

Early Years Curricula

Play-Based Approaches

According to Hwb (2015a) and UNICEF (2018), within the Foundation Phase Curriculum, play-based approaches enable children to practise and integrate their learning. Play-based learning can be demonstrated in unique ways, depending on the age of the child and their individual needs, for example, child-led play, guided play and staff-led play. Play-based approaches and activities are essential for early years settings as the children develop cognitive, emotional and social skills. Children can learn, explore and experiment within their own education, enabling them to combine learning, experimenting with ideas, and developing essential life skills. Play within the Foundation Phase Curriculum is a structured and purposeful method of learning that accompanies the seven Areas of Learning to ensure the children are always meeting their individual abilities (Cambridge, 2025), (Estyn, 2019) and (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025a).

Whereas Hwb (2025) and Welsh Government (2024a) suggest that within the Curriculum for Wales, play-based approaches in an early year setting encourages vital techniques for a child's holistic development as they begin to promote creativity skills, problem-solving and social competence. As children grow and develop, practitioners should encourage an inclusive practice that demonstrates high-quality, fun play experiences for every individual child. The Curriculum for Wales's developmental pathways produced by the Welsh Government, initiated by individual children, represents a child's right to experience and explore an environment where play is valued, both in itself and as part of learning techniques. Each developmental pathway includes a clear rationale to capture the essence of what is vital to children's holistic development at each stage of life. This is to ensure all children thrive as practitioners recognise and understand the drive of purposeful play opportunities for all children to fulfil their individual needs. Children tend to thrive in inclusive environments, indoors and outdoors, and where there are open-ended, child-initiated opportunities to play, explore and investigate their surroundings. Within these inclusive environments, practitioners who are attuned to children's responses, interests and nonverbal cues can support positive interactions to learning as the children begin to increase their knowledge, understanding and skills, as they aim to become ambitious, capable learners, creative contributors and confident individuals.

As stated above, both curricula state that play-based approaches to learning enable children to succeed in social skills, creativity aspects, cognitive and emotional development as well as problem-solving understanding. However, it is also stated within the Foundation Phase Curriculum that play-based approaches to learning were its primary method of teaching as practitioners ensure hands-on exploration was guaranteed. Whereas the Curriculum for Wales continues to segment play-based learning into their scaffolding but includes a wider learning framework that involves six different Areas of Learning and Experience. This may suggest that due to the increase of areas of learning and development that practitioners need to ensure that play-based learning is still being promoted, otherwise, play-based learning will be less likely for children when undertaking the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2023) and (Welsh Government, 2024a).

Additionally, they continue by suggesting that there are a variety of differences between the two curriculums. For example, within the Foundation Phase Curriculum the approach to play was at the centre of pedagogy, and became a facilitator to play-based exploration, whereas the Curriculum for Wales introduced broader learning experiences and staff-led learning, as well as structured learning which is also a priority within the teaching techniques of early year practices. These circumstances matter as play-based learning is shown as enhancing a child's social and cognitive development, encouraging children to be engaged individuals. However, the Curriculum for Wales provides play as a meaningful component of structured learning, as they engross within curiosity, indoors and outdoors (Welsh Government, 2024b) and Hwb (no date).

Hwb (2015b) says play can prompt children with ideas that enable them to experience, experiment, take risks, and make resolutions independently, in small and large groups. Learning through a play-based approach allows the children to develop an understanding of themselves as individuals and the world that they live in, all through first-hand experiences. Play within the Foundation Phase Curriculum encourages children to build upon or develop confidence with their self-image, self-worth and self-esteem throughout their explorations, as well as expanding their fundamental development to their cognitive development. However, to ensure the children can do this successfully, practitioners within the early years setting must understand how individual children develop, as they plan suitable activities through the Foundation Phase Curriculum, considering every child's developmental needs and the skills that the children need to extend as they become confident, capable learners.

In comparison, the Curriculum for Wales states that play-based learning promotes holistic development, as well as enhancing creativity and problem solving. As a result of this, children can experiment and develop decision-making. Similarly play-based approaches within the Curriculum for Wales allow children to investigate their interests and learn at their own pace. The Curriculum for Wales also encourages creativity, curiosity and a “free flow” between indoor and outdoor environments while having a variety of opportunities to challenge themselves throughout their sustained thinking (Estyn, 2019) and (Welsh Government, 2024). According to Welsh Government (2023), play-based learning within an early years practice is vital as children foster holistic development, explore the outdoors, nurture independent thinking and strengthen their problem-solving abilities. During this time, practitioners should assess and adapt their approaches to meet every child’s individual needs.

