

Early Years Curricula

Part 1

Play-based learning has long been recognised as a cornerstone of early childhood education, underpinned by the seminal theories of Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1962), and Froebel (1826), each of whom positioned play as integral to cognitive, social, and emotional development. In Wales, two distinct curriculum frameworks have shaped how play-based pedagogy is implemented in schools: the Early Years Foundation Phase (EYFP), introduced in 2008 and phased in by 2011, and the more recent Curriculum for Wales (CfW), which became mandatory from September 2022. While both frameworks espouse a commitment to play-based learning, they differ substantially in their structural provisions, accountability mechanisms, and implementation expectations. This essay critically analyses the key challenges that arise when implementing a play-based curriculum within the context of these two frameworks, arguing that while Curriculum for Wales broadens the philosophical reach of play, it simultaneously weakens the structural protections that made the EYFP an enforceable reality in Welsh schools.

One of the most significant tensions between the two frameworks concerns assessment. The EYFP was supported by a clear accountability infrastructure, including Baseline Assessment on entry and the Foundation Phase Profile on exit, providing practitioners with a shared developmental framework against which to track children's progress through play (Welsh Government, 2015). Critically, these tools gave schools a defensible evidence base, reducing the professional vulnerability that can accompany play-based approaches in contexts where measurable attainment is treasured.

Curriculum for Wales dismantles this structure in favour of school-determined progression. Rooted in Donaldson's (2015) Successful Futures review, CfW argues that learning should not be reduced to tick-box frameworks and that professional judgement should drive assessment. Whilst this is philosophically sound, it creates a significant accountability vacuum. Estyn, the Welsh inspectorate, continues to evaluate school effectiveness, and without common assessment milestones, practitioners may feel exposed when attempting to demonstrate the educational value of child-initiated play (Estyn, 2022). The risk is that absent formal protective structures, schools default to more measurable, formal tasks

precisely the pattern the EYFP sought to disrupt. As Wood (2014) notes, the tension between play and accountability is a perennial challenge in early years education, one that cannot be resolved through good intentions alone.

The EYFP created a statutory protected zone for play-based pedagogy, covering children from age three through to age seven. This legislative boundary was significant: it prevented the premature formalisation of learning that international research consistently warns against (Whitebread, 2012; Gray, 2013). Curriculum for Wales dissolves this boundary. The progression from Foundation Learning through Key Stage 2 is now a matter of school-level interpretation rather than statutory prescription, meaning the transition to formal pedagogies can occur at any point according to school culture, leadership priorities, and parental expectation.

This represents a critical vulnerability. Research by Howard and McInnes (2013) demonstrates that children's perceptions of play versus work are heavily shaped by environmental cues and adult behaviour; where teachers signal that play ends at a certain age or year group, children internalise this hierarchy accordingly. Without a hard structural boundary protecting play beyond the early years, schools operating under Curriculum for Wales may inadvertently reproduce the very formalisation that the framework rhetorically resists. The Welsh Government's (2020) statutory guidance acknowledges this risk but offers no enforcement mechanism beyond professional expectation a notably weaker safeguard than the EYFP's legislative provisions.

A further challenge concerns the professional competence required to deliver play-based learning effectively. The EYFP was accompanied by targeted training programmes designed to develop practitioners' skills in sustained shared thinking, continuous provision, and child-led inquiry (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). This investment concentrated expertise in early years settings and created a relatively coherent professional culture around play pedagogy.

Curriculum for Wales extends the expectation of play-based approaches across all phases of primary education, including Key Stage 2, where teachers were trained in and remain more comfortable with direct instruction models. The expectation that a Year 4 teacher will fluently facilitate loose-parts environments, provocation-based learning, or open-ended outdoor inquiry is substantial without commensurate professional development. Sahlberg

and Doyle (2019) argue that curriculum reform without sustained pedagogical retraining is one of the most common causes of implementation failure internationally, as surface-level compliance replaces genuine cultural change. In Wales, professional development provision has not kept pace with the ambition of CfW, and this deficit is particularly acute for mid-career practitioners who qualified under more didactic models (Education in Wales: Our National Mission, Welsh Government, 2017).

