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Part 1

Analysing the Implementation of Play-Based Curricula in Wales: A Comparative Study of the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings.

Introduction

Early childhood education in Wales has changed significantly over the past two decades, with a growing emphasis on play-based learning. The Foundation Phase introduced a child-centred approach that placed play at the heart of learning, while the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings was developed as part of Curriculum for Wales to provide greater continuity and flexibility in early years education (Welsh Government, 2015, Welsh Government, 2022).

Although both curricula are based on similar principles, implementing play-based learning consistently has been challenging. This essay critically examines the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings, focusing on play, professional learning, and assessment. It also explores why Wales moved away from the Foundation Phase and whether the newer framework addresses some of its limitations (Evaluating the Foundation Phase Final Report Ymchwil gymdeithasol Social research, 2015, Williams, 2020, A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings Consultation Document, n.d.)

Understanding Curriculum and the Foundation phase

Curriculum is often understood as the framework that guides teaching and learning. However, Kelly (2009) argues that curriculum extends beyond content and includes the values, experiences, and teaching approaches that shape children's learning. In early childhood education, curricula are generally designed to support children's holistic development rather than focusing solely on academic attainment.

The Foundation Phase was introduced between 2008 and 2011 for children aged three to seven years. It was developed in response to concerns that formal approaches to education were not always suitable for young children and could limit opportunities for active learning (Welsh Government, 2015). Drawing on Scandinavian educational models, the Foundation Phase emphasised experiential learning and encouraged children to learn through first-hand experiences (An independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales Final report, 2013)

The curriculum was organised around seven Areas of Learning, including language and communication, mathematical development, physical development, and creative development. Central to the Foundation Phase was the belief that play should be the main vehicle for learning. Practitioners were encouraged to create stimulating environments where children could explore, investigate, and make decisions about their learning. Adult interactions were viewed as important in extending children's thinking and supporting progression (Welsh Government, 2015; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009)

The Foundation Phase was strongly influenced by the theories of Piaget (1951) and Vygotsky (1978). Piaget suggested that children construct knowledge through active engagement with their environment, while Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social interaction and adult support in learning. These theories provided a strong rationale for play-based learning and continue to influence early years practice today.

Despite its positive intentions, the implementation of the Foundation Phase was not always successful. Estyn (2013) found considerable variation in how practitioners interpreted play-based learning. While some settings successfully created child-centred environments, others continued to use more traditional teaching approaches. This suggests that curriculum reform alone is not enough to change practice and that

practitioner understanding plays a crucial role in successful implementation (GOV.WALES, 2026, Boyd and Hirst, 2015, Evaluating the Foundation Phase Final Report Ymchwil gymdeithasol social research, 2015,

Why did Wales Move Away from the Foundation Phase?

Although the Foundation Phase was widely recognised as an innovative curriculum, several challenges emerged over time. One of the main concerns related to inconsistency in implementation. Research suggested that practitioners often found it difficult to balance child-led learning with curriculum expectations and accountability requirements (Taylor et al., 2015). Consequently, children's experiences varied considerably across different settings (Donaldson, 2015).

Assessment was another area of concern. The Foundation Phase promoted observational assessment, which reflected its play-based philosophy. However, many practitioners struggled to gather evidence of children's progress while remaining engaged in meaningful interactions. Roberts-Holmes (2015) argues that pressures to demonstrate measurable outcomes often resulted in increased adult direction, which could reduce opportunities for genuine child-led learning.

The publication of Donaldson's Successful Futures review (2015) provided the foundation for wider educational reform in Wales. Donaldson advocated a curriculum that was more flexible, learner-centred, and responsive to contemporary society. His recommendations highlighted the need for greater coherence across different stages of education and encouraged practitioners to focus on developing children's skills, confidence, and well-being.

The transition away from the Foundation Phase should therefore be viewed as an attempt to strengthen curriculum continuity and improve consistency rather than a rejection of play-based learning. Many of the principles underpinning the Foundation Phase remain evident within the newer framework (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021)

Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Setting

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings forms part of the wider Curriculum for Wales reforms and applies to children aged three to five years before they enter maintained education. Like the Foundation Phase, it promotes play-based learning and recognises children as active participants in their own development. However, it adopts a more flexible approach to curriculum design (Welsh Government, 2021).

