

Module: ECEY6010**Early Years Curricula: Portfolio****Portfolio Contents:**

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AI Declaration -

I acknowledge the use of Google Scholar [<https://scholar.google.com/>] between period:

(18/05/2026 - (14/06/2026) to help search for relevant academic journals and literature which are not always available via the university online library.

The following prompt themes were used:

- *Steiner Waldorf Early Years Curriculum*
- *Steiner Waldorf Early Years Assessment*
- *Welsh Curriculum Early Years*
- *Welsh Curriculum Early Years Assessment*
- *Social, emotional and cognitive development, Early Years*
- *Play based learning, Early Years*
- *Concept of the 'Unique Child', Early Years*
- *Inclusion and engagement education, Early Years*
- *Observation and assessment, Early Years*
- *Teacher's use of social media, Early Years*
- *Multilingualism and language development, Early Years*
- *Classroom environments and impacts of child learners, Early Years*

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

Part One: A Critical Examination of the Challenges of Implementing Play-Based Pedagogy in Steiner Early Years Education and the Curriculum for Wales

Curriculum is a planned framework of learning experiences that guides teaching and shapes children's learning, determining which knowledge, skills and experiences are valued (Jung and Pinar, 2016). It both organises learning and reflects educational priorities. This is evident in the increasing prominence of play-based approaches in early years education, signalling a shift towards child-centred and holistic learning. Recently, play-based pedagogy has grown in influence as education moves away from formal instruction towards approaches prioritising exploration, creativity and holistic development (Wyse *et al.*, 2016; Mohammed *et al.*, 2026; Dean and Wenner, 2025). Play is widely recognised as central to how young children construct meaning, develop social relationships and engage with their environment (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Ang *et al.*, 2025).

This shift is reflected in contemporary curricula. In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) promotes experiential, developmentally appropriate learning, with play as a key medium for exploration and understanding (Welsh Government, 2024). Similarly, Steiner early years education places play at the centre, emphasising imagination, creativity and emotional well-being as essential to holistic development (Nicol and Taplin, 2018; Taplin, 2024; Xiang, 2026). Although both approaches prioritise holistic, child-led learning, tensions arise in practice, particularly regarding curriculum expectations, assessment and the demands of formal systems. Part one critically examines these challenges within Wales.

Steiner Waldorf Early Years Curricula

Steiner, a twentieth-century philosopher, placed play at the centre of a holistic, developmentally sensitive pedagogy that influenced educational settings known as 'Steiner–Waldorf' schools (Pound, 2006). There are approximately 1,300 school settings and 1,900 kindergarten settings worldwide (Steiner Waldorf, 2026), with around 28 settings in the UK, with two in Wales (Waldorf UK, 2026). This holistic approach aims to support children's emotional, social and intellectual development while promoting curiosity and a love of learning (Nicol and Taplin, 2018).

Steiner education views early childhood as a distinct developmental phase that should be protected from premature academic pressure, with formal literacy and numeracy typically introduced after kindergarten. Children in kindergarten (typically aged three to seven) learn in mixed-age groups, and digital technology is generally avoided (Nicol and Taplin, 2018; Taplin, 2024). Play is central, focusing on creative and imaginative activities such as storytelling, role play

and self-directed exploration using natural resources (Nome, 2024). A strong emphasis is placed on rhythm and routine, providing predictable daily patterns that promote a sense of security (MacBlain, 2018).

Adults act as guides who shape the environment through routines and by modelling behaviours, such as demonstrating practical tasks or social interactions (Ryan, 2025). However, this raises questions about the extent of child agency, as the structured environment and routines may limit spontaneity and autonomy (Rentzou *et al.*, 2023).

The Curriculum for Wales

The CfW, implemented in 2022, promotes a play-based approach with child-led learning and exploratory experiences central to early years' practice (Welsh Government, 2024; National Day Nurseries Association Cymru, 2024). Play is viewed as the primary medium through which children learn, enabling them to actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment (Wainwright *et al.*, 2019). This prioritises children's interests, with practitioners responding flexibly to individual needs and stages of development (Childcare Wales Learning and Working Mutually, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024). Therefore, learning experiences are often spontaneous rather than pre-determined, supporting a more personalised and engaging education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). However, Jones (2026) highlights that while this child-centred approach aims to promote autonomy and engagement, its effectiveness may be constrained by contextual factors such as resources and practitioner capacity.

