

AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Google Scholar (Available at: <https://scholar.google.co.uk/>) for the purpose of research for Module 17 – Early Years Curricular (ECEY6010).

I acknowledge the use of COPILOT to locate current sources (including e-books, journal articles, and webpages), dated between 2015 and 2025 for the purpose of research for Module 17 – Early Years Curricular (ECEY6010).

I confirm 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 in evidence.

Prompts:

- What are the challenges in implementing play-based curricula
- Does culture have an impact on implementation of curriculum
- What is the Danish early years curriculum and expectations
- Differences between Danish and Welsh early years curricula
- Methods of assessment in Danish early years and impact for children's outcomes
- International data on Well-being for children
- How does regulatory frameworks and guidance impact play-based curricula
- Does the Welsh Government support schools with funding for ALN in Wales
- Is mainstream education as inclusive as policy intends?
- Are assessments methods in early years a good thing?

Module: ECEY6010

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Part 1.

Play is widely recognised as a complex and multifaceted concept shaped by different perspectives and beliefs about what play is and the impact it has for children's learning and development (Waters-Davies, 2022, p.4). Research highlights that play is influenced by cultural, social and professional perspectives, resulting in early years curricula interpreted and implemented differently across different contexts (Wood, 2019; Fleer, 2015). Consequently, early years pedagogy reflects the values, legislation and cultural norms within the societies in which the curricula are developed, leading to variation in how play-based learning is implemented in practice and the cultural related challenges that arise from these.

This section examines how these shared curricula principles are implemented differently in practice by using risky play as a lens to explore the cultural, structural and environmental factors shaping play-based pedagogy in each context.

In Wales, play is framed around the opportunities, experiences and environments that practitioners provide for children, with adults positioned as responsive facilitators of learning (Welsh Government (WG), 2022). In contrast, in Denmark, play is positioned as child-led and is understood as a central way children learn through their bodies, senses and movement, grounded in the belief that children are competent, active and independent (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018). However, both curricula frame play as a fundamental right of children but have interpreted and implemented this principle in different ways.

Although both Wales and Denmark position play as child-led within their curricula, their cultural and pedagogical differences are highlighted through approaches to risky play. Risky play emphasises the tensions between children's autonomy, adults risk-aversion, regulatory frameworks and the practical reality of delivering play-based pedagogy (Brussoni *et al.* 2015). Implementing a play-based curriculum therefore involves balancing curriculum intentions, with cultural expectations, personal beliefs and regulatory expectations. Within the Welsh context, this balancing act dilutes opportunities for authentic play-based learning and the freedom the curricula promotes (Jerebine *et al.* 2024; Stewart *et al.* 2024).

One key challenge for implementing play-based curricula in Wales relates to cultural and social attitudes towards risk. Evidence from the Ministerial Review highlights that

opportunities for risky play in Wales are limited by adult perceptions of safety and wider risk-aversion, with children often prevented from engaging in traditional activities over concerns about danger (Play Wales, 2023). Similarly, Sandseter and Sando (2016) and Brussoni *et al.* (2015) found practitioners limited children's access to challenge due to fear of accidents, parental complaints and health and safety policies further reinforcing risk-averse practice. This highlights children's access to risky play opportunities is constrained despite national guidance promoting a balanced approach to risk (Gill, 2021; WG, 2025). Clausen (2015) similarly argues that early year's settings can become institutionalised spaces shaped by health and safety policies, wider risk-adverse culture and concerns about accountability, all of which influence implementation of play-based opportunities in practice.

