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Section 1

In Wales, the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings [CFNMNS] and England's Early Years Foundation Stage [EYFS] both prioritise a child-centred transition that supports independence and emotional resilience as children move from early years to school using a play-based approach. This essay will explore the importance of transitions and the similarities and differences focusing on how play-based learning supports transitions between early years education and primary school, the language used within each framework and a critical analysis of the curricula guidance.

Play-based learning is a significant principle in early childhood education, recognising that children learn best through exploration and engagement encouraging children to develop skills and a positive attitude to learning (Education Endowment Foundation 2023).

According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2017) and O'Kane (2016) the transition from early years education to primary school is an important phase in a child's development, stating that a smooth, quality transition will have positive impacts on children's education and lifelong learning.

According to Care Learning (2024) children can experience four types of transitions during their early years: emotional, physical, intellectual and social. These transitions can occur when moving house, classrooms and can be disruptive if not managed well. Therefore, children require emotional support to help them feel secure. Other transitions such as making new friendships or advancing new intellectual stages requires adaptive teaching strategies to ensure continued growth. When transitions are well supported, children develop resilience and confidence to navigate these changes positively (Devon County Council, 2022). However, poor transitions can lead to anxiety and behaviour changes if not supported which can have long term effects to their well-being (Child Mind Institute, 2025). Recognising the importance of transitions and implementing structured yet flexible strategies ensure children are supported in their new environments. Moreover, Birth to 5 Matters (no date a) note that vulnerable children will need to be effectively supported with additional transitions such as more time and opportunities to make the necessary adjustments needed to support well-being.

The CFNMNS and the EYFS share important similarities that are essential for promoting smooth transitions into formal education. Their alignment in the frameworks ensures that regardless of location, children are receiving high quality experiences and education. According to Bryce-Clegg (2017), one of the most essential aspects of early education is a child-led learning approach, which prioritises play-based exploration and engagement, developing independence and creativity. By allowing children to take ownership of their learning, both frameworks recognise that children learn best when following their own interests and can explore their curiosities (Department for Education, 2025a; Welsh Government 2023b). Therefore, these approaches not only enhance social interaction but also ensures that education is inclusive and diverse.

Additionally, there is also emphasis on parental involvement, which both frameworks identify as important to successful transitions. Lopez *et al.* (2021) researched Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) who believed parents are a child's first educator and their role in supporting their children through maintaining routines, providing emotional security and mirroring play at home can help children adapt to their new settings with confidence. Both frameworks also state that collaborative relationships between families and practitioners can strengthen children's outcomes by taking part in transition activities in settings or communication between home and school to share information can benefit the child and build confidence and independence (Department for Education, 2021; Estyn, 2018).

Moreover, another key similarity is the use of observation and assessment to identify individual needs and monitor progress (Welsh Government, 2020). There is a strong focus on understanding children holistically and promoting their well-being which supports their emotional resilience and mental health (NSPCC Learning, 2021). Assessment is supported with guidance from Welsh Government (2023c) to assess children by supporting them daily and capturing and understanding their progress by reflecting on practice from educators to inform next steps of learning. Therefore, by enabling environments where children are engaged and feel safe in order for them to learn. This has been embedded this into the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) with well-being a priority as one of the four purposes and one of the developmental pathways in CFNMNS stating its importance for both learning considering the well-being of children. Moreover, personal, social and

emotional education is taught in the EYFS curriculum as one of the 7 areas of learning (Department for Education, 2023).

Furthermore, the clear and accessible language used with the CFNMNS and EYFS frameworks ensures understanding and consistency for educators, parents and stakeholders. By avoiding jargon and providing practical guidance such as Development Matters (Department for Education, 2023) and Enabling Learning (Welsh Government 2023a) these both empower practitioners to implement effective teaching strategies while allowing parents to get fully involved in their child's education. This clarity eases the process of transition ensuring children experience smooth supportive adjustments into structured learning environments (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021a).

Both frameworks approach transitions with differing emphases on flexibility and personalisation versus consistency and specific expectations. CFNMNS prioritises child-led learning which allows for individualised progression based on the needs, interests and developmental pace (Welsh Government, 2023b). This flexibility ensures that transitions are adaptable, developing emotional skills and independence through play-based exploration (Ahmed, Khan and Mehmood, 2023). In contrast, EYFS maintains structured expectations, providing a standardised framework that outlines clear learning goals and developmental milestones to ensure consistency across all early year settings. While this approach helps to create predictable transitions with children experiencing routine, it may be less adaptable to individual learning styles. Child Mind Institute (2025) agree noting that children with learning difficulties can find transitions difficult experiencing anxiety and overstimulation.

