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Early Years Curricula

Section 1

Children learn the same subjects in primary and secondary schools by following the national curriculum according to Department for Education (2014) which is a set of subjects and criteria. It discusses the topics that are taught as well as the expectations for each subject.

What does a curriculum aim to achieve according to Gov.uk (2018) the goal of a curriculum at the national level is to outline every student's entitlement to the knowledge and skills that our society deems most effective and necessary for an overall educational experience. A curriculum offers coherence (the alignment and reinforcement of the content, assessment, pedagogy, and teaching materials) when we consider curriculum at the school and classroom level.

A carefully designed curriculum is important because it guarantees equity and entitlement according to Gov.uk (2018) in order to ensure equity and uniformity among schools, the national curriculum lays forth the information and skills that society deems necessary for every student. Gives organization and coherence. A curriculum helps teachers organize learning rationally so that students can gradually gain knowledge by coordinating content, pedagogy, assessment, and resources. Coherence in the curriculum makes learning more difficult for both teachers and students. Gov.uk (2018) also explains what needs to be taught it outlines the values, knowledge, and abilities that students should acquire as well as the sequence in which they should do so. When effective work plans are in place, this helps teachers plan more efficiently and lessens their workload.

The foundation phase is the main early childhood education strategy of the Welsh government for children aged three to seven according to Taylor *et al* (2016) It promotes a developmental, experiential, play-based approach to teaching and learning, which is a fundamental change from the more formal, competency-based approach connected to the former key stage 1 national curriculum.

According to Teaching (2026) the design of the learning environment, which can serve as a third teacher to guarantee children's emotional, physical, social, and cognitive development, is the foundation of play-based curriculum. A sand and water area, a creative workshop, an investigative area, role-playing, small-world play, construction play, and more are frequently included.

In section one, early years new curricula for Wales will be discussed, in section two the unique child assessment link to the curriculum for Wales will be discussed and section three blog on funding and resource issues in early years education

Main body

With six areas of learning and experience and four overarching goals, the curriculum for Wales is a flexible, learner-centred framework that aims to develop each child's knowledge, skills, and values Welsh Government (2020) claims overview under the curriculum and assessment (Wales) Act 2021, the curriculum for Wales is a set of statutory guidelines designed to help schools and educational settings create their own curricula that are tailored to the needs of students while accomplishing four goals to help children become capable, ambitious learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethical, informed citizens, and healthy, self-assured individuals Welsh Government (2022) suggests that It is being implemented gradually, with full adoption anticipated by 2026, and it applies to all students between the ages of 3 and 16.

The four goals are at the foundation of the new curriculum. All teaching and learning in Wales are based on these four goals, which apply to every child according to Cwlwm.org.uk (2021) the curriculum seeks to develop children who are capable, driven students who are prepared to learn throughout their lives, creative, enterprising individuals who are prepared to fully participate in life and work, Wales's and the world's ethical and knowledgeable citizenry , healthy, self-assured people who are prepared to enjoy happy, rewarding lives as important contributors to society.

According to Gov.Wales (2026) flexibility, progression, and the four purposes are the cornerstones of the curriculum for Wales, a comprehensive reform of education for students ages three to sixteen. Fundamentally, it moves Wales away from a national curriculum that is prescriptive and content-heavy and toward a locally created, purpose driven curriculum that each school must develop for its own students.

The curriculum for Wales framework is statutory guidance under the curriculum and assessment Wales act 2021. Schools must follow it but can justify alternative approaches if appropriate Gov.Wales (2026) claims.

In contrast to the previous curriculum, the new curriculum is greater adaptability Instead of adhering to a set curriculum, teachers create learning experiences according to Gov.Wales (2026) more comprehensive education area of learning and experience promote interdisciplinary links as opposed to subject silos. Increased emphasis on wellbeing because of its critical importance, health and well-being is now a full area of learning and experience. Gov.Wales (2026) also claims human rights and mandatory relationship and sexuality it is required by law and developmentally suitable to provide relationships and sexuality education. The curriculum incorporates human rights, diversity, and local, national, and international perspectives.

