Early Years Curricula

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I have not used AI in this assignment.

Curricula

Donaldson (2015) argues that the Welsh school curriculum should include all learning experiences and assessment activities planned to achieve agreed educational purposes. This aligns with Caswell and Campbell's (1935) view of curriculum as the experiences children have under teachers' guidance. Vygotsky (1978) understood learning as a social process, while Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised the influence of relationships and environments. This assignment critically compares the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach, focusing on child agency, adult guidance, documentation and the contextual factors influencing implementation.

The Curriculum for Wales is the national curriculum for learners aged 3–16, organised around four purposes and six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) (Welsh Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2022b). Its flexible, learner-centred framework enables practitioners to design meaningful experiences responsive to children's needs and environments, promoting professional agency and holistic learning (Welsh Government, 2025; Smith, 2024). However, Smith (2024) argues that the guidance insufficiently explains the framework's theoretical foundations, potentially creating uncertainty about how its principles should inform practice.

Integrating areas of learning encourages children to connect knowledge with real-life experiences, supporting creativity, independence and understanding (Welsh Government, 2022b). Nevertheless, flexibility requires practitioners to exercise professional judgement when designing learning and supporting progression. Morrison-Love *et al*. (2023) highlight the difficulties in developing a shared understanding of progression and emphasise the importance of practitioners learning and working together to support consistent implementation.

Professional development is therefore essential to realising the curriculum's potential. Ongoing training, collaborative planning and professional dialogue can strengthen practitioners' confidence while preserving their autonomy. However, limited time, training opportunities and curriculum-design experience may contribute to inconsistent interpretations of the framework (Estyn, 2025; Glover *et al*., 2026). Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development, highlights how children can develop their learning through guidance, questioning, modelling and interaction with others. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory also highlights how relationships between home, educational settings and wider communities influence development (Mathews, 2022). These perspectives complement the curriculum's holistic aspirations, but applying them meaningfully requires appropriate theoretical knowledge and professional judgement.

The Reggio Emilia approach began in post-war Italy, bringing families, local communities and educators together to shape children's learning (Reggio Children, 2022). Unlike the Curriculum for Wales, it is an educational philosophy rather than a national curriculum. It sees children as capable, curious learners who build their understanding by exploring, interacting, and learning from others. (Reggio Children, 2022; Biroli *et al*., 2018). The idea of the 'hundred languages of children' recognises that children express their thoughts and ideas in many different ways, such as through drawing, music, movement and building (Tijnagel-Schoenaker, 2017). This highlights the importance of practitioners providing a range of materials and opportunities for children to explore their ideas and express their understanding in different ways.

A central feature of Reggio Emilia is *progettazione*, an evolving process in which educators observe and document children's learning, interpret their experiences and adjust future activities accordingly (Mussini, 2024; Reggio Children, 2022). Instead of directing every activity, practitioners act as collaborators, using pedagogical documentation to reflect on children's learning (Harcourt and Jones, 2016; Carlsen and Clark, 2022). Guo and Rouse's (2025) synthesis of 23 qualitative studies highlights the

importance of educator involvement and professional development in implementing Reggio-inspired practices. However, their review focuses on Australian settings, so its findings should not automatically be generalised to every context.

The environment is regarded as the ‘third teacher’, with spaces and materials supporting exploration and collaboration (Robson and Mastrangelo, 2018). The atelier provides opportunities for creative experimentation, while documentation helps practitioners interpret children’s ideas and develop ongoing projects. Fernández-Santín and Feliu-Torruella (2020) explore these processes through an atelier-based project, showing how creative experimentation and documentation can support children’s thinking.

Both approaches view children as active participants and emphasise meaningful learning, but differ in structure and pedagogical tradition. The Curriculum for Wales sets national purposes that schools use to design their curricula, whereas Reggio Emilia emphasises flexible projects and pedagogical documentation (Welsh Government, 2022b; Chicken, 2022). The Welsh curriculum requires practitioners to balance children’s interests with national expectations, while Reggio Emilia allows learning to develop in response to emerging interests. However, Chicken (2022) explains that practitioners may need to adapt Reggio principles to suit different cultures and educational settings. Nguyen (2024) similarly discusses the importance of collaboration, documentation and reflection in Reggio-inspired settings. Together, these studies show that the approach's effectiveness depends on practitioners' understanding and their working environment.

