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Early Years Curricular

Section 1: Foundations and Evolution of Early Years Curriculum in Wales

The Foundation Phase Curriculum (FPC) in Wales, introduced in 2008, marked a significant shift from traditional subject-based instruction toward a holistic, child-centred pedagogy rooted in developmental psychology and international early years education models, particularly those from Scandinavia that emphasise learning through play (Coliles, 2022; WG, no date c). This constructivist approach, influenced by Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory and Vygotsky’s social constructivism, supports children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth through active, hands-on experiences and guided social interactions (Celinska, 2023; Liu and Matthews, 2005; PACEY, 2016). For example, mathematical concepts are explored in real-world outdoor contexts rather than through abstract worksheets (Koyle, 2019). The curriculum also draws from Froebel and Dewey’s philosophies of child-centred, experiential learning, and the Reggio Emilia approach, which values creativity, inquiry, and environment as a “third teacher” (Froebel Trust, 2019; Clarke, 2022; Biermeier, 2015).

The FPC framework is organised around seven Areas of Learning designed to encompass holistic development: Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity; Language, Literacy and Communication Skills; Mathematical Development; Welsh Language Development; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development (WG, 2008). This broad scope reflects an understanding that learning is interconnected, and that social and emotional development underpins academic progress. The curriculum’s emphasis on experiential learning and play creates a supportive environment where children can explore and make sense of their world at their own pace, fostering intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes toward learning (WG, 2008; Bruce, 2011).

Despite its strengths, concerns have been raised about variability in implementation and staff preparedness. Estyn (2011a) noted that while many settings embraced the principles enthusiastically, there were inconsistencies in practitioner expertise and understanding of play pedagogy. Professional development, essential for the effective application of these theories, has not always been consistently delivered across Wales, with rural or disadvantaged areas sometimes having less access to high-quality training (WG, no date d; WG, 2023c). This inconsistency can impact the quality of learning experiences and the ability of staff to meet the diverse needs of learners, including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Building on the FPC’s principles, the Curriculum for Wales (CfW), launched in 2022, expands the vision into a comprehensive 3–16 education framework (WG, 2020). Unlike the fixed key stages of previous curricula, the

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CfW introduces Progression Steps as flexible developmental reference points to accommodate diverse learner trajectories and needs, including those with ALN (Dauncey, 2015; WG, 2022b). This shift reflects a more personalised and adaptable approach but introduces potential risks of variability in quality and coherence across schools (Mellor, 2023; WG, 2019).

The CfW retains the constructivist foundation but integrates broader theoretical perspectives. Notably, capability theory from Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum informs its emphasis on learner empowerment, agency, and well-being, moving beyond knowledge acquisition alone (Priestley and Philippou, 2022; London Metropolitan University, no date). This approach recognises education as a means of expanding learners' real freedoms and opportunities, including their capacity to participate fully in society. Curriculum coherence theory (Young and Muller) also shapes the CfW's focus on equitable access to powerful knowledge and structured progression (White, 2019). The curriculum encourages professional autonomy and responsiveness to local contexts while embedding Welsh values of inclusion, equity, bilingualism, and well-being within a post-devolution socio-political framework (WG, 2025; Senedd Research Service, 2015).

The FPC's child-centred approach highlights learning through play as a vital, exploratory process for children aged 3 to 7, emphasising the developmental readiness and interests of each learner (Bruce, 2011; WG, 2008). Practitioners adapt activities based on spontaneous interests, such as outdoor insect exploration, fostering engagement and meaning making (WG, 2008). Assessment is observational and holistic, focusing on naturalistic settings rather than formal testing, which allows practitioners to support learning flexibly (Estyn, 2011a; Bruce, 2011). However, some variability in assessment quality and staff training has been reported (Estyn, 2011a; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007).

In contrast, the CfW defines four core purposes aimed at developing learners as ambitious, capable, ethical, and healthy individuals prepared for life and work in a complex world (WG, 2020; Priestley and Philippou, 2022). It emphasises bilingualism and digital competence, aligning with national goals such as reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and preparing learners for a digital society (WG, 2020; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). The curriculum also recognises the importance of mental health and well-being, reflecting increasing societal focus on these issues and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's development and learning experiences (Public Health Wales, 2021). However, the broader scope of the CfW raises concerns that the specific developmental needs of early years learners might be overlooked if not carefully implemented (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011; Priestley and Philippou, 2022).

