

Critical Analysis of the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki: Play-Based Learning and Cultural Diversity

Introduction

Education enables individuals to develop the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for participation in society and lifelong learning (Werquin, 2010; Biesta, 2015; Verma, Doharey and Yadav, 2023; UNESCO, 2026; Shavkidinova, Suyunova and Kholdarova, 2023; Welsh Government, 2025). Key to this process is the curriculum, which provides a framework for teaching and learning while reflecting broader social, cultural, and political priorities (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2024).

In early childhood education, play-based learning is widely recognised as a developmentally appropriate approach that supports children in learning through exploration, social interaction and meaningful experiences (UNICEF, 2022; Welsh Government, 2024). The theoretical perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky, which emphasise the importance of play in fostering cognitive, social and emotional development, directly inform the design of curricula such as the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki. These curricula draw on such theories to promote play as a means of supporting independence, creativity, and problem-solving skills within structured early years frameworks (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Van Oers and Duijkers, 2013; Saracho, 2020; Alharbi, 2022; McLeod, 2025; Mohammed et al., 2026).

This assignment critically analyses two play-based early years curricula: the Foundation Phase in Wales and New Zealand's Te Whāriki. It examines their key principles, compares and contrasts their approaches to culture and inclusivity, and evaluates how far each supports culturally responsive practice within the Welsh context.

Foundation Phase Overview

The Foundation Phase became statutory in Wales in 2008 following concerns that early childhood education had become overly formal and insufficiently aligned with young children's developmental needs (National Assembly for Wales, 2008; Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Influenced by recommendations from the Early Years Advisory Group and evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project, the curriculum sought to replace traditional subject-based teaching with a more holistic and play-based approach (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2007).

The Foundation Phase is founded on active, experiential and play-based learning, with practitioners supporting development through observation, scaffolding and a balance of child-initiated and adult-guided activities (DCELLS, 2008). Outdoor learning is regarded as an important element of children's physical, social and cognitive development (Wainwright, 2021).

The curriculum aims to improve children's cognitive, social and emotional development while promoting literacy, numeracy, Welsh language and Welsh culture (Kingston and Siraj, 2017; Siencyn, 2019; Welsh Government, 2023). Although the Foundation Phase promotes inclusion and cultural awareness, its cultural responsiveness is less explicitly embedded than in Te Whāriki. As a result, it relies heavily on practitioners' interpretation and implementation, which can lead to variation in the integration of culturally relevant learning experiences (Bernstein and Lysniak, 2017; Lewis, 2016; Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

Te Whāriki Overview

Te Whāriki is New Zealand's national early childhood curriculum, first introduced in 1996 and revised in 2017. Meaning "woven mat" in Te Reo Māori, the curriculum conceptualises learning as a collaborative process in which children, families, communities and educators contribute to children's development through interconnected experiences (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Rather than prescribing specific content, Te Whāriki provides a flexible framework organised around four principles: Empowerment, Holistic Development, Family and Community, and Relationships, and five strands: Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication and Exploration (Ministry of Education, 2017). The curriculum positions children as competent learners whose development is supported through relationships, participation and play.

A defining characteristic of Te Whāriki is its bicultural foundation, rooted in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori language, values and ways of knowing are embedded throughout the curriculum rather than treated as additional content (May, 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017). It also recognises New Zealand's multicultural population and encourages educators who value children's home languages, cultural identities and family traditions (Ritchie, 2001). As a result, Te Whāriki is often regarded as a strong example of how play-based learning, cultural responsiveness and inclusion can be integrated within a single curriculum framework (May, 2012).

Comparative Analysis of Culture and Inclusivity

Both the Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki are underpinned by play-based, child-centred approaches that reject highly formal, teacher-directed models of early childhood education (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2017; Wainwright *et al.*, 2016; Hearfield, 2024; Jones, 2026). They adopt holistic views of development, position children as active participants in learning, and emphasise relationships with families and communities. Both also promote inclusive educational opportunities consistent with contemporary understandings of children's rights and equity (United Nations, 1989; UNESCO, 1994). However, they differ in the extent to which cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness are embedded in their curriculum structures.

The Foundation Phase promotes Welsh language, heritage and cultural identity through bilingual learning opportunities and engagement with Welsh traditions. It also encourages practitioners to adopt inclusive and anti-discriminatory approaches that recognise diversity among children and families (Foundation Phase Framework, 2015; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). However, cultural diversity is addressed mainly through broad curriculum principles and Areas of Learning rather than being embedded throughout the curriculum structure itself (Foundation Phase Framework, 2015). Consequently, the extent to which diverse cultures are represented often depends on practitioners' interpretations, experiences and confidence in delivering culturally responsive pedagogy (Kingston and Siraj, 2017; Ciampa and Reisboard, 2024; My-Progression, 2024).

In contrast, Te Whāriki positions culture as a central organising principle rather than a supplementary consideration. Biculturalism is embedded across curriculum principles, learning outcomes, assessment practices and practitioner expectations (Ministry of Education, 2017; Williams, Fletcher and Ma, 2023). Māori concepts such as whānau, mana and whakapapa are integrated throughout educational practice, ensuring that Māori perspectives are recognised as foundational to children's learning experiences. The curriculum also encourages educators to value multiple cultural identities and support children's home languages and cultural practices (Ritchie, 2001; Rameka, 2011).

