

Curriculum for Wales and The Steiner Curriculum

Play-Based Approaches in the Curriculum for Wales and Steiner Education (1866 words)

Introduction

Play is essential for young children's wellbeing and development, so much so, that it is included in the UNCRC (1989) (Lievens, 2023). Play is how children form an understanding of the world and develop their relationships and skills. After many years of education focussing on academic achievement and how presentable a child is, many curriculums including that of Steiner and the Curriculum for Wales have adjusted their curricula to accommodate a play-based approach (Audit Wales, 2022; Brodie, 2025). This follows from research stating that play is essential to building foundational skills that will carry through the child's life (nidirect, 2018). This essay will have a primary focus on play within Steiner Education and the Curriculum for Wales in non-maintained settings.

Compare and Contrast

The Steiner Curriculum and ethos have slowly spread to the UK, with two Steiner school now established within Wales (Good School Guides, 2025). Steiner education believes that play is at the heart of learning, and aim to centre their curriculum around purposeful, imaginative play (Ryan, 2025). Within the early years, including both Steiner and the Curriculum for Wales, play is seen as the primary method of learning and as a result, the Steiner curriculum delays formal academic learning until the age of 6 or 7 (Edinburgh Steiner School, 2020). This allows practitioners to focus on nurturing creativity, sensory experiences, and physical development, promoting a holistic approach to early years learning. This practice follows Rudolf Steiner's perception of play as the child's 'work' and that through fantasy and imitation, children can explore the world and develop their social, emotional, and cognitive capacities (Ryan, 2025).

On the other hand, settings such as day-nurseries, childminders, and community run playgroups are listed as non-maintained early years settings, and as such are required to follow the Curriculum for Wales; however, they can adjust the curriculum to ensure that it also aligns with their unique setting (OECD, 2020). Similarly to

Steiner education, the Curriculum for Wales perceives play as a fundamental right and holds it at the centre of their ethos (Welsh Government, 2022). However, unlike that of the Steiner approach, the Curriculum for Wales follows a set of five developmental pathways that are required across all settings, these pathways are separated out to ensure that developmental steps are achieved by each child. Practitioners are required to plan for and assess the five pathways through play-based experiences (Welsh Government, 2023). Despite this similarity, the Steiner curriculum uses a holistic and cyclical approach both in practice and their guidance, covering key developmental steps for each child throughout their journey, with the assessment process being far less separated to that of the Curriculum for Wales (Hargraves, 2020).

Within the Steiner early years, practitioners are encouraged to perform meaningful tasks throughout the day in a manner that will capture the children (Department for Education, n.d.). Tasks such as baking, cooking, and gardening can be done around the children without requiring them to join in. This models positive daily tasks that are often under looked within the education sector and enables the children to either participate if they wish or imitate the actions they have seen within their own play (SLK Curriculum, 2025). Like that of Steiner education, the Curriculum for Wales recognises the importance of the practitioner, however, the role of the practitioner changes from role model to facilitator. Across both curricula, practitioners are encouraged to enable play within the setting, however, where Steiner supports the practice of meaningful tasks to model positive behaviour and actions, the Curriculum for Wales states that practitioners are facilitators whose role is to create a rich environment for learning and use observation to adapt the provision depending on each child's developmental needs (Lewis, 2021). This practice can support children to play; however, it offers little in-terms of modelling activities to inspire role-play among the children and consequently develop well-rounded citizens (Kennedy and Tunnicliffe, 2022). Brodie (2025) states that modelling these everyday activities, such as those advised for practitioners in the Steiner curriculum, within the presence of young children can support their cognitive and motor development, encourage responsibility, contribution, and connect learning to life (Care Learning, 2024).

Non-maintained setting practitioners are encouraged to use the scaffold learning approach by asking open-ended questions, modelling, and providing thought

provoking questions that will allow the children to extend their thinking (Jones, 2025). However, this form of child and practitioner relationship no longer falls under child-initiated play or spontaneous play (Education Development Trust, 2019); instead by interrupting the child's play through questions and comments, the practitioner is forming a guided play experience, limiting a child's curiosity and reducing their autonomy (Weisberg *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, facilitating activities by setting up spaces and encouraging the children to play with the toys that are out, the practitioners, often unknowingly, are limiting a child's imagination as it implies that these toys must be used for the purposes laid out (Richards *et al.*, 2020). Whereas, by providing an open space and toys that align with the loose parts theory, children can approach their play in their own manner (Casey and Robertson, 2019). This is a key example of a fundamental difference between the Curriculum for Wales and the Steiner approach.