In contrast Denmark's cultural and societal acceptance of risk positions physically challenging, outdoor and autonomous play as a normal and valued part of childhood. Research shows that Danish early year's settings adopt a trust-based approach in which children are encouraged to explore, climb and experiment and manage challenges independently, supported by practitioners who view risk as essential for competence and resilience (Sando and Sanseter, 2020). Cross-cultural research demonstrates that Danish parents consider risk as a normal and manageable aspect of childhood, emphasising trust, autonomy and children's competence, in contrast to more risk-adverse parenting cultures (Boyatzis *et al.* 2025). Outdoor play is therefore embedded in Danish practice, due to cultural expectations that children will experience, weather, height, speed and physical challenge as part of learning (Sandseter *et al.* 2021). This aligns with the Danish Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum, which emphasises children's competence, autonomy and embodied participation (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018). While Denmark's early years system is rooted in children's autonomy, scholars note pedagogical shifts are happening. Clausen (2015) highlight changes in pedagogues' education since 2004, with an increased emphasis on quality assurance and learning plans and Einarsdottir *et al.* (2015) identifies shifts from traditional social-pedagogical approaches to more educational based practice. But these changes have not influenced Denmark's commitment to autonomy, outdoor play and children's freedom to explore. Danish pedagogical culture therefore continues to support risk-taking and child-led learning to a greater extent than in Welsh practice (McGee, 2022). However, Koch and

Jorgensen (2023) highlight Danish early years education experiencing pressures from government policy changes, rising needs of children, recruitment challenges and new laws around ratios impacting how play-based curricula that can be delivered mirroring the challenges faced in Wales impacting implementation of authentic play-based learning.

Furthermore, beyond the cultural attitudes towards risk, structural factors also influence how play-based curricula is implemented in practice. In Wales, many early years settings operate in limited physical environments, with small outdoor spaces or on shared grounds that require risk assessments, restricting opportunities for risky play. Inspection frameworks such as, Estyn and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) (2021) place strong emphasis on safety, compliance and evidencing learning outcomes, which can unintentionally limit practitioners' ability to offer open ended risky play opportunities. The requirement for detailed, time-consuming risk assessments before children can access certain activities reduces opportunities for spontaneous and child-led exploration, creating a barrier to implementing authentic play-based pedagogy as intended (Brussoni *et al.* 2015). However, in Denmark, children are routinely expected to engage in outdoor and community-based environments, and cultural acceptance of risk allows for access to risky and autonomous play. As a result, Danish setting places less emphasis on risk assessment, reflecting a trust-based view of children as competent and independent learners (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018; Eurydice, 2024). This trust-based approach supports children's autonomy, resilience, confidence and provides rich opportunities to embed authentic play-based learning.

International research also highlights that differences in how outdoor environments are viewed influences how they are implemented in practice and early years pedagogy. McGee's (2022) comparison of outdoor education found that Danish practice assumes regular, embedded outdoor learning as a core part of the curriculum, with many settings planning full days outdoors and treating outdoor spaces as teaching spaces rather than as an extension of the classroom. In contrast, outdoor learning within the UK is viewed an educational lens and is frequently timetabled into sessions such as PE or forest school of which forest school remains a recent addition to Welsh practice. This reinforces Danish setting is culturally and structurally better positioned to implement outdoor and play-based learning as a

natural and essential part of childhood. However, in Wales the risk adverse and systems tend to treat it as an activity requiring planning and risk management. These contrasting assumptions shape the extent to which children experience authentic, autonomous and risky play within each context.

The language used within each play-based curricula shapes impacts how practice is interpreted and implemented. In Wales, curriculum guidance emphasizes planned experiences, effective environments and enabling adults (WG,22) positioning practitioners as responsible for structuring provisions and facilitating learning. These expectations are reinforced through CIW and Estyn inspection frameworks, which require settings to evidence planning, compliance and risk management (Estyn and CIW, 2021). As a result, play-based learning starts to align with what Wood (2022) describes as educational play that is adult designed, purposeful and accountable reducing the opportunities for spontaneous, child led play limiting child agency. In contrast, the Danish curriculum emphasizes child agency, participation and co-creators (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018) reflecting a trust- based view of children as competent and independent. Danish settings have autonomy in deciding how to implement the curriculum and local councils are discouraged from imposing documentation or measurements of children as these are viewed as unnecessary taking time away from pedagogical work (Eurydice, 2024). This creates a richer and more authentic play-based experience, which aligns with Woods (2022) notion of play for its own sake enabling children greater influence over everyday life and more opportunities to exercise autonomy within the environment.