The CfW's organisational structure around six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), underpinned by What Matters Statements, grants schools' autonomy to tailor curricula to local needs and learner interests

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(WG, 2020). This flexibility fosters innovation and learner agency but can overwhelm schools with less experienced staff or leadership, particularly in early years settings where practitioners miss the developmental specificity and detailed guidance of the FPC (Estyn, 2011a; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). Advocates note that such adaptability allows schools in Welsh-speaking or urban communities to integrate cultural or digital priorities effectively (WG, 2020; Buckingham, 2015).

Assessment in the FPC was formative and observational, using tools like the Foundation Phase Profile to track progress in seven learning areas without the pressure of accountability-driven testing (WG, 2008; Bruce, 2011). This approach facilitated holistic development monitoring but also resulted in inconsistencies in recording and planning (Estyn, 2011a; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011). The absence of formal tests aligned with the philosophy of supporting intrinsic motivation and reducing anxiety for young learners, fostering a positive disposition toward education.

The CfW introduces Progression Steps at approximate ages 5, 8, 11, 14, and 16 as flexible reference points to guide learning developmentally (WG, 2020). Formative assessment is central, focusing on progression rather than attainment or standardised outcomes, recognising individual differences in growth (Priestley and Philippou, 2022; OECD, 2020). This model depends heavily on practitioner expertise and consistent application, posing challenges for those with limited training or support (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007). There is also concern about potential disparities if some schools are better equipped to implement these flexible assessment strategies effectively.

Inclusivity in the FPC is reflected in its child-centred, flexible pedagogy, which allows for differentiation but has been critiqued for limited emphasis on cultural identity, diversity, and explicit guidance on supporting learners with ALN or from minority groups (Estyn, 2011a; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011). Welsh language development was core, but broader multicultural inclusion was underdeveloped. This gap is notable given Wales' increasingly diverse population and the need to foster positive identities and social cohesion from early childhood.

The CfW adopts a more explicit and legally aligned commitment to inclusivity and equity, embedding values of bilingualism, anti-racism, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles across all AoLEs (Welsh Government, 2020; CAST, 2018). It aligns with the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) Act 2018, requiring schools to support all learners' access and success, including those with disabilities or minority backgrounds (WG, 2018). Yet, realising these ambitions depends on effective training, leadership, and resourcing, especially in early years where practitioner experience varies (Priestley and Philippou, 2022). The need for systemic support and sustained investment is critical to avoid widening inequalities.

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Professional development has been identified as a key lever to enable these reforms. The FPC era saw significant efforts to improve practitioner knowledge of play pedagogy and child development, yet gaps remained (WG, 2023c). The CfW demands even greater pedagogical sophistication and curriculum design skills, alongside cultural competence, and knowledge of UDL strategies. National initiatives such as the Early Years Professional Development Programme and regional consortia aim to address this, but their reach and impact vary (WG, 2023c).

In summary, the Foundation Phase Curriculum laid essential groundwork for early years education in Wales by embedding play-based, developmental, and inclusive pedagogies focused on the whole child. The Curriculum for Wales builds on and extends these principles into a more comprehensive, flexible, and future-oriented framework that spans ages 3 to 16. It introduces progression-based assessment, greater professional autonomy, and a clearer commitment to equity and cultural inclusion aligned with legal requirements.

However, the CfW's success hinges on balancing flexibility with developmental appropriateness, ensuring that early year's practices are not diluted within the broader 3–16 continuum. Without adequate professional development, leadership, and resources, the foundational strengths of the FPC risk being overshadowed. The transition from FPC to CfW thus represents both an ambitious systemic reform and a challenge for consistent, high-quality early years education in Wales.

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Section 2

The Unique Child and Play-Based Assessment: A Critical Evaluation

The concept of the 'Unique Child' is a cornerstone of early childhood education and care frameworks, particularly in Wales and the UK, reflecting a rights-based, inclusive philosophy that recognises every child as an individual with distinct abilities, experiences, and cultural identities (WG, 2008; Bruce, 2011). This principle is deeply embedded in the ethos of the Foundation Phase (FP) and the Curriculum for Wales (CfW), both of which promote holistic development and value play as central to learning. The idea is that assessment should not reduce children to numbers or levels but should honour their varied developmental trajectories, interests, and contexts (Priestley and Philippou, 2022).

