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Critically analyse the challenges of implementing a play-based curriculum.

The 'New Curriculum for Wales' has been introduced by the Welsh Government in September 2022. It has replaced the 'Old Curriculum for Wales', which was developed under the Education Act 1998 and last updated as the 2008 school curriculum (WG, 2008). The purpose of the New Curriculum for Wales is to transform education, shaping the ways in which children are being taught, moving away from rigid structures to flexible approaches (WG, 2022; Audit Wales, 2022; Equal Education Partners, 2023). Whereas, *Te Whāriki*, New Zealand's bicultural ('woven-mat') curriculum, was established in 1996, and it has been updated and revised in 2017 (The Education Hub, 2020). The curriculum focuses on how children's learning and education can be embedded in relationships between *Kaiako* (educators), *Whanau* (family), and *Taufale (the* wider culture) (Ritche, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2023). This essay will consider the challenges of implementing a play-based curriculum in relation to the following themes: 'belonging' and 'wellbeing.'

Belonging is one of the most fundamental human needs, as exemplified in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (King-Hill, 2015). In relation to the Welsh Government's 'New Curriculum for Wales', 'belonging' is characterised as a pathway that shapes learner's sense of who they are and who they can become. Moreover, it engenders pride in them, allowing them to celebrate the diverse landscapes of Wales, and helping them develop a sense of *cynefin* (WG, 2022; NDNA, 2022; BERA, 2024). Essentially, the word 'cynefin' speaks directly to the reforms taking place in Welsh Education. Similarly, this concept of 'belonging' or 'Mana Whenua' in *Te Whāriki*, is reflected in the four domains: "Belonging to the wider learning communities beyond the early childhood setting; Belonging in a particular early childhood setting; Belonging situated in routines, customs, and regular events; Belonging situated within rules, rights and responsibilities" (Ministry of Education, 2007). Therefore, 'belonging' is not a vague feeling, but a structured framework necessary for child development, identity formation and citizenship. When children are feeling safe, stable and empowered, they are confident to take risks and explore the boundaries of their own learning (Valentine *et al.,* 2022; Hearfield, 2025; Tahurangi - Te *Whāriki* Online, 2026).

However, one of the problems with implementing 'belonging' in the Welsh Curriculum is that it creates an excessive workload for teachers, but also, it is an expensive, resource-intense task to realise. Under the statutory requirements laid down by the Welsh Government, settings and schools can use their 'judgement to decide which aspects of learning should be assessed' and 'how much assessment information is sufficient to gauge progress in learning' (WG, 2019, WG, 2024). What this means is that schools are not required to follow standardised assessment procedures at specific, rigid milestones. It can be difficult, therefore, to translate 'curriculum guidance' into a highly constructive, meaningful experience tailored to students (Gatley, 2020; Smith, 2024, Glover *et al.*, 2026). Because of this, schools might treat

'belonging' superficially, rather than embedding it thoroughly, as the Welsh Government expects in one of the five developmental pathways (WG, 2022).

Despite so, the underlying principles of 'belonging', or 'Mana Whenua' in *Te Whāriki* is more integrated than the 'New Curriculum for Wales'. That is because one of the core beliefs for Māori is that the mokopuna (child) is special as 'living to the past, the embodiment of the present, and the hope for the future' (Reedy, 2019, p.39; cited by Wood *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, they hold this perception that the child is already an interconnected social being whose sense of belonging is actively forged through their current relationships with people, places, and things, rather than a citizen waiting to be shaped by a national curriculum (Gould *et al.*, 2013; Sumson *et al.*, 2018). This point is further compounded by the fact that 'belonging' itself is sustained through the daily, unhurried rituals of the learning environment (Mitchell *et al.*, 2018; Sterling *et al.*, 2020).