The Steiner educational approach encourages outdoor learning and places outdoor play and immersion into nature at the core of its philosophy, particularly within the early years (De Bruycker, 2015). Likewise, the Curriculum for Wales believes that outdoor play is the key to children's development and is a vital part of daily learning, with the requirement that children aged 0-5 to have regular opportunities to engage in outdoor play, in all weather (Play Wales, 2023). Steiner education has a strong focus on rhythm, emphasising the rhythm of the day and that of the seasons (Stehlik, 2019). This cyclical approach works holistically with the outdoor learning approach and the view of nature as the primary classroom. Children are encouraged to interact with the world in all seasons, supporting play through these changes and creating a deeper understanding of the world around them (Chawla, 2020). Whilst in these outdoor environments, whether it be the school playground, a green park, or a local woodland, unstructured and imaginative play is encouraged through the lack of structured sports or playground equipment (Zamani, 2016). By using natural resources within play such as logs, sticks, and mud, the children can foster their creativity, problem solving skills, and resilience (Ernst and Burcak, 2019). Similarly, through activities available at non-maintained settings, children are encouraged to build a sense of risk and resilience, in turn, improving their physical and mental development. A key point within the Curriculum for Wales and access to outdoor spaces, is the ability to form a sense of '*cynefin*', a feeling of belonging to your environment and community (Chapman *et al.*, 2023). However, gardens and access

to community areas such as parks are often underutilised and the necessary natural spaces required for children to fully immerse themselves in nature are ignored or forgotten (Richardson *et al.*, 2017).

Critical Analysis

The Steiner educational approach is based on Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, a philosophy of human development, with the main premise being that humans are spiritual beings (Dragana *et al.*, 2017). This belief serves as the foundation of the curriculum, however, although several smaller aspects are now dismissed within Steiner settings due to their outdatedness and inability to support our changing society, this does not take away from the foundation of Steiner education. Many parents and families opt to send their child to a Steiner school due to the underpinning philosophy; however, this can lead to other families without an awareness of Steiner's work to view the setting as alternative from a negative perspective (Binetti, 2020).

The curriculum framework guidance within Steiner Education has a layered approach containing three key levels: Macro, Meso, and Micro (Rawson, 2021). The Macro level consists of the overall developmental themes and what Rudolf Steiner initially envisioned for the curriculum, the Meso level comprises of the basic curriculum created for each country, and the Micro level is the specific curriculum content that each practitioner selects dependant on their children's interests and abilities (Waldorf UK, 2025). This approach to creating a unique curriculum supports children's development by catering it to individuals and recognising what areas may need additional support without making the child feel less than or not as good as others.

The non-maintained curriculum for Wales has three core principles: a child-centred and play-based approach, the five developmental pathways, and the four purposes. The curriculum structure covers six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) (Welsh Government, 2022b) When looking at the six AoLEs, it is evident that the academic learning is integral even within the early years, with literacy, mathematics, and science and technology, outweighing the more creative topics such as the humanities and expressive arts (Griffiths *et al.*, 2025). This is a key difference

between the non-maintained Curriculum for Wales and the Steiner approach to academic and creative learning (Kirkham and Kidd, 2015).

Steiner education places high importance on the arts from a young age encouraging songs and creativity through play (Springs, 2025). Academic subjects such as literacy and numeracy are weaved into the daily routine of the Steiner Kindergarten and modelled by practitioners that is later used within the children's play (Scholter, 2024). This holistic practitioner approach to early years learning, enables the children to gain a fundamental understanding of the world around them through movement, creativity, and play. The Curriculum for Wales for non-maintained settings approaches their teaching style as facilitator based as opposed to modelling behaviour and routine; where songs and structure are woven into the Steiner kindergarten day, experiences of the non-maintained settings routine, recognise a lack of flow and disjointed connection between activities (Local Government Association, 2023). This is often apparent in settings who lack of qualified staff, or struggle with insufficient funds, time, and resources (Early Years Alliance, 2021).