Research shows that the Curriculum for Wales's aims are not always fully achieved in practice. Glover *et al*. (2026) highlight challenges such as practitioners lacking knowledge and confidence, having limited experience in curriculum planning, and receiving insufficient support. Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley (2020) explain that

curriculum flexibility requires practitioners to have the right skills and to keep learning. Similarly, Landi and Pintus (2022) warn that copying Reggio practices without understanding their values and cultural background can lead to superficial implementation. Both approaches therefore require practitioners to understand the principles behind them and apply them thoughtfully in practice, rather than simply following them.

Adult guidance is another important point of comparison. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning highlights how purposeful social interaction can extend children's learning beyond what they achieve independently. Guided play combines child autonomy with adult scaffolding, allowing practitioners to support learning without controlling every step (Weisberg *et al*., 2016). Skene *et al*. (2022) found that guided play produced greater positive effects than direct instruction for early mathematics, shape knowledge and task switching, and greater effects than free play for spatial vocabulary. However, it found no significant differences for other key outcomes. This suggests that guided play can be valuable but should not be assumed to be universally more effective.

Documentation and assessment also reflect each approach's beliefs and values. In Reggio-inspired settings, documenting children's learning helps practitioners understand what children have learned and use this to guide future teaching (Buldu and Olgan, 2021). Buldu and Olgan (2021) found that documentation training helped two Turkish Early Years teachers change their assessment practices by introducing portfolios, displays, and opportunities for children to share and discuss what they had learned with others. Although the small sample limits generalisation, the findings illustrate how documentation can support reflective practice. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales sees assessment as an important part of teaching and learning, helping children make progress at their own pace rather than focusing on external expectations (Welsh Government, 2022b).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory helps explain why implementation varies across settings. Spear and Kirkman (2024) highlight how wider policies and the way organisations work can affect teaching and learning practices. Children's immediate relationships with practitioners and peers form part of the microsystem, while the mesosystem concerns connections between settings, including home and school. The exosystem includes indirect influences such as organisational decisions about staffing and professional development, while the macrosystem includes broader cultural values and national policy (El Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022). This suggests that curriculum implementation depends not only on classroom practice but also on the wider systems supporting children's learning.

In Wales, Arad Research's evaluation of early Curriculum for Wales implementation found that school leaders generally viewed the learner-centred approach positively, particularly its potential to promote equity and inclusion (Thomas *et al*., 2023). However, limited staff time and resources made curriculum planning more challenging (Welsh Government, 2023). Social Care Wales (2025) also identifies low pay and poor working conditions among concerns affecting recruitment and retention across the wider social care workforce, although these findings should not be treated as representative of every Early Years setting. Such pressures may restrict opportunities for sustained observation, collaboration and responsive planning. Similarly, Trang Thu *et al*. (2022) show how policies, funding and organisational factors can affect children's learning environments in Vietnamese primary schools. Although their study does not focus on Wales, it offers a useful ecological perspective on why effective implementation requires support beyond the classroom.

The Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia share an emphasis on child agency, relationships and active learning, but differ in their structures and pedagogical traditions. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of Learning explains how social interaction and responsive adult guidance can support learning, while Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory highlights the wider systems shaping children's

experiences. Evidence on guided play demonstrates potential benefits but also shows that outcomes vary, reinforcing the need for professional judgement. Research on curriculum implementation similarly highlights the importance of professional learning, reflection and supportive working conditions. Ultimately, neither approach succeeds on principles alone: practitioners need the knowledge, time, resources, and contextual support to enact those principles meaningfully.

Unique Child

The Unique Child concept recognises that every child has their own strengths, interests, experiences, and needs (Welsh Government, 2026b). Development varies from child to child and depends on both personal traits and environmental factors (Roubinov, Meaney and Boyce, 2021; Olson *et al*., 2025). Assessment can help practitioners notice these differences, but it always involves interpretation and professional judgement when choosing and analysing evidence (Albin-Clark, 2021). This raises the question of whether assessment truly enables practitioners to understand each child or sometimes reinforces early assumptions.

