

ECEY6010: Early Years Curricula

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1. Part 1

Play Pedagogy

Introduction

Play-based learning is now a key part of modern early childhood education, reflecting a growing understanding of the importance of active, child-centred experiences. In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales highlights play as a main teaching method. The Reggio Emilia approach also sees children as capable learners who build knowledge through exploring, being creative, and interacting with others (Welsh Government, 2024; OECD, 2020). Both approaches aim to support children's overall development and value their independence in learning.

Even though play-based learning is strongly supported in theory, putting it into practice can be difficult. Practitioners may understand play pedagogy differently, face challenges in turning curriculum ideas into real activities, have unequal access to professional development, and struggle to balance child-centred learning with curriculum demands. This section looks closely at these issues by comparing the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia. It argues that play-based curricula succeed not just because of their design, but also because of how well practitioners can understand and apply teaching principles in their own settings.

Curriculum for Wales

The Curriculum for Wales was created to help children become ambitious and capable learners through a child-focused and purpose-driven approach (Welsh Government, 2024). Inspired by the Successful Futures report, it aims to prepare children for lifelong learning by encouraging creativity, critical thinking, and wellbeing (Donaldson, 2015). In the early years, play is seen as a key teaching method that helps children explore, investigate, and understand the world around them (Welsh Government, 2024). Because of this, teachers are encouraged to offer meaningful learning experiences that align with children's interests and developmental needs, making play a central part of teaching and learning rather than treating it as a separate activity.

Reggio Emilia

The Reggio Emilia approach began in northern Italy after the Second World War. It is based on the idea that children are capable, resourceful, and active in their own learning (Rinaldi, 2021). In this approach, learning happens through collaboration between children, practitioners, and families, with a strong focus on observation, documentation, and inquiry-based learning. One key idea is the environment as the 'third teacher', meaning that well-designed spaces help children explore, communicate, and be creative (Maynard and Chicken, 2010). Unlike the Curriculum for Wales, Reggio Emilia is not a national curriculum but an educational approach that shapes teaching and curriculum development.

Challenge 1: Understanding Play Pedagogy

A major challenge in using play-based curricula is that practitioners often lack a common understanding of play pedagogy. While both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach see play as central to children's learning and development, what play-based practice looks like can differ widely between schools. Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022) point out that play-based learning is more than just offering free play; it also involves thoughtful teaching decisions. Walsh, McGuinness and Sproule (2019) add that when adults are unsure about their role in play, it can create tension as they try to balance letting children explore with guiding their learning. Because of differing views on play pedagogy, schools may not always implement play-based curricula in the same way, even when they follow the same curriculum principles.

Another challenge is deciding what role practitioners should take in children's play. Traditionally, play is seen as something children lead with little adult involvement. More recent approaches suggest that adults should be more active and responsive, observing, supporting, and helping children learn without taking over. Zosh *et al.* (2017) point out that high-quality play-based learning happens when children can explore with the right amount of adult support. Still, it can be hard to know how much to step in. Too much adult direction can limit children's independence and creativity, but too little can mean missed chances to help them learn more deeply (Walsh *et al.*, 2019). This means that putting play-based learning into practice relies not just on following the curriculum,

but also on practitioners using their judgement and understanding of how children learn.

There is also some confusion about what play pedagogy means, which can lead to differences in how the curriculum is put into practice. Supporters of play-based learning highlight its positive effects on children's thinking, social skills, and emotional growth (OECD, 2020; Zosh *et al.*, 2017). However, practitioners may understand curriculum expectations differently, depending on their backgrounds and training. Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022) argue that to use play-based learning effectively, practitioners need to clearly understand how play and learning are connected, rather than seeing them as separate. But reaching this shared understanding in different schools and settings is not always easy. So, the main question is not whether to use play-based curricula, but how practitioners understand and use play pedagogy in their daily work. This brings up concerns about how consistent and high-quality the implementation is across different places.

Challenge 2: Translating Philosophy into Practice

Another challenge in using play-based curricula is putting curriculum philosophy into daily teaching. Both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach support child-centred learning, but their principles do not always lead to effective teaching in practice. The Reggio Emilia approach is based on the idea that children are capable learners who build knowledge through relationships, exploration, and inquiry (Rinaldi, 2021). In a similar way, the Curriculum for Wales encourages meaningful, hands-on learning through play and active involvement (Welsh Government, 2024). Still, how well these ideas work depends on how practitioners understand and apply them in their own settings, which can lead to differences in their implementation.

