Early Years Curricula

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Implementing Play-Based Curricula: A Critical Comparison of the Welsh and South African Foundation Phases

Play is an important part of how young children learn and develop. In early years education, curriculum involves more than teaching specific knowledge and skills. It also includes the experiences, relationships and approaches to learning that support children's social, physical, cognitive and emotional development. Play-based curricula recognise that children can learn through exploring, being active, making choices and interacting with others, which can also contribute to their overall well-being. Research has suggested that play can have positive effects on children's learning, development and well-being (Mohammed et al., 2026; Skene et al., 2022). However, including play within a curriculum does not necessarily mean that it is easy to implement in practice. Differences in pedagogy, the role of practitioners, assessment expectations and wider cultural and institutional values can influence how play is understood and experienced by children. This piece of written work will critically compare the Welsh Foundation Phase and the South African Foundation Phase curriculum within CAPS, with a focus on how play-based approaches can support children's well-being. It will consider the role of the adult in play, well-being with play-based curricular and the cultural, institutional and practical challenges that can affect the implementation of play-based approaches.

The Foundation Phase was introduced in Wales in 2008 for children aged three to seven. It was intended to move away from the more formal approach used previously and place a stronger focus on learning through play, practical experiences and exploration. The curriculum was organised around seven Areas of Learning and placed children's well-being at the centre of the approach. It also encouraged a balance between activities where children could make choices and activities that were supported or led by practitioners (Taylor et al., 2015). This made play an important part of how children were expected to learn, rather than something separate from learning. There is also evidence that children experienced better progress and well-being when the principles of the Foundation Phase were followed more closely (Power et al., 2019). However, the Welsh Government's evaluation found that the way the Foundation Phase was put into practice varied between classrooms and settings (Waldron et al., 2014a). This is important because it shows that having play and well-being at the centre of a curriculum does not necessarily mean that children experience it in the same way in every setting.

In South Africa, the Foundation Phase covers Grades R to 3 and is guided by the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Rather than being organised around Areas of Learning like the Welsh Foundation Phase, CAPS is divided into three main subjects: Languages, Mathematics and Life Skills. Life Skills is relevant to this because it includes Social and Personal Well-being, Beginning Knowledge, Physical

Education and Creative Arts, showing that children's development is not only focused on academic learning (Dixon et al., 2018). The curriculum therefore includes areas that relate to children's wider development and well-being, while also setting out specific learning content and expectations for teachers. Play is also recognised as a useful way of supporting young children's development in South African early years settings. Lunga, Esterhuizen and Koen (2022) found that play-based approaches could support children's physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development in three ECD centres in Gauteng. Despite that, this does not mean that play is always easy to use in practice. Hoadley (2017) found that changes in teaching following the introduction of CAPS were sometimes more about following the structure of the new curriculum than making deeper changes to classroom practice. This is useful when considering the South African context because it highlights that, as with the Welsh Foundation Phase, there can be a difference between what a curriculum intends and what happens in everyday teaching.

The role of the adult is significant in play-based learning because children need opportunities to make their own choices, but they also need adults to support their learning. Child-led play allows children to follow their interests and have more control over what they do. This can help children feel involved in their learning and can support their well-being. However, adults still have an important role in making sure that play provides opportunities for learning. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) found that teachers can support play in different ways, such as providing resources, joining in and helping children develop their ideas. Finding the right balance can be difficult. Jensen et al. (2021) found that South African early educators saw play as active and enjoyable, but some still had more traditional ideas about what learning should look like. In Wales, Waldron et al. (2014a) also found differences in children's involvement and well-being depending on the activities and teaching approaches used. This suggests that having play within a curriculum does not automatically mean that children are given meaningful choices. Guided play could provide a balance, as adults can support learning while children still have opportunities to explore. Despite this, Ndabezitha and Gravett (2024) found that some South African student teachers were unsure about how to guide children during play. This shows that practitioners need to understand how to support play without taking control of it. Both approaches have strengths and limitations. Too much adult direction can reduce children's choices, while too little support may mean that learning opportunities are missed. The challenge is finding a balance where adults support children's learning while still allowing children to have a say in their play.

