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Ai cover sheet

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

Section one

Education can be understood as the organised process through which societies support children to develop knowledge, skills, and values that enable them to participate meaningfully in their communities. Central to this process is the curriculum, which provides a framework for what is taught and reflects wider beliefs about how children learn (Wood, 2020). In early childhood, play-based learning has become an influential concept, grounded in research showing that children learn most effectively through active, meaningful engagement with their environment (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Play-based curricula position plays not as a break from learning but as the primary vehicle through which cognitive, social, and emotional development occurs. This assignment will explore these ideas through three interconnected sections. The first will critically analyse the Curriculum for Wales and its ambitions for child-centred, play-rich learning. The second will examine assessment practices and their impact on play-based pedagogy. The final section will present a blog based on What does truly inclusive play look like for ALN learners.

The Curriculum for Wales represents one of the most significant educational reforms in recent UK history, aiming to create a system that is holistic, child-centred, and grounded in the Four Purposes. Its ambition is to move away from prescriptive content and towards a curriculum that empowers practitioners to design learning that reflects children's needs, interests, and contexts. While this vision aligns strongly with contemporary understandings of early childhood development, it also presents considerable challenges, particularly when implemented through a play-based approach. The curriculum's emphasis on well-being, belonging, language development, inclusivity, and learner autonomy requires a pedagogical shift that is both philosophically and practically demanding. As research on curriculum reform in Wales suggests, the success of the new framework depends not only on the quality of the curriculum itself but on the depth of professional learning, cultural change, and systemic support that accompanies it (Durden-Myers et al., 2025). Evaluating the Curriculum for Wales therefore requires an examination of both its strengths and the barriers that complicate its enactment in real settings.

A central challenge lies in the curriculum's reliance on practitioner agency. The Curriculum for Wales is deliberately non-prescriptive, encouraging teachers to design

learning experiences that reflect their learners and communities. While this flexibility is intended to promote creativity and responsiveness, it also places significant demands on professional knowledge. Teachers must understand child development, play theory, assessment, and inclusive pedagogy at a sophisticated level in order to design meaningful learning. Research indicates that many practitioners feel underprepared for this level of curriculum design, particularly in the early years where play-based learning dominates (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). Without sustained professional learning, the risk is that play becomes tokenistic or inconsistent, shaped more by individual beliefs than by evidence-informed practice. This is especially problematic for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), who require carefully structured environments, differentiated support, and practitioners skilled in observation and responsive teaching. When staff lack confidence or training, ALN learners may not fully access the curriculum's intended benefits.

The curriculum's emphasis on language, literacy, and communication—particularly within the Languages, Literacy and Communication AoLE—also presents challenges. Play-based learning offers rich opportunities for language development, but only when adults are skilled in extending children's talk, modelling vocabulary, and creating environments that stimulate communication. Research shows that high-quality adult-child interaction is essential for supporting language growth, yet this is an area where practice varies widely (McInnes et al., 2013). In multilingual Welsh contexts, the challenge is even greater. The curriculum promotes Welsh language development and cultural identity, but implementing this effectively requires practitioners who are confident bilingual models. In settings where staff have varying levels of Welsh proficiency, children's exposure to authentic language can be inconsistent, limiting the curriculum's aspirations for linguistic belonging and cultural continuity.

Belonging and well-being are central to the Curriculum for Wales, particularly within the Health and Well-being AoLE. The curriculum positions well-being not as an add-on but as a foundation for learning, recognising that children learn best when they feel safe, valued, and connected. Play-based learning naturally supports these aims by allowing children to express themselves, build relationships, and explore at their own pace. However, research on the implementation of the Health and Well-being AoLE suggests that teachers often struggle to translate these principles

into practice, partly because well-being is broad, complex, and difficult to assess (Durden-Myers et al., 2025). For children with ALN, well-being is closely tied to predictability, sensory regulation, and supportive relationships. Play-based environments can be overwhelming if not carefully structured, and without specialist knowledge, practitioners may find it difficult to balance freedom with the scaffolding required for emotional regulation.

Inclusivity and culture also play a significant role in shaping the success of the curriculum. A recent Welsh Government study highlights that while the Curriculum for Wales aspires to equity and inclusion, schools vary in how effectively they embed these values (Newton et al., 2025). Play-based learning can promote inclusivity by allowing children to participate in ways that reflect their strengths, interests, and cultural identities. However, inclusivity requires more than access to play; it requires environments that reflect diverse cultures, languages, and experiences, and practitioners who understand how to challenge bias and support equitable participation. Without this, play can reproduce inequalities rather than disrupt them. For example, children who are confident, verbal, or socially dominant may shape the direction of play, while quieter or neurodivergent children may be marginalised unless adults intervene sensitively.