The CfW promotes flexible, responsive play, allowing children to explore ideas meaningfully. Practitioners adapt activities based on engagement, supporting deeper learning (Wainwright *et al.*, 2019). This aligns with the Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs), which integrate learning rather than separating subjects (Welsh Government, 2020). In practice, this maintains play while supporting progression (Welsh Government, 2024).

The role of the teacher within the Welsh approach is that of a facilitator rather than a director (Welsh Government, 2025). Practitioners support learning by observing, scaffolding and extending children's play, rather than leading it explicitly. However, this approach is not without challenges. The emphasis on flexibility and child-led learning can sometimes lead to a lack of structure, particularly where practitioners lack confidence or sufficient training, or resources are short. This may result in fragmentation of approach, with some settings finding it difficult to balance the needs

of the child with purposeful learning which meets the progression steps of the new curriculum (Stewart *et al.*, 2024).

Strengths of Implementing Steiner Pedagogy in Wales

Holistic Educational Aims

Steiner pedagogy and the CfW share a focus of developing the whole child, including emotional, social, and physical well-being. Steiner education's focus on creativity and imagination aligns closely with the CfW's aim of developing enterprising, creative contributors (Stehlik, 2019). This parallels Welsh Government guidance on learners' creative thinking and use of imagination (Welsh Government, 2022). Steiner education's emphasis on emotional security and nurturing relationships reflects the CfW's goal of developing healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Attachment theory highlights how secure early relationships provide a strong foundation where children can confidently explore the world (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978). These attachments are strongly associated with positive emotional development, including greater self-esteem, resilience and social competence (Aubrey and Riley, 2016, Tatlow-Golden, 2023). This shared focus suggests Steiner pedagogy can support CfW priorities, particularly as well-being is central to curriculum design in Wales (Bryant *et al.*, 2025; Welsh Government, 2022b).

Play and Experiential Learning

Steiner education provides a model of play-based learning, characterised by uninterrupted, child-initiated activity often featuring key concepts of rhythm and repetition (Nicol and Taplin, 2018). This aligns with CfW's key principles of play-based learning, authentic experiences and child-centred environments (Welsh Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2022). Research consistently highlights play's role in developing problem-solving, creativity, and social competence, also emphasised in educational theory, including Piaget's constructivism and Vygotsky's socio-cultural perspective (Alharbi, 2022; Wang and Oyam, 2024; Cankaya *et al.*, 2025). Steiner pedagogy demonstrates how play can function as the central approach to learning. However, the freedom this allows could lead to inconsistency of experiences, less structured teaching, which in turn could affect assessment outcomes (Kirkham and Kidd, 2017; Taylor and Boyer, 2020).

Challenges and Limitations of Implementation in Wales

Literacy and Numeracy Expectations

The Steiner curriculum and Welsh Curriculum objectives differ in their expectations of literacy and numeracy development for children. Although the CfW is designed to be flexible, it still emphasises the early development of cross-curricular skills, identifying literacy and numeracy as foundational competencies embedded across all areas of learning and requiring ongoing progression and assessment (Welsh Government, 2022). Steiner education delays the formal teaching of reading and writing, based on the principle that early instruction may be developmentally inappropriate and should begin around the age of seven (Bell, 2024; Nicol and Taplin, 2018). While this may support long-term outcomes, it can conflict with Welsh expectations, as research comparing Steiner and mainstream education shows that Steiner pupils may initially lag in early literacy but follow different developmental trajectories and often catch up over time (Cunningham and Carroll, 2011; Telfer-Radzat, 2024). Practitioners may therefore feel pressured to introduce structured teaching earlier, weakening the Steiner approach, as research suggests a child's readiness for learning and accountability pressures can create tensions between pedagogy and literacy expectations (Kay, 2024).

Training and Pedagogy

Teaching practitioners in Welsh mainstream schools must have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Educators Wales 2021; Welsh Government, 2024). In Steiner schools, practitioners need both QTS and additional qualifications. For early years this would be the London Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Training (LoSWEC, 2026). These extra qualifications may affect the numbers applying, but equally there are fewer Steiner schools in the UK. The CfW encourages collaboration between practitioners, promotes cluster schools and local authority networks which can support practitioners in their practice, and professional development (Central South Consortium, 2023). Collaboration encourages a common approach to teaching, learning and assessment which produces standardised curricula outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022).