Well-being was an important part of the Welsh Foundation Phase and was closely connected to how children were expected to learn. The curriculum encouraged children to explore, be active, make choices and learn through practical experiences. Waldron

et al. (2014a) found that children's involvement and well-being were higher when they experienced activities such as physical activity, exploration and opportunities to make choices. Similarly, Power et al. (2019) found greater progress and well-being where the principles of the Foundation Phase were followed more closely. This indicates that well-being can be supported through the way learning is organised rather than being treated separately from learning. However, Waters (2016) highlights the significance of professional learning in maintaining the principles of the Foundation Phase. Lewis and Thomas (2021) also found that some practitioners had limited understanding of well-being and how it could be recognised and supported. This suggests that including well-being in a curriculum does not automatically mean it will be supported in everyday practice. In South Africa, well-being has a specific place within CAPS through Social and Personal Well-being in Life Skills, which includes areas such as relationships, health, safety and emotional development (Department of Basic Education, 2011). Declercq (2011) found differences in children's well-being and involvement between early childhood settings. These curricula both recognise the importance of well-being, but the Welsh Foundation Phase connects it more closely with play, choice and involvement, while South African CAPS gives it a defined place within Life Skills. In both, the curriculum alone does not guarantee positive experiences for children.

There are several challenges that can make play-based learning difficult to put into practice. In Wales, the Foundation Phase evaluation found differences between settings, with staff attitudes, adult-to-child ratios and pressure to use more formal teaching affecting how the curriculum was implemented. The Welsh Government also recognised that the quality of delivery was inconsistent and highlighted the need to strengthen professional learning and workforce training (Waldron et al., 2014b). This shows that even when practitioners understand the importance of play, other pressures can make it harder to give children the same opportunities to learn through play. Similar issues can be seen in South Africa. Hoadley (2017) found that changes following the introduction of CAPS were sometimes more about following the new curriculum than making real changes to teaching. This suggests that changing a curriculum does not necessarily mean that teaching practice will change with it. Selepe, Mofokeng and Hadebe-Ndlovu (2024) also found that practitioners experienced difficulties planning play-based activities and identified a lack of training and resources as barriers to using play effectively. Cultural expectations can also influence how play is viewed. In some settings, there may be greater pressure for children to take part in formal learning, particularly when academic progress is highly valued. Ang et al. (2025) highlight the importance of resources, teacher education and socioeconomic circumstances in supporting children's learning and well-being in South African settings. Implementing play-based learning is not simply about including play in the curriculum. Practitioners also need enough time, training, resources and support to make it work in everyday practice.

The approaches of the Welsh and South African Foundation Phases both recognise the importance of supporting children's wider development and well-being, although they approach this in different ways. The Welsh Foundation Phase places more focus on learning through play, choice and practical experiences, while South African CAPS includes well-being within Life Skills alongside other curriculum expectations. The comparison shows that having play and well-being included within a curriculum does not automatically mean that children will experience them in the same way. Practitioner knowledge, training, resources, staffing and wider expectations can all affect what happens in practice. Therefore, the main challenge is not simply including play within a curriculum but creating the right conditions for practitioners to use it effectively to support children's learning and well-being.