According to Gov.Wales (2022) a holistic, child-centred approach advantages whole-child focus, the four goals clearly emphasise citizenship, creativity, and well-being rather than merely achievement, which is highly consistent with holistic early childhood approach. Continuum 3–16, rather than creating artificial key-stage breaks, viewing learning as an ongoing process matches how young children truly develop, important points, rhetoric against reality, although the holistic language is effective, schools are nevertheless subject to accountability demands (qualifications, inspections) that may cause them to revert to narrow accomplishment, risk of uncertainty because the four goals are so general, they run the risk of becoming wall posters rather than pedagogical motivators in the absence of robust professional discourse.

Froebel and the reggio emilia approach strongly underpin the curriculum for Wales, particularly in early years. Both emphasise holistic development, play, creativity and relationships, ideas reflected in the curriculum's four purposes and its focus on well-being, agency and experiential learning Welsh Government (2022). Malaguzzi's concept of the environment as the third teacher aligns with the curriculum's emphasis on enabling environments and rich continuous provision Welsh Government (2025), while froebel's belief in play as the highest form of learning mirrors the curriculum's commitment to child-initiated exploration Clement and Sarwar (2024). The curriculum's progression model, which views learning as developmental and co-constructed, also reflects constructivist principles shared by both theorists Clement (2023). However, while the curriculum aspires to these values, practical challenges such as workload, assessment pressures and inconsistent environments can limit full realisation of Froebelian and Reggio-inspired pedagogy Maynard and Chicken (2010).

Funding and staffing are central challenges in implementing the curriculum for Wales. The curriculum's emphasis on play, inquiry, rich environments and professional autonomy requires significant investment in professional learning, planning time and high-quality early years environments Welsh Government (2022) and Welsh Government (2023). However, funding is often short-term and inconsistent, and schools report that the time required for curriculum design and professional learning exceeds the resources available OECD (2020) and Welsh Government (2024). Staffing shortages, particularly in early years and ALN support further limit the curriculum's ambitions, as practitioners need adequate ratios and specialist training to deliver child-led, inclusive pedagogy Estyn (2023) and Welsh Government (2023). Research also highlights that workload pressures and limited release time make it difficult for staff to engage in reflective, inquiry-based practice, which is essential for the curriculum's progression model (Donaldson (2015) and Esty (2024). These constraints mean that while the Curriculum for Wales aspires to froebelian and reggio inspired principles of play, creativity and enabling environments, practical barriers such as funding inequities, staffing capacity and

rising ALN needs can restrict full realisation of these pedagogical intentions Maynard and Chicken (2010).

Staff working within the curriculum for Wales must meet existing statutory qualification requirements rather than new curriculum-specific ones. Qualified teachers in maintained schools must hold qualified teacher status and be registered with the education workforce council, as required by the education Wales Act and national workforce regulations Welsh Government (2021). Teaching assistants are required to register with the EWC and typically hold level 2 or level 3 supporting teaching and learning qualifications, although requirements vary by school EWC (2023). In early years non-maintained settings delivering funded education, practitioners must hold CCPLD qualifications at level 2 or Level 3, while managers must hold level 5 CCPLD in line with the national minimum standards for regulated childcare Welsh Government (2023). ALN support workers are expected to hold level 3 qualifications alongside specialist ALN training to meet the requirements of the additional learning needs and education tribunal (Wales) act 2018 and the ALN code Welsh Government (2021). These qualification requirements ensure that staff have the developmental knowledge and pedagogical skills needed to deliver the curriculum for Wales emphasis on play, progression and child-centred learning OECD (2020).

Conclusion

Overall, the new curriculum for Wales represents a significant shift towards a more holistic, child-centred, and future-focused approach to learning. By replacing prescriptive content with broad areas of learning and experience (AoLEs) and emphasising the four purposes, the curriculum aims to develop children who are capable, creative, confident, and ethically informed. Its flexibility allows practitioners to design learning that reflects children's interests, developmental needs, and local contexts an approach that aligns strongly with high-quality early years practice.

However, this flexibility also brings challenges. Settings must interpret the framework effectively, ensure progression is meaningful, and maintain consistency across practitioners. The curriculum demands strong professional judgement, ongoing reflection, and robust quality assurance processes to avoid variability in provision. Despite these challenges, the curriculum's emphasis on play, wellbeing, authentic learning, and cross-curricular development positions Wales as a leader in progressive education. When implemented well, it has the potential to raise standards, reduce inequalities, and create learning experiences that genuinely prepare children for life, learning, and work.