Assessment and observation present another layer of complexity. The Curriculum for Wales promotes formative, ongoing assessment that supports learning rather than measuring it. This aligns well with play-based pedagogy, where observation is the primary tool for understanding children's development. However, research shows that assessment pressures often push practitioners toward more structured activities that produce visible evidence (Bradbury, 2019). In play-based settings, learning is often subtle, relational, and process-driven, making it harder to document in ways that satisfy accountability systems. For ALN learners, whose progress may be non-linear or highly individualised, the challenge is even greater. Practitioners must be skilled in interpreting small steps of progress, adapting provision responsively, and communicating learning in ways that are meaningful to families and external agencies.

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The Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) are designed to break down subject silos and promote holistic learning. In theory, play-based pedagogy aligns well with this integrated approach, as children naturally move across disciplinary boundaries in their play. However, the breadth of the AoLEs can overwhelm practitioners who are still developing confidence in curriculum design. Without strong professional learning, there is a risk that AoLEs become fragmented or superficial, with practitioners unsure how to connect play experiences to broader learning intentions. This challenge is compounded by environmental constraints. High-quality play requires rich, open-ended resources, outdoor access, and spaces that invite exploration. Many settings, particularly in disadvantaged areas, lack the physical environment needed to support sustained, meaningful play. When environments are

limited, the curriculum's aspirations for creativity, inquiry, and independence become difficult to realise.

Pedagogy sits at the heart of these challenges. The Curriculum for Wales promotes a child-centred approach in which learners are active participants in shaping their learning. This requires practitioners to adopt a responsive, relational pedagogy grounded in observation, dialogue, and co-construction. Yet research consistently shows that many educators struggle to balance child-led play with curriculum expectations, often fearing that too much freedom will lead to gaps in learning (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). This tension is particularly evident in early years settings where practitioners must navigate the expectations of parents, inspectors, and senior leaders who may hold differing views about the value of play. Without a shared understanding of play-based pedagogy, practice becomes inconsistent and vulnerable to external pressures.

Ultimately, the Curriculum for Wales offers a progressive, ambitious vision for education, but its success depends on the conditions in which it is implemented. The challenges of professional learning, inclusivity, assessment, environment, and ALN provision highlight the need for sustained investment in practitioner development and systemic support. Play-based learning has the potential to bring the curriculum's values to life, fostering well-being, belonging, creativity, and learner agency. However, without the necessary expertise, resources, and cultural alignment, these aspirations risk remaining rhetorical rather than realised. A critical evaluation therefore suggests that while the Curriculum for Wales is conceptually strong, its implementation requires ongoing attention to the realities of practice, the diversity of learners, and the professional learning needs of those responsible for enacting it.

Section two

In early childhood education, the term *unique child* reflects the understanding that every learner develops in their own way, shaped by personal experiences, relationships, culture, and individual dispositions. This perspective is grounded in developmental theory, which emphasises that children's learning pathways vary widely and cannot be reduced to uniform expectations (Brooker, 2011). Assessment, in this context, refers to the ongoing process of observing, interpreting, and responding to children's learning and development. It is a continuous, reflective practice that helps practitioners build a holistic picture of each child rather than relying on narrow measures of attainment (Carr and Lee, 2012).

Placing the unique child at the centre of assessment is essential because it ensures that practitioners recognise diverse developmental trajectories and avoid one-size-fits-all judgements. When assessment is responsive to individuality, it supports inclusion, well-being, and equitable learning opportunities, enabling practitioners to plan meaningful next steps and identify additional support needs in a sensitive and developmentally appropriate way (Sheridan, 2009).

The concept of the *unique child* is fundamental to contemporary early childhood education and reflects the understanding that every learner develops along an individual trajectory shaped by their experiences, relationships, culture, abilities, and dispositions. This idea is grounded in ecological and sociocultural theories, particularly Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, which emphasises that children's development is influenced by multiple interacting environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similarly, Rogoff's (2003) sociocultural perspective highlights that children learn through participation in culturally meaningful activities, making individuality inseparable from context. Within this theoretical landscape, the Curriculum for Wales strongly aligns with the principle of the unique child. Its emphasis on learner voice, well-being, identity, and holistic development reflects a commitment to recognising children as competent, capable individuals whose learning cannot be reduced to standardised expectations. The Four Purposes reinforce this by positioning children as ambitious, creative, ethical, and healthy learners, each purpose acknowledging that development is multifaceted and deeply personal.

