

Jordan MacDonald

Early Years Curricula Portfolio

AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Grammarly from the period of starting my work until submission on 14 June 2026. I accepted some of the suggestions provided to improve the grammatical accuracy of my work.

I acknowledge the use of CHATGPT.com, using the prompt “please give me subheading suggestions”. From this, I reworded some of the suggestions and used them for my work.

I acknowledge the use of Venngage, which provided me with a template for my blog; it did not suggest any written work for me.

I confirm that I have not presented any AI-generated text as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I used before and after the use of AI tools, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

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Component 1 - A Critical Evaluation of Play-Based Learning in Welsh Early Years Settings: An International Comparison

Introduction

Early years settings in Wales continue to recognise and develop the importance of play-based learning following a children's rights approach while supporting holistic development. In Wales, this is reflected in the Curriculum for Wales, underpinned by the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However, despite policy frameworks, the implementation of play-based learning is not without limitations. Practitioners often experience tensions between the principles of play-based learning and external pressures such as school readiness expectations, assessment requirements, and differing interpretations of curriculum development.

Additionally, this essay will explore the international Reggio Emilia approach, a pedagogy that similarly values child-centred learning and play; however, it is not constrained by a statutory curriculum framework. It will compare Welsh early years pedagogy with the Reggio Emilia approach, while critically evaluating the limitations of play-based learning.

Curricula in Wales

The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021) provides a legal framework for Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises the importance of child-centred learning and a children's rights-based approach to education (Holland, 2018; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2024). This approach aligns with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC] (1989), which recognises every child's right to rest, leisure and play. Following the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011, which embedded the UNCRC (1989) within Welsh policy, Wales has continued to develop and refine its curriculum to demonstrate a commitment to ensuring children have access to high-quality learning and play opportunities in early years settings in line with national guidance and legislation.

These rights-based principles are particularly evident within the Curriculum for funded non-maintained settings, introduced as part of the wider curriculum for Wales reform, where play is valued as a central component of supporting children's holistic

development. Furthermore, the curriculum recognises children as active participants in their own learning, highlighting the role of the practitioner as a supporter of play rather than a dictator (Welsh Government, 2021). However, a continuing challenge within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision is the limitations that exist in supporting practitioners to develop a shared understanding of the value of play and play-based learning. With many differing perspectives and beliefs surrounding play, it may influence how play opportunities are provided within early years settings (McLean, *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, MacDonald (cited in Waters-Davies, J. (2022) acknowledges the complexity of play and emphasises the responsibility of practitioners to be knowledgeable and reflective in their role as facilitators of meaningful play, ensuring play continues to be child-led rather than directed by the adult. This reflects Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where children learn best through supportive and positive interactions with knowledgeable adults. Nevertheless, Bottrill (2022) argues that practitioners within the UK often face an ongoing battle between listening to and responding to children's individual needs and interests and meeting curriculum expectations, assessment requirements and developmental outcome demands. Furthermore, while official guidance encourages play as an essential element of development (Welsh Government, 2021), it can be challenging for practitioners to assess development, as what children choose to do during their play does not always yield the measurable outcomes needed for assessment. This suggests that play in education has become more outcome-focused rather than being valued as a natural and important part of childhood (Wood, 2022). To ensure play is purposeful, practitioners are responsible for providing environments that support learning and development (Welsh Government, 2021). Learning environments should be designed to promote exploration and meaningful play experiences (Pramling, *et al*). This includes how the physical indoor and outdoor environments are presented; children should be provided with opportunities for authentic experiences using natural resources where possible, which promote creativity and rich conversation between children and practitioners (Farini and Scollan, 2025). Consideration should also be given to the emotional environment, ensuring that children feel safe, valued and secure. To support this, practitioners should develop positive relationships that are essential in supporting children's well-being. As a result, children may feel more confident to express themselves by exploring the environment with confidence, allowing for engaged

learning experiences. This reinforces Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, which highlights the benefits of secure and consistent relationships that act as a solid foundation from which children can then safely and confidently move forward and explore the world around them.

Returning the focus to the curriculum, Evans (2023) found that practitioners expressed enthusiasm towards implementing the new curriculum; however, Thomas *et al.* (2023) reported that there were varying interpretations of how the curricula should be delivered, resulting in some schools feeling apprehensive about interpreting the curriculum guidance to develop their own ideas confidently, highlighting further limitations in the implementation of play-based learning. Conversely, Estyn (2022) reported that some schools were said to have collaborated well with their staff and listened to the voice of the pupils to develop a curriculum that effectively aligns with the Four Purposes of Curriculum for Wales.

International

As Wales continues to develop a curriculum centred around children's rights and play-based learning, comparisons can be made with other international early years approaches that prioritise child-led learning. An example of this can be seen in the Reggio Emilia approach.