Section 2

The concept of the unique child is a foundational principle within early childhood education and underpins contemporary pedagogical approaches in Wales and internationally. It recognises that every child is an individual with their own

developmental trajectory, interests, cultural background, abilities, and ways of learning. These principal positions child as active agents in their learning, rather than passive recipients of adult-led instruction Nutbrown (2018). Understanding the unique child is therefore essential for creating inclusive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate learning environments.

Pedagogy in the early years is grounded in the belief that children develop holistically and at different rates. The unique child principle acknowledges that development is non-linear and influenced by biological, social, emotional, and environmental factors Sheridan *et al* (2021). This understanding supports a child-centred approach, where practitioners observe, listen, and respond to each child's cues, interests, and needs. Such responsiveness is central to high-quality interactions, which research consistently identifies as a key driver of early learning and wellbeing Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2002).

Recognising the unique child also aligns with rights-based pedagogy. The United Nations convention on the rights of the child emphasises children's rights to express their views, participate in decisions affecting them, and develop their full potential UNICEF (1989). When practitioners value each child's individuality, they create environments that respect children's agency, identity, and voice. This supports emotional security, confidence, and intrinsic motivation factors strongly associated with effective early learning Brooker (2011).

Within the curriculum for Wales, the unique child is embedded in the emphasis on developmentally appropriate practice, progression, and learner-centred design. The curriculum moves away from prescriptive content and instead requires practitioners to design learning based on children's developmental needs, interests, and contexts Welsh Government (2022). This flexibility is intended to reduce inequalities and ensure that learning experiences are meaningful and relevant to each child.

The curriculum's focus on the four purposes further reinforces the importance of individuality. Children can only become ambitious, capable learners or healthy, confident individuals when their unique strengths, needs, and backgrounds are recognised and supported. Similarly, progression steps rely on practitioners understanding where each child is developmentally, rather than assuming uniform age-related expectations Welsh Government (2020). Without a deep understanding of the unique child, curriculum implementation risks becoming generic and disconnected from children lived experiences.

Children develop skills at different rates and should be allowed to progress at their own unique pace according to Georgeson *et al* (2015) as they acquire new skills, they need opportunities to practice in various situations, reflect on their experiences, and evaluate their work. Throughout all areas of development, children's work should be respected, valued, and encouraged for its originality and honesty.

Early childhood teachers in aotearoa are guided by te whariki Ministry of Education (1996) and their obligations to te tiriti o Waitangi. However, many teachers feel uncomfortable with bicultural practice and find its application confusing according to Ongley (2013) this research aimed to explore strategies for naturally integrating te ao maori into the curriculum for toddlers. The study used action research methods in a younger toddlers room, involving both teachers and children. Over three weeks, waiata, pakiwaitara, and toi maori were introduced. Evaluation through observation sheets, questionnaires, and a research journal showed that waiata and pakiwaitara were highly effective teaching strategies. However Ongley (2013) claims the research revealed that the depth of children's learning was closely linked to the level of teacher involvement. Although the project was successful, limited team-wide participation made it difficult for some teachers to fully embrace responsibility for its outcomes. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that this bicultural approach works well for young children and could be easily adopted by other centres to incorporate te ao maori into daily learning programs.

Dweck (2017) suggest children's conceptions of ability significantly influence their achievement motivation. During grade and middle school, important changes occur as children begin to see ability as a stable trait of the self. They also develop the ability to understand the relationships among intellectual ability, effort, and performance, and to align their achievement beliefs with their motivation. However Dweck (2017) claims that as these conceptions mature, children grow more concerned about their ability and more sensitive to evaluation, especially negative feedback. The specific conception of ability they adopt strongly shapes their motivation, affecting whether they seek challenges, enjoy learning, and how resilient they are when facing setbacks.

The use of different assessment methods linked to a child's unique one-page profile supports a holistic understanding of learning and development. By bringing together observations, formative assessments, and summative data, practitioners can identify strengths, interests, and support needs more effectively. This approach moves beyond relying on narrow measures of attainment and helps ensure that planning is responsive to the individual child. Parekh (2017) argues that traditional notions of ability can be restrictive, often positioning children within fixed categories that may overlook their diverse capabilities and potential. Linking multiple forms of assessment within a one-page profile can therefore challenge deficit-based views of learners by recognising progress, participation, and achievement across a range of contexts. This promotes a more inclusive approach to assessment and supports personalised learning Black and Wiliam (1998).