The Unique Child: Assessment in Play-Based Curricula

Children do not all develop in the same way or at the same pace, which makes understanding the individual child an important part of early years assessment. Assessment should do more than record whether a child has reached a particular stage; it should help practitioners understand what children know, can do and may need support with. The Welsh Foundation Phase Profile was designed to use observation to identify children's developmental stage, interests and learning styles, showing how assessment can be used to build a broader understanding of the child (Welsh Government, 2017). However, assessment does not always provide a complete picture. Research into assessment practices in the Foundation Phase identified that practitioners valued observation, but some felt that assessment could become time-consuming, too concerned with recording progress against set expectations, not sufficiently tailored to individual learners (Welsh Government, 2022). Hanno, Portilla and Hsueh (2025) similarly argue that early childhood assessment needs to recognise the diversity of children's experiences and capture a wider range of their abilities. This raises questions about whether assessment supports the idea of the 'Unique Child' or whether fixed expectations can sometimes limit how children are viewed. This piece of work will critically examine the Foundation Phase Profile in Wales and formative assessment in Grade R within the South African Foundation Phase, considering how far these approaches recognise individual development, strengths and needs.

The idea of the 'Unique Child' has valuable implications for how practitioners assess children's learning and development. If children can demonstrate their abilities differently depending on the situation, then assessment needs to look beyond a single activity or outcome. Kunz and Oeri (2026), for example, found that young children's self-regulation could vary across different days and classroom activities. This suggests that what a child demonstrates during one assessment may not provide a complete picture of their abilities, making ongoing observation important. This is particularly relevant in play-based learning, where children may show their skills through activities that interest them rather than through a planned assessment task. Assessment can therefore provide useful information when it is carried out across different situations and over time. However, there is also a need to consider what happens when assessment identifies a concern. Burgess et al. (2025) found that appropriate developmental assessment tools can help identify developmental concerns and support children in accessing suitable intervention. This shows that assessment can have a significant role in supporting individual children, rather than simply measuring progress. At the same time, assessment needs to be interpreted carefully so that an identified difficulty does not become the main way a child is viewed. Sussman, Draney and Wilson (2025) highlight the importance of considering differences between children when using developmental assessment approaches, particularly across diverse groups

of learners. Ken Robinson (2006) also questioned whether education gives enough recognition to children's different talents and abilities, arguing for approaches that allow individual strengths to be recognised. This indicates the need for assessment to help practitioners understand the individual child rather than simply judge children against predetermined expectations. This will be important when considering how well assessment methods support the concept of the Unique Child.

The Foundation Phase Profile was introduced in Wales as a way of establishing a baseline of children's development when they entered Reception. From 2016, children were assessed within their first six weeks of starting school, using natural observations rather than formal tests. The assessment considered four main areas. These being, language, physical development mathematical development, literacy and communication, well-being and cultural diversity and personal and social development (Welsh Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2018). The Profile included a Compact Profile for the baseline assessment and a Full Profile that could be used to provide a more detailed understanding of children's development. Practitioners recorded children's progress against a series of skill ladders, with observations taking place across a range of experiences. The guidance encouraged practitioners to gather evidence through children's everyday learning rather than relying on a single assessment activity (Welsh Government, 2017). The Profile provided a structured way for practitioners to record children's development while allowing assessment to take place within the normal learning environment. One strength of this approach is that it provided practitioners with information that could be used to plan learning and identify appropriate next steps. The Profile was also designed to provide a consistent approach to assessment across Wales, which could help practitioners build a shared understanding of children's development. However, using a common set of skill ladders also meant that practitioners were making judgements against predetermined descriptions of development. This could support the tracking of progress but may not always capture the different ways in which children demonstrate their learning (Welsh Government, 2017). The research into Foundation Phase assessment provides a more critical view of how the Profile worked in practice. Practitioners generally viewed it positively and felt that it provided a useful account of children's abilities, but some reported that it was time-consuming and not sufficiently tailored to individual learners. Some skills were also considered easier to assess than others, particularly when comparing more easily observable abilities with areas such as personal and social development and well-being (Welsh Government, 2022). This suggests that although the Profile provided a useful structure, the quality and usefulness of the assessment could depend on how practitioners interpreted and applied it.

