorned into miniscule spaces and inadequate timeframes?

As a Teaching Assistant with sixteen years' experience in a primary setting, a constant sadness for me is the lack of art and craft opportunities available to our children. Over the years, I have seen the amount of time dedicated to art and craft sessions dwindle, with corridor displays becoming more clinical and less colourful. The scourge of computer-generated headings and images has wiped out the need for beautiful handwritten lettering, neatly drawn pattern borders and large paint or crayon creations, proudly made by children eager to get creative and messy!

We constantly hear from the government about the demise of the creative industries and how school leavers lack the skills needed to pursue creative careers (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2022) but how are they supposed to learn those skills when the school day is spent sitting at desks, looking at printouts full of information, which to be honest, they will probably never need again in their lives? Where are the activities that encourage creativity, such as building bridges from drinking straws, constructing paper baskets for Easter eggs, using simple sewing techniques to make pencil cases, aprons, greetings cards, or bookmarks? How proud would children feel if they managed to gain Art Award status for their setting, by working hard at something they enjoy?

I often think about how a revised Art and Craft curriculum could be introduced at my setting and dream of an airy, dedicated space, with large tables where groups or individuals could work, without fear of getting paint on the new classroom furniture, or being hurried along by a stressed teacher and not having time to complete their masterpiece. On the rare occasion the children are allowed an entire session of free play; two thirds of the class will dart to the workshop area, eager to experiment with the newly stocked resources. During the last of these occasions, I witnessed three children make their own paper watches, having become envious of a real watch worn by another child. Another made a card for her family, attaching coloured matchsticks to make small handles to open the card. By the end of the session, I had been treated to a story about koalas, read from a folded paper book, illustrated with beautiful drawings and some great writing, showcasing the child's fabulous phonics progress. I had chatted about a child's glittery creation, wondering whether it would look shinier on the lightbox, which she immediately ran off to test (it did!) Besides the enjoyment we all got from these activities, I also walked away with a fistful of post-it notes containing four times the number of observations I had obtained over the last four days, and of a much higher quality!

The above experiences were made possible through a play-based learning opportunity, where children were allowed to follow their own interests, make their own decisions, and solve problems themselves. A research review carried out by the UK Government (2023) recommends further investigation into art being used as a method of experimentation, or to improve mental health and wellbeing, as their review related only to how art meets the national curriculum. Maybe that's where things are going wrong. Art provides so many opportunities for children to explore texture, colour, size, shape, and material properties. Alongside this, they will be developing their fine and gross motor skills, leading to better handwriting outcomes and honing their creative thinking skills. Perhaps we should let our children loose, to see what their imaginative minds can create. Is this not how new discoveries are made, and innovative ideas are introduced?

Whilst art is a compulsory subject for key stages one and two, the government acknowledges that there has been a decline in both quantity and quality of art in primary schools. Barriers to a good art education include lack of funding, a higher focus on core subjects and lack of teacher knowledge in how to deliver art and design lessons. The art and design curriculum for schools, states that children should learn techniques and methods used by real-life makers, artists and creators and that their skills should be built on, in a sequential manner. Whilst this is the ideal, it can be difficult to build on a child's knowledge when their last art lesson was so long ago, they have forgotten what they learned. My vision would be to have a dedicated art space, run on a timetabled access basis, where children could return to unfinished projects and develop them further, or attempt something new, exploring whether the activity is enjoyable for them. Through observation and communication with the child, in a relaxed environment, it would hopefully become apparent what their learning style is, therefore enabling practitioners to build on their knowledge in a way that supports their understanding. In addition, class teachers could attend on a rota basis, firstly to observe their children and maybe also to pick up some useful knowledge to enable them to be more creative in class.

Arts and craft provision also offers plenty of opportunity to involve parents, carers and community organisations in school life. It is always funny to observe the parents at stay and play sessions, negotiating with their children over which of them gets to use the one remaining big sparkly sequin in their picture. There is a frustrated crafter in every group! As well as getting to spend valuable time with their child, many parents would also bring their own skill set to sessions and if willing, could be asked to share this with the group, giving them confidence to join in with their child's education.

According to Mondal (2021), advances in technology mean that knowledge is spread more quickly and therefore curriculum change is needed to keep up with changes in society. He mentions the benefits of a demonstration approach to curriculum change, whereby the new idea is introduced in small stages, posing as little interference to other staff and systems as possible. Staff who are not opposed to the change can be recruited to help set up and promote the new system. If new ideas are recognised by other staff as being useful, it may be that a gradual full curriculum change could be achieved. For the sake of our children's future wellbeing, I think we should give it a try.

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