

Early Years Curricula

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Introduction

Education is fundamental in supporting children's overall holistic development. A Curriculum provides the framework and guidance to what children learn, how learning experiences are structured and the values and principles that underpin practice. It outlines the educational goals, activities and experiences designed to support the development and learning of children in childcare settings (Department of Education, 2024).

The play-based curriculum in Wales for the early years emphasises the importance of play as a means of learning and development. The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) is an integrated approach to education and childcare. It focuses on holistic development to support wellbeing and lifelong learning. It aligns with the Curriculum for Wales and the National Minimum Standards, ensuring that children's needs are met through structured, play based planning. The curriculum aims to develop children to lead fulfilling lives as members of society (Welsh Government, 2025). Play based curricula encourages children to explore different ideas, develop communication skills and build relationships. Influenced by theorists including Jean Piaget whose theory focuses on active exploration and peer engagement, and Lev Vygotsky who emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural tools, have heavily influenced the way in which play based curriculum is made today (McLeod, 2024). However, implementing such curricula can cause challenges for practitioners in relation to professional understanding and balancing child led practice.

This assignment will critically analyse the implementation of the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings and the ECPLC. In section one I will be discussing these play-based curricula's including child centred pedagogy, professional learning and wellbeing and belonging. In section two I will be focusing on methods of assessment within play-based curricula whilst considering the 'unique child' and finally section three will contain a blog linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum change.

Section one - Critical Analysis of the Challenges of Implementing Play-Based Curricula

The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings has been developed through co-construction by practitioners, for practitioners. It is expressed from the viewpoint of the practitioner, drawing expertise from across the non-maintained sector. It seeks to bring a sense of belonging to practitioners and children, celebrating the diverse culture of modern Wales. The experiences, knowledge and skills needed for lifelong learning begin in the early years and high-quality early education provision is essential to support this and development. The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings aims to support children to develop as ambitious, capable learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethical, informed citizens and healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2022).

The curriculum also covers the six areas of learning and experience, encompasses the twenty seven statements of what matters, reflects the principles of what matters and encompasses the mandatory curriculum elements, including the mandatory cross-curricular skills (Welsh Government, 2022).

The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) is a play-based curriculum that is designed to support children's holistic development and wellbeing. It aligns with the Curriculum for Wales and the National Minimum Standards. The ECPLC focuses on play as a means of learning and development, ensuring that children have the best start in life and the foundations for their future learning and development (Welsh Government, 2023).

The ECPLC is about developing and delivering a consistent approach to nurturing, learning and development through the provision of high quality, play based childcare and education opportunities for all babies and young children aged between 0 and 5. this approach focuses on the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of young children during the early years in which they experience rapid growth and brain development (Welsh Government, 2025).

According to Wales Safeguarding Procedures (2021), a child centred approach in Wales aims to integrate children's rights into decision making, policy and practice. It is grounded in the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to be the best they can be.

This is also linked to Friedrich Froebel's theory which emphasises child centres, play based learning. Believing that children are naturally curious, creative and capable learners (Early Excellence, 2024).

When comparing both the ECPLC and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings, both frameworks prioritise play as central to learning and create a strong emphasis on holistic development. They both value strong relationships and encourage practitioners to engage with children's interests and needs. Both

frameworks align with early years pedagogy and children's rights principles ensuring that all learners no matter their age or ability are equipped with the knowledge and skills to advocate for their rights. As stated by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2022), human rights education is not just a separate subject but is woven into the fabric of the curriculum as a whole. This is similar to the ECPLC which has embedded the principles of the UNCRC into its framework. It emphasises the importance of human rights education in all settings, to ensure that all children are aware and understand their rights (Welsh Government, 2026).

However, whilst both frameworks share similarities, when looking at the purpose and focus of the frameworks they have some differences. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings is primarily an educational curriculum that focuses on learning and progression whereas the ECPLC is a quality framework that focuses on standards of play and care across early years settings. whilst the ECPLC focuses on a holistic approach to education and childcare the Curriculum for Wales is a continuum of learning that aligns with the four purposes of the ECPLC. The Curriculum may allow for greater pedagogical creativity, the ECPLC provides clear guidance for practitioners that may be more structured (Welsh Government, 2025).