Play-based learning provides an authentic context for observing how children engage with the world, solve problems, collaborate, and express their ideas (Estyn, 2011a). The Foundation Phase Profile and more recently CfW's formative assessment guidance seek to capture this, encouraging practitioners to use naturalistic observation, reflection, and dialogue as key tools (WG, 2020; WG, 2022). In theory, this aligns with inclusive principles, allowing each child to demonstrate their strengths and needs in a meaningful, contextualised way (CSIE, 2013). However, there remains a persistent gap between this philosophy and classroom realities.

Challenges of Capturing the Unique Child in Assessment

While the Foundation Phase Profile originally aimed to move away from standardised, narrow measures of attainment, in practice it often fell short of its ideals. Observations frequently became checklist-driven, as practitioners sought to meet accountability demands and workload pressures (Estyn, 2011a; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011). This reduced opportunities for in-depth reflection on children's learning and risked turning assessment into a bureaucratic exercise rather than a meaningful pedagogical tool. The time-intensive nature of high-quality observational assessment added to the strain, particularly in large classes or under-resourced settings (Harrison *et al.*, 2024).

The Curriculum for Wales has sought to address these concerns by replacing rigid targets with Progression Steps, which offer greater flexibility and are designed to reflect broad developmental pathways rather than precise age expectations (WG, 2020). This shift supports the unique child philosophy by acknowledging that children develop at different rates and in different ways. However, research indicates that without clear

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guidance and robust moderation processes, such flexibility can lead to inconsistency in how progress is understood and recorded (Estyn, 2022a). Practitioners may interpret progression differently, leading to potential inequities, particularly for children with additional learning needs or those from minority cultural backgrounds whose development may not follow typical patterns (Lindsay *et al.*, 2020; CSIE, 2013).

The Role of Narrative Assessment and Learning Stories

Narrative-based approaches, such as Learning Stories, offer a promising alternative to checklist or data-driven assessments. Originating in New Zealand, Learning Stories allow practitioners to create rich, personalised accounts of children's learning episodes, highlighting strengths, dispositions, and contexts (Carr and Lee, 2012). These narratives encourage educators to view children as capable and competent learners, valuing what they can do rather than focusing on deficits (Bruce, 2011). They also provide families with meaningful insights into their child's learning journey, strengthening partnerships between home and school (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011).

However, Learning Stories and similar narrative approaches are not without challenges. Producing high-quality narratives requires significant time, professional judgment, and confidence in child development theory (Estyn, 2022a). In settings where staff have limited access to training or where workloads are high, there is a risk that Learning Stories become superficial, focusing on what is easy to observe rather than offering genuine critical reflection (The National College, 2025). Furthermore, narrative assessments must be carefully managed to avoid practitioner bias—ensuring that all children, not just the most articulate or confident, have their learning valued and documented (Hayes *et al.*, 2023).

Progression Steps and the Unique Child in the Curriculum for Wales

The CfW's introduction of Progression Steps and emphasis on formative assessment represents a deliberate move towards greater personalisation and inclusivity. Progression is described as a continuum, enabling practitioners to plan learning that builds on individual starting points and interests (WG, 2020). This aligns strongly with the unique child philosophy, as it encourages the recognition of multiple pathways to success (Priestley and Philippou, 2022). However, Estyn (2022) highlights that many schools and settings are still developing their understanding of what progression looks like in practice. Without shared frameworks and ongoing moderation, there is a risk that some children's achievements, particularly those of children with ALN or from diverse linguistic or cultural backgrounds, may be underestimated (Lindsay *et al.*, 2020).

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Barriers to Implementing Unique Child-Centred Assessment

Several systemic barriers undermine efforts to embed truly child-centred assessment in early years practice. One of the most significant is workload. Observational and narrative assessment methods demand time for reflection, documentation, and analysis—time that practitioners often do not have, given the competing demands of teaching, planning, administration, and pastoral care (NASUWT, no date; Harrison *et al.*, 2024). This can lead to a reliance on quicker, less meaningful forms of assessment, such as tick-box checklists or pre-set tasks that do not fully capture the child’s learning.

Another key issue is training and confidence. Effective narrative assessment requires deep understanding of child development, cultural competence, and inclusive pedagogy (Hayes *et al.*, 2023; OECD, 2020). Yet professional development in these areas is patchy, and opportunities for collaborative moderation are limited in many settings (Estyn, 2022a). Without this support, practitioners may feel uncertain about making and recording judgments, particularly when working with children whose development does not align with typical age-related expectations (WG, 2023c).