The Reggio Emilia Approach was created by an Italian practitioner and philosopher, Loris Malaguzzi, who lived in the city of Reggio Emilia. Malaguzzi's concepts were contemporary for the time; he believed that children are capable individuals who actively construct their own learning through creativity and social interactions (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2022). Following the Second World War Malaguzzi, decided to create a society that truly saw and valued children as active participants in their community. Thus, the Reggio Emilia Approach was constructed using the voice of the child (Rinaldi, 2021). From observations, practitioners will facilitate the children's ideas by providing useful resources and creating an environment that sparks inquiry (Reggio Inspired, 2019). Unlike Wales, where practitioners are expected to record official assessments, the Reggio approach records learning and progress through written and visual journeys; learning journeys are recorded and used for future reflection (Lewman, 2024). Within the Reggio Emilia approach, the environment is viewed as the "third teacher", the environment is intentionally

designed using natural and open needed resources to promote exploration and collaboration. Environments can be enhanced by the practitioner following the children's curiosities (Rinaldi, 2021). Furthermore, Reggio emphasises the use of natural resources in an aesthetically pleasing space that helps to regulate children and helps them to focus (Nido, 2021). This pedagogical approach can also be reflected within the Curriculum for Wales. Both approaches recognise the importance of purposeful learning environments, with thoughtfully organised spaces designed to encourage independence and creativity. However, Rinaldi (2021) argues that the Reggio Emilia approach is not a model that can be easily replicated, as it is deeply rooted within the social and cultural values of the Reggio Emilia community.

While both approaches value play and child agency, policy-related barriers often prevent Welsh settings from fully embedding play-based learning into practice. Welsh Government (2026a) highlights tensions between play-based learning and school readiness expectations, with practitioners suggesting they felt an implicit pressure to prepare children for formal learning in year 3. This perception shifted the focus on preparing children for formal learning rather than sustaining an appropriate play-based learning curriculum.

In contrast, the Reggio Emilia Approach does not follow a policy-driven national curriculum. Instead, teaching and learning are guided by children's interests and practitioners' values within individual schools (Chicken, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has identified limitations in the implementation of play-based learning. Although the curriculum for Wales is strongly underpinned by child-centred, play-based learning and children's rights, practitioners continue to face misinterpretations of guidance expectations. These pressures can limit consistent and quality play-based learning. Additionally, while both Welsh and Reggio Emilia approaches advocate for child-centred learning, cultural and policy-related barriers often prevent Welsh settings from fully applying play-based principles in practice. In contrast, the Reggio Emilia approach has greater flexibility to develop its own approach without policy framework constraints. However, because of its unique cultural approach, it is not easy to replicate in other settings. Overall, this demonstrates that, in theory, authentic child-centred, play-based learning is not

always simple to put into practice in settings that are governed by policy frameworks and external requirements.

Component 2 – Critical evaluation of assessment methods

Introduction

The central theme of this essay is the key role that assessment plays in understanding and supporting the development of children within early years education. However, the effectiveness of different assessment methods has been increasingly questioned as to whether they truly reflect the whole child and their individual learning needs (Smidt, 2015). This essay will also explore the concept of the unique child, which recognises children as unique individuals with their own strengths and learning needs that develop at their own pace (Leach, 2025; Nutbrown, 2023). In Wales, this approach is reflected in a move towards a more play-based and holistic curriculum, which seeks to reduce dependence on overly formal assessment methods (Welsh Government, 2022a).

In addition, the essay will examine how current assessment practices fit with the concept of the unique child. To study this, two different assessment methods will be analysed, supported by examples from practice and theoretical perspectives, to assess their strengths and limitations. Overall, this essay will consider whether assessment in early years education genuinely places the child at the centre of practice, or whether some approaches risk limiting how children's development is understood and supported.

Concept of the unique Child

As Wales continues to develop and value a play-based curriculum that supports a holistic, whole-child approach, it has also acknowledged that children are unique and that their learning needs differ, meaning each child will learn and progress at their own pace (Nutbrown, 2023). The concept of the unique child recognises that each child has individual strengths, interests and needs (Leach, 2025). To address this, the curriculum has reduced emphasis on overly formal assessments and checklist-style methods, which were more commonly associated with the earlier Foundation Phase curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022a). However, Wales has not completely moved away from formal assessment practices, and there are still some formal

assessments that exist. These will be explored further in the following section of this work. Guidance suggests a variety of assessments are useful as not one assessment type will be suitable for all children (Department for Education, 2022). That said, Smidt (2015) questions the benefit of regular formal assessment; she argues that testing children against ratings and targets has no benefit to the child's progression. Furthermore, she suggests these forms of assessment can reduce both the time practitioners spend with the children and the quality of their interactions.

What is assessment?

