

Early Years Curricula

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Part 1 – Critical analysis of the challenges when implementing play-based curricula.

An early year's curriculum provides a framework for organising and guiding children's learning experiences, as defined through Beaver and Wyatt (2023). Curriculum offers support for children's holistic development including their cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth (Beaver and Wyatt, 2023). It also incorporates play, exploration and practical experiences to encourage learning through fun and exciting methods. Curriculum not only considers children, but it also guides practitioners in planning activities, observing progress and adapting teaching to support children's holistic development (Skene *et al.*, 2022).

Through incorporating play-based learning, children's holistic development is supported, which in turn helps them develop a broad range of skills during early childhood (Yogman *et al.*, 2018). Play-based learning also provides children with opportunities to practice vocabulary and express their ideas and communicate with other children and adults, supporting their developing language skills (Welsh Government, 2025).

This essay will compare the early years curricula of Wales and Japan, exploring how each country approaches play-based learning, and the role of the adult in supporting children's holistic development.

In Wales, early years education is guided by the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises children's holistic development, experimental learning and the importance of play. Through its approach to foundation learning, the Welsh curriculum focuses on play-based learning, and how playful learning is central to foundation learning (Welsh Government, 2023). This allows the child to explore, investigate and develop through meaningful experiences.

Curriculum for Wales also identifies five developmental pathways such as; belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and well-being. These pathways recognise that children's development is interconnected (Welsh Government, 2023b).

Throughout the Welsh curriculum, practitioners are described as enabling adults. Highlighting that their role is to support learning through responsive interactions, rather than directing every aspect of children's play (Welsh Government, 2023a). Practitioners should aim to provide opportunities for exploration, including outdoor experiences that respond to children's development and interests (Welsh Government, 2023a).

In Japan, early childhood education is guided by the Course of Study for Kindergarten, established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). This framework emphasises holistic child development through play, social interaction and experiences that encourage children's independence and curiosity. Rather than solely focusing on academic achievement, the Japanese curriculum recognises play as an important tool through which children develop knowledge, skills and relationships (MEXT, 2017).

Similarly, the Japanese curriculum organises learning through five pathways; health, interpersonal relationships, environment, language and expression. These pathways are intended to work together through children's experiences rather than isolated subjects (MEXT, 2017). The role of the adult under this curriculum is to establish trusting relationships, understand children's individual interests and create environments that encourage voluntary activities. The practitioner's role includes anticipating children's needs, and adapting their interests to enrich play and opportunities (MEXT, n.d).

The Japanese curriculum also recognises that children develop differently and have varied life experiences. Considering this, they encourage independence, cooperation, communication and learning through relationships with other children and adults (Ferguson and Takahashi, 2026).

Although the Welsh and Japanese frameworks operate within different educational contexts, both frameworks recognise play as a fundamental aspect of early childhood learning.

In Wales, practitioners are described as enabling adults who observe children and respond to their interest to extend learning (Welsh Government, 2023a). Meanwhile, in Japan, teachers organise stimulating environments and support children's voluntary activities and interactions (MEXT, 2017). Both approaches require practitioners to understand when to intervene and when to allow children to direct their own learning. But too much intervention may limit independence, and the Japanese framework heavily details the importance of independence. Knowing this, too little support may mean that opportunities for learning are missed.

The Welsh curriculum identifies three key enablers; enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments (Welsh Government, 2023a). Japan also emphasises the learning environment, in which practitioners use this environment to encourage children's voluntary activities (MEXT, 2017). Both frameworks involve intentional planning, but the practitioners support must remain responsive and observant. Creating opportunities and activities that are not overly structured or

adult-led could be challenging, especially with limited time, training and resources (Estyn, 2024).

As discussed, both frameworks promote child-centered learning, but their success depends on how practitioners interpret and implement guidance in practice (Pyle and Danniels, 2017). In 2026, the Welsh Government found that schools implement foundation learning differently, and that there is a need for clearer practical guidance and support (Welsh Government, 2026). Having a play-based curriculum that is successful depends on resources, appropriate environments and professional development, and even with these tools it does not automatically guarantee high-quality play experience's (Welsh Government, 2026). It ultimately depends on how the practitioner is interpreting the framework, and how much support they receive.

