

## **Introduction**

The concept of the Unique Child is a fundamental principle of early years education, recognising that children develop in different ways according to their individual experiences, strengths, interests, cultures and additional learning needs (DfE, 2025; Welsh Government, 2022). Supported by ecological and sociocultural theories, the concept questions universal assumptions about development and emphasises the influence of relationships, culture and environment on learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978).

Assessment is the ongoing process of observing, gathering and interpreting information about children's learning to inform planning and progression (Welsh Government, 2022; Birth to 5 Matters, no date). It may function as an assessment of learning, for learning or as learning (Carr, 2001; Wiliam, 2011; Aras, 2019). Considering the Unique Child within assessment is essential because children develop at different rates and in diverse ways (Espinosa, 2005; Gullo, 2005; Becker, Rigaud and Epstein, 2023). Assessment that fails to recognise this diversity risks deficit-based judgements and overlooking children's strengths and contexts (Grenier, 2020; Lucas, 2022; Kleinlein, 2026). Furthermore, tensions exist between child-centred assessment and increasing accountability demands, which may reduce children's learning to measurable outcomes (Wood, 2013; Stephenson, 2016; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). This essay critically evaluates Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories, examining the extent to which these play-based assessment approaches support the principle of the Unique Child, particularly for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

## **Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes**

The Foundation Phase in Wales used Desirable Outcomes as developmental benchmarks across seven areas of learning, including literacy, numeracy, and personal and social development (Welsh Government, 2015). Their purpose was to support planning, observe progress and identify children requiring additional support through practitioner observation and professional judgement (Maynard *et al.*, 2013; Welsh Government, 2017). Practitioners' knowledge of child development and confidence in making professional judgements are crucial to effective assessment, as assessment relies on practitioners interpreting and responding to children's learning rather than applying objective measures (Drummond, 2012). Although not intended as statutory testing, they were frequently interpreted as developmental checkpoints (Morgan *et al.*, 2022).

## **Te Whāriki Learning Stories**

Te Whāriki is New Zealand's play-based curriculum, underpinned by empowerment, holistic development, relationships and family and community partnerships (Ministry of Education, 2017). Learning Stories, developed by Carr (2001), are narrative assessments that document significant learning experiences through a process of noticing, recognising and responding. They focus on children's strengths, learning dispositions and participation, often incorporating children's voices, photographs and family contributions (Hargraves, 2020).

## **Critical Analysis: Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories**

The Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories represent contrasting approaches to assessment, reflecting different understandings of child development, progress and the purpose of assessment itself. Whilst both aim to support children's learning, they vary considerably in how they conceptualise the Unique Child, assess

progress and respond to diversity, including Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Welsh Government, 2015; Jones, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2017; 2026b)

A key strength of the Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes is their provision of developmental benchmarks, creating consistency in assessment and a shared understanding of expected development (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007; Kingston and Siraj, 2017). This can support practitioners in monitoring progress, identifying developmental delays and making referrals for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) (Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Developmental frameworks may therefore serve an important safeguarding function by helping practitioners recognise when additional support is required (DfE, 2022; Welsh Government, 2026). In contrast, Learning Stories reject predetermined developmental pathways and instead focus on children's strengths, interests and participation in meaningful experiences (Carr, 2001). This strengths-based approach aligns more closely with the concept of the Unique Child by recognising that children develop in diverse ways and at varying rates (Lee and Alonzo, 2024; Hearfield, 2025).

However, the developmental focus of Desirable Outcomes has been criticised for promoting a normative view of childhood (Waters, 2016). Although intended as guidance rather than a checklist, the framework encouraged comparison against predetermined expectations and was used as a policy tool for quality assurance, enabling practitioners, local authorities and inspectors to track progress and evidence provision (UK Government, 2015; Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Such approaches risk positioning children in relation to what they cannot yet do, rather than recognising their individual strengths (Jones, 2026). Nutbrown (2011) and Dinishak (2016) argue that developmental benchmarks can contribute to deficit-based thinking, particularly for neurodiverse children whose learning may not align with age-related expectations. By contrast, Learning Stories reduce this risk by centring observation on what children can do and how they participate. Whilst benchmarks appear objective, they are underpinned by particular cultural and theoretical assumptions about childhood and may overlook sociocultural, linguistic and neurodiverse ways of learning (Waters, 2016; Cook, 2024).