According to Hwb (2015c) the Foundation Phase Curriculum aims to create an inclusive environment where children can learn creatively, fostering their development of communication and self-esteem, as well as promoting an understanding of different religions and cultures of all individuals. The Foundation Phase promotes play and hands-on learning as it aims to achieve positive attitudes towards learning and wellbeing, which contributes to a child’s overall development. The Foundation Phase helps all children flourish, no matter their stage of development or learning ability. It promotes discovery and independence by intertwining play with all learning experiences of all (The Mountain Cambridge School, 2025).

Hwb (2023) and Welsh Government (2024b) say, similarly, within the Curriculum for Wales, inclusive environments are essential while supporting play-based learning as it ensures all individual children, no matter what their backgrounds, abilities or life experiences, will still be encouraged within participation, as practitioners support the children’s holistic development. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises belonging, communication, physical development and positive well-being. An inclusive environment ensures all children thrive while feeling safe and valued during play-based experiences.

However, according to Welsh Government (no date) and Ang (2013), there can be a variety of challenges while implementing the Foundation Phase Curriculum, for example, creating an inclusive, engaging environment requires a large space, adequate materials and skilled staff. However, due to budget limitations this may not be possible for all settings, which causes

staff absences, a lack of toys, and may result in the environment feeling overstretched, under-resourced and less nurturing for children. Supporting individual learning needs while implementing the Foundation Phase Curriculum may also become a barrier as every individual child develops at their own pace, but within the Curricula there are developmental areas that the children ‘must’ meet by the year group shown. This can become a challenge for children with additional learning needs as providing personalised support within a setting can be pressurising for practitioners, as well as having the lack of funding to ensure all resources and equipment needed are considered for each individual child. This may result in children with additional learning needs having the lack of support and care that they need to gain life skills, as well as learning about themselves and the world around them. For some families, this may lead to feeling discriminated, creating more stress for carers and hindering the child’s positive development. Within the Curricula it is also apparent that all aspects of learning descriptions are age and school year based, however this may become a barrier for young children as there may be an eleven-month difference between two children within the same year group. Development Matters (2023) agrees with this statement as they suggest that “this guidance sets out the pathways of children’s development in broad ages and stages”. However, also suggests that assessment and accurate planning helps practitioners make informed, professional decisions about what an individual child needs to learn, and their next steps for their individual abilities, no matter of age, stage or learning ability.

According to Hwb (no date) and Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) similarly to the Foundation Phase Curriculum, the Curriculum for Wales also has a variety of challenges during the process of implementing the curricula. Due to the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, education was hugely disrupted. This pandemic affected practitioners’ ability to implement the Curricula to the best of their ability with only online sessions with children. Due to this, children often struggle with catch up on missed learning content and the experience of education settings. Within the Curriculum for Wales, progression is prioritised rather than the standardised testing of young children, this can become a concern for practitioners and leadership as the unknown achievement of children will be measured and compared in different ways. Like the Foundation Phase Curriculum, early year settings and schools are experiencing a lack of funding, materials and skilled staff who can develop upon their professional development. As a result, some settings may struggle to implement the Curriculum for Wales effectively, especially without adequate funding. This can hinder their ability to meet individual children’s needs (Bera, 2020).

Veraksa, Colliver and Sukhikh (2022) argue that the “efficacy of play to lead to academic learning outcomes” but “higher quality evidence mounting that “soft skills”, such as social, emotional, and interpersonal abilities, are associated with free play in homes and ECEC settings”. Within this analysis, Vygotsky’s view is learning through play shows positive aspects, but adult-led play can achieve “hard” skills, these include reading skills and mathematical understanding. Whereas Piaget’s proposal was that children learn better through an active play-based structure as they progress throughout their developmental ages and begin to shape their knowledge and understanding of the world that they live in.

To conclude section one, as demonstrated above, the transition from the Foundation Phase Curriculum to the Curriculum for Wales reflects a broader perspective on play as the Curriculum for Wales moves away from play-based learning being the core pedagogy within the Foundation Phase, to play becoming a structured and meaningful area of learning. Within the Curriculum for Wales, play remains essential for fostering engagement, development and curiosity, while now operating as part of a structured process with defined outcomes (Encyclopedia, 2018).