In conclusion by comparing how Wales and Denmark have interpreted and implemented play-based curricula, it highlights that the challenges in practice stem from wider cultural, organisational, and regulatory factors that shape early years provision. Welsh pedagogy is influenced by embedded, generational culture of risk aversion that prioritises children's physical safety, shapes practitioner decision making around accountability, risk and safety influencing how play-based curricula is implemented. This is reinforced by Von Bank's Ted Talk (2018), which argues that children require meaningful opportunities for risk to develop resilience, confidence and judgement, yet contemporary childhood has become increasingly controlled by adult fears. Fully embedding a play-based curriculum in Wales may therefore requires not only structural change but a broader cultural shift towards valuing

uncertainty, autonomy and children's competence, alongside reducing unnecessary paperwork and compliance pressures that limit authentic spontaneity. In contrast, Denmark's trust-based culture and community-embedded pedagogy enable greater alignment between curriculum intentions and practice, highlighting how cultural mindsets shape the implementation of play-based learning.

Part 2.

This section examines the concept on the unique child and critically evaluates two different forms of assessment within play-based curricula. The Notice, Analyse and Respond (NAR) arrangements in the Welsh Non-Maintained Curriculum (WG, 2022) and Denmark's use of pedagogical documentation and learning journals to support each child as an individual (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018). The Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2025) describes the unique child as constantly learning, resilient, capable and self-assured. Similarly, Early Years Coalition (2021) positions the unique child as capable, motivated learners who shaped their own development. Siraj *et al.* (2023) emphasize that supporting the unique child principle requires practitioners to recognise individual strengths, needs and interests. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is socially constructed and unique to each child's experience, while Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) highlights how individual development is shaped by the interactions across children's environmental systems. However, interpretation of the unique child varies across curricular contexts due to cultural and societal belief about childhood learning and play (Dahlberg *et al.* 2013).

The Welsh Non-maintained curriculum (WG,2022) recognises that every child is unique and promotes a holistic, play-based approach to assessment. The NAR arrangement position the child at the centre by encouraging practitioners to observe children's play analyse what these reveals about their learning and respond by adapting provision to supports ongoing development. Welsh Government guidance emphasizes that observation should be grounded in strong knowledge of child development and used to understand the child's interests, motivations and well-being, enabling meaningful planning and supporting authentic learning tailored for the unique child (WG, 2022). This embodies the unique child be recognising development as individuals and varied rather than a measure of accountability (WG, 2024).

Research suggests that responsive, observation-based assessment strengthens practitioners understanding of children's interests and learning processes (Siraj *et al.* 2015; Pascal *et al.* 2018). Bradbury (2019) argues that age related assessments systems can contribute to deficit labelling by positioning children against

predetermined norms and reduces them to measurable data a process she links to schoolification of the early childhood education rather than unique individuals who develop at their own pace (Bradbury, 2019). Whereas NAR approach avoids this by embedding assessment within play, supporting a holistic and child-centred understanding of development and values the unique child.