Assessment plays a central role in realising this vision. In early childhood, assessment is understood as a continuous process of noticing, interpreting, and responding to children's learning. It is not simply a measure of attainment but a means of understanding how children engage with their environment, how they make meaning, and what support they may require. The Curriculum for Wales frames assessment as an integral part of learning, emphasising that it should be authentic, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in professional judgement. This aligns with the unique child because it requires practitioners to consider individuality, context, and diversity rather than relying on uniform benchmarks. For children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), this approach is particularly important, as their developmental pathways may differ significantly from typical patterns, and standardised assessments may fail to capture their progress or potential.

One assessment method commonly used in early years settings, and relevant to Section One of the assignment, is *learning stories*. Developed by Margaret Carr in New Zealand, learning stories are narrative assessments that document children's learning through meaningful episodes, focusing on dispositions, strengths, and identity as a learner (Carr, 2001). Although originally developed outside Wales, learning stories align closely with the Curriculum for Wales because they foreground the child's voice, celebrate individuality, and emphasise learning as a holistic, relational process. They are written in accessible language, often addressed directly to the child, and include photographs, practitioner reflections, and next steps. This makes them a powerful tool for recognising the unique child, as they capture learning in context and highlight personal interests, cultural influences, and emotional engagement.

Learning stories also align with the curriculum's emphasis on belonging, well-being, and inclusive practice. By documenting learning in a positive, strengths-based way, they help children see themselves as capable and valued. They also support relationships with families, who can contribute their own perspectives and cultural knowledge. This is particularly important in Wales, where the curriculum emphasises identity, language, and community. Learning stories can incorporate Welsh language development, cultural experiences, and family contributions, making assessment more culturally responsive. For children from diverse linguistic backgrounds, learning

stories provide a flexible way to document communication and engagement without relying solely on verbal output.

However, while learning stories offer many strengths, they also present challenges that must be critically evaluated. One limitation is that they are time-consuming to produce. High-quality learning stories require careful observation, thoughtful interpretation, and reflective writing. In busy early years environments, practitioners may struggle to find the time needed to produce meaningful narratives, leading to inconsistent quality or reduced frequency. This can undermine their effectiveness as an assessment tool. Another challenge is subjectivity. Because learning stories rely heavily on practitioner interpretation, they can be influenced by personal beliefs, cultural assumptions, or unconscious bias (Blaiklock, 2010). Without strong professional learning, practitioners may focus on behaviours that align with their own expectations rather than recognising diverse ways of learning. This is particularly relevant for ALN learners, whose behaviours or communication styles may differ from normative patterns. If practitioners are not trained to recognise neurodiversity or sensory differences, learning stories may misinterpret or overlook important aspects of development.

A further challenge relates to progression. While learning stories capture rich qualitative information, they may not always link clearly to curriculum progression steps unless practitioners are skilled in analysing dispositions and connecting them to learning outcomes. The Curriculum for Wales requires assessment to support progression, but learning stories can become descriptive rather than analytical if staff lack confidence. This can limit their usefulness for planning next steps or communicating progress to external agencies. For ALN learners, whose support may involve multi-agency collaboration, assessment information must be precise, meaningful, and aligned with individual development plans. Learning stories alone may not provide the level of detail required unless combined with other assessment methods.

Despite these challenges, learning stories strongly support the concept of the unique child. They foreground individuality, celebrate strengths, and recognise learning as a dynamic, relational process. They align with the Curriculum for Wales by promoting learner voice, well-being, and holistic development. They also support inclusive

practice by allowing children to demonstrate learning in ways that reflect their strengths rather than conforming to standardised expectations. For ALN learners, learning stories can be particularly powerful when practitioners understand how to interpret behaviours, recognise small steps of progress, and adapt environments to enable meaningful engagement. However, their effectiveness depends on practitioner expertise, reflective practice, and a commitment to inclusive pedagogy.

In conclusion, the concept of the unique child is deeply embedded in both early childhood theory and the Curriculum for Wales. It reflects a commitment to recognising individuality, promoting well-being, and designing learning that is responsive to children's diverse needs and identities. Assessment plays a crucial role in realising this vision, and learning stories offer a valuable method for capturing authentic learning and supporting the unique child. However, their effectiveness depends on practitioner skill, time, and training, particularly in relation to ALN and inclusive practice. A critical evaluation therefore suggests that while learning stories align strongly with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales, they must be implemented thoughtfully and supported by strong professional learning to ensure that they truly honour the individuality of every child.

Section three

What Does Truly Inclusive Play Look Like for ALN Learners?

What does it really take to ensure that children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) flourish within a play-based curriculum? As Wales continues its ambitious curriculum reform, this question sits at the heart of meaningful inclusion. Play-based learning is often celebrated for its creativity, flexibility, and child-centred ethos—but without careful planning, deep professional understanding, and structural support, ALN learners risk being unintentionally excluded from the very experiences designed to empower them.