Assessing the Unique Child

Every child is unique, with their own ways of learning and developing. According to Worcestershire County Council (no date) “the unique child” refers to the idea that every child is an individual with their own needs, abilities, way of learning and strengths. Within the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, ‘the unique child’ is central in all aspects of developmental descriptions as it ensures children develop in different ways, at different times. Recognising each individual child and their uniqueness allows practitioners to differentiate teaching techniques as they support the children’s growth and holistic development. Education Endowment Foundation (2025) agrees with this as they state within the Early Years Foundation Stage every child is “resilient, capable, confident” and self-assured. This suggests that practitioners should be encouraged to create an inclusive environment that respects and nurtures each child individually, ensuring they feel valued, no matter their religion, culture or background.

Assessment is fundamental when ensuring each individual learner is supported and challenged accordingly. Assessments should support positive developmental outcomes by offering a holistic perspective of each child, for example, the child’s strengths, their individual areas of development and the way that they learn and achieve best. This informs practitioners to have a better understanding of the child’s ability and the next steps in learning and teaching. Assessments should not be used to make judgements on the overall achievement of a child at a set age against the criteria on a “best-fit” basis. However, assessments do not incorporate and often fail to capture a child’s background and full holistic context, limiting practitioners’ ability to help and support the whole child effectively (Hwb, 2024).

Within the Foundation Phase Curriculum, assessment is an ongoing process that informs practitioners about each child’s development and individual learning needs. The Curriculum pinpoints observational assessments is used to oversee behaviours, learning approaches and the holistic development of a unique child. Within this Curriculum, there are a variety of assessment-based approaches that practitioners can undertake, including baseline assessments, continuous assessments and personalised assessments where the literacy and numeracy skills are assessed to prompt practitioners on how to support individual learning needs (Welsh Government, 2019) and (Welsh Government, 2017).

Whereas within the Curriculum for Wales assessment is a fundamental area of learning and a tool to support children's progression. Assessments are holistic as they become integrated into teaching and learning, instead of being a separate process. In this framework, there are various ways assessment can be demonstrated, for example ongoing assessments, shared understanding of progression assessments, reflective practice and personalised learning methods. Personalised learning methods enable practitioners to recognise that every individual child is unique, has different needs, various backgrounds and prior experiences (Central South Consortium, no date) and (Hwb, 2024).

However, assessment in the Foundation Phase Curriculum presents several challenges that can impact the process of assessment and data gained from the process itself. Welsh Government (2022) states that within this Curricula there can be inconsistencies while providing assessment practices, due to this, practitioners may use a range of methods or resources, leading to the inconsistent tracking of the individual child's development. Within educational sectors, practitioners can find it difficult to conduct all assessments within a time schedule due to having several criteria areas to complete. Assessments can be overly time-consuming, which can lead to practitioners detracting from teaching time (Welsh Government 2014). Drummond (2007) agrees by suggesting that assessments should be "observation-rich and child-centred", allowing practitioners to notice subtle developmental cues that reflects a child's development, Welsh Government (2015) also adds that the importance of observation-led assessments are vital to allow practitioners to capture the whole child and their uniqueness.

Culture plays a vital role in assessment within the Foundation Phase Curriculum because it shapes how children learn, express themselves and make sense of the world around them. Recognising and valuing a child's cultural background ensures that the assessments are fair, developmentally accurate and meaningful. According to Welsh Government (2022), children express knowledge in a culturally influenced way, for example, through language, storytelling, or play. Assessments that ignore this may mean that practitioners misjudge a child's ability. Ensuring culture is considered during assessments means that practitioners can reduce biasness and promote equity. Standardised assessments can reflect dominant cultural norms, disadvantaging children from minority backgrounds. Huba and Freed (2000) say that assessments should be completed from "multiple and diverse sources" to understand what

children know and can do (Assessment Network, 2021). When children see their culture reflected in assessment activity, they may feel more confident, engaged and understood by the practitioners. This emotional security between a child and practitioner helps to enhance the accuracy of assessments and supports the Unique Child principle.