Practitioners need to know the child and their triggers to overcome problems with transition. The EYFS also states the term "school ready" in the framework when referring to transitions. OECD (2017) notes that this term should be opposite making schools ready for children and favouring approaches such as CFNMNS where the focus is on the needs of the child. The CFNMNS framework allows practitioners to tailor transition strategies to support those children who develop at different times, while the EYFS ensures consistency supporting children in other ways such as a key person, or staggered start times (Barnardos, 2016). A key worker can play an important role in transitions by promoting secure attachment and belonging as noted by Ainsworth's attachment theory. They provide consistent emotional support, helping children feel safe during times of change. This aligns

with Maslow's hierarchy of needs ensuring psychological and safety needs are met, which enables children to confidently explore and engage in new experiences in early transitions.

Additionally, both frameworks differ in their approach of assessments in relation to transitions. CFNMNS emphasises flexible, child-led assessments allowing practitioners to observe children's progression without benchmarking to ensure that transitions are adaptable to each child's pace (Welsh Government, 2020). In contrast, EYFS incorporates structured assessments using developmental milestones to track progress and ensure children are meeting specific learning goals before transitioning to formal schooling (Department for Education, 2023). However, this has an implication for summer born children who turn five later into the academic year. Pascal, Bertram and Rouse (2019) noted that children faced disadvantages and potential negative effects on their education when beginning school, a year earlier than their peers. Additionally, Purdam et al (2023) conducted a study where 79% of Autumn born children were classed as school ready reaching their early learning goals compared to Summer born children at 60%. This may result in many children experiencing unfair challenges and disadvantages even before their first year of school education suggesting that not being school ready can have a long-term impact (Child of the North, 2024).

While EYFS uses standardised assessment frameworks ensuring consistency across early year settings, CFNMNS focuses on holistic observations which allow for personalised learning progression. However, this can lead to variability in implementation across settings, depending on how well educators apply the principles. If a lack of funding or insufficient training is given to practitioners that could result in uneven experiences across settings which can make transition difficult (Welsh Government, 2023b). Yet, there are professional learning modules stated in the CFNMNS framework for practitioners to undertake, although these are not mandatory to complete.

Moreover, both frameworks state they are centred around the well-being of the child with CFNMNS being guided by a play-based, child-led approach focusing on emotional development, independence and resilience which helps them adapt naturally to transitions and changes (Welsh Government, 2023b). In contrast, EYFS incorporates structured learning goals and standardised benchmarks, ensuring consistency and measurable progress in transitions (Learning Journals, no date). However, while this approach provides

clear expectations, it may create pressure for children who struggle to meet the predefined milestones, especially those with additional learning needs, and may affect their emotional well-being (UK Government, 2021). Nevertheless, it could be beneficial to those children who thrive in structured environment.

In conclusion, both the CFNMNS and EYFS frameworks play a vital role in supporting smooth transitions from early years settings to primary education. While they differ in flexibility and assessment methods, both prioritise children's well-being through play-based learning. Despite these differences, both frameworks highlight the importance of parental involvement, observation and secure relationships. Ultimately, a balanced approach that blends structure with personalisation is essential to support all children effectively throughout their educational journey.

Section 2

According to Birth to 5 Matters (2021b) the term "unique child" refers to the recognition that each child has distinct interests, learning styles, and developmental pathways. This individuality must be considered when evaluating children's learning progress, as their development occurs at different rates and stages (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). Additionally, various factors including cultural background, home environment, and personal experiences can shape a child's learning and overall development.

Assessment in early education plays an important role in understanding a child's progress, identifying needs and ensuring the effective implementation of learning strategies (Early Excellence, 2025). This combined with a play-based approach can holistically support each unique child. In this essay the Early Years Foundation Stage [EYFS] will be discussed looking at how assessments are completed whilst supporting the unique child.

The EYFS is a play-based framework in England that guide the care, learning and development of children from birth to five years old. Its four principles shape planning, assessment and daily practice in early year settings. Birth to 5 Matters (2021b) state the unique child as a core principle ensuring continuous learning while promoting individuality and inclusivity. MacBlain (2018) further emphasises the prime and specific areas of development stating that practitioners to consider each child's individual needs developmental stage to support effective learning, in readiness for school. With that in mind,

this focus on age-related milestones contrasts with the idea that children develop at different rates, potentially limiting a fully individualised approach (Sancisi and Edgington, 2015).