No formal research has been conducted regarding the long-term effects of being raised in a Steiner educational system in terms of an individual's well roundedness and ability to work within and support our society. However, statements from prior students and parents of Steiner settings, state that Steiner Education provided them with the ideal start in life and enabled them to have a strong sense of self and find satisfaction and reward throughout their lives (Fischer *et al.*, 2013 (cited Binetti, 2020)). The long-term impacts of the Curriculum for Wales are also unknown due to the recent overhaul of the curriculum. Therefore it is difficult to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum at this time.

Conclusion

The Steiner approach, due to its later focus on academic learning, supports a larger range of children, therefore families who seek for their child to have a deeper connection with nature may consider this as their best option. Whereas non-maintained settings offer a simple service to care for the child throughout the day with the offer of activities and experiences, however, as previously stated the depth of these experiences varies between settings and therefore a child may not experience the same fulfilment as another child in a separate setting.

The 'Unique Child' (1243 words)

Introduction (175 words)

The term 'Unique Child' was established to recognise that each child develops at their own pace and through a varied range of unique experiences (Grenier, 2025). The unique child is at the heart of child-centred early years practice and has become central to the early years' curriculum in recent years, particularly with the new play-based curriculum. This child-centred approach highlights the importance of holistic learning, inclusivity, and responsive practice (Nicholas *et al.*, 2021). This can be seen in the new curriculum and the wider use of certain assessment methods such as observational assessments. However, assessment methods such as progress tracking, and age or stage-based developmental models are still in use across the Curriculum for Wales and many others, impacting children who may not be able to conform to the standardised expectations (Estyn, 2022). This assignment will be looking at the current methods of assessment used across the Curriculum for Wales and Steiner Education, to see how the concept of the Unique Child is catered to and how standardised testing may be damaging each child's uniqueness.

Theoretical Framework: The 'Unique Child' in Context

The concept of the unique child aims to recognise that all children are unique and have their own pattern of development. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, used across a range of settings within Wales, define the unique child as one of their four core principles (Department for Education, 2024b). The concept can be seen throughout their guidance such as promoting individual development, inclusive practice, positive relationships, and celebrating diversity. Unlike the EYFS, the Curriculum for Wales does not mention the term 'unique child' within their guidance or practice (Stewart *et al.*, 2024). However, they often mention the underlying philosophy within their guidance with emphasis on child-centred learning, inclusivity, and their four purposes that aim to create well-rounded and strong citizens (Welsh Government, n.d.). Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales closely follows Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Akın-sabuncu and Çalık, 2025), which is closely linked to the unique child, therefore reaffirming their support of each child's individuality despite their lack of directly addressing the 'unique child'. The philosophy of the unique child is notable in the work of Bronfenbrenner, where his

ecological systems theory explores how a range of environmental layers, beginning at family and moving to the wider society, shape children's development and, therefore, each child will have a unique experience and view of learning and the world (Hewett *et al.*, 2019). Another theorist who highlights the uniqueness of children's development and learning is Howard Gardner. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences emphasises that children often excel through different methods of learning and interacting with the world, such as linguistic, musical, and spatial (Cavas and Cavas, 2020). Each of his nine core intelligences reflect the possibilities for each child's future and highlight the fact that the 'one size fits all' approach to education can be damaging to those who have a different core intelligence to those used within the standard curriculum (Mayata, 2024).

The concept of the unique child runs through many early years' curricula including, but not limited to, the Curriculum for Wales, EYFS, Steiner education, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia (Boyd and Hirst, 2015). Each of these curricula have a play-based approach that aims to support individual development pathways by allowing the child to explore their interests at their own pace. Using play as a form of learning allows for deep, meaningful interactions and supports decision making and problem-solving skills. Play-based curricula support practitioners in forming strong connections with the children through positive interactions and therefore create a level of trust that allows the children to feel safe to explore and take risks, promoting their authentic learning experiences (Hedges and Cooper, 2018).