A key strength of both frameworks is that they recognise the importance of skilled practitioners in supporting children's development. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings encourages practitioners to focus on the children's needs and interests when creating play experiences and the ECPLC emphasises high quality care and reflective practice. However, despite these aspirations, the early years sector faces challenges including severe funding pressures, workforce recruitment difficulties and the shift from traditional instruction to play based pedagogy that make it difficult for settings to implement.

According to Care Inspectorate Wales (no date), adapting to observation-heavy, child-led assessment models represents a massive cultural shift for some settings. practitioners require time and training to pivot from traditional, structured teaching to open-ended play. This also creates a barrier for meeting the distinct needs of children with additional learning needs (ALN) or disabilities as settings require specialized staff and resources that many non-maintained settings lack (Local Government Association, 2023).

Furthermore, when levels of qualification, experience and staff shortages vary between settings it places additional pressure on practitioners, especially when both frameworks emphasise the importance of high-quality childcare. In local authority areas such as Neath Port Talbot where Flying Start are able to provide free training to practitioners to help support their professional development, other local authority areas such as Swansea where early years practitioners and settings do not receive a free training programme can affect staff confidence and ability to provide high quality care (Neath Port Talbot Council, no date).

Section Two – Critical Evaluation of Methods of Assessment, Progress Tracking and Age/Stage Related Developmental Models within Play-Based Curriculum Considering the ‘Unique Child’

In Wales, the concept of the ‘unique child’ is part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework which emphasizes the importance of recognising each child’s individuality and development at their own pace. Guiding practitioners to tailor their support and learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of each child (Leach, 2025).

The unique child principle is also reflected in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 which addresses the education and wellbeing of children not in school, including those in elective home education. The act helps to protect vulnerable children, improve education standards and family support measures (Welsh Government, 2026).

Assessment within the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings is primarily based on ongoing observations and assessment arrangements. These arrangements have been developed to take the needs of all learners into account and recognise their language, ability, identity and background as well as the support they may need. They recognise that every child is unique and that their development can be rapid between birth and the age of five. They support holistic development by keeping the needs of all children at the forefront of pedagogical practice (Welsh Government, 2023).

Practitioners are encouraged to observe children during play, analyse what they notice and respond appropriately through planning and provision. Practitioners are expected to use assessment methods to identify children’s strengths, recognise any areas which may require additional support and plan experiences to promote further progression. The guidance the framework for Funded Non-Maintained Settings provides practitioners on assessment methods emphasizes that they should be purposeful and focused on understanding the unique needs of each child. These observation-based methods align closely with child centred practice and allow children to demonstrate learning naturally as well as supporting transitions between the nursery setting and school environment (Welsh Government, 2023).

Every young child and baby is unique, with their own interests, strengths, identities and circumstances. The guidance on assessment models from the ECPLC framework recognises that observations and assessments must respond to their individual needs. There are no templates or ‘one size fits all’ approach as the ECPLC framework acknowledges and values the different ways each early year’s settings work (Welsh Government, 2025).

This type of assessment model is built around the principle that assessment should be integrated into daily practice rather than conducted as a separate activity. Throughout this framework practitioners are encouraged to observe children

naturally through everyday play and gather information about their communication and social skills, regulating emotions and how they interact with others and their environment. Observation is a key part of supporting and understanding children's play, learning and care. Through watching, listening and understanding how children explore, engage and connect, practitioners can develop a better picture of each child's emotional wellbeing and learning journey (Welsh Government, 2025).

Observation is encouraged within the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Reflective Practice Toolkit and is described as a reflective process that encourages practitioners to be present and responsive. Using what they see and hear to shape interactions, experiences and the environment in ways which support each baby and child's learning and development.

The ECPLC focuses primarily on children's holistic development and ensuring practitioners are enabling adults who observe with care and curiosity. The notice, analyse and respond approach ensures observations are responsive and child centred and they nurture curiosity, wellbeing and confidence. Noticing things like how they express themselves and what sparks their curiosity and excitement, analysing their preferred way of playing or exploring and responding by adapting interactions and enhancing the environment.

Similarly to the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings, the ECPLC framework provides practitioners with a range of observation types to build a clear picture of the children's learning and development. Firstly, mentioning spontaneous observations which include noticing and recording significant moments in a baby or young child's play/interactions. Focused observations which focus on watching a child for a set period of time or following their behaviour or interactions over time. Observations for developmental assessment which means identifying milestones and recognising areas where a child may need extra support and finally planned observations which include observing specific areas of learning or development to deepen the practitioners understanding of the child's progress. These observations can then be recorded and presented in many ways such as one-page profiles, developmental journals, digital apps and sociograms. (Welsh Government, 2025).