However, the effectiveness of NAR is shaped by the capacity of the early year's workforce. Ward's (2025) workforce report highlights staff shortages, high workloads and limited time for reflective practice, meaning practitioners often struggle to complete observation-based assessment in the depth intended. Owston *et al.* (2024) similarly report that recruitment and retention challenges are placing pressure on settings, reducing the time practitioners have for high-quality interactions and making it harder to sustain consistent, reflective assessment practice. As NAR is an observational assessment is also vulnerable to bias. Noor *et al.* (2023) identify the halo and horn effects as common bias in practitioners judgement, where existing perceptions of a child shape what is noticed and recorded, while Inner Drive (2026) argue that cognitive biases can unconsciously shape how practitioners interpret children's behaviour when they are under pressure or feel the need to demonstrate progress. Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) highlight that accountability demands can lead to performative assessment rather than authentic documentation, and Osgood (2015) argues that regulatory requirements can pull practitioners away from children's play, limiting authentic opportunities to extend learning. Care Inspectorate Wales's Inspection Framework places strong emphasis on documentation, record-keeping and evidence of compliance (CIW, 2023). These pressures shift purposeful and meaningful assessment towards compliance, and the unique child is longer is at the centre of practice, as practitioners have reduced capacity to notice children's interests, emotional cues and emerging needs within play.

In contrast, the Danish strengthened pedagogical curriculum recognises the unique child through how they engage with the environment, peers and the community Pedagogical documentation and learning journals are used to capture children experiences, perspectives and participation, emphasising autonomy, well-being and child voice (Danish Ministry for Education, 2018). This reflects Denmark's wider

cultural commitment to trust, independence and democratic practice, where children are viewed as active citizens rather than learners to be measured (Brostrom, 2017).

In comparison to Wales Denmark has virtually no formal assessment system for tracking children's development. Learning journals are used to document meaningful moments, relationships and experiences, supporting rich, authentic learning without the pressure of accountability structures. These journals tend to focus on how the environments supports the child rather than evaluating the child against developmental expectations. This approach highly supports the principle of the unique child as it prioritises children lived experiences, autonomy and well-being over regulatory or guidance expectations. (Brostrom, 2017; Danish Ministry of Education, 2018).

Both Welsh and Danish approaches to assessment position the child as competent and capable, but they view the unique child in different ways. Wales uses NAR, as a structured formative cycle that supports consistency, early identification and clear evidence of progress, reflecting a wider emphasis on equity, accountability and quality assurance (WG, 22; ALNET 2018). The Welsh model offers clear expectations, values the child's current stage of development and reduces the risk of emerging needs being overlooked, embodying the principle of the unique child by recognising development as an individual rather than as a measure of accountability (WG, 2024). However, in a pressured workforce it can become compliance-driven, with practitioners focusing on producing evidence rather than engaging meaningfully within children's play. Inspection framework for childcare and play in Wales places strong emphasis on documentation, record keeping and evidence of compliance (CIW, 2023) and the Early Years and Childcare Workforce Survey highlights staffing recruitment and retention, limited time for reflective practice, making this shift towards performance and compliance driven more likely in practice. (Social Care Wales, 2026). In contrast Denmark's use of pedagogical documentation through learning journals viewing the unique child through relational pedagogy, prioritizing well-being and child participation, reflecting the cultural commitment they have in trust, autonomy and democratic practice (Danish Ministry of Education, 2018). Learning journals supports the unique child through rich, authentic learning experiences but the lack of structured systems in assessment of child development, may result in delayed identification of emerging needs. However, although there is

lack of contemporary evidence to evaluate the impact of learning journals on immediate outcomes for children, international from UNICEF Office of Research (2025) and data from OECD child well-being dashboard (2024) consistently places Denmark among the highest performing countries for child wellbeing and life satisfaction, while the UK including Wales rank lower. This does not directly evidence early years assessment outcomes, but it does suggest Denmark's broader and relational, autonomy focused approach may contribute to better long-term well-being. These differences highlight how the unique child is shaped by cultural values and policy priorities reinforcing the wider influences on implementation of assessment within the early year's curricula and as discussed in Part 1.