Formative assessment in the EYFS is central to recognising and supporting the unique child, as it is embedded into daily interactions and routines to enhance learning outcomes. This is echoed by (Barnados, 2016; Brodie and Savage, 2018) emphasising the role of the practitioner in understanding the child holistically. Through authentic observation during both play and structured activities, practitioners develop a deep understanding of each child's interests, developmental progress and individual learning styles, enabling tailored support (DfE, 2024; Siraj *et al.*, 2015). This child-centred, holistic approach allows for responsive planning that furthers progress and helps close developmental gaps which can have long term consequences (Famly, 2024; Ofsted, 2024). However, the effectiveness of formative assessment is dependent on the practitioner's skills, time and consistency.

Additionally, subjectivity in interpretation can lead to inconsistent assessments, particularly in culturally diverse settings (Morris, Perry and Wardle, 2021). Santin and Torruella (2017) highlight the importance of collaborative assessment between practitioners and learners advocating for a shift in focus from predetermined outcomes to the learning process itself. They argue that assessment should be grounded in observable behaviours rather than assumptions, ensuring that it reflects genuine understanding and development.

Moreover, time pressures and documentation demands may reduce assessment to a checklist task, limiting meaningful interaction with the children (Care Learning, 2025). While the ELGs offer structure, they can narrow focus to measurable outcomes, potentially overlooking broader developmental areas such as creativity and emotional resilience. Pascal, Bertram and Rouse (2019) suggest that in supporting the unique child, formative assessment should remain flexible, inclusive and shaped by a deep understanding of each child's background and needs.

The two-year progress check is a formative milestone that provides a holistic view of a child's development across the prime areas of learning. Influenced by Froebelian principles, it values individuality by considering each child's interests, cultural background and developmental pace (Froebel Trust, 2022). Through observation and collaboration with

parents, assessment reinforces the partnership between home and early years settings. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, as cited in MacBlain (2018), highlighting the influence of the microsystem on a child's learning and development. By integrating insights from both environments, practitioners can identify emerging needs (DfE, 2022; Gordon, 2023), ensuring timely support tailored to the child's unique experiences reinforcing inclusive, individualised learning. However, its success relies heavily on practitioner expertise, confidence and time.

Additionally, inconsistent training and limited understanding of child development can lead to inaccurate assessments, especially in settings where cultural and linguistic differences may obscure a child's true capabilities (Gonzales and Gabel, 2017). This can be problematic when practitioners are unfamiliar with the cultural norms or communication styles of children they assess, potentially resulting in biased judgements. To address this, Brody and Savage (2015) suggest settings provide professional development that equips practitioners with the skills to interpret development appropriately and the importance of reflective practice and inclusive strategies to ensure all children are supported and fairly assessed.

Summative assessment at the end of the reception year offers a structured overview of a child's development, supporting the transition into key stage one by evaluating progress against seventeen ELGs (DfE, 2024). When informed by holistic, observation-based practice, it can reflect a child's learning journey and inform tailored support (Keyte-Hartland, 2024; MacBlain, 2018). However, this method presents notable challenges in recognising the unique child. According to Care learning (2025) the standardised nature of the ELGs may narrow the focus to measurable outcomes, but may overlook important qualities such as creativity, emotional resilience and curiosity.

Additionally, children who are summer born, bilingual or have additional needs may be disadvantaged by expectations that do not account for developmental variability (NFER, no date; Brodie and Savage, 2015). Consequently, a child who has not reached the expected level will be identified as emerging, but this should be carefully evaluated, as various factors may contribute to their progress. Clear communication is essential to highlight the child's strengths and identify any barriers to development ensuring a holistic and supportive approach. Allingham (2022) highlights concerns that a child may appear to meet a goal but may not yet be fully secure in their understanding or abilities. In 2021 EYFS removed

exceeding from the profile, and this has led to uncertainty about what the ELGs represent, making it harder to gauge development using met or not met criteria (Foundation Years, 2020).

Moreover, the reliability of judgements can be impacted by practitioner bias, especially when there is a lack of training. Bias may arise due to unconscious assumptions about children's abilities, backgrounds or behaviours, leading to inaccurate judgements (Grenier, 2025). Louis and Betteridge (2020) highlight that practitioners may interpret the same behaviours differently depending on their experiences, expectations and knowledge of child development. Without training, these subjective variations can result in inconsistent assessment outcomes.