In South Africa, Grade R assessment is intended to be continuous and formative, with learning based on integration and play-based approaches. CAPS recommends informal

assessment, using observation to identify children's strengths and areas where further support may be needed. This makes assessment part of everyday learning rather than separating it from play. Practitioners can observe children across different activities and record progress using tools such as checklists and assessment tools (Department of Basic Education, 2019). This can support the Unique Child by giving children different ways to demonstrate their learning. Pewa and Mzimela (2024) also highlight the importance of considering children's cognitive, physical, language, emotional and social development when assessing readiness for Grade R. This approach also has limitations. Checklists and other assessment tools can organise assessment information but may encourage children's development to be viewed through set categories rather than their individual circumstances. This could be limiting in play-based learning, where children may develop skills through their own interests and interactions. The way practitioners understand play can also affect assessment. Isaacs et al. (2019) found that Grade R practitioners' knowledge and confidence improved following play-based training, but the use of play remained uneven in practice. This demonstrates that having a play-based curriculum does not automatically ensure that children's learning will be effectively recognised through play. Grade R assessment can support the Unique Child by considering children's learning across different experiences and developmental areas. Its effectiveness depends on whether practitioners use assessment to understand and support individual children rather than simply measure progress against developmental expectations.

When comparing the two approaches, an important issue is whether assessment provides a fair understanding of children from different backgrounds. In Wales, the Foundation Phase Profile was intended to provide information about children’s development and could help practitioners identify areas where further support may be needed (Welsh Government, 2017). This highlights how a common assessment can help identify children who may need further support, but additional assessment may still be needed to understand the individual child. Cultural and language differences are also important when considering assessment in South Africa. Botes et al. (2023) found that developmental screening tools needed to be culturally and contextually adapted for use within a South African community. This indicates that assessment methods cannot always be applied in the same way to every child, as children's backgrounds and experiences can influence how they respond. Language can also affect how accurately children's abilities are represented. Recent South African research found that preschool children achieved different early learning outcomes depending on whether they were assessed in their home language or English (Dawes et al., 2026). This is particularly relevant to the Unique Child because a child's assessment result may reflect their familiarity with the language being used rather than their actual level of understanding. There are therefore differences in the challenges faced by the two approaches. The Welsh Profile provides a national structure that can support

consistency, while the South African context highlights the importance of adapting assessment to children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Research into early childhood assessment in South Africa also shows the importance of developing tools that are culturally and linguistically appropriate rather than assuming that one approach will work equally well for all children (Giese et al., 2023). This shows that supporting the Unique Child requires more than having a play-based assessment system. Assessment needs to take account of children's individual circumstances, including their additional learning needs, language and cultural background. A consistent framework can provide useful guidance, but flexibility is necessary if assessment is to give a fair representation of each child.

The evidence considered shows that assessment has an important role within play-based curricula, particularly in helping practitioners recognise children's progress and provide appropriate support. The concept of the Unique Child means that assessment should contribute to understanding what makes each child different, rather than reducing their development to a single measure of success. Robinson (2006) argued for greater recognition of children's individual abilities and strengths within education. This supports the view that assessment is most valuable when it helps practitioners see the child as a whole and use what they learn to support future learning.

Blog

(This blog is aimed at fellow practitioners)

Let Children Be Bored

Can boredom be the beginning of imagination, creativity and learning, and how can a play-based curriculum make space for it?

Alistair Berg/Getty Images, featured in National Geographic (2022).

"I'm bored."

How often do we hear children say this, and how quickly do we feel the need to find something for them to do? We might suggest an activity, get out some toys or move them towards something that has already been planned. But what if boredom isn't always something that needs to be solved?

When children have time and space to come up with their own ideas, could boredom become an opportunity for creativity, imagination and child-led play? The Curriculum for Wales recognises the importance of play, exploration and children's interests within early learning (Welsh Government, 2022).

Perhaps the question isn't whether children should be bored, but whether we give them enough opportunity to discover what they can do when we don't immediately give them the answer.

Is boredom really a bad thing?