The framework is organised around five developmental pathways: Belonging, Communication, Exploration, Physical Development, and Well-being. These pathways are intentionally broad and avoid prescribing specific outcomes. Instead, practitioners are encouraged to use their professional judgement to plan experiences that reflect children's interests, strengths, and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2021; Practical Pre-School Books, 2025)

A key strength of the framework is its emphasis on children's rights, inclusion, and well-being. Children are viewed as capable and competent learners whose experiences and identities should be valued. This aligns with contemporary understandings of child-centred practice and reflects increasing recognition of the importance of emotional well-being and positive relationships in supporting learning (GOV.WALES, 2022).

However, the flexibility of the framework presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it allows practitioners to respond more effectively to individual children and local contexts. On the other hand, it requires practitioners to have a strong understanding of child development and play pedagogy. Without sufficient knowledge and confidence, there is a risk that learning experiences may lack purpose or progression (GOV.WALES, 2022, Practical Pre-School Books, 2025)

As a result, the success of the framework depends not only on curriculum design but also on practitioners' ability to interpret and implement its principles effectively.

The Role of Play in Both Curriculum

Play remains the most significant feature shared by both the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings. Both recognise that play supports children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development while encouraging curiosity, creativity, and problem-solving (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021).

Within the Foundation Phase, practitioners were provided with relatively detailed guidance on how play could support learning across different curriculum areas. This helped many practitioners organise learning experiences and identify opportunities for development. However, some practitioners interpreted play as simply providing enjoyable activities rather than creating opportunities for meaningful exploration. In some cases, highly structured activities were labelled as play despite offering limited opportunities for child choice or independence.

The newer framework adopts a less prescriptive approach, giving practitioners greater freedom to respond to children's interests. This can encourage more authentic child-led learning and provide opportunities for children to take ownership of their experiences. However, greater flexibility may also create uncertainty, particularly for less experienced practitioners who are still developing their understanding of play-based pedagogy.

Research suggests that practitioners' beliefs about play significantly influence how it is implemented. Wood (2014) found that some educators continue to view play and learning as separate activities, resulting in tensions between curriculum expectations and children's autonomy. Brooker (2011) similarly argues that balancing adult guidance with child-led learning remains one of the most challenging aspects of play-based education.

Cultural diversity also affects children's experiences of play. [Alsubaie, Merfat Ayesh, 2015](#) highlights the importance of culturally responsive practice that acknowledges children's backgrounds and experiences. Play-based curricula must therefore be flexible enough to accommodate different perspectives and ensure all children feel included and valued.

While both curricula place play at the centre of learning, research suggests that its effectiveness depends less on curriculum design and more on practitioners' ability to facilitate, observe, and extend children's learning through purposeful interactions.

Professional Learning and Assessment

Professional learning is one of the most important factors influencing curriculum implementation. Even the most carefully designed curriculum cannot achieve its aims if practitioners lack the knowledge or confidence required to implement it effectively (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2013).

During the introduction of the Foundation Phase, significant investment was made in training and professional development. However, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2013) identified variations in the quality and accessibility of training opportunities across Wales. Consequently, practitioners developed differing levels of understanding regarding play-based learning, assessment, and planning.

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings places even greater emphasis on professional judgement. Practitioners are expected to observe children closely, identify their interests and developmental needs, and create learning experiences that promote progression. Sylva et al. (2010) found that effective practitioners use observation and interaction to extend children's thinking and support deeper learning. This requires a sophisticated understanding of child development and play pedagogy.

Assessment remains a particularly challenging aspect of practice. Both curricula advocate observational assessment as the most appropriate way of understanding children's learning. The current framework emphasises that assessment should be embedded within everyday experiences and used to inform future planning (Welsh Government, 2021).