The physical environment is a non-negotiable component of effective play-based learning. Practitioners drawing on the work of Nicholson (1971) on loose parts theory, or Tovey's (2007) research on outdoor play, understand that the quality of the learning environment fundamentally shapes the quality of play. The EYFP was explicit about provision: it mandated continuous access to outdoor environments, specified guidance on indoor-outdoor ratios, and implicitly required the resourcing levels sand, water, construction, creative materials necessary to sustain open-ended play (Welsh Government, 2015).

Curriculum for Wales makes the environment implicitly important through its Health and Wellbeing and Expressive Arts Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) but strips away the statutory specificity that made EYFP provision inspectable and therefore fundable. Schools with ageing infrastructure, limited outdoor spaces, or constrained budgets can technically satisfy the letter of CfW without providing the rich sensory and physical play environments the framework conceptually requires. This risks creating a postcode lottery in provision quality, where children's access to high-quality play-based learning is determined by geography and school resourcing rather than entitlement.

A deeper structural tension concerns how the Areas of Learning and Experience interact with play-based pedagogy. The EYFP organised learning into seven areas that were intended to be holistic and cross-curricular but were frequently delivered in fragmented, quasi-subject ways (Hayes, 2010). Teachers mapped EYFP areas onto timetabled activities rather than creating genuinely integrated, child-led experiences, undermining the theoretical intent of the framework.

Curriculum for Wales restructures provision into six broader AoLEs Expressive Arts; Health and Wellbeing; Humanities; Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; and Science and Technology which are explicitly designed for cross-curricular

delivery. However, the interpretive freedom that makes CfW philosophically ambitious also makes it vulnerable to superficial implementation. Nutbrown (2012) warns that without genuine pedagogical conviction; play becomes a scheduled activity rather than a permeating philosophy a 20-minute add-on to an otherwise formal day. The Welsh Government's (2020) guidance on 'Designing Your Curriculum' attempts to address this, but the absence of prescribed timetabling or structural requirements leaves schools free to implement the AoLEs in ways that reproduce the very siloed delivery the framework seeks to transcend.

The transition from the Early Years Foundation Phase to Curriculum for Wales represents a shift from legislative protection to professional trust. The EYFP treated play as a developmental right requiring statutory specification and infrastructure; Curriculum for Wales treats it as a pedagogical value requiring professional commitment and school-level conviction. Both approaches carry risks. The EYFP's prescriptiveness could be experienced as constraining; CfW's flexibility creates the conditions for uneven, inequitable provision. What is clear is that broadening the philosophical reach of play-based learning across all phases, as CfW aspires to do, demands a corresponding investment in practitioner development, environmental resourcing, and accountability mechanisms that protect rather than erode play in practice. Without these structural supports, the risk is that Curriculum for Wales achieves rhetorical progress whilst permitting practical regression and that the children who benefit most from high-quality play-based pedagogy are precisely those least likely to receive it.

While both the Early Years Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales promote play-based learning, they differ significantly in how they support its implementation. The EYFP provided clear statutory protections and structures that safeguarded play, whereas CfW offers greater flexibility but relies heavily on professional judgement and school-level interpretation. Although this approach broadens the role of play across primary education, it also risks inconsistency in practice. For Curriculum for Wales to realise its ambitions, sustained investment in professional development, resources, and accountability will be essential to ensure that play-based learning remains a meaningful reality rather than simply a policy aspiration.

Part 2

The concept of the Unique Child is a foundational principle within early years education, enshrined as the first of four guiding themes in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department for Education, 2021). It asserts that every child is a competent learner from birth, with an individual identity, strengths, and developmental trajectory. Whilst this principle reflects a progressive, child-centred philosophy, its operationalisation within play-based curricula presents significant tensions, particularly in relation to assessment practices, progress tracking tools, and the application of age-and-stage developmental models. This essay critically evaluates the ways in which these mechanisms align with or contradict the ethos of the Unique Child, drawing on theoretical perspectives, policy frameworks, and empirical research to argue that, whilst observation-based and narrative assessment approaches hold considerable promise, the persistent application of normative developmental benchmarks risks homogenising children's learning in ways that are fundamentally at odds with this principle.

The notion of the Unique Child draws substantially from constructivist and socio-cultural theories of development. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children learn through social interaction within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasising the importance of responsive adults who support rather than prescribe learning. This model inherently acknowledges individual difference: each child's ZPD is distinct, and effective teaching must be tailored accordingly. According to, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory further reinforces the idea that child development cannot be divorced from family, culture, and community context, dimensions which inevitably shape how any individual child progresses and what constitutes meaningful learning for them.