Furthermore, the pressure for practitioners to meet end of year outcomes may shift focus from play-based, child-led learning to more outcome driven practices. While the ELGs aim to ensure consistency, their implementation can lead practitioners to prioritise measurable academic outcomes over holistic child development (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes, 2017). This shift frequently leads to increased child-led instruction while limiting spontaneous, child-initiated play, contradicting children's right to play as outlined in Article thirty-one of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (Unicef, no date). This is also concerning for children who develop at different rates or express their learning in non-traditional ways, particularly for those who are neurodiverse or bilingual (Brodie and Savage, 2015).

Alternative assessment approaches in the EYFS provide flexible and authentic ways to capture children's learning. Narrative assessments, such as learning stories, offer rich, contextual insights that reflect the child's voice allowing practitioners to document development in a meaningful and personalised way (Cowan and Flewitt, 2021). These stories highlight children's experiences, interests and interactions fostering a deeper understanding of their learning journey (Escamilla, 2021). This approach aligns with the principles of Te Whariki, New Zealand's early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2023), which emphasises holistic and child-led assessment based on a process of noticing, recognising and responding to learning encouraging practitioners to work with children and families sharing learning stories. By focusing on the child's strengths and potential, this approach promotes inclusivity and supports the EYFS ethos of recognising and nurturing the unique child.

Additionally, child-led documentation including drawings, self-selected photographs and recorded reflections empowers children to express their experiences and take ownership of their learning. This approach aligns with Froebel principles, which emphasise the uniqueness of each child's capacity and potential (Froebel Trust, 2022). Similarly, the Reggio Emilia Approach views documentation as a key tool for reflection and communication allowing children to discuss their learning experience (Roberts-Holmes, 2017). By involving children in the documentation process, using photographs and artwork, practitioners can create a shared narrative that supports deeper understanding and collaboration therefore creating a more inclusive assessment framework.

Furthermore, digital tools and platforms streamline documentation and enhance collaboration with practitioners and families. Technology such as Tapestry (2025) enables real time sharing of observations, supporting continuity between home and early years settings. These technologies enable practitioners to record children's experiences efficiently, reducing paperwork and allowing more time for meaningful interactions (Major, Francis and Tsapali 2021). However, research from Weinstein (2022) highlights that digital assessment tools must prioritise child-centred learning rather than becoming compliance-driven systems. Practitioner must balance digital documentation with observational assessment, ensuring that technology enhances rather than replaces reflective practices. Moreover, settings must adhere to General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] and *Data Protection Act 2018* when using digital tools to document children's learning. The GDPR requires settings to handle personal data responsibly and gain consent from parents when sharing photographs or data online (Early Years Alliance, 2022).

To conclude, the EYFS assessment framework offers a strong foundation for recognising and supporting the development of the unique child. Its emphasis on formative, observational assessment aligns well with the principles of child centred pedagogy. However, challenges such as subjectivity, workload and the risk of narrowing the curriculum must be addressed. By adopting more inclusive, reflective and participatory assessment practices, early years settings can better honour the individuality of each child and support their holistic development.

Section 3

Blog

27th May 2025



RETHINKING NATIONAL TESTS IN A CHILD-LED CURRICULUM

As a Teaching Assistant in Wales, I see first-hand how national tests can impact both the children and educators in schools today. The Curriculum for Wales prioritises a child-led approach to learning, which encourages curiosity, creativity and promotes the well-being of the child. Yet, national testing often contradicts these principles forcing children into rigid frameworks that prioritise standardised results. Therefore, children experience a pressure to perform with anxiety overshadowing the broader aspects of the new curriculum in developing curious, capable and well-rounded individuals. So, I ask myself this question, do we need to rethink how we test children in a child-led curriculum?

I surveyed my colleagues at a Primary School in South Wales and the results were unanimous. Educators want to abolish these tests. One Teacher commented "This curriculum expects us to know the children and plan for their learning, why not trust our own assessments of what we know the children can achieve?" I also asked the children in my class and opinions were divided, but if given the choice 80% of children wouldn't want to do national tests, believing it has no value.

Is National Testing a good idea?	
Yes	No
Important to know what you are capable of. Know what level you are working at. Important for letting your next school know. Can boost your self-confidence.	Look at our books to see what we're capable of. Practising wastes our time. We could be learning more. Stressful, frustrating. Not an accurate representation.

Welsh Curriculum

The curriculum is designed to be flexible where teachers take ownership of exploring topics that interest the child, adjusting teaching methods and assessments to meet the needs of each child in the classroom. This approach values progress over performance putting children in phases of learning not age and stage. Children can benefit from learning vital skills such as problem solving and creative thinking, all lifelong skills needed to shape their futures as stated by Donaldson (2015).