Although observational assessment aligns with play-based principles, it requires considerable skill. Practitioners must make informed judgements about children's progress while maintaining meaningful interactions. Carr and Lee (2012) argue that excessive documentation can reduce opportunities for engagement with children, creating tensions between assessment requirements and quality interactions.

Tierney (2013) also highlights the importance of fairness and inclusivity in assessment. Practitioners must ensure that assessment practices recognise children's individual strengths and experiences rather than focusing solely on

predetermined outcomes. This is particularly important in diverse settings where children may demonstrate learning in different ways.

These challenges reinforce the importance of ongoing professional development. Without sufficient support, practitioners may struggle to implement the curriculum consistently, regardless of its design or intentions.

Conclusion

The Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings both demonstrate Wales' commitment to play-based, child-centred learning. While the Foundation Phase provided clearer guidance, it faced challenges with consistency, assessment, and practitioner understanding. In comparison, the newer framework offers greater flexibility but relies more heavily on professional judgement (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021).

Overall, the success of both curricula depends on practitioners' knowledge, confidence, and ability to implement play-based approaches effectively. Continued professional development and support are essential to ensure consistent, high-quality practice across early years settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021).

Part 2

Introduction.

The Unique Child concept plays a key role in modern early years education, emphasizing that each child develops along a distinct path (Matters, 2024)

This perspective understands development not as a uniform or linear process but as one shaped by each child's unique experiences, cultural background, interests, and abilities. It therefore challenges approaches that rely too heavily on standardised expectations of development (Matters, 2024).

Assessment in early childhood involves continuously observing, interpreting, and responding to children's learning to actively support their development (Carr and Lee, 2012).

In play-based curricula, educators integrate assessment into daily activities rather than isolating it as formal testing (Carr and Lee, 2012; Grimmer, 2017)

Practitioners gain a more comprehensive understanding of the child within their environment by observing and engaging with them. However, assessment becomes more complex when considered alongside the principle of the Unique Child. Frameworks aim to promote consistency and support development, but they can also lead to evaluating children against broad expectations that may not align with each child's unique growth path (Arthur, Beecher and Death, 2020).

This tension is especially important in diverse classrooms, where educators support children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), neurodiverse profiles, and a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Arthur, Beecher and Death, 2020)

This essay provides a critical analysis of assessment practices within the Curriculum for Wales' Foundation Phase and the Reggio Emilia approach.

It examines how each framework defines progression and evaluates how well their assessment methods align with the concept of the Unique Child (Arthur, Beecher and Death, 2020).

The Unique Child: Theoretical and Curriculum Context.

The Curriculum for Wales emphasises learner-centred education and acknowledges

that student progress varies from student to student (Welsh Government, 2022b). It emphasises a comprehensive approach to development that goes beyond attainment outcomes to include wellbeing, engagement, and lifelong learning skills.

This reflects a move away from strict age-based expectations toward a more comprehensive understanding of the child (Welsh Government, 2022b).

This approach aligns closely with sociocultural and ecological theories of development. Vygotsky's research emphasizes how social interaction shapes learning, emphasising that children reach higher levels of development when supported within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Assessment should reflect not only what a child can accomplish independently but Also, their potential is realised when supported by meaningful relationships (Hayes, 2023, Vygotsky, 1978)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises how development actively depends on multiple environmental factors, such as family, community, and broader societal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This emphasises why a single standardised measure cannot fully reflect a child's learning journey.

Reggio Emilia also strongly reflects the idea of the Unique Child.

Loris Malaguzzi developed this approach, which views children as capable and curious learners who communicate through multiple forms, often referred to as the "Hundred languages of children" (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012).

This philosophy directly challenges traditional developmental models by accepting diverse forms of expression and rejecting narrow criteria for success.

These perspectives indicate that assessment should prioritise flexibility, context, and responsiveness rather than relying solely on comparative or age-based criteria.

Assessment in the Curriculum for Wales (Foundation phase).

Assessment in the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales relies primarily on continuous observation and the knowledgeable judgement of professionals.

Practitioners gather evidence of learning through play, conversations, interactions and children's responses to experiences. This approach aims to encourage a comprehensive understanding of the child, moving beyond a focus solely on measurable learning outcomes (Welsh Government, 2015, 2022b). In principle, this method aligns well with the idea of the Unique Child.