In conclusion, by comparing learning journals and NAR as forms of early years assessment highlights how different pedagogical cultures interpret and implement the principle of the unique child. In Denmark, fewer regulatory expectations and minimal documentation requirements enable practitioners to embrace the unique child more fully through relational, autonomy focused practice. This creates richer, more authentic opportunities and experiences for children to learn and grow. However, the lack of structured assessment system carries risk, include inconsistent implementation in practice and potential to miss identification of emerging needs. In contrast, Wales regulatory frameworks and guidance is designed to ensure quality, accountability and early identification providing clear expectations and consistency. However, these structured systems can unintentionally steer practice from child centred pedagogy, as paperwork and evidence of compliance take up practitioner's time and attention. As a result, the principle of the unique child is lost to the demands of assessment systems that take priority. This raises an important question for early years; how can systems balance the need for accountability and developmental oversight without allowing assessment processes to lose valuing the Unique child?

Part 3.

Early Years Blog

Where is inclusion going wrong? A view from inside the system!

The non-maintained curriculum in Wales sets out a clear and ambitious vision for early years education. It emphasises that every child is unique, that development between birth and five is rapid, and that pedagogy should be shaped around holistic needs (WG, 2022). In principle, this framework should create an inclusive, responsive and child-centred experience for all learners (Additional Learning Needs Act (ALNET), 2018). However, in my experience as an Early Years ALN Officer working across non-maintained nursery settings and school-based nurseries, the reality does not always reflect these intentions, a concern highlighted in the Welsh Government's review of ALN implementation, that emphasized inconsistency and variability quality across Wales (WG, 2025).

While the curriculum promotes the idea of the unique child and inclusive education, this message often seems to apply only until a child presents with identified or emerging ALN. Increasingly, I find myself supporting school-based nurseries where teachers are overwhelmed, flustered and struggling to balance the curriculum's expectations with the practical demands of meeting the needs of thirty unique children. Thematic reports on the ALN system found that early year's staff feel stretched, uncertain and under pressure to meet competing demands (Estyn, 2024). The pressure to demonstrate progression, produce data and meet accountability requirements often overshadows the curriculum's emphasis on responsive, play-based learning. As a result, children with ALN can become the first not be given equitable access when staff feel stretched or under-resourced denying them of their full educational entitlement (Senedd Cymru, 2024). Even though the ALN code for Wales places a statutory duty of schools and local authorities to ensure every child's needs are met through a rights based, needs led approach (ALNET, 2018), supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC) that stipulates all children have the right to education without discrimination (UNCRC, 1989).

A common issue I encounter is the belief that schools do not have enough staff or money to implement meeting the child where they are at, despite every school

receiving delegated ALN budgets (WG, 2025; Department for Education (DfE), 2026). Estyn evidence shows that schools are experiencing financial pressures, rising ALN costs and inconsistent support from local authorities which are contributing to the belief that they lack the resources to deliver inclusive education effectively (Estyn, 2024). Before transition, Flying Start and private childcare settings hold PCP meetings where I sit alongside practitioners and families to discuss the child's strengths, needs and support strategies. Children have one-page profiles, emerging targets and where appropriate local authority IDPs already in place. All this information is shared with the receiving school well before the child starts. In other words, schools are not meeting these children for the first time in September; they are receiving a detailed picture of the child months in advance (WG, 2021). Of course, there is an occasional surprise, but schools should be more than prepared. But instead, I see resources and adults not placed where they are most needed within the early years, where the foundations for learning, wellbeing and future achievement are established (WG, 2024). In contrast, many non-maintained childcare settings demonstrate a willingness to adapt, scaffold and respond flexibly to children's needs, even with fewer qualified staff. Early Years Wales (2023) highlights how non-maintained settings often use relational, flexible approaches that support ALN children effectively approaches also identified by the OECD as central to high-quality early years practice (OECD, 2021). This raises an uncomfortable question, if childcare providers can roll up their sleeves and get stuck in, why is this more difficult in school-based nursery environments?