Grouping children according to perceived ability can create significant challenges for inclusion and equity in education. While ability grouping is often intended to provide targeted support, research suggests that it can reinforce fixed assumptions about children's capabilities and limit opportunities for growth and participation. Children placed in lower ability groups may experience reduced expectations, less access to

challenging learning experiences, and negative impacts on self-esteem. Parekh (2017) argues that the concept of ability itself can be problematic, as it often reflects social and institutional judgments rather than a child's full range of strengths and potential. Consequently, educators are encouraged to adopt more flexible and holistic approaches to assessment that recognise diverse ways of learning and support all children to achieve their potential.

The new curriculum for Wales strongly supports the concept of the unique child by placing children's individual development, well-being and rights at the centre of early years pedagogy. The curriculum requires practitioners to design learning that is responsive to each child's developmental stage, interests and experiences, emphasising that children progress along non-linear pathways and therefore need personalised support Welsh Government (2022). This aligns directly with the early childhood play, learning and care framework, which states that every child is unique and develops at their own pace across the five developmental pathways, and that adults must observe, reflect and adapt provision to meet each child's needs Welsh Government (2023). The curriculum for Wales further reinforces the unique child principle through its rights-based foundation, drawing on the UNCRC to ensure that children's voices, identities and cultural backgrounds shape their learning experiences Welsh Government (2020). Assessment expectations also reflect this approach practitioners must use ongoing, formative, observation-led assessment to understand each child's progress and plan next steps, rather than relying on age-related outcomes or standardised measures Welsh Government (2022). Together, these frameworks create a coherent early years system in which the individuality of each child is recognised, valued and used to guide high-quality, play-based learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the new curriculum for Wales provides a robust and coherent foundation for recognising and supporting the unique child across the early years. By embedding children's rights, developmental progression and individualised learning at the heart of its design, the curriculum ensures that each child's distinct needs, interests, pace of development and cultural identity shape their learning experiences. Its alignment with the early childhood play, learning and care framework strengthens this commitment, creating a seamless 0–5 system where responsive, observation-led practice is central to high-quality provision. The curriculum's emphasis on play, well-being, relationships and family partnership further reinforces the principle that every child is valued as an individual learner. Ultimately, the curriculum for Wales not only supports but actively operationalises the unique child concept, ensuring that early year's practice is inclusive, child-centred and developmentally appropriate for all children in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023).

Section 3

Blog

Funding and Resource Issues in Early Years Education

Early years education plays a vital role in supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Research consistently demonstrates that high-quality early childhood education can have long-lasting benefits, including improved educational attainment, social mobility, and future employment opportunities according to Sylva et al (2010). However, the quality of early years provision is heavily dependent on adequate funding and access to appropriate resources. Across many countries, including the United Kingdom, early years settings face significant challenges related to financial constraints, staffing shortages, and limited educational resources. These issues can negatively impact the quality of care and education provided to young children. This blog explores the funding and resource challenges faced within the early years sector and examines their implications for children, practitioners, and families.

The Importance of Funding in Early Years Education

Funding is essential for maintaining high quality early years provision. It enables settings to employ qualified staff, provide suitable learning materials, maintain safe environments, and deliver enriching educational experiences. Government funding schemes are designed to support childcare providers and increase access to early education for families. In Wales, funded childcare support is provided through initiatives such as the Welsh government childcare offer for Wales, which provides eligible working parents of 3 and 4 year old children with up to 30 hours of early education and childcare per week for up to 48 weeks of the year as suggested by Welsh Government (2024).

Despite these initiatives, many early years providers report that funding rates do not adequately cover the actual costs of delivering quality childcare. The gap between funding received and operational costs has widened due to rising inflation, increased utility bills, and higher staff wages according to Early Years Alliance (2023). As a result, many nurseries and childcare settings struggle financially, with some reducing services or closing altogether.

Insufficient funding creates pressure on providers to operate within tight budgets. This can lead to reduced investment in staff development, learning materials, and facility improvements, all of which are essential components of quality early years education.

