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Early Years Curricula/Cwricwla Blynyddoedd Cynnar (ECEY6010/C)

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Appendix; I haven't used AI to help support me, with this assignment.

Part 1-

The curriculum in the Early Years is understood as the full range of learning experiences children take part in, shaped through planned provision, spontaneous opportunities, routines, relationships, and the environment practitioners create to support holistic development. Instead of relying on fixed activities, the Early Years curriculum offers a flexible framework that adapts to children's interests, developmental stages, and cultural backgrounds (Department for Education, 2021). At its heart Play based learning enables children to explore, problem solve, communicate, and make meaning through active engagement (Wood, 2020). This reflects the understanding that young children learn best through hands on, meaningful experiences that connect with their natural curiosity. Alongside curriculum and pedagogy, children's behaviour needs to be understood as something that develops through their experiences and surroundings, rather than something to be simply managed. Behaviour is shaped by relationships, sensory needs, communication abilities, and the expectations within the environments they are part of (MacNaughton et al., 2009). From this perspective, behaviour becomes a form of communication that reflects children's emotional states and lived experiences. This positions practitioners as co regulators who notice what children need in the moment and offer steady, supportive co regulation (The MEHRIT Centre, n.d.).

This essay will explore how curriculum, play based learning, and understandings of children's behaviour connect within Early Years practice. It will look at important theoretical perspectives, consider what this means for inclusive and responsive provision, and discuss how practitioners can create environments that nurture children's wellbeing, engagement, and learning. Outdoor play also offers valuable opportunities for supporting behaviour and wellbeing, as natural and open spaces promote regulation, and exploratory play (Ramsden et al., 2025).

Curriculum for Wales takes a holistic, child centred approach where wellbeing, relationships, and emotional development sit at the heart of learning. It views behaviour through the lens of self regulation, emotional safety, and children's everyday experiences, rather than behaviour management rooted in fixed rules or adult led control. The curriculum recognises that behaviour communicates how children are feeling or coping with their environment (Welsh Government, 2022).

Understanding behaviour in this way connects well with Bronfenbrenner's view that children are influenced by many layers of their world, from close relationships to wider community systems, meaning behaviour must be understood within context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Alongside this UNICEF's work on children's rights emphasises that children express themselves in many different ways and that adults have a responsibility to listen to these forms of communication (UNICEF, 2018). This also links with Gerhardt's work, where she explains that young children's behaviour is closely tied to their early emotional experiences and the development of their stress response systems (Gerhardt, 2015).

Strong, trusting relationships are seen as essential. Adults support children to co regulate, helping them understand and manage their emotions over time. This links closely with Shanker's work, which highlights how co regulation and emotional attunement help children move from stress to calm, supporting their capacity for self regulation (The MEHRIT Centre, n.d.) Attachment informed perspectives also emphasise the importance of attuned, responsive adults in promoting children's emotional wellbeing, as seen in Bowlby's early attachment theory (1988). Geddes builds on this within educational contexts, explaining that children's behaviour in school is often shaped by their underlying attachment needs and their search for safety, connection, and predictability (Geddes, 2006). Vygotsky similarly emphasised that children develop through guided interaction, with adults providing scaffolding that supports emotional and behavioural growth (Vygotsky, 1978). These theoretical perspectives align with the Curriculum for Wales emphasis on understanding behaviour through relationships, emotional development, and children lived experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). However, the Curriculum for Wales does not offer very detailed or explicit guidance on behaviour, which means different settings may approach it differently and develop their own ways of working (Welsh Government, 2022). This can lead to inconsistency across schools and early years environments. Because the curriculum gives practitioners a lot of professional freedom, many staff rely on additional training and courses to guide their practice. This includes trauma informed approaches, attachment aware training, ELSA training, and behaviour and wellbeing courses, which are highlighted as important parts of professional learning in Wales (Welsh Government, 2020). Schools also vary in the support they have available in house some have Behaviour and Wellbeing