Assessment forms a part of an educational cycle called assessment for learning, used to support and monitor a child's progress. This approach involves observing a child as they play; from these observations, practitioners assess and reflect on what they saw to inform future planning. This process helps to bridge the gap between the level of learning the child is at and their next steps in progression (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021; Welsh Government, 2024a). For assessment to be effective and meaningful, practitioners must share an understanding of what forms valuable information (McHugh, 2024). Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2015) state that through regular observation and high-quality interactions, practitioners can build strong relationships with children, enabling a deeper understanding of who they are as individuals. They suggest that these strong relationships, together with ongoing assessment, support knowledgeable practitioners in identifying learning needs, including signs of additional learning needs, so that appropriate progression steps can be implemented. This view is supported by Piaget (1952), who suggested that children progress through stages of cognitive development at different rates depending on the experiences they are exposed to. For this reason, the assessment should consider an individual's child's stage of development to ensure learning opportunities appropriately support their learning needs. Additionally, as children can develop at their own pace, assessment should not be viewed as a one-time process, but as an ongoing approach that ensures each child is supported throughout their time in education and beyond (Department for Education, 2025a).

Methods of assessment

Reception Baseline Assessments (RBA)

Welsh Government (2022a) says that entry assessments should be conducted for each child within the first six weeks of starting reception, and these initial assessments, also known as Reception Baseline Assessments (RBA), are seen as the foundation for ongoing assessment. Connect Childcare (2025) suggests that assessments should reflect children holistically and that they should reflect a play-based curriculum. However, the Standards and Testing Agency (2025) say that RBA assessment targets a child's knowledge in early maths, literacy, communication and language, meaning this assessment method does not offer a view of the whole child as part of baseline assessment. Controversially, Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) criticise the use of RBA, suggesting that they add pressure on schools to demonstrate progress for inspections. In the past, schools have been accused of deliberately lowering baseline scores to ensure higher scores reflect well on the school in the future. This raises concerns that RBAs are being used more as a tool to measure school performance than as a meaningful assessment to support individual children's progress and development.

WellComm Toolkit

The development of early language and communication skills is fundamental to lifelong learning and development, helping to reduce the chances of difficulties later in life (NHS England, 2025). The WellComm toolkit is a method used to assess speech, language and communication skills. One of the main benefits of using WellComm is its ability to identify the need for early intervention of speech and language difficulties or delay (*GL Support*, 2017). According to the Welsh Government (2025), assessment should be “unobtrusive” and should not categorise or label children. However, the WellComm assessment grades children using a traffic light system, which suggests that the WellComm toolkit uses methods that go against the guidelines of assessment (Dysart and Code, 2024). Similarly to the RBA, its benefit in supporting the outcomes for children has been questioned. Findings from Dysart and Code (2024) suggest that the WellComm toolkit offers valuable insight for practitioner professional development; however, they question its effectiveness, especially for children who have English as an additional language (EAL).

The Bell Foundation (2024) advises practitioners to avoid using formal standardised testing for children with EAL because they are typically designed for children whose first language is English. In addition, cultural differences and unfamiliar language within the tests may disadvantage EAL learners. Consequently, children with EAL may underperform, potentially leading to inaccurate judgments and lowered expectations of their abilities. As a result, practitioners may set development goals that do not accurately reflect the child's abilities, which can prevent children from working towards their full potential. This can be related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), which indicates individuals can only reach their full potential when their emotional and educational needs are met. If children are underestimated, there is a chance their progression steps will not accurately reflect their abilities, preventing them from progressing towards their highest potential and achieving self-actualisation.

Department for Education (2026) asks practitioners to consider what strengths children demonstrate, ensuring assessment is inclusive and focuses on what children can do rather than what they cannot do yet. This promotes a strengths-based approach, where ongoing observation and professional judgement are used to inform progression steps. Overall, this supports a child-centred approach to assessment that values children as individuals (Welsh Government, 2023). However, the Department for Education (2025a) also sets out statutory expectations such as the RBAs, which can influence how settings implement assessment in practice. The continued use of varied assessment methods raises questions about the extent of freedom practitioners have in selecting the most appropriate approach to meet the needs of their children.

Conclusion

Overall, this essay has shown that assessment is essential in supporting children's learning and development but must reflect the idea of the unique child (Leach, 2025). While recent policy promotes a more holistic and child-centred approach (Welsh Government, 2022a). Formal and standardised assessments can sometimes limit how well practitioners understand individuals' needs (Smidt, 2015).

Methods such as the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and the WellComm toolkit can help identify early support needs, but they may also risk narrowing

understanding of children's abilities, particularly for those with English as an Additional Language or additional needs (The Bell Foundation, 2024; Dysart and Code, 2024). Ultimately, although there is a move towards more inclusive and strengths-based assessment (Department for Education, 2026), practitioners must balance statutory requirements with professional judgement to ensure assessment remains meaningful and truly child-centred.