However, during the assessment process, challenges can provide a barrier throughout when trying to incorporate the criteria and recognising the different cultures. For example, some children may speak a different home language than the language of instruction, this can make it difficult for the child to fully express their knowledge and understanding, as well as practitioners finding it difficult to assess the child's true abilities throughout. While assessments need to be standardised for consistency, assessments should allow flexibility to accommodate cultural differences (SA Journal of Education, 2013) and (Welsh Government, 2022).

Whereas, within the Curriculum for Wales, culture is integrated into assessments to ensure that learning is inclusive, reflective of diverse background and are meaningful for all learners. According to Hwb (2024), Community and Cultural Engagement Schools are encouraged to develop assessment arrangements that reflect their local communities, this means incorporating local traditions, cultural narratives and history into learning and assessment, making education more relevant. As well as this, the framework highlights the importance of holistic assessment, this means that learners are evaluated, not just on academic development and their personal and social development. This ensures that cultural values and lived experiences are acknowledged throughout the child's learning process (Central South Consortium, no date).

While culture enhances the accuracy and inclusivity of assessments, it also presents unique challenges that practitioners must navigate. Like the Foundation Phase Curriculum, the Curriculum for Wales also presents a few challenges when incorporating culture into their assessment guidance. According to Hwb (2024) and Welsh Government (2020), cultural assessments require collaboration with families and communities. However, families may hold different expectations regarding educational assessments, which can create barriers to effective engagement between practitioners and communities. While the Curricula supports bilingualism, assessing children who do not speak the language of instruction presents

challenges. It may hinder their ability to express their knowledge fully, while also making it difficult for practitioners to accurately evaluate their understanding.

Within the Foundation Phase Curriculum there are several assessment techniques that can be used by practitioners to assess a child's learning and development. The Foundation Phase Profile is a baseline and ongoing assessment tool that focuses on several areas of development including literacy, numeracy and social development. Within this assessment type, practitioners can assess a child's holistic development that evaluates a child's understanding across multiple areas, individualised learning that helps practitioners tailor instruction based on each individual child's strengths and weaknesses, as well as continuous monitoring that provides ongoing insights into their progress, rather than relying on a singular test. Individualised learning allows children to express their unique ways of learning, communicating and developing. As every child is unique, individualised learning is key. Child-centered learning is vital to ensure practitioners can plan provision and activities based on a child's interests and abilities (Estyn, 2017). Mackay Psychology (2025) suggests that individualised assessments offer a variety of advantages within education settings, these include, practitioners being able to tailor evaluations to individual strengths, challenges and learning styles that lead to better outcomes. Equity, efficiency and empowerment is also beneficial during these assessments as it ensures fairness by address unique needs, reduces wasted resources and helps children to understand their own strengths and challenges.

However, according to Heriot Watt University (no date) challenges can arise while undertaking an individualised assessment, such as AI introducing challenges in maintaining fairness and accuracy if assessments are created online and having diverse learning styles. Diverse learning styles makes it difficult when students have unique ways of learning, this suggests that standardising evaluation systems can vary (ExpertEase Education, 2023).

Whereas, the Curriculum for Wales uses various assessment tools, such as progressional code, Curriculum design templates, formative assessment strategies and digital assessment tools (Hwb, 2025). The Curriculum Design Template is an assessment tool that is used in the Curriculum for Wales. This assessment tool helps practitioners to design learning experiences at whole school levels and classroom levels. This assessment provides a step-by-step process, ensuring the national framework is in alignment. This assessment tool help children progress, as well as helping practitioners to plan accurately for the unique children. Within this

assessment process, flexibility is varied, practitioners are able to adapt assessments to meet the individual needs of every individual child. The Curriculum Design Template also offers resources to refine Curriculum planning and assessment methods, which can ease pressure from practitioners (Hwb, 2025) and (Department for Education, 2024).

However, the Curriculum Design Template assessment tool presents several challenges. According to Education Scotland (2023) and Hwb (2025), schools may struggle to integrate the template effectively within existing frameworks due to variations in assessment tools and resources. Additionally, aligning data with National Standards and maintaining consistency with broader curriculum goals can be difficult, as the Curriculum for Wales encompasses multiple priorities that must be met. To address these challenges, regular training and collaboration with curriculum experts help ensure consistency and provide up-to-date knowledge on aligning with National Standards.