This distinction is significant because it highlights different approaches to cultural responsiveness. Within the Foundation Phase, cultural inclusion is encouraged but not systematically embedded and implementation may vary considerably between settings (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2014; Murphy *et al.*, 2022).

In contrast, Te Whāriki provides clearer expectations regarding cultural responsiveness, increasing the likelihood of consistent practice across educational settings. This suggests that cultural responsiveness is treated as a core educational principle rather than an optional enhancement (Ministry of Education, 2023).

However, it would be simplistic to conclude that Te Whāriki automatically achieves culturally responsive practice more effectively. Although the curriculum provides stronger structural support, research indicates that practitioners' confidence and understanding remain critical factors in successful implementation (Ritchie, 2013). Therefore, both curricula show that curriculum frameworks alone cannot guarantee inclusive practice.

From a critical perspective, culturally responsive education extends beyond celebrating diversity or displaying multicultural resources. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy requires educators to build on learners' lived experiences whilst challenging social inequalities. Similarly, Freire's emphasis on critical pedagogy as a means of social transformation is reflected in the culturally responsive education literature (Teleni and Surtees, 2024). Viewed through this lens, Te Whāriki moves closer to a culturally responsive model because culture is embedded within the curriculum's fundamental structure. Nevertheless, both curricula still depend on practitioners' ability to translate policy aspirations into meaningful educational experiences.

Critical Analysis of Implementation in Wales

While both curricula offer valuable approaches to play-based learning and inclusion, their implementation raises important practical considerations within the Welsh context.

One strength of the Foundation Phase is its strong alignment with Welsh educational policy and cultural priorities, as it integrates the promotion of Welsh language and identity within the cultural context of Wales (Welsh Government, 2008; Rhys, 2018). Furthermore, its emphasis on active learning and child-centred pedagogy aligns with contemporary understandings of effective early childhood education (Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

Despite these strengths, research has identified significant implementation challenges. Effective play-based learning requires practitioners who can skilfully balance child-led exploration with purposeful adult interaction. Studies have shown that practitioners often interpret play-based pedagogy differently, resulting in variations in quality across settings (Lewis, 2016; Kingston and Siraj, 2017). This inconsistency may weaken children's experiences of inclusion and cultural responsiveness and suggests that the Foundation Phase's aims are not always realised in practice.

Practical constraints also influence implementation. Time pressures, staff shortages, large class sizes and limited funding can restrict opportunities for observation, planning and individualised support (Welsh Government, 2024b). Professional development remains essential for culturally responsive practice, requiring practitioners critically reflect on assumptions and adapt learning to diverse needs. Where training opportunities are limited, practitioners may struggle to move beyond superficial representations of culture.

Although Te Whāriki offers a stronger framework for cultural responsiveness, directly transferring its approach to Wales would present challenges. The curriculum is deeply rooted in New Zealand's unique historical, political and cultural context, particularly its relationship with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the status of Māori communities. Consequently, its bicultural framework cannot simply be replicated within Welsh settings. However, Te Whāriki provides valuable lessons on the systematic integration of culture into curriculum design.

A key strength of Te Whāriki is that it provides practitioners with clearer guidance on cultural responsiveness and stronger expectations regarding the inclusion of indigenous knowledge, language and values. This may reduce variability in practice and encourage greater consistency. However, evidence suggests that implementation still depends upon practitioners' confidence in engaging authentically with Māori concepts and language (Education Review Office, 2013; Ritchie, 2013).

These findings support Ball *et al.* (2017) argument that educational policies are enacted rather than simply implemented. Curriculum documents establish aspirations and expectations, but their impact is shaped by the contexts in which practitioners work. Research in Wales similarly identifies a gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, highlighting inconsistencies and fragmentation in early years provision (Stewart *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, culturally responsive practice depends not only on curriculum design but also on adequate resources, professional development and meaningful engagement with families and communities. Given continuing pressures relating to funding, staffing and workload within Welsh education, sustaining such practice consistently across settings may remain challenging.

Conclusion

The Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki share a commitment to play-based learning, holistic development and child-centred education. However, significant differences emerge in their treatment of culture and inclusivity.

The Foundation Phase promotes Welsh language and culture and encourages inclusive practice, yet cultural responsiveness largely depends on practitioners' interpretation. In contrast, Te Whāriki embeds biculturalism throughout its structure and provides more explicit guidance regarding cultural identity, language and community engagement. As a result, it offers a stronger framework for culturally responsive practice.

Overall, Te Whāriki offers a more explicit model of cultural responsiveness, whereas the Foundation Phase provides greater flexibility but relies more heavily on practitioner interpretation. The comparison highlights that inclusive play-based curricula are shaped not only by policy design but also by the conditions in which they are enacted. Therefore, the effectiveness of either curriculum ultimately depends on educators' capacity to translate curriculum principles into meaningful and culturally responsive experiences for children and families.