This assignment critically compares assessment practices in the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach. Both value children's active participation, but they work in different settings and use different assessment methods (ChildCarePath, 2026). The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 makes progression, next steps, and future teaching key assessment goals (Welsh Government, 2021a). To ensure fairness, it is also important to consider children's different experiences and abilities (Hanno, Portilla and Hsueh, 2025). This analysis assesses how each approach recognises the Unique Child, particularly the limits of developmental expectations and the importance of practitioner judgement.

Dynamic assessment is rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, which focuses on how children learn with support from others. Dynamic assessment examines how children respond to guidance and support, not just what they can do independently (Tzuriel, 2001; Kelley *et al*., 2025). Hussain and Woods (2019) found that play-based dynamic assessment helps practitioners spot children's skills and plan support. Silva Moreira, Ferreira and Veiga Simão (2022) also studied self-regulated learning in preschoolers using this method. Still, Elliott, Resing and Beckmann (2018) point out that dynamic assessment has limits in how well it works in

classrooms. So, dynamic assessment should be used alongside other ways of gathering evidence about children's learning, not as a replacement.

Capability assessment focuses on identifying what children can do, what they understand and how their strengths can be developed through learning and support (Buzzelli, 2018). More and Proyer (2025) link this idea to concerns about ableism in early childhood education, and Hanno, Portilla and Hsueh (2025) say fair assessment should consider children's different backgrounds and experiences. Research from Welsh Early Years settings shows that relationships and the environment also affect children's participation (Henderson, Tyrie and Tur Porres, 2026). So, a child's performance depends not just on their abilities, but also on how accessible activities are and the support they get.

Even with these challenges, assessment remains important for understanding children's progress, identifying their needs and planning appropriate support (Welsh Government, 2022d). Parekh (2017) criticises narrow ideas of ability and shows how educational judgements can shape how we see children's potential. Practitioners should pay attention not just to what children show, but also to the context and assumptions behind their interpretations.

The Curriculum for Wales puts learner progression at the heart of assessment. Welsh Government (2022d) guidance encourages a broad view of learners' strengths, how they learn, and where they can grow. The Progression Code says learners move forward at different speeds and in different ways, so practitioners should give time for reinforcement and reflection (Welsh Government, 2021d). This approach values the Unique Child by focusing on individual progress rather than fixed expectations. This reinforces the importance of using assessment to understand each learner's developing strengths and needs and to adapt teaching to support their progression (Welsh Government, 2022c)

Another assessment method is formative assessment, which involves observing, questioning and discussing children's learning during everyday activities (Welsh Government, 2022d). For example, when children build a bridge from loose parts, practitioners may watch how they solve problems, work together, and respond to help, not just the final result. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) idea that social interaction is key to learning. The OECD (2021) also notes that interactions among children, practitioners, families, and environments support development. Research examining teachers' approaches to play-based learning and classroom assessment emphasises the value of incorporating assessment within play-based experiences (Pyle *et al*., 2022).

Observation is not always objective. If practitioners focus mainly on what children say, they might miss understanding shown through gestures, building, or other non-verbal ways (Cowan and Flewitt, 2018). This links to Parekh's (2017) point that narrow ideas of ability can affect educational judgements. Also, if practitioners spend too much time recording, they might miss important interactions (Department for Education, 2024). Formative assessment is most effective when practitioners use evidence of children's learning to inform teaching and plan appropriate next steps, rather than simply recording observations (Welsh Government, 2022d).

The Reggio Emilia approach uses documentation, such as photos, observations, children's comments, drawings, and work samples, to show how learning happens. Alaçam and Olgan's (2021) review of 24 studies found that documentation promotes reflection and interaction about children's learning among children, practitioners, and families. For example, recording children exploring shadows can show their experiments, theory building, and teamwork, things a narrow, skills-based assessment might miss.

Documentation also lets children look back on experiences and share their views, linking to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and their right to express their opinions (UNICEF, 1989). Still, practitioners choose what to record and how to interpret it. Giamminuti, Merewether, and Blaise (2022) warn against treating documentation as a fixed method and stress the demand for critical, shared reflection. Documentation helps recognise the Unique Child only when practitioners consider whose views are included and what the evidence shows or omits (Wien, 2015; Blaisdell *et al*., 2021).