Play-based curricula such as those found in the EYFS, Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017), and the Reggio Emilia approach are grounded in the belief that children are natural investigators who construct knowledge through first-hand, self-directed experience (Moyles, 2010). Assessment within these models should, in theory, be embedded in authentic observations of child-initiated play rather than decontextualised testing. However, as Wood (2013) cautions, the political imperative for accountability has

increasingly colonised early years spaces, introducing standardised metrics that sit uncomfortably alongside the individualised ethos these frameworks espouse.

Observation is widely regarded as the cornerstone of formative assessment in play-based settings (Carr, 2001). Learning stories, popularised through the work of Margaret Carr and the Te Whāriki framework, represent one of the most theoretically coherent approaches to capturing the Unique Child in action. Rather than measuring children against external standards, learning stories document what children can do, privileging narrative, voice, and context. Carr and Lee (2012) argue that this approach positions children as active agents in their own learning, fostering dispositions such as curiosity, resilience, and collaboration that are not easily captured through tick-box frameworks.

In England, the use of Learning Journey, portfolios of observations, photographs, and annotated samples of children's work has become widespread as a means of documenting individual progress. Formative assessment tools such as Tapestry and Evidence Me facilitate this process digitally, enabling practitioners to record observations against EYFS developmental bands and share documentation with families. Used sensitively, these tools can honour individuality and promote parental partnership. However, Bradbury (2013) raises important concerns about how even observational data, once mapped to standardised bands and shared with inspectors or management, becomes subject to normalising pressures practitioners unconsciously selecting observations that conform to expected trajectories rather than those that reveal the full complexity of a child's learning.

There are also equity considerations. Osgood (2012) critiques the way in which observational frameworks can reflect and reproduce dominant cultural norms, with practitioners trained within paradigms liable to misread or undervalue the competencies of children from minority ethnic or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. If assessment tools are developed from samples that do not reflect the diversity of the population they serve, the Unique Child is assessed not on their own terms but against a culturally specific norm presented as universal.

Developmental stage models have a long lineage in early childhood education. Piaget's (1952) cognitive developmental stages, Erikson's (1963) psychosocial stages, and the maturations accounts of Gesell (1928) have all informed curricular frameworks and

practitioners' expectations of children's progress. The revised EYFS (Department of Education, 2021) retains age-related expectations across seven areas of learning, with typical developmental progressions described for children in broad age bands (birth to three years, three to four years, reception year). These are intended as guidance rather than prescription, yet their presence in a statutory framework necessarily shapes practice.

Supporters of age-and-stage frameworks argue that they provide practitioners particularly those in the early stages of their careers with a shared professional language and a scaffold for identifying children who may need additional support (Sheridan et al., 2014). The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (Squires and Bricker, 2009) is a widely validated screening tool used internationally to identify developmental delay, and its utility in prompting early intervention is well-evidenced. There is, therefore, a genuine tension between the individualism implied by the Unique Child principle and the public health value of population-level developmental surveillance.

However, the critical literature highlights significant problems with the uncritical application of developmental norms. Rose and Rogers (2012) argue that stage models are often presented as natural, biological truths when they are, in fact, socially constructed and historically contingent — the result of studies conducted predominantly on white, Western, middle-class children. This means that children who develop differently, or who develop competencies earlier or later due to cultural, linguistic, or neurological factors, risk being pathologised rather than celebrated as unique. The neurodiversity movement, for instance, has powerfully challenged the assumption that atypical developmental trajectories represent deficits; many autistic scholars and disability rights advocates argue that early intervention frameworks grounded in normative milestones seek to assimilate rather than accommodate difference (Milton, 2012).

The introduction of the Statutory Progress Check at Age Two (Department of Education, 2012) and its continuation in subsequent EYFS revisions illustrates this tension acutely. Whilst framed as a collaborative, narrative assessment shared with families and health visitors, Goouch and Powell (2013) found that, in practice, the check often reduced complex developmental pictures to brief summaries measured against normative expectations, with limited time for genuine reflection or parental co-construction. Far from affirming the

Unique Child, the check could inadvertently reinforce deficit narratives particularly for children from multilingual households or those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), whose strengths in non-assessed domains were rendered invisible.