In conclusion, assessments within the Foundation Phase Curriculum and the Curriculum for Wales play a crucial role in tracking children's development and ensuring inclusive, culturally responsive learning experiences. While both frameworks emphasise holistic assessments, they face challenges, including inconsistencies in tracking progress, time constraints, and difficulties in accommodating diverse cultural backgrounds. The Curriculum for Wales integrates assessment within teaching and learning, while the Foundation Phase Curriculum focuses on observation-rich and child-centered methods. Despite differences in approach, both Curricula highlight the importance of supporting children's unique developmental journeys, addressing barriers through practitioner training, cultural awareness, and tailored assessment strategies.

Blog

Assessing Learning Through Play: A More Effective Approach Than Independent Testing

In an early years educational setting, assessment methods significantly impact how children's learning and development are measured. While independent testing has traditionally been used to monitor and evaluate progress, play-based assessments offer a more holistic, engaging, developmentally appropriate, and holistic approach, supporting children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Wood, 2019).

Independent tests are often structured assessment formats that may not align with the 'natural' learning processes of children. Research suggests that play-based assessments enable children to explore concepts, develop critical thinking skills and engage in hands-on experiences, fostering a deeper understanding (Whitebread, *et al.*, 2012). Play-based assessments allow practitioners to observe a child's creativity skills, problem-solving understanding and adaptability within learning environments (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

According to Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008), while undertaking standardised testing can cause children stress, affecting their confidence and trust with practitioners. Instead, play-based approaches enable children to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skills in low-pressured environment, improving enjoyment and engagement. By intertwining a playful aspect into assessment techniques helps practitioners to gain a better representation of a child's unique abilities, ensuring learning progressing is assessed effectively to meet every individual child's needs (Broadhead *et al.*, 2010).

Traditional testing like timed tests, fill-in-the blank tests, true/false questions and multiple-choice exams all focus on literacy and numeracy, often overlooking other developmental aspects including communication, social skills and emotional development. Studies highlight that play-based learning fosters collaboration, language skills and self-regulation, providing an accurate view of a child's progress (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Observation-led assessments capture a child's interactions, learning preferences and barriers that they may be facing, this

helps practitioners to plan tasks or activities ensuring all individual needs are being met to the child's highest standards (Welsh Government, 2015).

Howard and McInnes (2013) states that supporting individual learning needs are critical while working alongside children. Each individual child learns at their own pace, with unique strengths and challenges. Traditional tests often use fixed benchmarks that cannot be overlooked. However, this may not have an accurate reflection on a child's learning development. Play-based assessments allow practitioners to tailor observations to children's likes and interests, as well as their development stages, while ensuring that personalised learning support is presented that nurtures a child's curiosity and confidence.

A variety of different Curriculums highlight the benefits of play-based assessments in early years educational settings. According to Encyclopedia (2018), the Reggio Emilia's philosophy views play as a natural form of curiosity and inquiry. Assessments are conducted throughout documentation, including videos, observations and photos, that captures children's learning experiences. While presenting this method of assessments a child-centered and reflective response of the real-world interactions begins to become apparent.

The Montessori Method is a global approach that promotes self-directed play as a means of assessment. Instead of standardised assessments, practitioners observe children's engagement with a variety of materials, tracking their emotional growth and cognitive and social skills. This approach fosters an independent learning motivation to all individual children and educators (Encyclopedia, 2018)

Whereas, Scottish Government (2018) says Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence integrates play-based learning to early education, highlighting the importance of "free-flow" play and active learning. The framework acknowledges that play enhances problem-solving, creativity skills and social interactions, making assessments more reflective of a child's individual abilities and needs.

Care Learning (2025) says that Friedrich Frobel's approach believes that play is the foundation of learning and should be central to early childhood education. Play as a Developmental Necessity is presented as structured play activities including building blocks, storytelling and singing songs that supports children's cognitive and emotional growth.

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Assessment through play is vital, Froebel encouraged observational assessments, where practitioners are able to analyse children's engagement, creativity development and problem-solving abilities during her play.

To conclude, while traditional, independent testing provides a structured assessment guidance, they can often fail to capture the full view of a child's learning and development. Play-based assessment methods offer a more effective, inclusive and engaging approach, this helps to foster creativity skills, social interaction and holistic skill development. By recognising play as a valued approach for assessment, early years practitioners can support children's individual growth and development while maintaining a child centered approach to education effectively (Fleer, 2021).

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