Unlike the Welsh Curriculum, where professionals build relationships with students through statutory support - such as empathy, restorative practice and active listening - (WG, 2019), *Te Whāriki* shifts the pedagogical focus entirely. 'Belonging', or 'Manu Whenua' is embedded when professionals create responsive, reciprocal relationships between students and the wider community. Alternatively, this can be cultivated by forging social interactions with *Kaiako* (educators), *Whanau* (family), *Tamariki* (children or peers), and the wider, interconnected society (Ministry of Education, 2017; Education Review Office, 2018; Waters-Davies, 2022). This conceptual focus on holistic, community-based relationships is perhaps mirrored in *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.* Within the curriculum, children's experiences are often shaped by the microsystem and the mesosystem, where they encounter day-to-day interactions with people like family, peers, and friends. The immediate environments of children serve as a bridge to the wider world, and this directly includes parents and *whanau* (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Wood *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, teachers do not rewrite or adapt the curriculum; they simply 'weave' their local community's stories into this existing, flexible mat, reducing planning time unlike Welsh curriculum (Hall *et al.*, 2025).

Well-being, on the other hand, refers to when pupils feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence (WHO 2026). The concept of Well-being is multi-dimensional, encompassing physical, emotional, and social well-being, and focusing on children's immediate as well as their future lives (Statham and Chase, 2010). In Wales, well-being is often underpinned as part of the four purposes of the 'New Curriculum for Wales.' One of the pillars of the four purposes is for pupils to become 'healthy, confident individuals', who are capable of 'building their mental, and physical wellbeing by developing confidence, resilience and growth' (WG, 2022). Well-being also plays a vital role in the Areas of Learning and Experience (WG, 2020). Conversely, *Te Whāriki* views wellbeing holistically, taking into consideration the child's social, emotional, physical, and spiritual health altogether (Tahurangi - Te *Whāriki* Online, 2026). They believe children have a fundamental right to be safe and

safeguarded from any harm, or danger - especially regarding their mental health, or wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2017). This is also known as Mana Atua and is one of the first strands of this early childhood curriculum framework.

Professionals in both the Welsh Curriculum and Te *Whāriki* face surprisingly parallel barriers when trying to implement wellbeing into the classroom environment. Wellbeing is subjective and non-linear; it cannot be delivered through rigid systems, but instead grounded in high-quality, strong relationships between practitioners, and students. For example, in September 2024, Early Years Wales surveyed its members, mostly professionals in EYFS, to evaluate the systemic pressures, and emotional challenges targeting Welsh childcare workers, at every stage of practice. This survey was available for three weeks, and asked members across Wales 'a series of open and closed questions regarding their mental health, and subjective well-being' (Early Years Wales, 2025). The research, in general, confirms this perception that professionals within the Early Years sector are feeling undervalued, and overwhelmed. Specifically, over 45% of people reported that they felt their concentration has reduced; while 30% of people experienced constant stress (Early Years Wales, 2025; Play Wales, 2025; Wales Cymru, 2025). This is further intensified by a poor funding gap, compromising professionals' ability to perform their duties effectively (NESTA, 2026; NDNA, 2026). Therefore, educators struggle to track, evidence and assess a child's progress in emotional, or social well-being, without reducing it to an artificial, corporate tick-box exercise. This undermines the purpose of the curriculum: educators cannot nurture the holistic well-being of children if their own well-being is continually neglected (WG, 2022; Waters-Davies, 2022; WG, 2023).

However, unlike the Welsh Curriculum, where a failure to deliver well-being for children comes from excessive teacher workload and central funding gaps, *Te Whāriki* faces a rhetoric-reality gap (Hedges, 2012; Croner, 2022). Whilst *Te Whāriki* has played a significant role in shaping holistic, child-centered education, its effectiveness can be ultimately diminished by the fact that it fails to transition these goals into actual training, knowledge base, and resource of everyday ECE practitioners (OECD, 2006; Mitchell *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that *Te Whāriki* is making a profound difference to 'children's learning and development relative to other models of [curriculum]' (Nuttall, 2005, p. 20). Essentially, those from Non-*Maori* educators did not grow up with the wider cultural worldview required to teach it properly. This creates anxiety, stress, and an ongoing struggle for those educators to implement the five strands, specifically, Mana Atua, if they do not fully live or comprehend it (Houkamau *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, to ensure the consistency and the delivery of the *Te Whāriki* curriculum, New Zealand must be open to other pedagogical strategies - such as the 'provision of instructive learning teaching environments and sustained shared thinking' (OEDC, 2006, p. 63) - to make sure that the curriculum has a greater focus on children's learning in key areas, like well-being. This might help sustain the holistic well-being

of children, by bridging western intentional teaching approaches into their curriculum (Blacklock, 2013).