Part of the answer may lie in current mindset within Education. Research on scarcity shows that when people feel they lack resources time, staff, money, their thinking narrows and decision-making becomes more defensive (Huijsmans *et al.* 2019). This may explain why some settings default to limiting access or reducing hours rather than adapting practice. England's Every Child Achieving and Thriving framework emphasises proactive early intervention (DfE, 2026), and although it applies to England, it highlights a wider UK ambition that does not always translate into practice in Wales. England also provides explicit guidance on how inclusion funding should be used (DfE, 2022), whereas Wales has no equivalent, contributing to inconsistent use of delegated ALN budgets (Estyn, 2026).

The curriculum offers freedom, authenticity and opportunities for enabling adults to step in, extend learning and scaffold development. However, this flexibility is not always extended to children with ALN. Instead of adapting the environment or pedagogy, the system often attempts to adapt the child or find ways or how this cannot work. I frequently hear concerns such as “What about the others?”, “We can’t meet this level of need”, or “This is more than we can offer.” These responses reflect a growing tension between the curriculum’s inclusive intention and the practical realities of rising levels of need in early years settings.

There is no doubt that the needs of young children have increased in recent years, potentially influenced by factors such as the pandemic, reduced social experiences, and increased exposure to digital devices (Mesce *et al.* 2022). But these children are here, and they are not going anywhere. The response cannot be to reduce hours, limit access or rely on systems and processes instead of meaningful support. Yet too often, the system defaults to paperwork, referrals, evidence-gathering and procedural steps rather than the responsive, enabling practice the curriculum calls for.

This disconnect between policy and practice raises an important question if our curriculum is inclusive by design, why are children with ALN still having such a hard time accessing it? Until this gap is addressed, the vision of a truly child-centred early years system will remain aspirational rather than achievable.

What makes this even more concerning is the inconsistency. Estyn (2021) highlighted variation in inclusive practice across schools in Wales, some demonstrate strong inclusive practice while others show weaker practice. Within the same local authority, I see one school embracing inclusion wholeheartedly, adapting environments, using enabling adults effectively, and viewing behaviour through a developmental lens, unpicking and actively embracing how they can build on develop these for the child. Then other schools using reduced timetables, withdrawal to smaller spaces and using professional reports as evidence they cannot meet need.

Part of the problem lies in the mismatch between the curriculum and the regulatory frameworks that sit around it. The early years curriculum emphasises holistic development, child-led learning and stage not age progression (WG, 2022). Yet the

inspection and accountability systems emphasise evidence, compliance, documentation, risk assessments and measurable outcomes (Estyn and Child Inspectorate for Wales, 2021). Practitioners are caught between two messages following the child's lead and how are we making and showing progress. When the system prioritises paperwork over presence, children with ALN who need responsive, relational, support they are the ones who lose out.

If we truly believe in early intervention then early years should be the place where inclusion is strongest, not where it begins to fracture. Getting it right early improves outcomes for all children, not just those with ALN. Inclusion is not an extra it is the foundation of a healthy learning community (Global Education Monitoring Team, 2020) When children grow up seeing difference as normal, supported and valued, they carry that mindset into later schooling and into life. However, when adults believe ALN children don't belong, can't be supported, children absorb those messages too. Inclusion is not just a policy it is a culture. Culture is shaped by the adults in the room. Popular media, such as *The Good Doctor* (2017), has helped challenge stereotypes about neurodivergent individuals, by highlighting their strengths, perspectives and humanity. Similarly, the Netflix documentary, *I Swear* (2025) offers an authentic portrayal of a child living with Tourette's, confronting deficit attitudes and the emotional impact of not feeling a sense of belonging. Yet in early years settings, we still see outdated beliefs shaping practice, with some children experiencing the same lack of acceptance because adults are not offering the inclusive, curious attitudes needed to do better. If adults struggle to embrace difference, how can we expect children to?

Inclusion is not going wrong because children have more complex needs. Inclusion is going wrong because the system doesn't support mindset and ethos shifts that values every single child. And until we confront that honestly, we will continue to fail the very children the curriculum promises to support.

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