Practical Constraints in Welsh Settings

Practical constraints also present barriers to effective implementation. This can include time pressures, staffing ratios, and curriculum demands (Education and Training Inspectorate for Wales, 2024; Education and Training Inspectorate for Wales, 2024a). Steiner education requires extended uninterrupted play, which supports sustained engagement and creativity (Hargraves,

2020), but can be difficult within structured schedules (Taplin, 2024). Requirements for documentation of evidence may further limit time for child-led learning, as administrative and assessment demands are a major component of practitioner workload (DfE, 2019). These constraints make it difficult to implement a purely Steiner approach within current systems, which often require alignment with standardised curricula and accountability frameworks (Mephram, 2024; Schieren, 2025).

Accessibility and Equity

Many Steiner settings operate independently on a fee-paying basis, which could limit access for some children and affect scalability (European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, 2024). In Wales, there is an emphasis on equality and inclusion within education highlighted in both the curriculum and the Additional Learning Needs policies which both aim to create a more inclusive education system (Knight and Crick, 2022), an area where Barth and Wiehl have found limitations to inclusion and diversity in Steiner settings and the potential for improvement (Barth and Wiehl, 2024).

Conclusion

While both the Steiner approach and the CfW demonstrate a shared commitment to play-based, child-centred and holistic learning, challenges could arise when trying to integrate these approaches in practice. Steiner pedagogy offers a model that prioritises imagination, emotional well-being and extended play, aligning closely with the broader aims of the Welsh curriculum. However, tensions emerge in relation to curriculum expectations, particularly around early literacy and numeracy, as well as the need for measurable progression and accountability. Practical constraints such as time, training requirements and administrative demands further complicate implementation, often limiting the possibility of maintaining a fully authentic Steiner approach within mainstream settings. Additionally, issues of accessibility and inclusion highlight concerns around equity within Steiner provision. Ultimately, while Steiner principles can enhance play-based practice in Wales, effective implementation requires careful adaptation, balancing philosophical ideals with the structural and policy realities of contemporary education systems.

Part 2: Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child', critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking or age and stage related development models within play-based curricula

'Unique Child' is an important part of early years education, emphasising every child as an individual with distinct needs, abilities, interests, and developmental pathways (Grenier, 2025). Rooted in child-centred pedagogical approaches, this concept recognises that children develop at different rates and in diverse ways, shaped by their experiences, relationships, and environments (Department for Education, 2021). Within play-based curricula, the 'Unique Child' underpins the belief that learning should be responsive, flexible, and personalised rather than standardised (Taylor and Boyer, 2020; Baker *et al.*, 2023).

Assessment, in early years contexts, refers broadly to the processes through which practitioners observe, document, and evaluate children's learning and development. It includes both formal and informal methods, such as observations, developmental checklists, and practitioner reflections, which aim to support children's progress and inform teaching (Bohart and Procopio, 2018; Smidt, 2015). In play-based learning, assessment is typically embedded within everyday activities rather than conducted through structured testing (Wall and Roeschlaub, 2021; Walsh and Sproule, 2017).

Part two of this portfolio aims to critically evaluate how issues in the title play out in play-based curricula, focusing on the CfW and Steiner education, and examines whether these approaches effectively support the concept of the 'Unique Child'.

Assessment in the CfW

Assessment within the CfW is designed to be formative, holistic, and embedded within everyday learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2022f). Rather than relying on formal testing, practitioners use observational assessment to monitor children's progress across progression steps within the AoLEs (Protheroe, 2025). This includes documenting children's play, interactions, and emerging skills, enabling practitioners to build a comprehensive understanding of each child's development (Welsh Government, 2024).

Progression steps are not intended as fixed benchmarks linked strictly to age, but rather as reference points that help practitioners identify where a child is in their learning journey (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach reflects an attempt to balance flexibility with the need for

structure, ensuring that assessment remains responsive while still providing a sense of progression.

A strength of this model is its alignment with the concept of the 'Unique Child'. By prioritising observation and practitioner judgement, it allows for individualised assessment that reflects children's interests, strengths, and developmental pace. It also supports inclusive practice, particularly for children with ALN, as assessment can be adapted to reflect diverse needs and abilities (Welsh Government, 2026).

However, challenges remain. Despite its flexible design, the CfW operates within an accountability framework which requires practitioners to evidence progress. This can create pressure to align observations with progression steps, potentially leading to the standardisation of assessment. As a result, play-based learning may become directed towards demonstrating specific outcomes, limiting its spontaneity and authenticity. Furthermore, practitioner confidence and expertise play a crucial role in the effectiveness of observational assessment, meaning that inconsistencies may arise across settings (Welsh Government, 2025).