Officers, ELSA practitioners, trauma informed practitioners, or support from the Behaviour and Community Team. Estyn has noted that access to these roles and wellbeing interventions differs widely across Wales, which affects how consistently children's emotional and behavioural needs are supported (Estyn, 2021) because of this variation in training and staffing, the support children receive can look very different depending on the setting and the opportunities staff have been able to access. By comparison, England's EYFS gives much clearer guidance on behaviour, self regulation, and emotional development. It sets out more specific expectations for how adults should respond to children, the kinds of interactions that support co regulation, and the importance of modelling calm, consistent behaviour (Department for Education, 2021). As this guidance is more detailed, there tends to be greater consistency across settings in England in how behaviour is understood and supported. This contrasts with Wales, where practice depends more on practitioner training, school ethos, and the additional courses staff have been able to access.

The Reggio Emilia approach provides an alternative lens, It offers a more expressive way of understanding what children are trying to communicate, emphasising curiosity, agency, and multiple languages of expression (Reggio Children, n.d.). Reggio is not a curriculum but a way of working that sees children as capable and full of potential. Learning grows from children's interests and everyday experiences, giving adults a chance to follow the child's lead (Edwards et al., 2012). Topics often develop from children's questions and discoveries, and research shows that curiosity is a natural driver of learning (Engel, 2015). This connects closely to the idea of listening to the voice of the child, which is central to both the Welsh Curriculum (Welsh Government 2022) and the UNCRC (UNICEF, 1989). A key influence behind this way of working is Loris Malaguzzi, who believed that children have many different ways of expressing themselves. He described this as the hundred languages, meaning children communicate through movement, creativity, relationships, and behaviour itself (Edwards, 1998). Carlina Rinaldi builds on this idea, emphasising that children construct meaning through interactions, relationships, and multiple forms of expression, and that adults must learn to listen to these languages with sensitivity and curiosity (Rinaldi, 2006). When looking at practice, curiosity is encouraged within the Curriculum for Wales, but it does not always unfold in the same way it does in Reggio Emilia. Many Welsh settings want to

follow children's interests, but practical factors such as large class sizes, limited space, and staffing ratios can reduce opportunities for open exploration or movement breaks. In Italy, the Reggio approach is supported by smaller groups, practitioner roles that allow time for close observation, and a shared approach to documentation. These structural differences help explain why the idea of the hundred languages is able to flourish in Reggio settings, while in Wales it is often adapted or shaped by staffing, space, and wider expectations (Reggio Children, n.d.).

Montessori emphasised carefully prepared environments where children choose meaningful tasks at their own developmental level, reducing boredom and disengagement (Montessori, 1967). In many Welsh classrooms, planning must focus on activities that all children can access at once, which can leave more able or highly curious learners under challenged. When children are not stimulated, they may switch off or show behaviour that appears challenging but is actually a sign of unmet cognitive need. This aligns with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, where children learn best when supported by a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978), and with Bruner's view that effective scaffolding keeps children engaged, motivated, and regulated (Bruner, 1983). When staffing is limited or TAs are shared across classes, it becomes harder to provide this level of individualised support, again highlighting the difference with Reggio settings where adults are employed for the whole environment rather than tied to specific children. A key difference between the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach lies in how behaviour is understood and supported. In Wales, behaviour is viewed through wellbeing and regulation, with adults acting as co regulators who guide children towards emotional safety and self management. In Reggio Emilia, behaviour is co constructed, seen as part of children's expressive learning, with adults working as research partners who interpret meaning rather than correct actions (Reggio Children, n.d.).