In conclusion, this essay has critically analysed the challenges of implementing a play-based curriculum in Wales and New Zealand. Through close examination of the themes: 'belonging' and 'wellbeing', it becomes evident that both the Welsh curriculum and *Te Whāriki* suffer from systemic and structural failures, as a result of poor policy outcomes, financial burdens, and a clear rhetoric-reality gap. To guarantee a consistent curriculum delivery, both nations may wish to consider alternative approaches - such as 'sustained shared thinking' and 'instructive shared environments' - to make sure that children's 'wellbeing' and 'belonging' needs are being satisfied without compromising teacher's time or planning limits.

Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child' critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking, and age or stage-related development models in play-based curricula.

Central to Early Years is the 'Unique Child' principle - the belief that every single child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured (Leech 2025; EYFS, 2025). This philosophy is embedded into practice through continuous assessment, effective environments, and a sustained play-based pedagogy (WG, 2024). However, while the concept of a 'Unique Child' is universal, its real-world applications may differ regionally and globally. For example, Jenkin (2016) proposes that delivering a bicultural curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) relies heavily on early childhood teacher-education providers to shape future educators, though widespread gaps in teacher proficiency still exists. Conversely, statutory guidance in Wales moves beyond the mere isolated definition of uniqueness, placing the child at the centre of family, language, and *cynefin* (WG, 2022). This essay will critically analyse two prominent formative methods of assessment, namely, *traditional observation*, and *narrative learning stories.* By comparing these approaches to the Welsh Government's 'Early Childhood Play, Learning, and Care framework', and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki*, this study will explore how these methods support child-centered progress.

Observation is at the forefront of both the 'New Curriculum for Wales' and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki*. Despite so, whilst both frameworks prioritise play-based, child-centered learning, they differ distinctly in their observation philosophies (McLachlan, 2018; WG, 2023). This difference is exemplified by the ways in which observation is presented within the school environments. For example, a practitioner in Wales might use observation when children are in indoors and outdoors, solitary and collaborative play. They use it to understand a child's strengths and weaknesses, and next steps, aligning observations with developmental pathways in areas like well-being, exploration and communication (WG, 2021; WG, 2023). They identify a range of skills and knowledge that children possess, as they start to engage in different experiences. Most importantly, professionals use observations so that they can create authentic and purposeful learning opportunities for children within the curriculum (WG, 2020; OECD, 2020; Knight, T., and Crick, T., 2022). In contrast to these findings, *Kaikaos* will use observation for a variety of purposes grounded in learning stories - such as documenting a child's progress through storytelling, photos and analysis. These capture a child's strengths, interests, and learning dispositions rather than, ticking off standardised milestones, unlike the Welsh Curriculum (McChensey *et al.,* 2022, Boss, 2024). *Kaiako* believe in this perception that the child is an 'active learner who chooses, plans, and challenges' (Smith, 2007, cited by Ministry of Education, 2021). They focus heavily on the process of learning, and the development of dispositions, such as resilience, curiosity, and play-based exploration (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2024). Whilst these countries use observations in different ways, both frameworks recognise and acknowledge the fact that a child's

development cannot be isolated from the family and the wider community. Consequently, both the Welsh Government and *Te Whāriki* encourage collaboration with parents to provide a holistic picture of the child developments.