Both approaches go beyond assessing children based solely on fixed age expectations. The Curriculum for Wales focuses on non-linear progress, and the Reggio Emilia approach uses documentation to understand children's thinking in different ways. However, flexibility in assessment does not always mean fairness. Research on the Curriculum for Wales shows that schools vary in how they use the curriculum and assessment, making it hard to apply principles consistently (Priestley *et al*., 2025). Estyn (2022) also argues that assessment should have a clear purpose that guides teaching and progress. Ultimately, both approaches depend on practitioners' skill to interpret evidence thoughtfully.

Developmental information can show children's strengths, areas to work on, and next steps (Welsh Government, 2022d). In Wales, assessment for children aged 0–3 also focuses on recognising each child's unique development (Welsh Government, 2026b). However, developmental descriptions should guide professional judgement, not turn into strict checklists (Welsh Government, 2022d). If children are judged against narrow expectations, differences in how they communicate, their experiences, or disabilities may be seen as problems rather than different ways of learning (Parekh, 2017). Assessment should help practitioners understand children's progress and plan appropriate learning experiences, rather than focusing on labelling children (Welsh Government, 2022a; Sussman, Draney and Wilson, 2025).

This is especially important for children with additional learning needs. The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales stresses person-centred practice and involving children and families in support decisions (Welsh Government, 2021b). Estyn (2025b) also says it is vital to adapt support to each child, and Welsh Government (2026a) suggests looking at evidence over time and considering barriers in the learning environment. For example, if a child rarely speaks, practitioners can observe how they communicate during play, use visual choices, and talk with the family regarding their interactions. These steps may help distinguish between a child's understanding and language challenges under certain situations.

However, focusing only on children's interests might not challenge them enough or meet all their learning needs. Practitioners must help children learn beyond what they already know (NAEYC, 2020; Sheridan *et al*., 2009; Estyn, 2025a). Estyn (2025a) shows that paying attention to children's interests and responding to them can help identify learning opportunities and plan next steps. Skene et al. (2022) also found that guided play can improve some learning outcomes more than free play or direct teaching. This suggests that thoughtful adult involvement may complement child-led activities.

Cultural and language experiences strongly shape how children show their learning (Shneidman *et al*., 2016; Taylor *et al*., 2008). Culturally responsive practice also highlights the need for educators to reflect on whose cultural knowledge and experiences educational settings represent (Jenkin, 2016). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological systems theory argues that development happens within wider social and cultural settings. In Wales, Thomas *et al*. (2022) note that assessing bilingual children's literacy is hard without the right tools and standards for each language. Hanno, Portilla and Hsueh (2025) also say fair assessment should reflect children's cultural, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Practitioners need to consider children's languages and how they demonstrate understanding, rather than judging differences against uncommon or narrow standards. This means both the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia approaches need ongoing critical reflection.

Assessment in the Curriculum for Wales and documentation in the Reggio Emilia approach can help recognise each child's uniqueness, but neither guarantees inclusive practice on its own. Assessment can show children's strengths, interests, and needs, but how practitioners interpret what they see is key (Albin-Clark, 2021; Giamminuti, Merewether and Blaise, 2022). Developmental information is most useful when it helps plan support, but it can be a problem if practitioners see current performance as a fixed limit (Parekh, 2017). Ultimately, recognising the Unique Child depends not just on the assessment method, but on practitioners' skill to interpret evidence thoughtfully, work with families, and offer inclusive learning experiences.

It Starts at Three:

How Wales Is Rewriting the Script on Misogyny

(Twinkl, n.d.)

*"He's going to be a **heartbreaker**."*

People say it with a smile as my toddler sits on the floor, chewing a toy. He has never heard the word 'misogyny'. He can't even say 'pink' yet.

However, they're already writing a script for him: win the girls, be tough, don't do anything perceived as 'girly'. Some people have told me that pink toys and clothes are off limits as they're 'girly', as if the colour itself can rub off on him. He's too young to roll his eyes, so he just absorbs it all, one cheery comment at a time.

No one means harm, so no one notices it.

In a matter of days, his sister arrives, and I wonder what script she'll be handed. I'm studying early years at university, so I already know that my children will absorb messages about what boys and girls are 'meant' to be, long before they can even speak.

Early years practitioners are often the first adults in a child's life to shape those scripts through the behaviours they model, the books they read, and how they handle conflict. In this blog, I will examine these messages, identify the individuals and systems that create them, and explain why interventions work best when started early in a child's development. Later, I'll share practical, actionable strategies practitioners and parents can use to challenge these scripts in everyday settings, so you'll leave with ideas you can apply immediately.