Assessment and Progress Tracking Methods

There are many methods of tracking progress throughout the early years; methods such as standardised testing have been used for many years, whilst formative observations and learning journals have become more common in recent years (Ismail *et al.*, 2022). The traditional use of standardised testing and normative teaching methods often have the effect of marginalising children who do not fit the typical patterns, such as neurodivergent children and ALN learners (Briey, 2025). Modern research has highlighted this issue and now many early years educational systems are turning to observational assessments, including the updated Curriculum for Wales (Audit Wales, 2022). The Curriculum for Wales has a focus on observational assessments and learning journals throughout the early years with a focus on stage-related tracking for the first five years of life. However, stage-related tracking can often be positively or negatively viewed, particularly when working with

young children and their families. Stage-related tracking enables practitioners to track a child's progress in relation to the general population and can make it easier to recognise concerns early on, promoting early intervention for conditions such as ASD and other ALNs (Chödrön *et al.*, 2019). Despite this positive view, many consider it as a hindrance to the child's own developmental path, stating that stage-related achievements do not embrace the unique child and their own pace of learning (Early Years Coalition, 2021). As previously stated, the unique child is an essential concept within the early years and it is important to allow all children to develop in their own way, whether they are neurotypical or neurodivergent. However, being able to recognise the presence of an ALN from a young age and provide the necessary support through early intervention has proven to benefit the child in later life (Wearmouth, 2022). Therefore, the approach taken by the Curriculum for Wales enables practitioners to support all children without additional pressure on the child whilst maintaining the ability to identify additional learning needs from a young age.

Piaget's theory of development is recognisable within the curriculum for Wales such as the emphasis on experiential and play-based learning, progression based on cognitive and emotional readiness (stage-related tracking), and the use of schemas (NDNA Cymru, 2022); These are all noticeable features of the Steiner education system as well (Ginsburg, 1982, cited Hansen, 2019). Progress tracking with Steiner Education aims not to track alongside fixed outcomes, with a focus on practitioners observing how each child expresses their developmental milestones through play, creativity, and social interaction (Lewis, 2018). As previously stated, there are many benefits to stage-related tracking, such as early identification, supporting cognitive and emotional progress, and it can often guide the practitioner's planning to support the child's development and interests (Pascal *et al.*, 2019). However, there are several issues that can be raised in regard to the unique child. The A strong reference that supports both the strengths and limitations of stage-related tracking in early years education is the Care Learning (2024) guide on evaluating the EYFS assessment framework highlights the possibility of over-generalisation, labelling, and lack of flexibility for children who may experience asynchronous development. Despite this, stage-related tracking is a simple system and is extremely beneficial when used as a guiding framework as opposed to a checklist (Department for Education, 2024a).

Conclusion

It is evident from current research that the concept of the unique child is spreading throughout the early years sector and many educational settings are recognising that the traditional assessment and tracking methods are not suitable to all children.

Therefore, the progress of using observational assessments as well as using stage-related tracking as a guide within educational guidance including that of the new Curriculum for Wales is a fundamental step in creating a more inclusive early years sector.

Why is the natural environment underutilised within Curriculum for Wales settings?
Comparison between the use of natural spaces in mainstream settings and Steiner
Kindergartens (1199 words)

My experience

I grew up in Steiner schools across Wales and experienced first-hand the holistic approach to growing physically, mentally, cognitively, and creatively in a holistic manner. Through my education I formed a life-long love of learning and now experience both Steiner Kindergartens and non-maintained nurseries as a practitioner. My mother was a Steiner Kindergarten teacher; after working in mainstream early year settings for a long time, she recognised the benefits of a Steiner education when she stumbled across it during her studies for her master's degree. After working in Steiner Kindergarten's for a short while, she was able to identify that children who grew up with a Steiner education often had a higher level of creativity, independence, and resilience.

Steiner Philosophy and Background

The Steiner educational philosophy is based on Rudolf Steiner's theory of Anthroposophy, first laid out in 1908, the belief that we are spiritual beings in a physical existence (Sydney Rudolf Steiner College, 2025). His theory focusses on the study of the human being and our nature, development, and task. The first Steiner school was opened in 1919, in Stuttgart, Germany, and after six years, it made its way to the United Kingdom (Waldorf UK, 2025). There are now approximately 1,200 Steiner schools and kindergartens across the world, with two based in Wales, Nant-y-Cwm Steiner School and Cardiff Steiner School (IASWECE, 2025). The Steiner educational system has a therapeutic and creative foundation; it aims to use natural resources and means to optimise and develop the physical and mental health and well-being of children (Binetti, 2020). The Steiner philosophy teaches that life is lived in stages of seven years, with the first seven years being focussed on physical development, learning through imitation, and developing their own will (Hargraves, 2020). This is often seen through the style of play that is promoted within a Steiner Kindergarten.