The environment plays an important role in shaping behaviour in both approaches, but in different ways. Wales emphasises calm, predictable spaces that reduce stress and help children feel safe enough to regulate. In Reggio Emilia, the environment is viewed as a third teacher, designed to provoke curiosity, collaboration, and expressive learning (Reggio Children, n.d.). Froebel believed that natural materials, order, and routine support emotional security (Froebel, 2005), while Steiner

highlighted the importance of rhythm and predictable routines (Steiner, 1996). Together, these perspectives reinforce the view that behaviour is closely linked to the sensory qualities of the environment. This is often seen in practice. For example, in one nursery setting, a three year old became distressed and began pushing toys off a table. Rather than viewing this as misbehaviour, the practitioner noticed the rising noise level and guided the child to a quieter space. The child settled quickly and later rejoined play. This illustrates how behaviour can signal a sense of overwhelm and how small environmental adjustments and attuned relationships can support regulation. Relationships are central. Learning is co constructed, meaning adults and children work together to make sense of behaviour. Practitioners observe closely, acting almost like researchers, trying to understand the meaning behind children's actions.

In day to day practice, things can feel more complicated than theory suggests. Many Early Years settings work with large groups and limited adults, making it difficult to offer the individualised co regulation children often need. Busy routines can mean staff respond reactively rather than having time to reflect on what behaviour communicates. There are also tensions between play based practice and expectations around early learning outcomes (Wood, 2020). Supporting children with ALN or neurodiverse needs means there's more to think about, especially when specialist training or adjustments are not always available. Local Carmarthenshire guidance shows that support can look quite different across settings (Carmarthenshire County Council, n.d.) These challenges are intensified by reduced 1:1 support or shared TAs due to budget pressures. This contrasts with Reggio Emilia, where staffing is organised around the needs of the whole group, creating more flexibility. All of this raises questions about how consistently behaviour is interpreted across settings, and whether children's actions are always understood as communication or sometimes managed due to external pressures.

Part 2 –

The concept of the Unique Child recognises that every child develops along an individual pathway shaped by their identity, experiences, and relationships. The Department for Education (2024), emphasises that each child is unique and constantly learning, highlighting the importance of understanding their background, culture, and personal patterns of development. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales places the child at the centre of learning, valuing their lived experiences and identity as foundations for wellbeing and progression (Welsh Government, 2022). This principle also reflects the UNCRC (1989), which states that every child has the right to be heard, to develop to their full potential, and to be supported in ways that respect their individuality. This view aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which explains that a child's development is influenced by multiple interacting systems, including family, community, culture, and wider society. It also reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which positions learning as a social process shaped by relationships and meaningful interactions. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) reinforces that children can only thrive when their basic physiological, emotional, and belonging needs are met, emphasising the importance of environments where they feel safe, valued, and understood (Abbot,2020). Recognising the Unique Child requires practitioners to observe sensitively, respond to individual needs, and create environments where every child feels seen and valued. When children experience belonging, they are more able to explore, take risks, and develop confidence in their own abilities. Ainsworth's (1978) attachment research shows that secure, attuned relationships give children the emotional base needed to explore independently. Similarly, Bowlby (1969) emphasises that children develop confidence when they feel safe and connected to responsive adults , reinforcing the importance of environments that nurture belonging and emotional security.

Assessment in the early years is an ongoing, formative process involving close observation of children's interests, interactions, and emerging skills. This supports practitioners to shape future learning experiences and respond holistically. The EYFS (DfE, 2024) emphasises that effective assessment is embedded in everyday practice rather than delivered through formal testing. Rather than being a single

moment, assessment is a reflective process of watching, listening, documenting, and adapting provision. In play based contexts, practitioners assess through children's everyday exploration, role play, problem solving, outdoor learning, and social interactions where children demonstrate their knowledge and thinking in meaningful ways. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) view that learning is socially constructed and best understood within real activity. Nicholson's Theory of Loose Parts (1971) also supports this, highlighting how real life, materials that can be used in many ways encourage creativity, problem solving, and exploration.