The curriculum for Wales emphasises observing children's learning and development to understand their needs, interests and progress (Welsh Government, 2023b). In turn, this supports individual development, as children can demonstrate learning through play exploration and everyday interactions (Welsh Government, 2023b). With this being said, observations to gain holistic insight on a child requires time, professional judgement and accurate interpretation as argued by Estyn (2024). If practitioners feel pressured to demonstrate progress, play may become overly structured or focused on producing high outcomes (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

Japan's course of Study for Kindergarten details holistic development across five pathways, as discussed above. Children's development is supported through play, experiences and interactions rather than solely being understood within everyday play (MEXT, 2017). This allows the practitioner to recognise social, emotional, physical and cognitive development within everyday scenarios (Imai-Matsumura and Schultz, 2022). However, teachers must interpret complex developmental progress while supporting children's individual needs. Expectations from adults or families about school readiness may also create tension within the setting, especially if they are prioritising visible academic outcomes over broader development (Ogisu and Kitamura, 2022).

Both the Welsh curriculum and the Japanese curriculum recognise that early learning involves more than academic knowledge, and that development occurs through different experiences and at different paces (Welsh Government, 2023b). The Welsh curriculum frames assessment around progression along a learning continuum from ages 3-16, with ongoing assessments forming the next steps in learning. Meanwhile Japan's kindergarten framework sets broad national educational standards for children ages 3-5. This allows the practitioners to plan experiences suited to children's development.

As argued by Pyle, DeLucca and Danniels (2017), practitioners must aim to balance broad learning expectations with children's individual interests and developmental pace. If expectations are interpreted differently, children may be pushed towards predetermined outcomes rather than being allowed to freely explore and learn naturally through play (Pyle and Danniels, 2017).

In conclusion, the comparisons of the Welsh and Japanese curricula demonstrate that although both recognise the importance of play-based learning, successful implementation means considering cultural, institutional and practical challenges. This essay has also demonstrated that implementing a play-based curricula involves balancing children's independence, developmental needs and educational expectations.

Ultimately, successful outcomes depend upon practitioners being adequately supported to provide meaningful, responsive, inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Part 2 - The concept of the 'unique child', and methods of assessment within play-based curricula.

The concept of the 'unique child' recognises that children have individual identities, interests, strengths, needs, experiences and rates of development, meaning that development does not follow an identical pathway for all children (NAEYC, 2020). This concept is reflected within Wales's curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings, which demonstrates emphasis on developmentally appropriate provision that considers children's individual circumstances to support their progression (Welsh Government, 2022).

Within an early year's context, assessment is defined by the ongoing progress of gathering evidence of children's learning, development and wellbeing to help practitioners make decisions. Effective assessment is essential in early years settings as it allows practitioners to identify children's strengths and recognise potential barriers that they may face when learning, to adapt experiences and support their individual progression (Welsh Government, 2023).

This discussion will critically evaluate the concept of the 'unique child' within a play-based curricula, along with the use of a variety of assessment methods used within early years settings and considering their benefits and limitations.

In early childhood education, it is important to note that children are not passive recipients of information, and differ in interests, abilities, experiences and developmental pace (NAEYC, 2020).

In a play-based curriculum, such as the Curriculum for Wales's framework, children may explore resources differently, which in turn impacts the way they develop skills and understanding (Welsh Government, 2022). As the NAEYC (2020) claims, children actively shape their learning through their choices, interests and interactions within educational settings. To help children receive adequate learning experiences, practitioners should be responsive and flexible to possible challenges that children face (NAEYC, 2020). Knowing this, practitioners should still provide intentional guidance to ensure opportunities for development are accessible across different areas of learning (NAEYC, 2020).

The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings encourages practitioners to build learning around children's interests, experiences and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2022). This allows practitioners to adapt activities to differing abilities that are demonstrated in practice. Considering this, settings within Wales face challenges such as staffing procedures, limited resources

or educational expectations without time or funding (Welsh Government, 2023). A study done by Davies and Hamilton in 2018 found that these challenges impacted practitioner's abilities within early year settings to assess and adapt activities to children with differing developmental skills.

Throughout everyday activities, practitioners are constantly observing children and how they play to identify emerging skills, interests, interactions and learning. Observations can be both spontaneous or planned, which allows practitioners to see how children communicate, solve problems and engage in environments which they find familiar (Welsh Government, 2023). Observational assessments align with the concept of the 'unique child' because it focuses on children's genuine responses to the environment and the activities, rather than formal testing where outcomes may not be authentic (NAEYC, 2020).