In contrast, Learning Stories are widely regarded as more inclusive because they assess children's engagement, relationships, communication and learning dispositions rather than measuring attainment against developmental norms (Ministry of Education, 2017; Cengiz and Altındağ, 2022). This is particularly beneficial for neurodiverse children and those with ALN, whose strengths may not be recognised through traditional developmental frameworks (Ministry of Education, 2005; Morton, MacArthur and McIlory, 2024). Learning Stories can also capture multimodal communication, including gestures, movement, visual cues and alternative forms of expression, supporting broader recognition of learning beyond spoken language (Moreno-Núñez and Casla, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2026). Consequently, practitioners can document achievements such as joint attention, engagement and problem-solving that might otherwise be overlooked (Theodotou, 2020). Furthermore, the involvement of families reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective by recognising the importance of children's wider social and cultural contexts.

Despite these advantages, Learning Stories present different challenges. Whereas Desirable Outcomes are often criticised for over-standardisation, Learning Stories are criticised for excessive subjectivity (Blaklock, 2008; Samuel Waldron, 2015; Wanoa and Johnston, 2020; Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Their narrative nature relies heavily on practitioner interpretation, meaning different practitioners may reach different conclusions from the same observation. Blaklock (2008) questions their reliability and consistency, particularly when used to demonstrate progress over time. This raises important questions about practitioner confidence and

professional judgement. Whilst narrative assessment allows practitioners to develop rich understandings of children's learning, it also increases the risk of cognitive and confirmation biases, whereby observations may be interpreted in ways that reinforce existing assumptions (Blaiklock, 2008; 2013; Betsch et al., 2015).

Both approaches, therefore, raise concerns regarding the reliability of assessment evidence, albeit for different reasons. Desirable Outcomes may appear more reliable because they use common benchmarks; however, Williams (2018) argues that increasing reliability often requires additional assessment time, which can reduce opportunities for meaningful teaching and play. Furthermore, Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that developmental assessment frameworks contribute to the governance of early childhood data, aligning practice with school-readiness agendas and accountability structures rather than holistic child-centred learning. In this sense, assessment serves not only children's development but also wider policy, inspection and accountability purposes.

Conversely, whilst Learning Stories support inclusion and the Unique Child, their strengths-based focus may unintentionally obscure developmental concerns (Hargraves, 2020). By privileging positive narratives, practitioners may under-identify learning difficulties or delays requiring targeted intervention (Hall *et al.*, 2025). Blaiklock (2008) argues that Learning Stories prioritise dispositions and participation over specific knowledge and skills, limiting their usefulness for identifying precise developmental needs. This becomes particularly problematic within statutory assessment, funding and ALN contexts, where measurable evidence is often required to justify support (Fabian, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2023). Although Learning Stories provide rich qualitative information, their validity as formal assessment tools remains contested, particularly when demonstrating progression over time (Blaiklock, 2008; Wanoa and Johnston, 2020).

Ultimately, neither assessment approach fully resolves the tension between recognising individuality and evidencing progress. Desirable Outcomes provide structure, comparability and early identification of need but risk reducing children's development to age-related expectations. Learning Stories offer a more holistic and inclusive understanding of learning that aligns closely with the principle of the Unique Child, yet concerns remain regarding reliability, consistency and accountability. Therefore, effective assessment may require a balanced approach that combines developmental knowledge with professional judgement, ensuring children's unique identities, abilities and learning pathways are recognised whilst still providing robust evidence to support intervention, funding and educational planning.

## **Conclusion**

Foundation Phase Desirable Outcomes and Te Whāriki Learning Stories reflect contrasting approaches to assessment within play-based curricula. Desirable Outcomes provide developmental benchmarks that support progress monitoring and early identification of need, but may promote normative expectations that conflict with the principle of the Unique Child. Learning Stories offer a more holistic and inclusive approach by recognising children's strengths, identities and diverse ways of learning; however, concerns remain regarding reliability, consistency and their use within accountability and funding systems. Ultimately, neither approach fully resolves the tension between recognising individuality and evidencing progress. Effective assessment, therefore, requires a balance among developmental knowledge, professional judgement, and meaningful recognition of children's unique learning pathways to support both accountability requirements and the principle of the Unique Child.