It can be difficult to apply educational philosophies in new settings. The Reggio Emilia approach is often seen as a strong example of early childhood education, but it was developed in a unique cultural, social, and historical setting that differs significantly from today's Welsh education system. Maynard and Chicken (2010) point out that bringing Reggio-inspired ideas to Wales requires careful consideration of these differences rather than copying them directly. Things like funding, staff organisation, educational goals, and policy rules can all affect how play-based methods work in practice. As a result, what works well in one place may not have the same results somewhere else.

There are also limits to what can be achieved because of real-world challenges in schools. The OECD (2021) points out that meaningful learning depends on good interactions, supportive environments, and skilled teachers. But it is not always easy to create these conditions in every school. Recent evidence from Wales shows that schools have varying levels of confidence in implementing curriculum changes and adopting new teaching ideas (Estyn, 2025). This means the main challenge is not the curriculum itself but ensuring teachers have the knowledge, resources, and support

they need. So, for these approaches to work well, schools need more than just guidance, they need ongoing investment in what makes good teaching possible.

Challenge 3: Professional Learning and Workforce Capacity

Professional learning is another challenge when putting play-based curricula into practice. Both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach ask practitioners to take on complex roles that go beyond simply delivering set content. Practitioners need to watch children's interests, respond to new learning opportunities, and decide when and how to step in during play. Because of this, successful implementation requires a strong understanding of child development, play-based teaching, and curriculum principles. Estyn (2025) points out that ongoing professional learning helps practitioners feel more confident with the Curriculum for Wales. The Welsh Government (2024a) also stresses that workforce development is key to providing high-quality early years education.

Past curriculum reforms in Wales also highlight the importance of professional learning. When the Foundation Phase was introduced, evaluations found that practitioners understood child-centred and play-based approaches differently, leading to inconsistent practices across settings. Although the Foundation Phase was known for encouraging active learning, these differences in interpretation affected how effectively it was implemented. These issues remain relevant to the Curriculum for Wales, as curriculum reform requires practitioners to understand new guidance and adjust their existing practices and beliefs. So, curriculum change should be seen as an ongoing professional process, not just a one-time policy change.

Workforce capacity also affects how effectively play-based curricula can be implemented. According to the OECD (2021), high-quality early childhood education depends on skilled practitioners, strong leadership, and chances for ongoing professional development. However, not all educational settings provide the same level of access to professional learning, which can affect how confident practitioners feel about using play-based approaches. This can weaken curriculum goals as they are interpreted and applied differently in each setting. For play-based curricula to succeed, it is important to focus not just on good curriculum design, but also on ongoing investment in practitioner development and workforce capacity.

Challenge 4: Balancing Play and Curriculum Expectations

One ongoing challenge is finding a balance between play-based learning and meeting curriculum expectations. Play-based approaches aim to give children chances to explore, be creative, and lead their own learning. At the same time, educators must show that students are making progress and meeting curriculum goals. Pyle, DeLuca, and Danniels (2017) point out that it can be difficult for teachers to combine child-centred teaching with the growing demands of assessment, planning, and accountability. As a result, teachers may feel pressure to organise learning in ways that fit curriculum requirements, which can limit opportunities for true child-led play.

Still, play and curriculum expectations do not have to be in conflict. The Curriculum for Wales encourages progress through meaningful learning experiences rather than completing set content, aligning with the principles of play-based learning (Welsh Government, 2024). In the same way, the OECD (2021) notes that strong early childhood education can support both children's independence and purposeful learning when teachers use effective methods. Even so, finding this balance is difficult and largely depends on how well teachers can connect curriculum goals to real play experiences. Because of this, the tension between child-led learning and curriculum demands remains a major challenge for play-based programs.

Conclusion

Both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach see play as key to children's learning, but there are still major challenges in putting these ideas into practice. These include differences in how teachers understand play-based teaching, trouble turning curriculum ideas into real classroom activities, uneven training opportunities, and the struggle to balance child-led learning with curriculum demands. Because of this, the success of play-based curricula relies not just on how the curriculum is designed but also on how well teachers understand, adapt, and apply these principles in their own schools.