Practitioners observe children during natural play to identify their individual interests, strengths, and preferred learning styles. It also accepts responsive planning by adapting activities to children's developing interests and needs instead of relying on fixed outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022). The emphasis on progression rather than fixed attainment targets is another important feature. It acknowledges that children may develop skills at different rates and in different sequences (Welsh Government, 2022). This approach is especially beneficial for children with ALN, enabling practitioners to track individual progress over time rather than compare it to age-based standards. However, in practice, tensions still exist (Hayes, 2023).

While the curriculum encourages flexible assessment, practitioners often still refer to developmental milestones, whether consciously or not, as key benchmarks.

Measuring children against standard expectations often overlooks their unique learning paths. This issue takes on added importance when addressing the needs of neurodiverse children. A child with autism may exhibit strong skills in areas like memory, pattern recognition, or focused attention, while also showing differences in communication and social interaction (Guldborg, 2020; Moss, 2019). If assessments focus too heavily on developmental expectations, they risk overlooking individual strengths in favour of perceived delay (Moss, 2019).

In addition, observational assessment is inherently interpretive. It depends heavily on practitioner judgement, which can introduce subjectivity and inconsistency. One practitioner may consider certain progress major, while another might assess it differently. This raises questions about reliability, particularly in settings where multiple practitioners contribute to assessment records (Carr and Lee, 2012). The Curriculum for Wales provides a flexible, child-centred framework; however, its success in supporting the Unique Child relies largely on practitioners' understanding of progression and their ability to move beyond a deficit-based perspective (Carr and Lee, 2012)

Assessment in Reggio Emilia.

The Reggio Emilia approach to assessment diverges from traditional developmental frameworks by emphasising pedagogical documentation instead (Cadwell, 1997, Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012)

This process actively documents children's learning through photographs, written observations, conversation transcripts, and samples of their work, rather than focusing on whether children meet specific milestones, documentation aims to make learning visible (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). It reveals the thinking, reasoning, and creativity behind children's actions, providing insight into how their understanding evolves. This approach strongly reflects the concept of the Unique Child. Each child's learning journey is viewed as individual and meaningful. Children are not expected to follow a uniform developmental path, nor are they measured against (Rinaldi, 2021).

standardised benchmarks. Instead, learning is understood as complex, relational and deeply influenced by context. One of the key strengths of this approach is its inclusivity (Department for Education, 2024).

Reggio Emilia values diverse forms of expression, enabling children to demonstrate their understanding beyond language and traditional academic skills.

This approach offers important advantages for neurodiverse children and those with

additional learning needs, as it supports their unique communication and learning styles (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Their strengths are more likely to be recognised and valued. Besides, sharing documentation with children and families encourages a collaborative approach to assessment. This promotes a deeper understanding of the child and strengthens the connection between home and educational environments (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013).

However, there are also limitations. Because documentation relies heavily on interpretation, it can lack consistency.

Practitioners often emphasize different elements within the same learning experience, which leads to varying interpretations of progress. This raises questions about objectivity. Another challenge is the absence of clear developmental benchmarks. While this approach encourages individuality, it can also make it harder to recognise when a child needs additional support.

Without clear reference points, there is a risk of overlooking developmental concerns or identifying them later than in more structured systems. Besides, documenting the process requires a major amount of time (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013).

Practitioners must observe, reflect on, and document learning in major detail, which can be challenging to manage in larger educational environments. Despite these challenges, the Reggio Emilia approach continues to prioritize the child's individuality and actively resists standardization, making it one of the most genuinely child-centred assessment methods available (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012; Rinaldi, 2021).

Critical Comparison and Discussion.

Comparing the Curriculum for Wales with the Reggio Emilia approach reveals that both seek to replace traditional, rigid assessment methods with more flexible

Alternatives. Both emphasise observing, engaging in play, and developing a comprehensive understanding of the child. However, they interpret progression and structure assessment in notably different ways.