"97% of teachers believe tests should be abolished with a sensible alternative" Guardian (2019)

National tests undermine child-led learning

National testing, however, forces a one size fits all model shifting the focus away from the flexibility and expecting children to conform to predefined benchmarks which limits their ability to guide their own journey. So why does this clash with child-led learning?

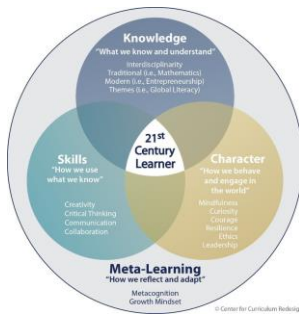
- Rigid expectation – Testing enforces a strict syllabus with teachers often teaching to test leaving little room for children to explore other topics. Teachers spend hours preparing children for tests focusing on subjects such as maths and literacy that will produce the best results (Siddaraju, 2021).
- Limited creativity – Child-led education celebrates individual strengths yet national tests measure students in narrow ways, taking a snapshot of their ability to perform under pressure.
- Pressure – The focus on the tests can lead children who normally thrive in a creative, hands-on environment struggling with the test conditions, causing emotional stress and anxiety (Lenon, 2020). This then becomes a cycle of memorisation and assessment where I've witnessed very capable children struggle under the pressures and expectations leaving one with a sense of helplessness.
- Inequity in assessment – Children learn in different ways, particularly for those with a learning difficulty. However, standardised tests fail to account for diverse talents and abilities which will affect their confidence and well-being (Holler, 2024).

So, with this in mind, questions need to be asked, are assessments accurately measuring the depth of a child's knowledge or simply their ability to perform under pressure? It is time we rethink how we measure children's progress because learning is more than just numbers on a page.

Ways forward- alternatives to testing

A curriculum built around standardised testing risks becoming restrictive, leaving little space for developing critical thinking, problem solving and interpersonal skills – skills that are arguably more important than recalling facts under exam conditions. Rethinking national tests does not mean abandoning assessments altogether. Instead, we should be looking at alternatives to testing to create a more balanced, holistic approach to evidence a range of skills (Lucas, 2022). Success can be measured through continuous assessment that align with the child-led principles of the curriculum. Jimenez and Modaffari (2021) state that by tracking progress over time through projects, teacher observations and peer evaluations can build a more comprehensive picture of the child's abilities the need for testing. Children themselves can showcase what they have learnt by building portfolios that reflect their strengths and show understanding in diverse ways rather than those who excel in timed exams. Other countries such as Finland have already embraced a more flexible curriculum emphasising creative, hands-on learning experience with autonomy given to teachers by the government to teach based on the interests and needs of the child. Additionally, with testing of a rare occurrence, children are able to enjoy the process of learning without having to prepare for exams. Finnish children sit just one exam at age 16 and when compared with OECD's PISA Finland score near the top in all subjects outranking most countries (OECD, 2023). This begs the question, if we are testing children, putting them under stress every year, who is this for?

The following diagram suggested by Lucas (2021) shows what a 21st Century learner looks like with knowledge, skills and character. These are all things the new curriculum promotes but national tests will not show. Therefore, I believe assessment needs to focus on these areas to gain the best from children not their failings.



Centre for Curriculum Redesign, Lucas (2022)

Rethinking Accountability

Accountability in national testing is often framed as a way to measure school performance with parents and stakeholders wanting to see schools delivering quality education. Williams (2017) suggested that national tests are used to strengthen children's learning and the approach taken by teachers rather than for school accountability purposes. This is seen as a formative test, but consequently, still a test with pressure to perform. However, as these results are not published, who are we testing for? It is also important to consider if testing takes into account the diverse children in school with different socioeconomic backgrounds and learning styles (Holler, 2024). The nature of these tests will not allow these children to achieve resulting in lower outcomes and even possibly not scoring which can be detrimental to their confidence and well-being. Welsh Government (2024) state that these tests are to gauge progress on what is learnt in class and to provide teachers with information on how learners are progressing. However, I have been present when results are published and teachers commenting that they know they can do better than they performed so why do we need a test to justify this or not as the case may be?

Conclusion

Education should be about growth, discovery and developing lifelong skills, not test scores. It is time to rethink national testing in Wales, ensuring that assessments in a child-led curriculum truly support learning rather than limit it. Children deserve a fairer system which captures more of what they achieve, to feel inspired and happy to learn.

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