Accountability pressures also influence assessment practice. Despite CfW’s focus on formative, narrative-based assessment, schools still face expectations to produce data that can be used for monitoring and reporting (Estyn, 2023b). This can create tension between documenting rich, qualitative learning and meeting demands for quantitative evidence (EEF, 2023a). As a result, some practitioners revert to checklist-style assessments that feel more objective or measurable, even though they may not serve the best interests of the child (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, cultural responsiveness in assessment remains a challenge. While both FP and CfW frameworks stress the importance of valuing children’s cultural identities, in practice this is not always realised. Estyn (2011a) found that many practitioners lacked confidence in incorporating children’s home languages, traditions, or cultural knowledge into assessment processes, risking a narrow view of achievement that does not reflect the whole child (Hammond, 2018).

Strategies for Supporting Unique Child-Centred Assessment

To overcome these barriers, schools and practitioners can draw on a range of strategies. One key approach is the use of embedded formative assessment cycles, such as the “Notice, Recognise, Respond” model, which encourage practitioners to observe children in authentic contexts, interpret learning meaningfully, and plan

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responsively (Carr and Lee, 2012; Estyn, 2022). When integrated into daily practice, such approaches can help reduce the burden of additional documentation and ensure that assessment directly informs teaching.

Portfolios of learning can provide a cumulative, holistic picture of development, capturing progress across time and contexts. The most effective portfolios are co-constructed with children and families, including examples of work, photographs, and narrative accounts that reflect the child's voice (Department of Early Education and Care, 2014). However, as with Learning Stories, their value depends on practitioner skill in selecting and interpreting evidence, rather than simply amassing large quantities of documentation.

Professional learning communities and moderation are vital for developing shared understandings of progression, particularly within the CfW framework (Priestley and Philippou, 2022). Collaborative dialogue helps ensure that judgments are fair, inclusive, and consistent, and supports practitioners in developing confidence in narrative and formative assessment techniques (Estyn, 2022a). Training in culturally responsive assessment is equally important to ensure that tools and interpretations reflect and respect children's diverse identities (Hammond, 2018).

Digital tools may also have a role to play. Carefully designed platforms can support practitioners to record, share, and reflect on observations more efficiently, provided they are used thoughtfully and do not replace direct engagement with children's learning (Brodie, 2024).

Conclusion

In summary, while both the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales offer strong philosophical frameworks for assessment that respects the unique child, their practical implementation has often fallen short of this aspiration. The tension between formative, narrative-based assessment, and external accountability pressures, alongside challenges of time, training, and resources, has led to uneven practice across settings. If early years assessment is to truly honour each child's individuality, a cultural shift is required—one that values rich, narrative documentation as much as numerical data, and that supports practitioners through sustained professional development, leadership, and systemic change (OECD, 2020; Carr and Lee, 2012).

Effective, inclusive assessment is not an optional add-on: it is central to equitable, high-quality early childhood education. As Wales continues its CfW journey, there is a critical opportunity to embed child-centred assessment practices that genuinely reflect and celebrate the diversity, potential, and rights of every learner.

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Section 3

Should Teachers in Wales Be Required to Have a Grade C or Above in English, Maths, and Science?

In Wales, trainee teachers are expected to hold at least a Grade C in English, Maths, and Science (Welsh Government [WG], 2024a). On the surface, this seems reasonable—surely teachers should be competent in the very subjects they teach?

However, the debate is more nuanced. Is this requirement fair? Does it reflect what makes a good teacher? And could it exclude passionate, capable individuals who might thrive in the profession?

The Case for Requiring a Grade C or Above

Setting the Standard

Teaching is a demanding and intellectually skilled profession. Just as we expect doctors to understand biology or lawyers to master language, teachers should demonstrate foundational knowledge in core subjects (Shing, Saat, & Loke, 2015; Thomas *et al.*, 2023). A Grade C signals the ability to communicate clearly, apply reasoning, and explain scientific concepts. For Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Wales, candidates must hold a Grade C or equivalent in English/Welsh, Maths, and, for primary teachers, Science (WG, 2024a).