Learning journals are observations that are done over time, often including photographs to demonstrate a child's growth within a setting (Flewitt and Cowan, 2020). Practitioners may begin these journals when a child first starts at a setting, then continue writing the journal as the child develops. These journals provide rich and contextual evidence of the child's development and can often give the parent's information of activities the child has enjoyed doing and how they have developed throughout their time in the setting (Flewitt and Cowan, 2020). However, creating learning journals requires time, evidence and correct staff ratios, practitioners may find this observational method hard to keep up to date, with the busyness that early year's settings face (Hohmann, 2024).

Another method is narrative observations, which are taken while a child is engaged in an activity. Instead of collecting photographic evidence and writing about the activity the child is doing, a narrative observation can be done quickly and effectively (Head Start, n.d.). Without requiring much time, this method can also be useful when tracking a child's development. Practitioners can note certain words the child is saying at that time, and how exactly they are utilising the resources provided (Edwards, n.d.). But, without practitioners using open-ended questions where appropriate, they may miss opportunities to explore children's reasoning and understanding of the thought process behind their actions (Edwards, n.d.).

These methods allow practitioners to continuously document progress over time, helping to identify any changes in a child's abilities (Welsh Government, 2023). Assessments not only benefit the practitioners, but it can also boost family partnerships. By communicating a child's at home interests and language in everyday situations can help the setting with planning activities that the child will enjoy and learn from (NAEYC, 2020). Overtime, methods of observation can become

time consuming, and practitioners may prioritise activities that are easily assembled and easily documented.

But knowing this does not take away from the fact that observations can also become subjective (Eisenhauer, 2016). Each practitioner may interpret the same behaviours demonstrated differently, and a child's performance could vary depending on their confidence, comfortability and familiarity with the adult who is observing them (Wood et al., 2026). As referenced by Maslow, a child is completely engaged and comfortable when all their needs are met (Maslow, 1943). Without these needs being met, children cannot fully engage and enjoy the activity presented to them (King-Hill, 2015). Eberhart *et al.* (2023) claims that children can also over-perform or under-perform depending on who and how the observation is being taken.

Formative assessment involves using information gathered during learning to support a child's next steps. For example, if a practitioner notices that a child is engaged during role-play, they may introduce additional resources to extend the learning opportunities (Welsh Government, 2023). This approach supports individuality as it adapts in response to the child's demonstrated understanding, without having to write anything down and become engaged in the activity with the child (NAEYC, 2020). With a combination of these assessment methods, it provides a more holistic understanding of the 'unique child' rather than a single assessment method. Formally testing a child, especially in early years settings, may take away from the authenticity. Being able to recognise when a child is engaged in play and observing makes the observation genuine and helpful when deciding the next steps for the child's learning journey (Welsh Government, 2023).

A theory called the Zone of Proximal Development, founded by Lev Vygotsky in 1978 explored that children may achieve more when supported by an adult, rather than working independently (Loizou and Olymbiou, 2024). This theory encourages practitioners to consider each child's current understanding before extending their learning further and challenges the idea that a child's abilities can be understood through a singular assessment or observation, as performance can change depending on the context and the support provided (Carranza-Pinedo and Diprossimo, 2025).

But practitioners must remember that using these methods are only effective if staff are supported and have received adequate training (NAEYC, 2020), otherwise the quality of the observations may not be helpful when considering the 'unique child'

and how to support their learning development (NSW Department of Education, 2020).

When looking at observation in the early years, it is clear that there is an expectation that children should be at the skill level that their peers are at within the same age range, as stated by American Academy of Pediatrics (2022). But does this work?

As discussed, children are different in many ways from one another, meaning a child may be more advanced in one area than another. Piaget's stages of cognitive development, outlined in *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (Piaget, 1952), provides useful examples of how development has historically been understood through stages (Winstanley, 2023). Although these stages offer a broad framework for understanding development, treating them as fixed expectations can contradict the principle that every child follows an individual developmental pathway (Karasik and Robinson, 2022).