Within the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings and the ECPLC the assessment models are designed to be child centred and responsive to each child's unique needs. When considering children with ALN or neurodiversity, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 establishes a statutory framework to support children and young people with additional learning needs in Wales. The ALN Act 2018 introduces a new statutory plan, the Individual Development Plan (IDP) for children and young people who require additional learning provision due to learning difficulties or disabilities. The act also establishes the Education Tribunal for Wales which allows children, young people and their parents or carers to appeal decisions regarding IDPs (Welsh Government, 2024).

The act aims to provide a clear, consistent and legally enforceable system that support children with additional learning needs across Wales. This support is reflected within the ECPLC and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings through the flexibility of observation-based assessments. Children with additional learning needs such as autism may not effectively demonstrate their abilities through standardised assessments, however completing observations on children in familiar environments, with meaningful play experiences and with enabling adults they are familiar with or have built a positive relationship with, practitioners are more likely to identify children's preferred way of communicating, interacting and the observation is likely to be far more detailed. Observations can also reveal areas where the child may struggle and require extra support and interventions, they enable parents and practitioners to communicate effectively about their child's progress and challenges which fosters a collaborative learning approach and when observations are done regularly, then can promote early intervention enabling timely support and adjustments to the child's learning environment (Welsh Government, 2025).

However, despite the benefits observation methods provide, and the inclusion and the acknowledges to individuality the ECPLC and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings frameworks promotes, the reliance on professional judgement may create challenges for consistency. Research from the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Cymru (2025), in the early years sector neurodiversity can often be seen as a delay rather than an additional learning need causing a delay in diagnosis and the assessment process. Parents or carers may also be reluctant to engage as they struggle to understand their child's needs as well as some practitioners missing out on early intervention due to their lack of training or experience.

Furthermore, observation assessment models can be impacted by the Hawthorne effect which refers to the phenomenon where individuals alter their behaviour in response to the awareness of being observed. Therefore, children may exhibit a more animated or enthusiastic interaction during observation as they can feel the presence of their observer. The Hawthorne effect can also be influenced by the observer's skills and the context of the observation, which may affect the authenticity of the observed behaviour. Understanding this effect is crucial for early years practitioners and professionals in the sector to ensure that the observations reflect genuine development rather than performance adjustments in response to the observer's behaviour (Perera, 2024).

Overall, the assessment arrangements and observation models within the ECPLC and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings framework is inclusive, child centred and flexible for early years practitioners. However, the implantation of this framework and guidance and support for neurodiversity children relies significantly on professional knowledge, training, multi-agency cooperation and an understanding of supporting children with additional learning needs.

The assessment arrangements within the framework for the ECPLC and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings support the concept of the unique child through their child centred approach and inclusive observation methods. Practitioners are encouraged throughout the guidance to observe children within everyday experiences and use professional judgement to make environmental and support adaptations and to understand each child's individual strengths, areas for extra support and their interests (Welsh Government, 2023).

Both frameworks display a strong emphasis on a whole holistic approach and ensuring that through ongoing observations, practitioners gain a better understanding of children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development and wellbeing. Observation based methods of assessment enable practitioners to identify individual learning preferences, providing a more personalised approach to the support they receive which aligns with the concept of the unique child as it emphasises that every child is deserving of having their individual developmental stages and needs met with the appropriate support.

The ECPLC framework recognises that every child is unique, developing at their own pace, influenced by their relationships and experiences. This quality framework aims to provide children with high quality, inclusive, play based childcare, with ongoing appropriate assessments to build a clear picture of each child's needs. The framework supports quality provision by ensuring that the children's development is at the forefront of practice, with a focus on effective environments and engaging experiences. These elements collectively aim to create a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports the unique child and their needs (ExChange Wales, 2022).

Furthermore, the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings supports the unique child by focusing on their individual needs and their backgrounds. The curriculum is designed to be developmentally appropriate, recognising and valuing the identity, culture, ethnicity and language of children in the settings care. The aim is to develop children who are healthy, confident individuals, emphasising the importance of play as a fundamental right for all children and encouraging practitioners focus on pedagogical and scaffolding learning approaches and to develop engaging experiences within stimulating environments that respond to the unique child's interests and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2022).