The Steiner Education and Curriculum for Wales view of the Outdoors

The outdoor environment is seen as essential to the child through its ability to support resilience, imagination, and authentic learning experiences, and is viewed as the primary classroom within Steiner schools (De Bruycker, 2015). Due to the underpinning philosophy, Steiner Education recognises the therapeutic and developmental benefits of activities such as gardening, woodwork, and time spent in natural environments where the children are able to play freely (Ryan, 2025). Steiner Kindergartens promote daily outdoor play no matter the weather, as well as regular trips to natural spaces such as woodlands, forests, beaches, rivers, and fields (Rudolf Steiner School of Ann Arbor, 2023).

The recent change in the Curriculum for Wales highlights the importance of the outdoors, however when looking at the guidance alongside the current practice it is evident that there are issues in translation (Welsh Government, 2023; Edwards, 2022). The Curriculum for Wales guidance states nature as integral to holistic development and well-being, with access to the outdoors embedded into the Areas of Learning. It recognises the benefits to well-being and promoting collaboration and a sense of place (Durden-Myers *et al.*, 2024).

The Issue

The outdoor environment is one of the few environments that all children have in common, it is often used to help settle a young child when transitioning into a new setting or with new people as it provides them with a sense of familiarity in which they will be more open and responsive (Moorhouse, 2020). The quality of a child's experience in the outdoors often revolves around three key factors: the quality of the environment, the ability to take risk, and the resources available to develop creativity (Kalpogianni, 2019). The quality of an outdoor space can impact a child's reaction to the environment, for example a natural green space provides more opportunities for children to that of a re-surfaced environment, such as tarmac or fake grass (Erskine, 2025). For example, access to the outdoors has been highlighted in the latest change in the Curriculum for Wales, however many settings have inadequate outdoor environments, that do not meet the sensory needs of the child (Wainwright, 2021). This results in children who are easily bored or show little interest in spending time outdoors or exploring natural environments. This can be damaging to the child's inquisitiveness and development as it provides few valuable experiences (Liu and Green, 2023). This issue is recognised in both maintained and non-maintained

settings across Wales. Similarly, the ability and opportunity to take risks can occur due to the environment but often comes down to the practitioner's own view on safety and how risk-adverse they are (Spencer *et al.*, 2021). It is often noted that risk-averse practitioners provide fewer opportunities for children to take risks and therefore develop their own risk awareness and strengthen their resilience (Jerebine *et al.*, 2024).

The Steiner approach to the outdoors is well-known by all practitioners who look to work within a Steiner setting; therefore, it is likely that the practitioners working within Steiner Schools will have a higher risk-awareness and tolerance to those who are unaware of the underpinning philosophy (Karabon and Steiner, 2020).

Solution

To improve a child's experience of the outdoors it is essential to improve the environment promoting natural plant and animal life and encouraging the children to fully experience nature (Szmerk, 2022). However, the cost of maintaining a natural garden can be expensive and occasionally settings will not have the opportunity to create a natural outdoor space (Traynor *et al.*, 2022). Despite this, due to the importance of the natural environment provision should be made to access the local community green spaces to improve their use of the outdoors. Unfortunately, many early years settings are experiencing staffing shortages, making external trips difficult to organise due to the child-practitioner ratio required for outings (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). However, with a higher focus on the quality of staff entering a setting and organising smaller groups to attend more frequent trips this issue can be resolved. This is noticed in Steiner Kindergartens where staff are required to have completed their Level 4 Diploma in Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Studies (Crossfields Institute, 2023). Practitioners who have completed these studies are knowledgeable about the importance of the natural environment and will therefore promote use of the outdoors and have nature at the forefront of their minds. Qualified practitioners also gain an understanding of the importance of taking risks within the early years (Vollans, 2024). This enables practitioners to allow children to push their boundaries through running, jumping, climbing, and many other risk-taking activities. This promotes resilience and independence within young children (Kershaw *et al.*, 2017).

Conclusion

If mainstream early years settings were to improve their outdoor spaces by creating a more natural environment, and set minimum requirements for the staff they employ, the experiences of the children will increase, improving their love for the outdoors, along with their resilience, emotional and cognitive development, and their physical well-being. I understand that these changes are drastic, however, with our natural spaces decreasing in size and number it is essential we raise our children to love the outdoors in order to promote their well-being and their love for nature.

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