Beyond formative tools, summative assessments represent a more acute challenge to the Unique Child ethos. The EYFS Profile (EYFSP), completed in the final year of the EYFS, requires practitioners to judge whether each child is emerging, expected, or exceeding against seventeen early learning goals. Critics argue that these binary judgements necessarily oversimplify the nuance of individual children's development and are prone to practitioner bias (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Moreover, the aggregation of EYFSP data at school and local authority level for Ofsted accountability purposes creates perverse incentives: practitioners may be tempted to teach to the profile goals rather than follow children's genuine interests, thereby undermining the play-based philosophy the EYFS ostensibly promotes.

Moss (2019) frames this problem within a broader critique of what he calls quality and high returns discourses in early childhood policy an instrumentalist approach that reduces education to measurable outcomes and positions children as future economic investments rather than present human beings. This managerial rationality sits in fundamental contradiction to the image of the Unique Child as a full person with intrinsic value, capable of setting their own learning agenda. The risk, as Dahlberg et al. (2013) observe, is that assessment becomes an exercise in governing childhood rather than understanding it.

It would be reductive, however, to dismiss all structured assessment as incompatible with the Unique Child principle. The question is not whether to assess, but how. Formative assessment that is dialogic, co-constructed with children and families, and grounded in authentic contexts has the potential to genuinely illuminate individual strengths and needs. Merewether (2019) advocates for slow pedagogy a deliberate slowing down of the assessment process to allow practitioners to dwell with children's perspectives, resist the rush to judge, and remain open to unexpected competencies. This approach resonates with the Reggio Emilia concept of documentation as a pedagogical practice: not merely a record of what has occurred, but a tool for reflection, professional dialogue, and advocacy for the individual child (Rinaldi, 2006).

Asset-based approaches, which explicitly seek out and build on children's existing knowledge and family funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005), offer a culturally responsive alternative to deficit-oriented assessments. For bilingual children, for instance, an asset-based framework would recognise translinguaging as a sophisticated linguistic competency rather than evidence of delayed English acquisition. Such approaches require practitioners to critically examine their own assumptions and invest time in relationship-building with families prerequisites that are challenging in under-resourced settings but essential if the Unique Child is to be genuinely rather than rhetorically honoured.

The concept of the Unique Child presents a compelling and morally robust vision for early years education: one that places individual children, in all their complexity, at the centre of pedagogical thinking. However, this essay has demonstrated that the assessment practices, progress tracking tools, and developmental stage models most employed within play-based curricula frequently fall short of this ideal. Age-and-stage frameworks, whilst valuable for identifying children requiring additional support, risk pathologising difference and embedding cultural biases within supposedly universal standards. Summative assessments driven by accountability agendas can distort play-based practice and reduce rich developmental narratives to reductive categories. Even formative observational tools, if poorly implemented or unconsciously shaped by normative assumptions, may inadvertently narrow rather than widen our understanding of who each child is.

Realising the promise of the Unique Child requires more than rhetorical commitment in policy documents. It demands assessment practices that are genuinely dialogic, culturally responsive, and oriented towards understanding rather than measurement. Learning stories, documentation-as-pedagogy, and asset-based approaches offer meaningful alternatives that align far more closely with the image of the child as competent, active, and irreducibly individual. The challenge for practitioners, leaders, and policymakers alike is to resist the normalising pull of accountability systems and instead create the structural conditions including time, training, and professional trust within which such practices can genuinely flourish.

Part 3

Left Behind Before They Begin: Additional Learning Needs, Systemic Failure, and the Promise of Play-Based Curriculum

There is a child somewhere on a waiting list right now. Perhaps they are four years old, already struggling in a nursery setting, their distress visible to every adult in the room yet invisible to the systems that should support them. Their parents have been told the assessment will take eighteen months, maybe two years. By the time a diagnosis arrives, if it arrives at all, that child will have spent a significant portion of their early education without the support they need. This is not an anomaly.

The crisis in additional learning needs (ALN) also referred to as special educational needs (SEN) in England is one of the most pressing and least adequately addressed challenges in contemporary education. When we simultaneously consider moves toward play-based and child-centred curriculum reform, as seen in Wales. (Curriculum for Wales, 2022). Curriculum change without inclusive infrastructure is not reform. It is a rebranding exercise that risks leaving the most vulnerable children further behind.