2. Part 2

The Unique Child

Introduction

The idea of the Unique Child is central to modern Early Years education, highlighting that each child develops, learns, and experiences the world differently (Early Education, 2021). As a result, Early Years curricula now focus more on assessment methods that respond to each child's strengths, needs, and interests. Tools such as assessments, progress tracking, and developmental frameworks help practitioners understand children's learning and plan appropriate activities. Still, relying too much on standardised expectations can mean missing the unique ways children learn.

Both the Curriculum for Wales and Te Whāriki place the child at the heart of education, though they use different approaches to assessment and progression (Welsh Government, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2017). This section looks at why recognising the Unique Child matters for assessment, progress tracking, and development models. It argues that assessment works best when it considers the different ways children develop and learn.

Assessment and the Unique Child

Assessment is a key part of early years curricula because it helps practitioners understand how children learn, spot their developmental needs, and plan suitable learning activities. In the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is seen as a continuous process that helps learners move forward, not just to measure achievement against set

goals (Welsh Government, 2024). In the same way, Development Matters highlights the value of observing children to understand their strengths, interests, and what they need to learn next (Department for Education, 2023). A good assessment gives practitioners useful information to support children's growth. Still, assessment only works well if it recognises each child as an individual, not just as someone to be measured against fixed standards.

The Unique Child principle shows why it is important for assessment to recognise each child's individual learning journey. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) points out that children grow and learn at different rates and in different ways, so assessment should respond to each child's situation rather than just focusing on age-based expectations. Keilty, Trivette and Gillespie (2022) also say that strengths-based assessment helps practitioners see what children can already do and values the family's role in learning and development. Problems can happen if the assessment is more about collecting evidence or tracking progress than about understanding the whole child. When assessment is based on the Unique Child principle, it is more likely to create meaningful and inclusive learning experiences.

The Curriculum for Wales uses assessment to support learner progression, while Te Whāriki takes a narrative, strengths-based approach through Learning Stories. These stories document children's learning experiences, interests, and achievements in meaningful contexts rather than measuring them against set milestones (Carr and Lee, 2019). According to Minson and Nuttall (2024), this method helps practitioners better understand each child's learning by recognising their unique strengths, dispositions, and interests. In contrast, the Curriculum for Wales focuses more on tracking progression over time (Welsh Government, 2024). Still, Learning Stories may be better at showing each child's individuality, which suggests that narrative assessment can help promote the idea of the Unique Child.

Progress Tracking and Individual Learning Journeys

Progress tracking plays a key role in early years curricula by helping practitioners monitor children's learning and spot areas where extra support may be needed. In the Curriculum for Wales, progression is seen as a continuous process that shows growing knowledge, skills, and understanding, rather than simply moving through set stages of development (Welsh Government, 2024). Assessment is meant to support each learner's progress and guide future planning. Good progress tracking helps practitioners notice children's achievements and keep learning experiences challenging. Still, focusing on the Unique Child means understanding that not all children progress at the same pace or in the same way.

On the other hand, Te Whāriki places greater emphasis on documenting children's learning journeys through narrative assessments such as Learning Stories. Instead of mainly tracking progress against set curriculum goals, Learning Stories aim to capture important moments of learning, participation, and engagement in real-life situations (Carr and Lee, 2019). This method helps practitioners see children's interests,

strengths, and personalities, and it recognises that learning can be complex and not always follow a straight path. As a result, progress is seen as a dynamic process shaped by each child's experiences and interactions, rather than a set of fixed outcomes (Minson and Nuttall, 2024).

Problems can occur if progress tracking focuses too much on measurable outcomes. While structured methods can provide useful information about children's development, Barghaus *et al.* (2022) point out that assessment systems may miss important aspects of learning when they rely too heavily on standardised measures. This matters especially for the Unique Child principle, since children can show their learning in many ways that standard tracking might not capture. So, while progress tracking is important in early years practice, it should be flexible enough to recognise each child's learning path rather than reducing development to a set of numbers.