Play-based pedagogy is not simply about providing toys, open-ended resources, or outdoor spaces. It is a sophisticated approach that requires practitioners to understand how children learn through exploration, interaction, and sensory engagement. For ALN learners, these processes can look different, unfold at a different pace, or require specific adaptations. Recent research emphasises that neurodiverse children benefit most from environments where sensory needs, communication differences, and emotional regulation are understood and supported (Guldborg et al., 2023). This means that play must be intentionally designed—not left to chance.

Curriculum change adds another layer of complexity. The Curriculum for Wales positions play as a central driver of early learning, aligning with global evidence that child-led exploration fosters deeper engagement and well-being. Yet curriculum reform also demands shifts in mindset, pedagogy, and professional identity.

Practitioners are expected to exercise greater autonomy, design responsive learning experiences, and use assessment in more holistic ways. For ALN learners, this shift is promising: it moves away from narrow attainment measures and towards a richer understanding of the whole child. But it also requires practitioners to be confident in observing, interpreting, and responding to diverse developmental pathways.

One of the biggest considerations is the environment. Play-based learning thrives in spaces that are flexible, sensory-rich, and emotionally safe. For ALN learners, the environment is not a backdrop—it is a key component of learning. Sensory overload, unpredictable noise, or cluttered spaces can quickly overwhelm children with sensory processing differences. Research highlights the importance of predictable

routines, calm zones, and sensory-responsive design in supporting participation (Cologon, 2022). When environments are thoughtfully structured, ALN learners can access play more independently, engage for longer periods, and experience a greater sense of belonging.

Language is another critical factor. Play is a powerful context for communication, but only when adults understand how to scaffold language in ways that reflect children's individual profiles. For some ALN learners, spoken language may not be the primary mode of communication. Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC), visual supports, and gesture-based interaction can transform play into a meaningful communicative space. Recent studies show that when practitioners embed multimodal communication strategies into play, children with communication differences demonstrate increased engagement, agency, and social interaction (Iacono et al., 2023). This reinforces the idea that play must be accessible—not assumed.

Assessment also plays a pivotal role in shaping inclusive play-based practice. Traditional assessment models often fail to capture the subtle, non-linear progress typical of many ALN learners. The Curriculum for Wales encourages practitioners to use observation-rich, formative assessment that focuses on understanding how children learn rather than simply what they can do. This shift is essential for recognising the unique child. However, it requires practitioners to be skilled in noticing small steps, interpreting behaviours accurately, and avoiding deficit-based assumptions. Without strong professional learning, assessment risks becoming inconsistent or biased, particularly when practitioners are unfamiliar with neurodiversity or developmental variability.

Professional learning, therefore, becomes the backbone of successful curriculum change. Implementing a play-based curriculum for ALN learners requires more than enthusiasm—it requires expertise. Practitioners need training in sensory processing, communication differences, trauma-informed practice, and inclusive pedagogy. They also need time to reflect, collaborate, and refine their approaches. A recent Welsh study found that teachers felt most confident implementing curriculum reform when they had access to sustained, high-quality professional learning communities (Evans

et al., 2024). This suggests that inclusion is not an individual responsibility but a collective, systemic commitment

Belonging and well-being must also remain central. Play is a natural context for building relationships, expressing identity, and developing emotional resilience. For ALN learners, these experiences can be transformative—but only when adults create environments where difference is not merely accommodated but valued. Inclusive play means recognising that children may engage differently, communicate differently, or regulate differently—and that these differences enrich the learning community. When practitioners adopt a strengths-based lens, ALN learners are more likely to experience positive self-identity, agency, and joy in learning (Woods, 2023).

Culture and inclusivity also shape how play is experienced. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises identity, language, and community, encouraging settings to reflect the cultural backgrounds of their learners. For ALN learners, cultural responsiveness is essential. Families bring unique knowledge about their child's strengths, communication styles, and sensory preferences. When practitioners build strong partnerships with families, play becomes more meaningful, more authentic, and more inclusive. This aligns with global research showing that culturally responsive play environments enhance engagement and reduce barriers for neurodiverse children (Underwood et al., 2023).

Ultimately, implementing a play-based curriculum during a period of curriculum change requires deep reflection, intentional design, and a commitment to equity. Play has the potential to be a powerful vehicle for inclusion—but only when practitioners understand the diverse ways children access, experience, and express learning. ALN learners deserve play that is accessible, responsive, and joyful. They deserve environments that honour their individuality, assessment that recognises their progress, and practitioners who see their strengths before their challenges.

As Wales continues its curriculum journey, the question is not whether play-based learning can support ALN learners—it absolutely can. The real question is whether we are prepared to make the pedagogical, environmental, and cultural shifts needed to ensure that every child, in all their uniqueness, can thrive.

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