Understanding the Unique Child is essential because children develop at different rates and in ways that look different for every child, aligning with Montessori's view that children progress through individual developmental pathways shaped by hands on exploration and moving forward when the moment is right for them (Montessori, 1967). Their progress is shaped by their background, experiences, culture, and needs. If assessment relies too much on standardised measures or expectations that don't allow for children's differences, there is a risk of overlooking children's individuality and the diverse ways they express learning. Frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) and the EYFS (DfE, 2024) emphasise that assessment must be responsive, holistic, and rooted in the child's lived experiences. Children learn in different ways, some respond best to visual or practical experiences, while others thrive outdoors where movement and sensory input support concentration and engagement. Research shows that over 80% of children demonstrate higher levels of engagement and wellbeing outdoors (Waite, 2011). Many schools now offer outdoor learning days and invest in outdoor areas because these environments support regulation, communication, and wellbeing. Dunn's Sensory Processing Framework (1997) explains why busy classrooms can overwhelm some children, while open outdoor spaces help them regulate (OT Theory N.D). However, schools often face challenges in providing this flexibility, particularly when under pressure to produce written evidence, meet curriculum expectations, or manage staffing ratios. In some Carmarthenshire settings, the emphasis on having more in the books can unintentionally limit opportunities for children to learn at their own pace, highlighting wider concerns that pressure for written evidence can limit high quality practice (Alexander, 2010).

The Unique Child approach recognises that development is shaped by emotional, social, cognitive and physical influences, with children's pathways shaped by their relationships, experiences and cultural contexts, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's ecological view that development is shaped by multiple interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).The Reggio Emilia approach positions assessment as a collaborative, observation based process that captures children's thinking, creativity, and problem solving as they unfold (Rinaldi, 2006). Practitioners document learning through written observations, photographs, and video. Many schools now use QR codes and online platforms to capture learning in real time. These are stored in individual observation files, supporting practitioners monitor progress and identify needs. Observation allows practitioners to see how children learn through play, exploration, and relationships, reflecting Piaget's view that children construct knowledge actively through hands on experiences (McLeod, S. 2023) and Froebel's belief that play reveals children's developing ideas and capabilities (Froebel, 1887). For example, a child building outdoors may reveal problem solving skills or communication that would not appear in a written task. Furthermore, when looking at observation, another challenge would be that some children may not feel comfortable being recorded. However, some children may mask their abilities in busy environments. Hull et al. (2017) describe masking as a strategy used by neurodiverse children to blend in, which can hide their true needs.

In settings that follow Reggio Emilia ideas, observations are used to understand why children act as they do, what skills they are using, what interests are emerging, and what support they may need next. This means observations are not carried out simply to record what a child is doing, but to interpret the meaning behind their actions, reflecting Malaguzzi's emphasis on the hundred languages of children (Edwards, 2012) Observations are essential because they provide real evidence that may not appear in checklists, particularly for children with ALN, sensory differences or communication needs. Ways of gathering information such as sensory profiles, one page profiles and Individual Development Plans help ensure assessment remains fair and inclusive (Welsh Government, 2021). Importantly, many observations are shared with appropriate multi-agency professionals, such as speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, health visitors or ALNCo teams to build a holistic understanding of the child when additional support is

needed. This reflects the ALN Code for Wales (2021), which requires assessment to be ongoing, person centred and informed by multi-agency collaboration rather than one off observations. Approaches such as Steiner education also emphasise close, holistic observation to understand children's developmental rhythms, reinforcing the shared principle that observation is a tool for understanding the whole child rather than simply documenting behaviour (Steiner, 1996). This approach aligns strongly with the Curriculum for Wales, which positions observation, learner voice and real evidence of progression at the heart of assessment, rather than relying only on written outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022)