Moreover, both Welsh Government and *Te Whāriki* believe that 'observation' must be active, purposeful, dynamic and contextualised within the child's daily environment - as they are a 'unique child' - rather than treated as an isolated context. For example, Ongley (2013) highlighted that *Kaikaos* should use learning stories as a qualitative form of narrative observation. Besides, he proposed that *Kaikaos* should observe what the child can already do - and their dispositions (such as perseverance or curiosity) - instead of focusing on what they cannot do. However, the Welsh Government believes that observation is essential for professionals to sustain high-quality, child-centered and relational pedagogy (WG, 2022). This is embedded through the principles of 'sustained shared thinking', whereby essentially, professionals can use open ended questions, active listening and tuning in to co-construct meaning alongside the child (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). These contexts should be communication rich and focus on further promoting emerging communication skills, and developing them further, in realising the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978, cited by Waters-Davies, 2022). Ultimately, responsive 'observation' that is embedded in strong relationships is viewed as paramount for children to become unique individuals within the curriculum. Through this relational lens, the child's authentic voice, their opinions, and individual's learning experience are elevated above standardised expectations. Ensuring that adults share the ethos of a child-centered approach, in creating safe and conductive learning environments (Leicestershire County Council, 2026).

Crucially, the approaches of the Welsh Government and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* differ fundamentally in how they use narrative learning stories. New Zealand pioneered the use of 'narrative assessment' to promote holistic, sociocultural, and bicultural philosophy of *Te Whāriki.* This framework uses a cyclical format: **Notice** (observation), **Recognise** (the analysis of learning dispositions like curiosity or perseverance), and **Respond** (planning future learning pathways) (Whyte *et al.*, 2019; Li, 2020). Unlike the 'New Curriculum for Wales', Te *Whāriki* was constructed so that children develop 'courage and curiosity', 'trust and playfulness', 'confidence', and 'responsibility' - to help them prepare for the future (Mitchell *et al.*, 2025). These learning dispositions are deeply rooted in cultural identity, and they are highly valued by Te Ao Māori (Ministry of Education, 2026). Within *Te Whāriki,* the uniqueness of a child is celebrated by understanding them well, respecting their individual learning styles, and acknowledging their culture and community (Dearnley, 2022; Hall, 2025). Conversely, the Welsh Government shifts the focus from narrative assessment to narrative style documentation. In the Welsh curriculum, this appears as 'Learning Journeys', or digital pedagogical documentation (Hutt, 2024). This professional learning journey helps schools plan staff development while preparing for the New Curriculum for Wales. For instance, teachers might observe each other's lessons to

see how they can better incorporate outdoor learning, or digital skills into their daily teaching. Similarly, it allows practitioners to reflect on their teaching, map students' progress against the Four Purposes and adapt the curriculum to local needs (WG, 2023). It fosters a whole school culture of peer reflection while offering a framework for evidence-based self-evaluation to ensure equity for all learners (WG, 2022; WG, 2025). Consequently, while New Zealand's approach is inherently child-centered, the Welsh Government uses narrative documentation to track progress against external criteria through the use of the five developmental pathways. Educators can then possibly use this evidence to tailor high-quality support to each child's individual development.

Lastly, schemas play a powerful role in the Welsh Curriculum and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* when observing the 'Unique Child' through narrative learning stories. As set out by the Welsh Government's statutory framework, 'A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings', schemas represent a vital part of children's cognitive and intellectual development through which children can deconstruct knowledge and decode the world around them. Through this process, children's drive for exploratory play is reinforced, which ultimately strengthens their neural pathways, and allows them to make easier connections with the wider curriculum (WG, 2022; WG, 2023). Similarly, *Te Whāriki* advocates for 'authentic' play - that is, when play is self-leading, self-directed, and self-initiated. Through such approach, children are able to familiarise themselves with repeated actions or behaviours, and consequently, this can enable them to experience multiple schemas within their learning environments - as they begin to understand the world around them. This can be achieved in dynamic, responsive practice or play-based integration. By doing so, it ultimately allows teachers (*Kaiako*) to observe these natural urges, and weave (*Whatu*) them into the curriculum (Croner, 2022; Tahurangi, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2026). Therefore, when a child is observed exploring how things move (**trajectory**), or how objects are occupied in enclosed spaces (**enclosing**) (Audit Wales, 2022, practitioners must capture these cognitive patterns with narrative learning stories to plan responsive, open-ended environments that intentionally stretch that unique child's line of thinking. In this way, the child has unlocked its own unique exploration pathway within both Welsh curriculum and *Te Whāriki* (Cameron, 2023; Play Wales, 2025).