Early years settings use observational methods to monitor progress, identify possible difficulties and demonstrate that children are receiving appropriate support that reflects their skills. When practitioners rely solely on evidence that a child has achieved a milestone, they may focus on predetermined outcomes instead of a child's interests, curiosity or emerging abilities (Karasik and Robinson, 2022). However, these expectations can also prevent children who have additional learning needs to access the support they require (NAEYC, 2020).

These developmental expectations might disadvantage children whose development is influenced through other areas, such as language, culture, disability or differing life experiences (Karasik and Robinson, 2022; NAEYC, 2020). As some methods of assessment are easier and less time consuming, they do not provide a meaningful insight to a child's development. Especially individually. Recognising individual differences does not mean that practitioners should ignore potential developmental difficulties. Professional judgement, knowledge of the child and the family perspectives are essential when interpreting developmental information (Welsh Government, 2023).

In conclusion, observations throughout early years settings provide useful reference points to guide practitioners into planning activities that are engaging and supportive to individual children and their needs. But the NAEYC (2020) suggests that assessments and observations are most effective when practitioners are flexible, inclusive and responsive to individual development.

This shows that the 'unique child' is best supported when practitioners use observational methods as developmental references to create a better understanding of each child, rather than allowing age-related expectations to define a child's capabilities (Welsh Government, 2023). Ensuring practitioners are well informed on the importance of assessments will allow them to consider the 'unique child' in everyday practice, and to recognise that each child is completely different.

Part 3 – Blog.

ECEY6010
1,354 words
2418805

"Look at the 'moos'!

Does the way we talk to young children actually influence how they develop language?"

I recently sat down with a group of 3 year olds, at my setting, getting ready to do an activity involving animals. I was quite surprised when they started telling me that the simple farm animals had completely different names to what I thought they were.

For example, the sheep was no longer called a sheep, instead its name was "baa". Along with a "moo", a "quack quack" and a "neigh". As I continued the activity, I wondered how much of an effect this could be having on their language development.



ECS,
2017



NAPA
Team,
2023

Adults automatically adapt their speech when speaking to a child, whether it is changing their pitch or exaggerating certain words, especially during play (Shi et al., 2023). Play can offer opportunities for children to hear, practice and experiment with new language, and by making it fun and engaging it becomes more memorable (Masters, 2023). But what happens when "moo" becomes the default?

Throughout this blog, I will be examining the potential benefits and limitations that come with the use of playful speech, and how practitioners can implement this throughout play.

Child-directed speech or CDS is often informally referred to as "baby talk", which describes the way adults adapt their speech when talking to young children (Saint-Georges et al., 2013). For example, when adults raise their pitch, exaggerate intonation, repeat and simplify their language to capture a child's attention and support communication. Although this adaptation may seem instinctive in everyday interactions for practitioners, they play an important role in how adults engage with young children throughout play and routine activities.

Genovese et al. (2018) found that words such as "choo choo" can relate to early vocabulary development. They found that words with repetition or playful sounds were associated with vocabulary growth in younger children. This suggests that words like "moo" can actually be useful when helping a child to develop their language skills, because of the memorable and engaging sound (Genovese et al., 2018).

But child-directed speech is much more than a simple way of gaining a child's attention, it can also provide opportunities for language through everyday interactions and play (Neuman et al., 2025). By using the methods mentioned in Neuman et al. (2025)'s research, practitioners can create engaging opportunities for children to hear, interpret and begin using language.

According to Bauer et al. (2016), children learn the most when they are playing. Repeating the names of objects can help children to create connections between words and their meanings. This exposes children to conventional words and sentence structures (Schwab and Lew-Williams, 2016).

CDS can also support social interaction and communication. Responsive adults and practitioners can follow children's interests, and allow time for responses before extending on what the child says. The Department for Education (2024) claims that acknowledging the child's contributions and creating an opportunity to develop an interaction can develop their social, communication, turn-taking and shared attention skills. Helping the child to create their own interactions is the goal.

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Not all children are the same when developing language, and this is important to mention when facilitating opportunities for speech. The Department for Education (2024) argues that practitioners are not only there to help and encourage, but they should also recognise and consider gestures, attempts at words, questions and spontaneous communication, understanding that speech comes in many different forms. Recognising this may help children become more confident when experimenting with new language, especially when practitioners respond positively to their attempts at communication.