A Cross-Curricular Necessity

Primary teachers are generalists. A lack of confidence in a core subject can lead to avoidance or misconceptions in teaching. For example, a teacher unsure about Maths might limit problem-solving tasks. Poor literacy skills could impact how reading and writing are modelled. A weak understanding of science may lead to missed opportunities for exploration. Teachers often share their own negative experiences, unintentionally signalling that it is okay to disengage. Ensuring a solid grasp of all three subjects supports balanced, high-quality education (Coe *et al.*, 2014).

Professional Credibility

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Teachers are role models. Meeting clear academic standards builds parental trust and reinforces teaching as a respected profession (Coe *et al.*, 2014). Conversely, perceived underqualification can undermine confidence (Klimeck, 2019). Requiring a Grade C upholds expectations and aligns Wales with UK-wide standards. Notably, the previous requirement of a B in English/Welsh and Maths was reduced to a C in 2022 to ensure fairness while maintaining rigour (WG, 2024a).

The Case Against a Strict Grade C Requirement

Grades Are not Everything

GCSE grades may not reflect an individual's current capability or potential. Many underperform at school due to test anxiety, personal hardship, or lack of support but develop strong skills later through work or further study (OECD, 2016; Atkinson, Brown, & Soares, 2019). Someone who struggled with Maths at 16 might now confidently use numeracy daily. The Welsh Government recognises this and allows equivalency routes for those without the required grades (WG, no date b).

Lost Talent

Rigid academic requirements risk excluding individuals with qualities vital to teaching—empathy, creativity, resilience, and the ability to connect with learners (WG, 2023a; Teachers of Tomorrow, 2025). These traits cannot be measured by exam results. The “Teaching Tomorrow’s Teachers” report (Furlong, 2015) argued for broadening access to teaching, highlighting that raising quality should not narrow the candidate pool (Department for Education, 2025).

A Barrier to Inclusivity

Strict grade requirements may disproportionately affect disadvantaged applicants, those educated outside the UK, or those for whom English/Welsh is an additional language (Farquharson, McNally, & Tahir, 2022). Without accessible pathways to equivalency, these candidates risk exclusion (DfE, 2021). The Welsh Government has introduced initiatives to improve diversity in teaching, including financial support for ethnic minority and Welsh-medium candidates (WG, no date b).

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The 2023 PCET (post-compulsory education and training) review also called for more inclusive teacher education, especially in adult and further education. It recommended mentoring, bilingual support, and flexible entry routes (Bell, 2023).

A More Balanced Approach?

There is no doubt teachers need strong foundational skills. But applying the Grade C rule as a strict filter may be overly rigid (Farquharson, McNally, & Tahir, 2022). A more inclusive system would reflect the varied paths people take into teaching.

Alternative routes are already emerging in Wales. The University of South Wales offers equivalency modules in English, Maths, and Science for those who do not meet GCSE requirements. These allow candidates to demonstrate competence without being barred for past performance (University of South Wales, no date). As someone who tutors trainee teachers in Maths, this author has seen how these sessions often become “tick-the-box” tasks. Building deep understanding and confidence in a subject takes more than an hour a week.

The Open University in Wales offers part-time and salaried PGCE routes that combine study with in-school experience. These are particularly suited to career changers, teaching assistants, and those with caring responsibilities. The salaried option enables candidates to earn while training, supported by Welsh Government funding (Open University in Wales, no date).

Crucially, flexible routes do not mean lower standards (Glover & Hutchinson, 2022). They reflect that people develop in different ways. A candidate who missed out on a grade due to hardship may have since built deep knowledge through experience (OECD, 2019; Learning and Work Institute, 2020).

To build a diverse and motivated teaching workforce, Wales must welcome those who may not meet traditional benchmarks but show real potential (WG, 2024b; Evans, 2019). Bridging courses, foundation qualifications, and resit opportunities can maintain high standards while also being inclusive and forward-thinking.

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Final Thought

Maintaining standards in education is essential—but so is recognising human potential. It is time to look beyond past grades and see the full picture.

As a Maths tutor, it is disheartening to see talented trainees held back by past performance or a lack of confidence in core subjects—especially when this mindset is often reinforced by colleagues. Too often, trainee teachers hear others dismiss their own struggles with Maths or Science as “just not my thing.” This defeatist attitude can be internalised and passed on to pupils.

It is time primary education borrowed a model from secondary schools, where specialist teaching is the norm. Assigning topics based on teachers’ strengths and passions could boost confidence, improve delivery, and inspire learners across the curriculum.

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