Development Models and the Unique Child

Development models have shaped how assessment and curriculum are designed in early years education by giving practitioners ways to understand children's learning and development. Theories such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory have helped us understand how social interactions, relationships, and the environment influence learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). These ideas still guide curriculum and assessment by reminding practitioners to look at the broader contexts that influence children's growth. As a result, developmental models offer helpful guidance for understanding children's learning and planning suitable educational experiences.

Developmental frameworks provide practitioners with helpful ways to track children's progress and identify areas where support might be needed. Both Development Matters (2023) and the Curriculum for Wales highlight the value of knowing typical development patterns when planning learning and supporting growth. These frameworks help practitioners identify children who may need extra help and make sure education meets their developmental needs. They also support more consistent assessment across different settings. Because of this, developmental models remain important for assessment and tracking progress in early years education.

However, relying too heavily on developmental models can be problematic when considering the Unique Child. While these frameworks are helpful, they can lead practitioners to judge children's progress only by set expectations. Barghaus *et al.* (2022) point out that focusing on standard indicators can miss important parts of children's learning. This is especially true for children with additional learning needs, whose development may not match traditional models. The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021) stresses the need to recognise each child's strengths, needs, and goals, and calls for assessments that respond to different developmental paths. So, developmental models should be seen as guides, not strict standards for all children.

Inclusion, ALN and the Unique Child

Recognising each child as unique is especially important when thinking about inclusion and additional learning needs in early years education. Children come to school with different backgrounds, strengths, interests, and developmental paths, so assessment methods need to be flexible enough to meet these individual needs. The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (2021) stresses the value of person-centred practice and the importance of involving children and their families in decisions. In the same way, Keilty, Trivette, and Gillespie (2022) suggest that focusing on children's strengths helps practitioners see what children can do rather than just their challenges. As a result, assessment methods that recognise individual differences are more likely to support inclusive and meaningful learning for everyone.

The idea of the Unique Child also shapes how we assess children's strengths, interests, and achievements. For instance, Learning Stories aim to capture meaningful moments and show children's growing skills in real-life situations (Carr and Lee, 2019). In a similar way, Birth to 5 Matters (2021) supports a holistic view of children's development, valuing each child's individuality and avoiding reducing learning to just a list of checkpoints. Still, it can be difficult to create truly inclusive assessments, especially when teachers must balance personalised approaches with wider curriculum goals and accountability. Even so, recognising each child's uniqueness is key to making sure assessment helps every child feel included, supported, and able to succeed.

Conclusion

Assessment, progress tracking, and developmental models are key to helping children learn and grow in Early Years education. Their success depends on how well practitioners can see and respond to each child's unique needs. Although the Curriculum for Wales and Te Whāriki use different methods for assessment and progression, both value each child's individual learning journey. Because of this, assessment should stay flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the different strengths, needs, and experiences of children. This way, assessment supports children's learning and development rather than holding them back.

3. Part 3

Putting the Unique Child at the Heart of Play-Based Learning

Have you ever watched two children doing the same activity and noticed how differently they approach it? One child might build a tower and think about balance and shape, while another uses the same materials to invent a story or an imaginary world. Even though the activity is the same, each child's learning experience is unique.

This observation shows a key idea in Early Years education: every child is unique. Children grow and learn at their own pace, have different interests, and bring their own

experiences, strengths, and needs to the classroom (Early Education, 2021). As play-based learning becomes more common in the Curriculum for Wales, it is more important than ever to notice and support these differences (Welsh Government, 2024).

In this blog, we look at why it is important to understand each unique child for successful play-based learning. We also share ways practitioners can create learning experiences that help every child do well.



Children engaging in different forms of play-based learning (Journey Early Learning, 2024)

Every Child Learns Differently

The Unique Child principle reminds us that every child develops, learns, and interacts with the world differently. Play-based learning gives children chances to explore and discover, but it is important to remember that each child will experience activities in their own way. For example, one child might use a construction activity to learn about math, while another might use it to build communication, creativity, or problem-solving skills.

Children's learning may be influenced by a range of factors, including:

- Interests and motivations
- Family and cultural experiences
- Communication styles
- Additional Learning Needs
- Developmental differences
- Previous learning experiences

Birth to 5 Matters (Early Education, 2021) points out that children grow and learn at their own pace and in their own ways. The Curriculum for Wales also encourages teachers to respond to each child's needs, interests, and strengths (Welsh Government, 2024). This

shows why it is important to avoid a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and instead create learning experiences that are flexible, responsive, and meaningful for every child.