As discussed the valuable opportunities for language development through CDS, its effectiveness depends on how much it is used within interactions between adults and children. While the playful sounds, repetition and simplified vocabulary can spark engagement, practitioners must also consider the importance of exposing children to accurate vocabulary and increasingly complex language.

For example words such as "moo", "baa" and "quack" are often used in early childhood to help children connect sounds to the animals, making learning fun and engaging, providing opportunities for imitation and shared attention. This works best when a child is still not quite talking, as claimed by Motamedi *et al.* (2021).

However, Green *et al.* (2026) found that onomatopoeic words were more prominent in children's early vocabularies, but that conventional words became increasingly prevalent as children's vocabularies developed. This suggests that while animal sounds can form part of early language learning, practitioners should also provide children with opportunities to use and hear conventional vocabulary such as "cow" and "sheep".

Overreliance on simplified language like animal sounds, may limit children's exposure to a wider range of vocabulary if practitioners do not introduce conventional words alongside playful expressions (Rowe, 2012). Therefore, practitioners should balance playful communication with accurate language modelling. For example instead of sticking with "moo" and praising that; "yes, a cow! The cow says moo! Well done" creates a deeper meaning. Offering more context to the word, and expanding the child's understanding of the original phrase.

It is important to remember that all children have differing language abilities and developmental stages and what works for one child may not be effective for all children (NAEYC, 2020). For this reason, practitioners should adapt their communication to individual children's needs, abilities and ages, ensuring that their language supports development while remaining inclusive of different languages and communication styles (Welsh Government, 2022).

Playful speech and accurate language modelling do not have to compete. Effective practice can combine both.



But understanding the benefits and limitations of CDS highlights the importance of how practitioners can use language within a play-based curriculum. Adopting a responsive and intentional approach to communication can create meaningful opportunities for children to develop their language skills while engaging in play (Department for Education, 2024).

Kids Care Home Health,
2022.

ECEY6010

1,354 words

2418805

As Rowe (2012) argues, practitioners should not rely on playful words as a main method of teaching language skills. In fact, Motamedi *et al.* (2021) claims that it can actually be highly useful, when used correctly alongside accurate vocabulary. As the child develops through the first 1000 days (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2018), it is important to note the role in which the adult plays in modelling behaviour and skills. Practitioners must expand their language through meaningful interactions with children, to model accurate vocabulary.

Expanding your responses as a practitioner reinforces the child's contributions while also introducing the correct word (Urban *et al.*, 2021). This approach allows playful communication while also supporting language development without limiting the children's exposure to that richer vocabulary.

A play-based curriculum should allow the child to explore their own interests while providing opportunities to extend their learning through those responsive interactions (Welsh Government, 2022). Observing children's play can introduce relevant questions to boost new vocabulary, while also encouraging language development without unnecessarily interrupting children's independence and creativity. This balance can help ensure that learning remains enjoyable and meaningful.

But becoming an observant practitioner comes with adapting and being open to new strategies that accommodate children's different developmental stages (Welsh Government, 2023). For example, using gestures, visual resources, repetition and familiar words can help make interactions more accessible to children with varying language abilities. This highlights the importance of creating an inclusive play environment in which every child has access to opportunities to participate and develop their communication skills (NAEYC, 2020).

Along with these skills, family partnerships are equally as important. The Welsh Government (2023) highlights the importance of families and early years settings sharing information about children's interests, home language and words they use in everyday situations, to ensure the child is receiving learning that reflects their level of development.

So, does the way we talk to children actually impact how they learn language?

From dissecting research, and learning through different points of view, it's not the language itself, it is how it is used that determines how the child develops their language skills. "Moo" and other onomatopoeic words are useful tools that should not replace opportunities to develop conventional vocabulary and richer language.

When helping children to learn and develop their language, becoming responsive; observant and intentional is important. And with this combination, you can switch "moo" to "cow" and extend children's understanding of language.



Blub Blub, 2025.



Blub Blub, 2026.

Link to blog presentation - [Presentation 13.pptx](#)

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AI Acknowledgment

I acknowledge the use of AI tools such as CoPilot and ChatGPT to structure my work.

I used the following prompts:

1. How can I structure my assignment academically.
2. Please put my references in alphabetical order without changing any words or formats
3. Which is the most useful website when discussing Japan's curriculum which has already been translated.

I also acknowledge that there has been no AI used to write the contents of my work.

All original copies and prompts have been saved.