The Curriculum for Wales attempts to balance flexibility with structure. The progression framework clarifies development over time, aiding both planning and accountability (Welsh Government, 2022; Rinaldi, 2006).

However, this structure can sometimes steer assessment back toward standardization, especially when practitioners depend too much on developmental Expectations. Reggio Emilia, by contrast, rejects standardised progression entirely. It focuses instead on the process of learning and the individuality of each child's experience.

This approach aligns closely with the concept of the Unique Child by avoiding comparisons and recognizing diverse forms of achievement. Removing developmental reference points entirely can make it difficult to identify children who require additional support (Rinaldi, 2006; Moss, 2019).

Identifying difficulties early requires recognizing when development deviates noticeably from expected patterns (Welsh Government, 2021). Without such reference points, there is a risk that intervention may be delayed.

From a critical perspective, neither approach is perfect in isolation.

The Curriculum for Wales offers a clear framework but may reinforce conventional expectations, whereas Reggio Emilia provides deep individual insights yet can lack consistency and clear developmental guidance (Welsh Government, 2022).

An effective approach integrates developmental awareness with a truly child-centered understanding of learning, creating a balanced framework that supports growth (Rinaldi, 2006; Moss, 2019).

Conclusion

The concept of the Unique Child encourages educators to recognize that each child develops individually and should not be evaluated solely by standardized criteria.

The Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia each provide valuable approaches to assessment within play-based learning environments, demonstrating this principle through distinct methods (Department for Education, 2024).

The Curriculum for Wales establishes clear progression and promotes comprehensive assessment through observation. However, it still presents the challenge of comparisons against developmental norms (Welsh Government, 2022).

Reggio Emilia emphasizes a highly individualized, strengths-based approach that aligns closely with the concept of the Unique Child. However, it may offer less clarity when it comes to identifying developmental concerns (Rinaldi, 2006; Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). The most effective assessment practice combines these approaches in a balanced way.

Practitioners who integrate knowledge of child development with a flexible, responsive, and reflective approach can more effectively support each child as a unique individual with diverse learning paths (Moss, 2019).

Part 3

Why Inclusion Should Be Central to a Play-Based Curriculum in Early Childhood Education?

Research has consistently shown that the early years are a critical period in a child's development.

There is widespread agreement that early childhood experiences have a long-term impact on children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The

Welsh Government (Curriculum for Wales, 2022) emphasises that learning begins at birth, with early experiences playing a critical role in shaping children's identity, wellbeing, and future learning outcomes. In this context, inclusion is a core principle that drives high-quality early years practice, rather than being an optional element. As play-based curricula become more widespread in early years settings, a key challenge remains making sure that inclusion is deeply understood and consistently integrated into daily practice, rather than being limited to mere access or attendance. Many early years settings still define inclusion primarily as guaranteeing that children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) are physically present and receive necessary support.

While access to provision is essential, this alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. Ainscow (2016) argues that inclusion must go beyond placement and focus instead on participation, engagement, and belonging. A child who is physically present but not actively engaged in play, interaction, or collaborative learning cannot be regarded as fully included.

True inclusion means children feel they belong, know their voices matter, and actively engage in the learning community. This presents a key challenge for practitioners implementing play-based curricula: inclusion should be evaluated by the quality of the experience, not merely by participants' presence. Play-based learning lays a solid foundation for comprehensive practice by enabling children to participate in learning that is flexible, meaningful, and aligned with their developmental needs. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) and the Foundation Phase framework emphasize play as a critical method for learning, especially in promoting communication, problem-solving, creativity, and social skills. Play enables children to explore ideas at their own pace and level of understanding, reducing the pressure associated with formal instruction. Moyles (2015) emphasises that play enables children to build understanding through direct experience, a method especially beneficial for children with ALN who may struggle with structured or language-intensive approaches. However, play alone does not guarantee inclusion; it must be carefully supported through intentional adult interaction and thoughtful environmental design. Adults play a critical role in embedding inclusion within a play-based curriculum. Practitioners are not passive observers of play but active facilitators who shape learning experiences through observation, interaction, and reflection. Comprehensive practice