Misogyny is learned behaviour.

I'm not saying three-year-olds are misogynists. However, as Manne (2017) argues in 'Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny,' misogyny is less about hatred and more about enforcement. You reward girls for behaving as expected, and you're prepared to penalise them if they don't. A girl in charge is 'bossy'. A boy in charge is 'a natural leader'. The message is clear, and the children are listening.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory states children copy what they see. Bem's (1981) gender schema theory suggests children categorise the world as 'boy things' and 'girl things.' Research shows children begin preferring gender-stereotyped toys around age 2 and develop more stereotyped behaviour between ages of 3 and 6 (Segura-Nebot *et al.*, 2025; Todd, Barry and Thommessen, 2016; Reynolds, 2023).

You can hear the rehearsal in the sandpit:

"Girls can't be Spider-Man."

“Boys don’t play with dolls”.

"Stop crying like a girl."

Each one is a dress rehearsal for adulthood, and no one realises it.

What Wales Is Doing Differently

In Wales, Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is compulsory from age 3 (Welsh Government, 2024). For three-year-olds, the Code emphasises learning to express needs, appreciating that others have needs too, and seeing adults treat everyone with respect regardless of gender (Welsh Government, 2021c). Practitioners should model respectful language, encourage children to express feelings and preferences, and guide them to consider others' feelings during daily routines. For example, during group play, a practitioner might ask, "How do you think your friend feels?" or demonstrate how to include everyone in activities. By embedding these behaviours into everyday moments, practitioners can create environments where respect and inclusion become the norm.

My first thought was "But they're only three!" I imagine most people would think that. It's not sex education in the conventional sense. The Code states teaching must be appropriate to the child's stage, and for the youngest children that means showing them how to ask permission to share toys and respect personal boundaries (Welsh Government, 2021c). So it's the fundamentals:

take turns, ask first, say stop.

In a nursery, that might be one child taking a block and the practitioner saying, "Let's ask first". Later, "If you don't want that, you can say stop". Not a big deal. But when it happens every day, it becomes the norm, and that's what the Code asks for.

Does Starting Early Work?

The evidence is promising but limited overall.

- ★ A 2023 review of 13 school-based programmes for children up to age 12 found that the most effective ones were embedded in the curriculum and daily school life, actively involved children, families, and staff, and were evidence-based and tailored to the groups they served. The programmes led to increased awareness of gender-based violence, reduced stereotyping, improved classroom relationships and reduced violent behaviour (Villardón-Gallego *et al.*, 2023).
- ★ A Spanish study found that a storybook challenging stereotypes reduced gender-based exclusion in play among three- to six-year-olds (Segura-Nebot *et al.*, 2025).
- ★ The RSE Code was introduced in January 2022 (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2026), so evidence of its long-term effects remains limited. Estyn (2026) found that few schools regularly assessed how RSE influenced pupils' understanding, views and choices over time. Further research is therefore needed to understand its lasting impact on learners' attitudes and behaviours.

Strategies: What I'll Do at Home and Work

As a practitioner:

- ★ Name exclusion when I see it. For example, I could say, "I noticed Sam wasn't included. How can we help everyone join in?" This helps children recognise exclusion and include others.
- ★ Teach 'stop' and 'ask first'.
- ★ Review my books.

As a parent:

- ★ Use the same feeling words for both children.
- ★ Don't force affection.
- ★ Watch how I speak about women and girls.

Back to the Basics

You won't get it all right, and no practitioner or parent will. What matters is observation, change, and trying again. Real progress happens when you reflect on what works, stay open to feedback, and adjust your approach. Ongoing reflection is essential because it means we are always learning, improving, and doing better for children in our care. It's about progress, not perfection.

Here's what matters to me: *My son can wear pink if he wants and cry if he needs to. He needs to understand that 'no' means 'no' from others and himself, and being a boy gives him no right to have his own way. He is a brother, a friend, and one day someone's safe person, not just a heartbreaker.*

I want my daughter to know she is never too small to be heard. I want her to say 'stop' and be believed. I want her to climb, shout, and take up space without being told to be quiet or nice.

Misogyny is learned, so respect can be too. It starts at three.

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