Developmental stages models provide structured ways of tracking progress by comparing children's skills to typical age related expectations. Tools such as the Ages & Stages Questionnaires support early identification (Squires et al., 2009). Milestone frameworks, including those published by the CDC (2022), outline expected behaviours across communication, physical development, and social emotional skills. However, development does not always follow a predictable sequence, and stage based models can risk oversimplifying complex learning processes (Whitebread, 2012). For children with ALN, personalised targets are essential, as outlined in the ALN Code for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021). Structured tracking can support early identification but may overlook cultural differences, neurodiversity, or strengths expressed in non typical ways. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises progression as a steady progression rather than fixed age bands (Welsh Government, 2022). Research also shows that when staff feel pushed to produce evidence, they may lean too heavily on written tasks or checklists, which can get in the way of meaningful, play based learning (OECD, 2020). By looking closely at both approaches, key differences become clear in how each one recognises the Unique Child. The Reggio Emilia approach offers a flexible, child led method where learning is documented as it naturally unfolds (Rinaldi, 2006). In contrast, developmental stages models rely on structured checklists and age related expectations, offering clarity but risking standardisation (Whitebread, 2012). This shows a wider tension between child led, child centred assessment and more structured, adult led ways of measuring learning. From a Unique Child perspective, the Reggio approach allows children to demonstrate learning in diverse ways, through play, movement, dialogue, creativity, and outdoor exploration. This is

particularly important for children with ALN, neurodiverse profiles, or sensory processing differences, as highlighted in Dunn's Sensory Processing Framework ,1997 (OT Theory, n.d.). Observation based assessment also supports children with ACEs by prioritising relationships and emotional safety (Perry, ND). However, this approach can be time intensive and relies heavily on practitioner skill. In contrast, developmental stages models offer strengths in early identification, providing clear indicators that help practitioners recognise when a child may need additional support (Squires et al., 2009). However, they can unintentionally set expectations that don't suit every child, which can lead to children being seen in limiting ways. This is particularly important to consider for multilingual or culturally diverse learners (Broadhead et al., 2010).

Overall, the Reggio Emilia approach better supports the Unique Child because it recognises individuality, honours lived experiences, and supports children to show their learning in different ways (Rinaldi, 2006). However, when used flexibly, developmental frameworks can complement this by offering clarity and early identification (Squires et al., 2009). A balanced approach ensures assessment remains inclusive, relational, and aligned with the Curriculum for Wales learner centred principles (Welsh Government, 2022).

Part 3 – Blog.

Inclusion Begins Before the Child Walks In;The Heart of Early Years Practice.

In the early years, I have learned that inclusion is not a reaction to a child's needs but a principle we embed from the beginning, shaping how we plan, teach, and relate to children long before they walk through the door. As practitioners, we create environments and relationships that tell every child you belong here. This belief sits at the heart of inclusive practice and aligns with national guidance emphasising the removal of barriers so all learners can participate meaningfully (Welsh Government, 2021). With around 21% of learners in Wales identified as having Additional Learning Needs, inclusive, responsive provision is not simply good practice, it is essential to high quality early years education (Welsh Government, 2023).

For me, this topic is more than theory or policy, it is lived experience. I have seen first hand, across nursery, primary, and secondary settings, how early identification and responsive support transform a child's confidence, communication, and wellbeing. Research shows that early identification significantly improves long term outcomes, particularly in communication and social development (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). I have also experienced inclusion as a parent of a child with ALN. Every day, I advocate for her needs, celebrate her strengths, and make decisions that help her feel understood and included. This combined insight shapes how I view ALN support not as small, separate changes, but as an ongoing commitment to recognising each child as a unique learner with their own story. As I reflect on my practice and personal journey, one message becomes clear inclusive early years provision grows from everyday interactions, relationships, and environments that honour children's individuality and uphold their right to participate. High quality early years settings have the strongest impact on children with emerging needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2021), and strong parent practitioner relationships are equally influential in supporting children's inclusion and wellbeing (UNICEF, 2019). This blog explores why that matters, how it aligns with child centred approaches such as the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2021), and what it looks like in real practice.