Assessment in Steiner Waldorf Education

The Steiner approach to assessment is rooted in careful, reflective observation and a holistic understanding of the child (Rawson, 2020; Taplin, 2024). Rather than focusing primarily on measurable outcomes, practitioners seek to "solve the riddle of the individual child" through ongoing observation and reflection (Nicol and Taplin, 2018, p.117). Assessment begins with a genuine interest in the child and recognises that understanding develops through attentive interaction rather than predefined criteria (Attfield, 2021). A key feature of this approach is objective observation, where practitioners avoid assumptions and instead record what they actually see and hear, aligning with broader early childhood research on bias-free assessment (Al-Hendawi *et al.*, 2025; National Association of Children and Young People, 2020). Observations are then developed into rich descriptive accounts and shared collaboratively through child study, where colleagues work together to deepen understanding and plan appropriate support (Nicol and Taplin, 2018).

This approach strongly supports the concept of the 'unique child', a principle central to early years frameworks (Attfield, 2021; Taplin, 2024). By focusing on detailed, individualised observations and avoiding comparison to rigid norms, Steiner assessment recognises each child as developing in their own way and time (Rawson, 2020). The emphasis on observing children during self-initiated

play is particularly significant, as it allows practitioners to see authentic interests, motivations and social behaviours without adult direction (Nicol and Taplin, 2018; Taplin, 2024; Xiang, 2026). This holistic and relational approach enables practitioners to respond to the whole child, including emotional, social and physical dimensions, aligning closely with research on holistic development in Waldorf education (Mavrelos and Daradoumis, 2020; Taplin, 2024).

However, there are also limitations to this method. Despite efforts to remain objective, this method acknowledges that observation is “inevitably someone’s picture, coloured by that person” (Nicol and Taplin, 2018, p. 121). This introduces subjectivity, as different practitioners may interpret the same child differently. Additionally, the approach can be time intensive, particularly the process of child study, which may not always be feasible in busy early years settings where practitioners balance multiple responsibilities (Gutsmore, 2025; Hamel and Schachter, 2025). There is also tension between Steiner practices and statutory requirements such as the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework in England, particularly in relation to summative ‘tick-box’ assessments, which many practitioners view as being at odds with their pedagogical approach (Nicol and Taplin, 2018). Traditional outcome-driven assessment systems have been criticised for reducing children’s learning to checklists, rather than supporting meaningful understanding (Alaçam and Olgan, 2021). While Steiner settings now incorporate both formative and summative assessment, the balance between holistic understanding and accountability measures remains challenging. (Rawson, 2020; Taplin, 2024).

Critical Analysis of Assessment Approaches

A main difference between the CfW and Steiner education is how they balance personal learning with accountability. CfW tries to do both by using observations as well as structured progression steps, while Steiner education focuses more on each child’s individual development and places less importance on measurable results. From the perspective of the ‘Unique Child’, both approaches offer strengths but also limitations. The CfW’s structured framework allows for early identification of additional needs and supports intervention, which is particularly important for children with ALN, as timely identification is crucial for ensuring appropriate support and positive long-term outcomes (Welsh Government 2021a). However, the use of progression steps may inadvertently introduce normative expectations, potentially conflicting with the principle of individual development (Osgood *et al.*, 2026)

In contrast, Steiner education avoids these normative pressures but may lack the mechanisms needed to identify and support children who require additional intervention. This raises concerns in

relation to neurodiversity, where early recognition of differences such as autism or ADHD is essential for providing appropriate support, although research has found that early intervention does not necessarily result in better outcomes (Knight *et al.*, 2024). Without structured assessment, there is a risk that children's unique needs may be overlooked or misunderstood (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, both approaches are influenced by practitioner interpretation. Observational assessment relies heavily on professional judgement, which can introduce subjectivity and inconsistency (Smidt, 2015). This is particularly significant in play-based learning, where outcomes are less visible and more difficult to measure (Bodrova *et al.*, 2023). Another important consideration is equity. While the CfW is designed to be inclusive and accessible across settings, Steiner education is often limited to independent provision, raising questions about accessibility and fairness. This suggests that, while Steiner assessment aligns strongly with the concept of the 'Unique Child', its wider applicability may be less effective.

