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1. Reggio Emilia and the Welsh Foundation Phase

1.1 Introduction: Play-based learning approaches are increasingly seen around the world as vital for children's development in the early years. Play-based education is valued in both the Reggio Emilia approach (from Italy) and the Foundation Phase curriculum in Wales, though they are developed within different frameworks. In this part of the discussion, the focus is on how they approach curriculum, key theories, basic beliefs, and teaching methods. We consider the obstacles and uncertainty that practitioners encounter, referring to OECD (2018) as well as important research on play pedagogy.

1.2 Curricular Guidance:

The Reggio Emilia method was first developed after World War II in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and it is not a single fixed curriculum. In 1963, Loris Malaguzzi created Reggio because children were seen to suffer greatly from the trauma of war (Thomas & McInnes, 2018). While it created recommendations and municipal directives over the years, there is still no national policy. It calls for the same themes to be practiced (such as including children's voices, project-based methods, and using the "hundred languages of children") and shares common principles (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012).

Meanwhile, the Foundation Phase introduced by the Welsh Government in 2008–11 is a legal requirement for children aged 3–7 in Wales. According to the WAG (2015), the Foundation Phase Framework states that all publicly funded preschools should adopt seven learning topics (social development, literacy, numeracy, etc.) and important principles (being child-centred, inclusive, and encouraging play). In addition, guidelines in the Foundation Phase emphasize that learning should be through play (see Table). Assessment is also carried out along a "continuum of learning" (WAG, 2015; Waters, 2016).

Table 1: Comparison of Play Pedagogy in Early Years Curricula adapted from Thomas & McInnes (2018).

Curriculum	Philosophy of play
Foundation Phase Wales	“Learning through play is integral. Play should be planned for in an enabling environment... structured tasks... support stages of development
EYFS (England)	“Emphasis... is through play; it must be planned for and purposeful. A mix of child-led and adult-led activities advocated.”
CfE (Scotland)	“Children should experience the majority of learning through well-planned and challenging play.”

So, the Foundation Phase follows set regulations and is checked by inspectors, but local initiatives and professional collaborations guide Reggio. The Welsh curriculum states that play is valued and formally part of assessment and learning objectives (WAG, 2015), whereas in Reggio Emilia, it emerges naturally based on children’s ideas and is not linked to a specific stage.

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings:

Both perspectives use constructivism and socio-cultural theories, but they use them differently. Reggio Emilia is shaped by Vygotsky’s focus on people’s interaction and language, Dewey’s theory of learning via activities (Dewey, 1938), and some aspects of Piaget’s work, but it is mainly presented as “constructivist-communicative” learning by Malaguzzi and his colleagues (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012).

Reggio points out that interacting with peers, adults, and the environment is important for gaining knowledge. It takes inspiration from Piaget’s symbolic play and

Vygotsky's imagination but describes these as "hundred languages" instead of single ways of expression. The environment is referred to as "the Third Teacher," showing similarity with Froebel's and Dewey's approach to child-centred classrooms (Dewey, 1938; Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012).

Socio-cultural theory is also an influence in the Foundation Phase. Waters (2016) stresses how children are keen to learn and are assessed using a 0–7 continuum instead of simply by age. Rather than following early developmental models, Wales began to use ideas taken from recent studies (Edwards, 2009; Brooker, 2008). It has been referred to as "post-developmental" by scholars, who highlight the significance of social and cultural settings (Brooker, 2008; Donaldson, 2015).

Brooker (2008) and Maynard et al. (2013) argue that the pedagogy is mainly constructivist, allowing teachers to adjust support according to each student's skills and needs. As a result, Reggio was developed collectively by the community, while the Foundation Phase started with government policies based on academic studies.

1.1 Values:

Both approaches give importance to respecting the child and learning from experience. Reggio Emilia views the child as an active participant who has their voice and rights (Malaguzzi, mentioned by Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012). It creates opportunities for children, teachers, and parents to work together, believing every child is capable and creative. Art and the environment are key values: the things children make are respected by adults and left as they are.

In contrast, the Foundation Phase merges inspiration and expansion towards developmental goals and general education (Donaldson, 2015). It focuses on making sure everyone feels welcome, healthy, and connected to their traditional Welsh culture and language. It sees children as active participants and emphasizes both community and national identity (OECD, 2018). Although educators focus on the child being at the heart of each approach, Reggio tends to call for democracy and rights, whereas Wales is concerned with educational outcomes.

However, Thomas and McInnes (2018) state that there are key similarities in that they both promote a thematic, learner-centred method. Both outline the importance of ensuring children can develop and learn through play. On the other hand, Reggio could be considered stronger in child agency, aiming to help children affected by war heal and grow, while the Foundation Phase carefully weaves child independence into its official curriculum set by the government.