For practitioners, this means taking time to watch, listen to, and think about how children play. By understanding what interests children and how they learn, practitioners can make better choices to support their development and well-being.

"Children may participate in the same play experience, but their learning journeys are rarely identical."

(Adapted from Early Education, 2021; Welsh Government, 2024).

What Does This Mean for Play-Based Learning?

Recognising the Unique Child means more than just knowing that children are different. It involves responding to those differences in daily practice. Play-based learning works best when practitioners observe children closely, notice their interests, and create learning experiences that motivate and engage each child.

Research shows that high-quality play-based learning is about more than just letting children play freely. Practitioners are key in watching, supporting, and helping children learn through meaningful interactions (Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022). They need to know when to let children explore on their own and when to join in to encourage deeper thinking, problem-solving, or communication.

For example, when a group of children play outside, each child may have different learning needs:

- One child might be building physical skills by climbing and balancing
- Another might be learning to work with others and take on roles during pretend play
- A third child could be exploring math ideas like distance, size, or measurement

Even though the activity looks the same, each child is learning something different.

The OECD (2021) points out that meaningful interactions are important for supporting children's learning and development. These moments help practitioners better understand each child's interests, strengths, and needs. Observation is not just a way to assess children; it is a tool for learning how each child learns best.

When practitioners put the Unique Child at the centre of their decisions, play-based learning becomes more responsive, inclusive, and engaging. Instead of just looking at what children are doing, practitioners should think about why children choose certain activities and how these experiences can help them learn more in the future.

Inclusion Matters

In every Early Years setting, children bring their own strengths, interests, abilities, and experiences. Recognising each unique child means ensuring all children feel valued, included, and able to participate in meaningful learning, regardless of their individual needs.

This is especially important for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Some children may need changes, extra help, or different ways to access learning. Inclusive practice starts by noticing what children can do, not just where they struggle. The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) encourages a person-centred approach that puts children and their families at the centre of decisions.

Practitioners can support inclusion in several ways:

- Noticing and building on children's strengths
- Offering flexible ways for children to learn
- Changing the environment to fit each child's needs
- Working together with families and other professionals
- Encouraging participation and helping children feel they belong

Keilty, Trivette and Gillespie (2022) say that focusing on strengths helps practitioners see the whole child and understand their abilities and potential. This matters a lot in play-based learning, where children often show what they know and can do in ways that formal assessments might miss.

When practitioners pay attention to children's strengths and interests, they give every child a chance to succeed. Inclusive play-based settings support learning and growth, and help children build confidence, independence, and a positive sense of who they are.



Inclusive play environments support participation, belonging and meaningful learning experiences for all children (Play Matters, 2023).

Looking Beyond Checklists

Assessment plays a key part in early years education by helping practitioners see how children are progressing and plan what comes next. Still, there is a risk that assessment

can become more about gathering evidence and measuring results than truly understanding each child.

Strengths-based approaches can help address this issue. Learning Stories, which are common in Te Whāriki, highlight important moments of learning, participation, and achievement in real-life situations (Carr and Lee, 2019). Instead of only checking if a child has reached a milestone, practitioners are encouraged to notice what interests the child, what they can already do, and how to support their learning in the future.

Minson and Nuttall (2024) point out that narrative assessment gives a fuller view of children's learning by noticing their strengths, dispositions, and interests. For practitioners, this is a good reminder that assessment is not just about tracking progress, but about understanding each child's unique learning journey.

When assessment is used this way, it becomes a strong way to support each unique child, rather than just reducing development to a list of achievements.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

As Early Years practitioners, we often find ourselves focused on planning activities, tracking progress, and meeting curriculum goals. But play-based learning works best when we truly understand the children we work with. By taking time to observe, listen, and respond to each child's interests, strengths, and needs, we can create learning experiences that are meaningful, engaging, and inclusive.

The most important question we can ask is not, "Are children meeting expectations?" but "Are learning experiences meeting each child's needs?" When we put the Unique Child at the centre of play-based practice, we help create spaces where every child feels valued, supported, and able to thrive.

Even though children share the same classroom, resources, and experiences, each child's learning journey is unique.

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