Boredom is often seen as something negative. When a child says, "I'm bored," our first reaction can be to find something for them to do. But maybe we don't always need to. Sometimes, having nothing planned can give children the chance to come up with their own ideas. Howard-Jones, Taylor and Sutton (2002) found that children who took part in unstructured play showed more creativity in a later activity. This suggests that giving children time to play without a set outcome can be valuable. However, we should not assume that boredom automatically leads to creativity. Zeißig et al. (2024) found that the relationship between boredom and creativity is more complicated, with the evidence not showing a clear link between the two. In Wales, child-led play and exploration are also recognised as important parts of early learning (Welsh Government, 2024). Perhaps boredom isn't about children having "nothing to do"; maybe it is about giving them the time and freedom to decide what they want to do.

What does the curriculum say?

So, where does boredom actually fit into a play-based curriculum? The Curriculum for Wales does not say that children should be bored, but it does place a lot of importance on play, exploration, independence and children's interests. It recognises that children need time to explore, investigate and play, rather than always being given something to do by an adult (Welsh Government, 2023a).

This made me think about how often we plan activities for children without really considering what might happen if we gave them some time to decide for themselves. The Curriculum for Wales encourages children to make choices and become more independent, as well as giving them opportunities for active and uninterrupted learning (Welsh Government, 2023a). Play is also seen as an important part of children's physical, intellectual and creative development (Welsh Government, 2023b).

The Welsh Government's Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan also puts children and child development at the heart of early childhood provision and emphasises the importance of high-quality, inclusive, play-based experiences (Welsh Government, 2024). This indicates that play should not just be something children do when the planned learning is finished. It can be the way children learn in the first place.

We can also see this in practice. Estyn describes settings where children are able to choose their own experiences, follow their interests and work at their own pace. Adults are still there to support them, but they do not need to direct every part of the play (Estyn, 2019). More recently, Estyn has also highlighted the importance of giving younger children opportunities to lead their own learning, organise themselves and test out their own ideas (Estyn, 2026).

This makes me wonder, 'are we giving children enough space to decide what to do when nobody has planned it for them?' If every part of the day is filled with activities, are we leaving enough room for children to use their own imagination and ideas? Maybe "letting children be bored" is not about doing less. Maybe it is about giving children the time and freedom to discover what they can do for themselves.

Are we putting the curriculum into practice? What might need to change?

We know that the Curriculum for Wales values children's independence, interests and opportunities to explore, but what does this look like in everyday practice? It is one thing for the curriculum to encourage children to make choices and learn through play, but are children actually given the freedom to do this during the day? Are they given enough uninterrupted time to explore their own ideas, or are they regularly moved on to the next planned activity?

This is where the environment becomes important. Are resources easy for children to access? Can they choose what they want to use? Do they have enough time to explore an idea without being moved on to the next activity? Providing open-ended resources such as boxes, blocks, fabric, natural materials and loose parts can give children the freedom to decide how they want to use them. Estyn (2023) highlights the importance of responsive planning that places children's interests and individuality at the centre of their learning.

The adult's role is important too. Giving children more freedom does not mean leaving them to get on with everything alone. We can watch, listen and notice what children are interested in before deciding whether to step in. When a child says, "I'm bored," perhaps we do not always need to give them an activity straight away. We could simply ask, "I wonder what you could do?" and give them time to think.

Maybe the biggest change is how we view boredom. Instead of seeing it as something we need to fix, could we see it as a small opportunity for children to take the lead?

Could boredom be part of the curriculum?

Maybe we need to stop worrying so much when a child may seem bored. The Curriculum for Wales encourages children to develop independence, follow their interests and learn through play, so perhaps we need to think about whether our everyday practice gives them enough opportunity to do this. Children do not always need an activity planned for them or an adult telling them what to do next. Sometimes they need time and space to come up with their own ideas. As practitioners, our role is to create an environment where children can explore, make choices and take the lead. Maybe being bored is not something we need to solve, but a chance to put the curriculum into practice.

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