Staffing Challenges and Workforce Retention

One of the most significant resource issues within early years education is staffing. Qualified practitioners are important in supporting children's development and learning. However, low pay and limited career progression opportunities contribute to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff according to Bonetti (2019).

Many early years practitioners earn wages that are relatively low compared to professionals with similar qualifications and responsibilities. Consequently, experienced staff may leave the sector for better paid employment opportunities. High staff turnover can disrupt children's learning experiences and affect the consistency of care provided.

Furthermore, staffing shortages often increase workloads for remaining employees, leading to stress and burnout. This situation can negatively impact practitioner wellbeing and reduce the quality of interactions with children. Research highlights that positive adult child relationships are fundamental to children's development, making workforce stability an important factor in educational outcomes as suggested by Nutbrown (2012).

Investment in workforce development is also affected by funding constraints. Many settings struggle to allocate resources for professional training, limiting opportunities for practitioners to enhance their skills and knowledge. This can hinder the implementation of best practices and reduce the overall quality of provision.

Limited Educational Resources

Educational resources are another key component of effective early years education. Resources such as books, toys, digital technology, outdoor equipment, and sensory materials support children's exploration, creativity, and learning. However, financial pressures often restrict providers' ability to purchase and maintain these resources.

A lack of appropriate learning materials can limit opportunities for children to engage in stimulating and developmentally appropriate activities. For example, insufficient access to books may affect early literacy development, while inadequate outdoor resources can reduce opportunities for physical activity and exploration.

The increasing emphasis on inclusive education also requires settings to invest in specialised resources to support children with additional needs. These may include adaptive equipment, communication aids, and sensory resources. However, many providers report difficulties accessing sufficient funding to meet the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities according to National Audit Office (2024).

Without adequate resources, settings may struggle to create inclusive learning environments that support all children to achieve their potential.

Impact on Children and Families

Funding and resource issues can have direct consequences for children and families. When providers experience financial difficulties, they may increase fees for parents, making childcare less affordable. High childcare costs can prevent some parents from accessing early education services or returning to work, creating economic challenges for families as suggested by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023).

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be particularly affected by reduced access to quality early years provision. Research shows that high quality early childhood education can help narrow achievement gaps and improve outcomes for vulnerable children according to Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Therefore, funding shortages risk widening existing inequalities.

Additionally, the closure of early years settings due to financial pressures can reduce the availability of childcare places, particularly in rural and deprived areas. This can limit parental choice and create challenges for families seeking suitable childcare arrangements.

Government Policy and Future Considerations

Governments recognise the importance of early years education and have introduced various funding initiatives to support the sector. Recent policy developments in Wales include the continued implementation of the Childcare Offer for Wales and increased investment in early years education aimed at improving access to affordable childcare for working families according to Welsh Government (2024). While these initiatives have been welcomed by many families, childcare providers have expressed concerns about whether funding levels are sufficient to cover the true costs of delivering high quality early years provision.

Long-term solutions require sustained investment in both funding and resources. Policymakers must ensure that funding rates reflect the true costs of providing high quality early education. Increased financial support could enable settings to improve staff salaries, invest in professional development, and purchase essential learning resources.

Collaboration between government agencies, local authorities, and childcare providers is also important in addressing workforce challenges and ensuring equitable access to resources. Furthermore, targeted funding for SEND provision can help create more inclusive environments and improve outcomes for children with additional needs.

The future success of early years education depends on recognising it as a critical investment rather than a cost. Adequate funding can contribute to improved educational outcomes, economic productivity, and social wellbeing over the long term.

Conclusion

Funding and resource issues remain significant challenges within the early years sector. Although governments have implemented policies to increase access to childcare and early education, many providers continue to face financial pressures that affect staffing, resources, and service quality. Insufficient funding can lead to workforce shortages, limited educational materials, and reduced support for children

with additional needs. These challenges have implications not only for providers but also for children and families who rely on high quality early years services.

To ensure that all children receive the best possible start in life, greater investment in early years education is required. Sustainable funding models, improved workforce support, and enhanced access to resources are essential for maintaining high standards of provision. Addressing these issues will help create a stronger early years sector capable of supporting children's development and promoting positive lifelong outcomes.

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