demands that adults attentively observe children's engagement, interpret their behaviour as a form of communication, and respond in ways that encourage participation rather than restrict it. A child who consistently avoids group play may not be disengaged; instead, they might be experiencing sensory overload, anxiety, or uncertainty about social interaction. In these situations, practitioners should modify the environment, support interactions, and offer alternative ways to engage in play rather than lowering expectations for participation. This approach reflects Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory, emphasizing the critical role of adult guidance in advancing children's learning beyond their independent capabilities. Communication is a key factor in ensuring inclusion within a play-based curriculum, yet it is often misunderstood or narrowly defined. Traditional methods often emphasize spoken language as the primary mode of communication, which can unintentionally marginalize children who express themselves differently. Comprehensive practice recognizes communication in its fullest form, encompassing gestures, facial expressions, body language, utilizing objects, symbolic play, and augmentative communication systems. Macintyre and McVitty (2004) emphasize that recognizing and valuing non-verbal communication plays an essential role in preventing children from being excluded from social and learning opportunities. When practitioners consistently respond to all forms of communication, children begin to see themselves as active participants in their environment rather than passive recipients of care or instruction. This responsiveness is central to developing a genuine sense of belonging. The learning environment considerably supports inclusion within a play-based curriculum. A well-designed environment can either enable or restrict participation depending on how accessible and flexible it is. Comprehensive environments provide clear structure, establish predictable routines, and offer accessible resources alongside spaces that encourage active participation and support emotional regulation. Providing quiet areas, sensory spaces, and open-ended resources enables children with diverse needs to engage in learning methods personalized to their individual strengths. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) emphasizes that quality environments promote independence while offering suitable levels of challenge. However, the effectiveness of the environment relies not only on its design but also on how practitioners actively support children in engaging with it meaningfully. Comprehensive practice requires careful attention to avoid unintentionally lowering expectations when encouraging participation. While

differentiation is essential, providing excessive support or shielding children with ALN from challenges can hinder their independence and progress. Florian (2014) emphasizes that comprehensive education should prioritize expanding opportunities for all learners instead of simplifying the learning process for a select few setting high expectations alongside effective scaffolding ensures children receive the support and challenges they need to succeed. Inclusion should therefore not be about doing less for some children, but about finding ways for all children to achieve more.

Relationships are also fundamental to inclusion within a play-based curriculum. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) emphasizes that secure relationships play an important role in encouraging children's emotional growth and their confidence to explore the world around them.

In early years settings, strong relationships are built through consistent, responsive interactions, shared engagement in play, and emotional attunement.

When children feel secure and understood, they are more likely to engage in learning, take risks, and develop relationships with peers (Bowlby, 1988; Welsh Government, 2021).

For children with ALN, building secure relationships with key adults provides the essential foundation for all other learning and inclusion efforts (Welsh Government, 2021).

Collaborating closely with families plays a critical role in effective comprehensive practice. Parents and carers hold valuable insight into their child's communication, behaviour, interests, and needs (Department for Education, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021).

Effective inclusion requires ongoing collaboration between practitioners and families to ensure consistency of approach and shared understanding of the child's development (Department for Education, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021).

The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021) emphasises the importance of co-production between families and professionals in supporting children's progress.

When families are actively involved, inclusion becomes more consistent across home and setting environments, strengthening outcomes for children (Department for Education, 2015; Welsh Government, 2021)

To summarise, achieving inclusion within a play-based curriculum requires more than policy directives or simply having children present in the environment.

It is achieved through everyday practice that prioritises participation, belonging, and meaningful engagement. Practitioners must recognize communication in all its forms, create environments that are both flexible and accessible, and cultivate strong relationships that encourage emotional security. It also requires high expectations, reflective practice, and genuine partnership with families. Inclusion forms the essential foundation of high-quality early years education rather than being an add-on to existing practices. Practitioners should regularly assess whether all children are actively engaged in play and take deliberate steps to identify and eliminate any barriers to inclusion. Inclusion requires transforming systems so that every child can belong, participate, and thrive, rather than simply adapting children to fit existing structures (UNESCO, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2023).

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