The Scale of the Problem

The numbers are stark. In England alone, the proportion of pupils identified with SEN has risen consistently, reporting that 18.4% of pupils have some form of identified SEN the highest figure on record (Department of Education, 2026). Yet identification is not the same as support. The Education Policy Institute (2023) found that the average wait for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) now routinely exceeds the legal twenty-week limit, with some local authorities taking well over a year. In Wales, where the ALN Act (2021) promised transformational change, implementation has been widely criticised as under-resourced; the Children, Young People and Education Committee noted significant inconsistency across local authorities and a shortage of specialist staff (Welsh Government, 2023).

These waiting lists are not administrative inconveniences. They represent months, sometimes years, during which children do not receive targeted interventions. Neuroscience is unambiguous on this point: early intervention matters profoundly. The early years is a critical window for brain development, and that unaddressed adversity and unmet need

during this period has measurable long-term consequences for learning, behaviour, and wellbeing. Every month on a waiting list is a month of developmental opportunity that cannot be recovered (Shankoff and Phillips, 2000).

Funding: A System at Breaking Point

Underlying the waiting list crisis is a chronic funding crisis. The Local Government Association (2024) has repeatedly warned that the high-needs block of the Dedicated Schools Grant the primary funding stream for SEN support is in deficit across most local authorities in England. Many councils are spending money they do not have, accumulating debts that are reshaping the entire local education system.

The human cost manifests in predictable ways: teaching assistants cut, specialist outreach services reduced, Educational Psychologist caseloads stretched beyond reasonable capacity. Without sustained structural investment, the rhetoric of inclusion would remain disconnected from the reality of practice. More than a decade later, their warning reads less like scholarship and more like prophecy (Norwich, 2013).

Families, especially those with fewer financial resources, are increasingly finding themselves responsible for funding private assessments and pursuing formal appeals to secure statutory support. Such circumstances risk entrenching inequalities, as access to provision becomes dependent on a family's capacity to navigate complex systems and bear additional costs. In this environment, inclusion can too easily become a matter of postcode and privilege rather than need.

Play-Based Curriculum: Transformative Potential, Uneven Ground

Given the situation, the growing momentum behind play-based and child-led curriculum approaches presents both genuine opportunity and significant risk. Advocates are right to champion this shift. Research is compelling: it demonstrates that play supports cognitive flexibility, language development, self-regulation, and executive function precisely the competencies many children with ALN find most challenging. Play-based learning, at its best, meets children where they are rather than demanding they meet a standardised threshold (Whitebread, 2012).

Lillard et al. (2013), in a widely cited review published in 'Psychological Bulletin', found that play, particularly pretend play, supports children's theory of mind, narrative development, and problem-solving. For children with autism, developmental language disorder, or social communication difficulties, a well-designed play-based environment can reduce anxiety and facilitate the kind of incidental learning that structured tasks frequently obstruct.

However, and this is the critical caveat, play-based curriculum only delivers on this promise when practitioners are equipped to implement it with genuine intentionality. Child-led approaches require sophisticated professional knowledge: the ability to observe, interpret, and extend children's play in ways that scaffold learning. This is not a less demanding pedagogical model. It is a more demanding one (Clark and Walker, 2012).

Curriculum change without accompanying investment in practitioner training, staffing ratios, and specialist support is a hollow gesture. A child with sensory processing difficulties navigating a busy, resource-rich play environment without adequate support may experience not enrichment but overwhelm. A child with developmental language disorder in a predominantly verbal, collaborative play setting needs skilled adult facilitation not benign neglect dressed up as autonomy. According to Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), they argue for "inclusive pedagogical approaches" that treating all children as capable learners while remaining alert to individual need. This requires resources. It requires time. It requires the professionals who are currently waiting eighteen months to assess the child on the waiting list.

Reform Cannot Outpace Infrastructure

The argument here is not against play-based curriculum. The argument is that curriculum philosophy and system infrastructure must develop together, or the former will betray the latter. When Wales introduced the ALN Act and the Curriculum for Wales in overlapping timescales, the ambition was admirable. The execution, as the Senedd's own scrutiny revealed, was hampered by the very workforce and funding gaps this essay describes.

Policymakers, school leaders, and curriculum designers must ask an uncomfortable question before implementing any curriculum change: for which children do this work, and under what conditions? If the answer assumes adequate specialist support, trained staff, and timely assessment conditions that currently do not exist for hundreds of thousands of children then the reform is being designed for an education system that does not yet exist.

The child on the waiting list deserves better than vision statements. They deserve a system in which the curriculum designed for them is supported by the infrastructure to make it real.

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