However, challenges surrounding the implementation of the 'Unique Child' within the Welsh Curriculum, and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* still exist. Both the Welsh Curriculum and *Te Whāriki* heavily rely on narrative documentation (Learning Stories) (WG, 2022). Writing meaningful, deeply analytical stories that capture a child's specific schemas takes significant time. In busy, understaffed under-three or Nursery settings, practitioners struggle to find the time to write these while maintaining proper staff-to-child ratios (WG, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024). This means the quality of provision of learning is not always at the highest possible standards (EIP, 2018). Therefore, the implication is that the 'Unique Child' concept

becomes futile; without the time for deep pedagogical reflection, and ongoing assessments, narrative documentation might not be relevant (McCormack, 2022). This obscures the child's schemas, and it undermines the purpose of the curriculum for both Wales and New Zealand.

In conclusion, a critical analysis of the 'Unique Child' - through the Welsh Curriculum and New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* - was undertaken. There was a thorough consideration of the themes: *traditional observation* and *narrative learning stories*, and its effectiveness in terms of enabling the 'Unique Child' to become an active part of the curriculum, rather than a passive mode of developmental tracking. Through extensive research, this essay highlighted that whilst both curricula create dynamic, responsive environments embedded in strong relationships, the operational costs and high staff-to-staff ratios ultimately means that deep pedagogical reflection may not be realistically achievable. Consequently, professionals may fail to realise the concept of the 'Unique Child', should they encounter any structural challenges within the day-to-day classroom environment and any other pressures.

Write a blog suitable for a professional publication (for example, Nursery World, Small Talk) linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum/curriculum change.

Theory vs Reality: Systemic challenges faced by Early Years Practitioners

Ever since I worked in the Early Years, I realised how there is a massive gap between the daily practice in EYFS and its theoretical policy. For example, the intense pressure of systemic expectations (like school readiness and standard assessment data) squeezes out the time needed for genuine, slow child-led exploration. Moreover, a lack of physical resources, space, and continuous professional development (CPD) makes it incredibly difficult to build the 'open-ended' environments the Welsh curriculum promises. As such, these challenges are becoming increasingly prominent, and there is little that we as practitioners can do to ensure we avoid these problems.

I know, from my personal experience, that professionals experience several difficulties everyday within the Early Years Curriculum. These issues have been ingrained within the curriculum for years, and they show a clear failure for policymakers to provide the funding and adequate support that professionals are required to meet such high levels of teaching and learning standards. Given the complexity of this topic, I will focus on two most important issues. Firstly, I will consider how professionals may encounter well -being problems within the school environment. This stems from heavy workloads, or high stress levels, causing widespread teacher burnouts. Secondly, I will analyse why is it difficult for professionals to support children with diverse needs, as mainstream schools simply lack the right resources.

In 2019, before proposing the New Curriculum for Wales, the Welsh Government said that:

'The teacher consistently secures the best outcomes for learners through progressively refining teaching, influencing learners and advancing learning. The teacher in a formal leadership role exercises accountability for the pedagogy of others by creating and sustaining the conditions to realise the Four Purposes for learners and achieve the best for them in terms of standards, well-being and progress' (WG, 2020).

Essentially, professionals must use their judgement to adapt, modify environment parameters, and advance early years learning dynamically (WG, 2024). Moreover, the Welsh Government expects professionals to use effective, enabling environments in the Early Years, by employing the following aspects: a stimulating indoor and outdoor space, a communication-rich atmosphere, and responsive, nurturing relationships with children. Through exploration of their environment, children begin to develop a sense of awe and wonder within the world around them (WG, 2021; Estyn, 2024).