Inclusive practice is often described as a core principle, yet in reality it can be inconsistent. According to the ALN Code for Wales (2021), all children are entitled to participate fully in learning. However, inclusion is sometimes viewed as something that happens after a child is identified as having ALN, rather than something embedded from the start. In my experience, inclusion must be proactive, embedded into the environment, routines, and relationships from the start. This aligns with universal inclusive pedagogy described by Florian and Black Hawkins (2011), who argue that teachers should plan for diversity rather than exception. A key issue is that not all practitioners feel confident or knowledgeable about ALN. Research by Early Years Wales (2023) shows that many practitioners report limited training in neurodiversity, sensory needs, and behaviour as communication. Without this understanding, even well intentioned staff may unintentionally create barriers. I have seen this first hand, environments that are too noisy, transitions that are rushed, or expectations that overlook a child's sensory or emotional profile. These small oversights can significantly affect a child's sense of belonging. However, the consequences of non inclusive practice extend far beyond the moment. Children quickly sense when they are treated differently, which can contribute to anxiety, withdrawal, or feelings of not being good enough. According to Humphrey and Lewis (2008), children with ALN are highly aware of peer comparison and can internalise exclusion, affecting self esteem and mental health. I see this in my own daughter, she notices when she learns or communicates differently and picks up on little signs that she is not the same. Without intentional inclusive practice, these moments can accumulate and shape how a child sees themselves. This is why inclusion must extend to every aspect of school life, not just classroom activities. The ALN Code for Wales (2021) states that participation should be meaningful and fair, including school shows, trips, celebrations, and daily routines. When schools adapt tasks, differentiate work, or offer alternative ways to participate, they are not lowering expectations they are removing barriers. Florian and Spratt (2013) support this, arguing that inclusive pedagogy expands what is available to everyone rather than creating separate pathways for some children.

The environment also plays a crucial role in shaping inclusion. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), children's development is influenced by the systems around them, starting with the immediate environment. In early years

settings, layout, lighting, sensory experiences, and access to resources all communicate whether a child is welcome and understood. However, many environments are designed for the average child, a child who sits still, copes with noise, transitions easily, and communicates verbally. This average child does not exist, When we design for an imagined typical child, we exclude the children who need us most. This is supported by Ayres Sensory Integration Theory (1972), which explains how sensory overload can affect children's ability to regulate, participate, and engage in learning. This reinforces the need for calm, predictable, sensory aware environments. In my own practice, small adjustments, a quiet corner, visual timetables, reduced clutter, flexible seating, have transformed children's ability to engage and regulate. Practitioners also play a central role in creating inclusive cultures. The ALN Code emphasises person centred practice, where children's strengths and needs guide planning. However, this requires practitioners to be reflective, relational, and responsive. According to Roffey (2016), emotionally attuned adults are essential for children's wellbeing, particularly those with ALN who rely on co regulation. Yet not all practitioners feel equipped to offer this level of emotional support. Without ongoing professional development, staff may default to behaviour management approaches rather than relational, needs led strategies. Parents also hold a vital place in inclusive practice. Too often, families of children with ALN feel unheard or overwhelmed. A report by Contact (2021) found that many parents experience stress trying to access the support they need and feel excluded from decision making. This highlights the need for strong, trusting partnerships where parents are welcomed as equal contributors. When parents are listened to and empowered, children feel safer, more understood, and more included. Ultimately, inclusion is not just about access to learning, it is about protecting children's emotional wellbeing, identity, and sense of belonging (UNICEF, 2019).

As I reflect on ALN inclusion, my main suggestion for readers is simple, start with belonging. When children feel seen, valued, and understood, everything else follows. Yet inclusion is not always consistent. Limited training, high ratios, and time pressures mean some practitioners struggle to embed inclusive approaches daily (Early Years Wales, 2023). Without addressing these barriers, children may continue to feel different or not good enough, affecting their wellbeing and identity (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). However, progress is being made. In Carmarthenshire, ALN

transformation work and person centred planning have strengthened collaboration between schools, families, and services (Carmarthenshire County Council, 2022). To keep this momentum, we must continue investing in training, reflective practice, and strong parent partnerships. Inclusion is not a destination but an ongoing commitment and every small change makes a difference.

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