Component 3 – Blog

Please click this link or copy and paste it into your web browser to view my blog:

<https://infograph.venngage.com/ps/fXK33qhTYro>

Here is a screenshot of my blog:

June, 2026
University of Wales Trinity St David
ECEY60101



Overworked and Underpaid: The Hidden Workforce Behind Early Years Education in Wales

The success of Wales' high-quality approach to Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) increasingly depends on a workforce that feels overstretched and underpaid.

Invisible workload

Picture this;
A teaching assistant arrives early to prepare the classroom for a busy day of play, ensuring resources support and enhance children's learning. As the day begins, they provide emotional reassurance to children settling in, de-escalate challenging behaviour, support a child with additional learning needs, and change the clothes of a three-year-old who is still in the early stages of toilet training—all before 10 am. As the day continues, they are asked to carry out observations for assessment records, supervise lunchtime routines, and report a safeguarding concern to the designated lead. Despite this wide range of responsibilities, their role is often described simply as "supporting the teacher". Beyond the classroom, they return home to their own responsibilities, balancing work with family life while receiving a wage that is barely enough to last until the next payday.

This scenario is not uncommon in many early years settings and highlights the range of daily demands and complexity of responsibility placed on teaching assistants every day. Arguably, the role extends far beyond the title of "supporting the teacher".

The Reality Behind Play-Based Curriculum

The Curriculum for Wales emphasises high-quality education and positions play-based learning at the centre of effective early years provisions in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024b; Welsh Government, 2022b). However, while national guidelines outline high expectations for early years provision, less attention is given to the increasing professional responsibilities placed on teaching assistants who are responsible for implementing these approaches in practice. UNISON (2019) reported that hundreds of teaching assistants believe they do not have appropriate training to deliver the curriculum as expected by Wales. Yet, teaching assistants across Wales are expected every day to deal with challenging behaviours and a curriculum they don't always understand, often without sufficient training or salaries that struggle to cover the cost of living (Hodgkins, Malomo and Solvason, 2024).

If the Curriculum for Wales is going to succeed, more attention needs to be given to the value of teaching assistants.

Valued in Theory, Undervalued in Pay

The imbalance between the responsibilities of teaching assistants and their financial recognition is increasingly apparent. Teaching assistants often take on extra responsibilities above their formal role; however, this often leads to feelings of being undervalued, particularly when they are being paid less than what a person would earn working in a supermarket (Bottrill, 2022). Welsh Government (2026b) has attempted to value teaching assistants' contribution towards consistent quality childcare through proposed pay increases. However, the changes mainly benefit Level 1 teaching assistants, whose pay will rise to match that of Level 2 staff.

For many Level 2 teaching assistants, who have completed additional qualifications and training, this has created feelings of frustration and further undervaluation. While the pay rise may be seen as a positive step towards recognising support staff, it also raises questions about whether experience and professional development are being fairly paid in the early years.

The Department for Education (2025b) repeatedly highlights that effective childcare cannot be achieved without a strong and knowledgeable workforce. Their proposed solution appears to focus heavily on increasing staff qualifications, encouraging practitioners to achieve Level 3 qualifications as a way of improving quality within the sector. Although the importance of retaining skilled staff is acknowledged and financial incentives are suggested as a possible solution, there is still very little detail about when staff pay and financial conditions will actually improve.

Workforce Wellbeing and Its Impact on Practice

Recent findings from Early Years Wales (2025) highlight significant pressure across the early years workforce, with teaching assistants reporting a decline in their mental health and well-being, alongside ongoing recruitment and retention challenges. The report also emphasised that children require high-quality interactions in order to support their development, which is dependent on practitioners having sufficient time and their own emotional capacity to deliver them. These factors are increasingly constrained by workforce pressures, which can impact the consistency and quality of practice.

Stability and predictability in a child's environment are essential for their long-term well-being and development. As children are highly influenced by the people around them, it is important that practitioners provide consistent, emotionally responsive care (Burghardt, et al., 2026). However, this raises an important concern: when teaching assistants themselves are under ongoing pressure, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to consistently meet the emotional needs of children and provide secure, nurturing interactions required to support development.

So what does this mean for teaching assistants and the sustainability of early years education?

Teaching assistants play a central role in contributing to high-quality Early Childhood Play, Learning, and Care in Wales, yet their work continues to be undervalued. This creates a clear tension between the ambitions of the Curriculum for Wales and the reality of daily practice.

Ultimately, if Wales is serious about developing a high-quality provision for early years, this imbalance can no longer be overlooked. Relying on an already overstretched workforce has real consequences, not just on practitioners but on the consistency and quality of child development. Teaching assistants deserve pay that reflects the responsibility and value of the work they do every day.

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