Conclusion

Both the Curriculum for Wales and Steiner education demonstrate a clear commitment to recognising the individuality of children. The CfW does this through flexible progression and inclusive assessment practices, while Steiner education does so through holistic, non-standardised approaches. However, neither approach fully resolves the challenges of assessing the 'Unique Child'. The CfW, despite its flexibility, operates within a system that requires measurable outcomes, which can limit its ability to fully accommodate individual variation. Steiner education, while philosophically aligned with the 'Unique Child', struggles to meet the practical demands of modern educational systems, particularly in relation to accountability and inclusion. This suggests that the concept of the 'Unique Child' is difficult to realise fully in practice. Assessment inevitably involves some degree of comparison, categorisation, or judgement, which can conflict with the principle of individuality. Therefore, the effectiveness of assessment depends not only on the methods used but also on how they are implemented within specific contexts.

The concept of the 'Unique Child' plays a fundamental role in shaping assessment practices within play-based curricula. Both the CfW and Steiner Waldorf education aim to support individual development through holistic and child-centred approaches. However, they adopt different strategies, each with distinct strengths and limitations. The CfW provides a balanced model that integrates observational assessment with progression frameworks, supporting both individualisation and accountability. In contrast, Steiner education offers a more radical approach that prioritises the child's natural development but faces challenges in demonstrating progress and

supporting inclusion within mainstream systems. Ultimately, while both approaches support the principles of the 'Unique Child' to varying degrees, neither fully resolves the tensions between individuality and standardisation. A more effective approach may involve combining the strengths of both models, ensuring that assessment is both responsive to individual needs and capable of supporting equitable, inclusive education within contemporary policy frameworks.

Lost in translation:

BLOG

Are Instagrammable Early Years Classrooms Inclusive in Wales?

JUNE 2026

by Emily Downs



Instagram (2026)



Pinterest (2026)

In recent years, early years classrooms have become increasingly shaped by social media, with platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest influencing teachers' practices and perceptions of classroom design (Schroeder *et al.*, 2019; Shelton *et al.*, 2020). These platforms often promote highly curated and aestheticised environments, contributing to pressures of comparison and idealisation (Meyer *et al.*, 2025). While classroom aesthetics can communicate important pedagogical messages (Terreni, 2019), research suggests that overly decorated environments may negatively affect children's attention and engagement (Godwin *et al.*, 2022; Foster, 2025). For early years practitioners like myself, this raises questions about whether such spaces prioritise **appearance over inclusivity**.

In early years settings, the classroom environment isn't just a backdrop! It plays a vital role in helping children feel a sense of belonging and encouraging them to participate (Rausch *et al.*, 2021). In fact, within Loris Malaguzzi's theory in the Reggio Emilia approach, it's often described as the *third teacher* (Robson and Mastrangelo, 2018; Daniel, 2022), highlighting just how much influence the space itself can have on children's learning and development. This is especially important for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL), who rely on clear and meaningful visual cues to make sense of their learning experiences (Bell Foundation, 2024). In Wales, where bilingualism is a key part of everyday learning and resources can already be stretched, creating accessible classroom environments becomes even more important (Beauchamp, 2021). This is made even more challenging by ongoing funding pressures, with reports showing that many teachers are now dipping into their own pockets to provide basic classroom materials, raising real questions about how fairly and consistently rich learning environments can be created across settings here in Wales (Thomas, 2024).

What are "Instagrammable" classrooms?

The phrase Instagrammable classrooms refers to highly stylised, visually coordinated spaces, often designed with presentation in mind (Gibson and Hadley, 2025). These environments typically include colour-coded resources, themed displays and carefully arranged learning areas to create a cohesive aesthetic (The Advocate, 2025). Social media has played a key role in popularising this trend, enabling educators to share classroom ideas and displays with a global audience (Carpenter *et al.*, 2020; Aydoğmuş *et al.*, 2023). Many teachers actively post images of their classrooms online, gaining inspiration from others and contributing to a wider culture of visually curated learning environments (Bautista and Sanchez, 2025), with some even using it as a *side-hustle* to boost income in difficult economic times (Reinstein, 2018).