However, while this is true to some extent, it can be argued that professionals are too overwhelmed by complex classroom profiles to teach effectively. Whilst the New Curriculum for Wales attempts to combine traditional subject knowledge and the Four Purposes - shaping ambitious, ethical, enterprising, and healthy citizens - Gatley argues that these two ideas conflict with each other (Gatley, 2020). This stands in sharp contrast to Donaldson's report in *Successful Futures*, which argued that knowledge and holistic purposes could be perfectly balanced (Donaldson, 2015). If schools focus solely on the Four Purposes, traditional academic subject knowledge becomes diluted and redundant (Murphy, 2024). Conversely, prioritising traditional academic subjects sidelines the four purposes, leaving these holistic goals lost in daily classroom settings (Welsh Government, 2024). This compromise means that teachers can never truly succeed at either goal. This constant battle forces teachers to undermine their pedagogy, turning what the government intended to be 'professional flexibility' into a source of constant workplace stress. Consequently, this causes their wellbeing to deteriorate, leading to widespread professional burnout.

Also, the Welsh Government in 2026 highlighted the procedures that professionals should implement to determine whether a child has Additional Learning Needs:

'Stage 1: Determine whether the learning has a learning difficulty or disability.

Stage 2: Assess whether that difficulty or disability calls for Additional Learning Provision (ALP). This means support that is additional to or different from what is made generally in mainstream education' (WG, 2026).

Here, the two stage criteria clearly sets out expectations as to how professionals should decide on whether a child has ALN or not. Evidence that professionals may wish to gather is: information of the child, young person or their parents; developmental history and milestones; attendance, behaviour and engagement records; track record and impact of existing support, and inputs from health and social care (DERA, 2025; Audit Wales, 2026; WG, 2026). This is not an exhaustive list; professionals may wish to consider alternative points. Correspondingly, schools are expected to collaborate with external stakeholders - involving statutory services, specialist agencies and third-sector organisations - to secure the highest standards of interventions necessary for every individual child (WG, 2020; WG, 2021).

On the other hand, though, this two-stage process under-represents the day-to-day challenges encountered by Early Years Practitioners. The expectation to gather exhaustive, multi-layered evidence presumes that settings possess the administrative capacity to do so. Severe staff shortages and high staff-to-child ratios can ultimately mean that practitioners are forced to balance administrative data collection against immediate care needs. Distinguishing a definitive learning disability from typical early development at Stage 1 remains highly subjective and a pressured task especially for educators when there is an absence of specialist professional support within schools.

Consequently, this professional anxiety can be directly linked to one of the strands of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. When applied to this situation, professionals cannot achieve 'self-actualisation' (King-Kill, 2015). Instead, they are operating in a constant state of survival and physiological deficit, whereby understaffing and ongoing financial pressures cause professionals to just get through the day, instead of focusing on deep learning needs (WG, 2025; Audit Wales, 2026). Because the WG fails to deliver practical support for schools, expecting practitioners to successfully manage this complex two-stage process is completely unrealistic.

Compounding these effects, professionals in maintained settings face financial barriers when supporting children with ALN. Viewed through a Vygotskian perspective, practitioners themselves are denied the professional 'scaffolding' - such as targeted funding for specialist training or diagnostic resources - necessary to act as the 'More Knowledgeable Other' in a high-stakes, specialised environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Bodrova, 2015, Wu, 2025). Therefore, significant budget constraints severely undermine Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, as understaffed settings cannot afford the specialist input or resources required to support neurodivergent pupils.

For anyone who works as professionals, trust me, I know how difficult it is to implement these things into the classroom environment! Reality shows us that it is nearly impossible to achieve these things without the necessary funding, staffing and proper structural support. We are always in a constant battle between unworkable policy ideas and an under-resourced classroom. So, whilst policies may seem to suggest that it is straightforward to embrace these changes, reality looks far more complex.

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