In conclusion, the assessment arrangements withing the ECPLC and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings demonstrates a strong understanding of the unique child and a commitment to providing a child centred approach and play based practice. These frameworks support settings and practitioners into recognising that children develop at different rates and possess individual learning needs and interests. Whilst they are both heavily dependant on professional knowledge and practitioner training, both the ECPLC and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained

Settings support neurodiverse children and enable practitioners to gain a holistic understanding rather than relaying on standardised measures.

Section Three – Professional Blog Linked to the Considerations Needed when Implementing a Curriculum Change

Every Child Included: Supporting Additional Learning Needs in a Play-Based Curriculum

When thinking about a nursery or early years setting you would imagine an environment where children are deeply engaged in play, reading stories, exploring sensory play or building towers and at first glance it may seem that all children are participating equally in these experiences. However, for children with Additional Learning Needs or (ALN), accessing these experiences can require planning and careful adaptations.

As Wales promotes the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) framework and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings, practitioners are encouraged to use this guidance to provide a child centred and play based approaches, promoting inclusion and recognising every child as unique. However, in order for settings to promote inclusivity, practitioners need to provide support for ALN children to flourish in these environments.

Why Inclusion Is So Important

True inclusion means fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring that all children feel valued and respected which is vital for their emotional development and wellbeing. When children see themselves, their families, their culture and their background represented within their learning environment it enhances their confidence and identity allowing them to thrive in a supportive atmosphere. Inclusive practice within settings can also prepare children for a diverse society by introducing them to differences in language, culture, ability and family structures (Nutbrown, 2024).

A play-based curriculum like the ECPLC and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings offers significant opportunities for inclusion and supports settings with guidance on how to promote inclusivity. It supports children to play and explore in ways that are meaningful to them. Inclusion means that all children no matter their abilities or backgrounds have access to the same opportunities. These frameworks support practitioners into adapting teaching methods, environment and resources so that the needs of all children are met including those with additional learning needs. Ensuring that every child reaches their full potential (One Education, 2025).

Play-Based Learning Within the Curriculum

A play-based environment in a child-centred setting is where learning occurs through active, imaginative and purposeful play, supporting holistic development.

Play-based environments can:

- Promote social development and positive relationships
- Provide sensory exploration
- Encourage independence

For example, a child with autism who may experience challenges with communicating verbally, may use sensory play experiences to communicate with practitioners and parents or carers.

Children learn through exploration and experimentation, meaning that play-based environments should be inclusive and accommodating to the diverse needs of all children, including those with ALN to support their overall development (Welsh Government, 2025).

The Challenges Early Years Practitioners Could Face

Implementing inclusive practice and following the guidance these curriculums set out is not always easy.

Creating these play-based learning experiences requires professional experience, training and flexibility.

Some practitioners may question:

- How can I adapt experiencing without excluding children?
- What resources will I need?
- How can I ensure I am following the children's interests?
- How can I encourage independence whilst supporting them when needed?

The ECPLC and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings emphasises the importance of practitioners frequently observing children's play to build a deeper understanding of areas that need extra support, their strengths and their interests. Training is also recommended throughout the framework to help support professional development and ensure high quality care (Welsh Government, 2026).

Neurodiversity

As the awareness of neurodiversity grows, early years settings are recognising that all children experience the world in different ways. As explained by Kerry Murphy in A Guide to Neurodiversity in the Early Years (2023), the neurodiversity umbrella is expansive, a few of the many examples include ADHD, Autism, OCD, Downs Syndrome and Dyslexia.

These should not be viewed as barriers but as opportunities to understand how the child learns best.

Creating inclusive environments within settings also means creating neurodiversity friendly environments where children feel safe, supported and respected. Offered flexible routines, sensory resources and visual supports.

The resources needed to provide high quality do not need to be expensive, they can be,

- Creating sensory spaces
- Visual prompts
- Following children's interests
- Celebrating children's developmental milestones
- Adapting environments

Simple strategies such as regular conversations with parents, observations and collaborative planning can strengthen the relationships between practitioners and families and help provide better support for children, as families are experts on their children.

The emotional security that strong relationships between practitioners and parents or carers provides all children with are beneficial for their wellbeing and development as they provide that sense of belonging and emotional support (Department For Education, no date).

Looking Ahead

As professionals in the early years sector, we should be continuing to ask ourselves, are we adapting our environments to meet children's needs and are we providing inclusive practice?

By embracing the guidance the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings and the ECPLC provides, we can create environments where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

Every child deserves to feel heard, seen and have their unique needs met.

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