There are clear positives to this approach. A well-organised and visually appealing classroom can feel welcoming and calm, helping children feel safe, supported and ready to learn (Leach, 2026; Bienkowski, 2023). Decorative displays can also inspire creativity and foster a sense of pride in the learning environment, particularly so when children are actively involved in their creation, which supports engagement and helps children value their own work (Gibson and Hadley, 2025; Clayton, 2026). **I myself have wanted to share Insta-worthy classroom displays I have been particularly proud of!**

However, whilst these environments may appear engaging, research indicates that excessive decoration and visual clutter can distract young children and reduce their ability to focus (Godwin and Kaur, 2021). Practitioners must ensure that aesthetics do not overshadow the primary purpose of the environment: supporting learning and development.

EAL learners rely on:

- clear and consistent verbal modelling (Department for Education, 2025; Thunder *et al.*, 2024)
- meaningful, easy-to-interpret visual supports (The Bell Foundation, 2024)
- interaction through play (Washington-Nortey *et al.*, 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024)
- a strong sense of inclusion and belonging (Louis and Betteridge, 2024; Devarakonda, 2021)



Canva (2026)



Canva (2026a)

Understanding EAL learners in Wales

Children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) speak a language other than English at home and learn English within an educational setting (Education Policy Institute, 2018; Bower, 2018). In Wales, the curriculum promotes a multilingual approach, where children develop both English and Welsh language skills (Welsh Government, 2024). **For some learners, this means navigating not one but two new languages!**

A key strategy within this context is translanguaging, encouraged by the Welsh Government, where children draw on all their languages to support understanding and communication (Thomas *et al.*, 2022). While multilingualism can enhance communication, cognitive development and long-term outcomes (Lieberman *et al.*, 2017; Collins, 2024; Paap, 2022; Filippi *et al.*, 2025), and implementation can be challenging due to limited guidance, time and training (Arfon, 2024).



How does your classroom environment help support these learners?

Aesthetics vs accessibility: the problem

While visually rich classrooms may seem engaging, research by Zazzi and Faragher suggests that overly decorated environments can have unintended consequences. Busy walls filled with images, bright colours and excessive displays can distract children's attention, reduce their ability to focus on learning tasks, and even evoke negative emotional responses owing to sensory overload (Zazzi and Faragher, 2018).

For children learning English as an additional language, this challenge is even greater. When the classroom environment adds extra visual stimulation, it can increase cognitive overload when they are already working harder to understand classroom language (Goldschagg *et al.*, 2023; Walker, 2022) whilst also adjusting to new routines and potential cultural differences.



The Wall Street Journal (2026)

In order to gain *likes* and *followers*, Instagrammable classrooms may focus on beautifying learning spaces and wall displays for appearance rather than function. Decorative posters or stylised text may look attractive, but if they are not clear or meaningful, do little to support understanding and engage young learners. For EAL children, confusing or abstract displays might be more of a barrier than a tool, with recent critiques of early years practice also suggesting that the new minimalist beige classroom trend has the potential to neglect the colourful diversity of the children within them (Peach and Caswell, 2025). When home languages and cultures are not visible in the environment, **EAL learners may feel less included, less connected and unrepresented in their learning space** (Louis and Betteridge, 2024; Björck, 2023)!

So, what does an inclusive Early Years classroom look like?

In light of this evidence, creating an inclusive environment does not mean abandoning aesthetics, but ensuring every element serves a clear purpose. Therefore, inclusive early years environments should focus on:

CLARITY AND SIMPLICITY

(Fisher *et al.*, 2014)

- uncluttered walls
- limited, purposeful displays
- clear organisation of resources

CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE

(Arnerich, 2023; Welsh Government, 2024)

- displays created by children
- real-life photographs rather than abstract images
- opportunities for talk and interaction through play

LANGUAGE SUPPORT

(The Impact Team, 2025; Nnoli, 2024; Welsh Government, 2022g)

- visual timetables
- simple, meaningful images
- labels in English, Welsh and home languages

REPRESENTATION AND BELONGING

(Rausch *et al.*, 2021; Louis and Betteridge, 2024)

- inclusion of diverse languages and cultures
- recognition of children's identities

Final reflections

While Instagrammable classrooms may reflect creative and passionate practitioners, it is important to question whether they meet the needs of all learners. For children with EAL, particularly within Wales' bilingual context, learning environments must prioritise clarity, communication and inclusion.

A visually appealing classroom does not necessarily equate to an effective one. When aesthetics overshadow accessibility, some children, especially those already navigating language barriers risk being left behind.

Perhaps the most important question is not how a classroom looks, but how it works for the children within it.

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