1.5 Pedagogical Approaches: In Reggio Emilia, educators pay attention to children's interests and set up projects that children and adults develop over time. The learning environment has ateliers and a wide range of materials; teachers join in the learning together with the children (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012). Reflections are made using photos and learning stories to ensure consistency in learning. Teachers are given ready-made plans in the Foundation Phase. Teaching should involve play, outdoors, investigation, storytelling, drama, and music, all while following the curriculum Areas of Learning (WAG, 2015). It includes time when children and parents engage together and when children can play freely. Play should always include both literacy and numeracy from an early age (Donaldson, 2015). Reggio says adults and children should both be involved in learning, while the Foundation Phase recommends planning learning through play. Based on research, guided play also helps with learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

1.6 Complexities of Implementation:

Both approach are not easy to follow completely. Expertise from teachers, the influence of the community, and effort in documentation are the bases of Reggio's model. According to Thornton and Brunton (2015), many people who rethink identity often fail to consider how it emerged from its cultural context. According to Thomas and McInnes (2018), some UK adaptations prefer to express themselves as adults while being aimed at children. Documentation is time-consuming and hard to keep up to date. It is difficult to understand how the Foundation Phase works.

Waters (2016) explained that practitioners had difficulty telling the difference between free play, structured play, and purposeful play. The guidance talks about “free play ... with set goals,” which does not clearly explain how to implement planning. According to Siraj (2014), there was a lack of consistent educational information on what play means. Despite claiming to value experience, this approach expects teachers to understand child development—something not all knew when it began (Waters, 2016). Both methods depend on educators with strong education

According to Siraj (2014), teachers in Wales need training in play-based learning and assessment approaches that are formative. Without emphasizing the community aspect, settings inspired by Reggio may move toward projects guided only by adults and structured as arts tasks. When philosophy and practice are different, it could prevent children from learning in a way that suits their needs.

1.7 Critical Comparison: Reggio Emilia and the Welsh Foundation Phase both consider play to have top priority and view the child as a learner, yet they approach these concepts in various ways. Reggio gives students freedom to explore, but the Foundation Phase focuses on shaping play from curriculum goals. Reggio puts strong focus on the arts and making decisions within communities, while Wales has incorporated literacy and the use of the Welsh language in play (Waters, 2016).

Reggio Emilia is based on a post-war cooperative movement, while the Foundation Phase is formed by academic policy reform. Each approach promotes uniqueness: Reggio through letting the child lead their projects, and the Foundation Phase by observing the child as they progress (Waters, 2016). Notably, how play is viewed varies, with Reggio seeing it as exploratory and expressive, and Wales as intentional and teacher-guided (Donaldson, 2015). Instead of formal evaluations, Reggio focuses on qualitative outcomes (Biroli et al., 2018), the opposite of what the Foundation Phase practices (Taylor et al., 2015).

1.8 Implementation and Practice

A study by Maynard and Chicken (2010) found that Welsh teachers exploring Reggio-inspired practices appreciated the philosophy but struggled with implementation due to the WFP's outcome-driven structure. Teachers reported that prescribed learning outcomes often constrained genuine child-led learning.

Nilsson et al. (2018) argue for a reconceptualization of early childhood education that sees learning as an outcome of both play and exploration, challenging the dichotomy between formal instruction and imaginative play. Their ethnographic research in Reggio-inspired Swedish preschools supports the idea that exploration and creativity are central to meaningful learning. Chicken (2023) further critiques the feasibility of "doing Reggio" in UK contexts, noting that the dominant discourse of school readiness and accountability often undermines the philosophical depth of Reggio-inspired practices

Conclusion – The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes the child's agency and the environment as a third teacher, fostering creativity and inquiry through long-term projects. In contrast, the Wales Foundation Phase, while inspired by similar principles, is constrained by statutory learning outcomes that can limit child-led exploration. Research by Samuelsson and Björklund (2023) supports the integration of play and learning, arguing that developmental pedagogy benefits from teacher sensitivity and child agency. Nilsson et al. (2018) further argue that exploration, as practiced in Reggio-inspired settings, bridges the gap between imaginative play and structured learning

In conclusion, both Reggio Emilia and the Welsh Foundation Phase place strong emphasis on learning through play and agree on major points (including holistic, creative, and child-centred viewpoints). However, policymakers need to look at these theories from a different perspective than practitioners. Reggio emphasizes values and ideas without a set learning plan, so it can be adapted to suit the local community. Although the Foundation Phase uses a clear structure, its terms may be unclear to those unfamiliar with play theory. Addressing these complications calls for teachers to be well-educated, for instructions to be easy to grasp, and for effective

leadership. From here, we explore how these policies relate to assessments and acknowledge the idea of the “unique child”.

2. The Unique Child – Assessment, Progress and Child-Centred Philosophy

2.1 Introduction: The concept of the "unique child" is a foundational principle in early childhood education, particularly within frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the Welsh Foundation Phase. It recognizes each child as a capable, resilient learner with individual needs, interests, and developmental trajectories. This philosophy underpins child-centred pedagogy, which prioritizes personalised learning experiences and respects the agency of the child.

2.2 Concept of the Unique Child:

It is well established in early years curricula that all children are unique. The concept of “unique children” featured in UK guidelines means that children learn and grow at their own pace. In most cases, play-based curricula assume that children construct their own knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Brooker, 2008). Development in Wales states that the people and environment around them influence children’s growth. Families all have their traditions, which reflect where they come from and their values (Early Education, n.d.). With the “unique child” perspective, educators understand that children develop differently and should be assessed based on their own strengths.

The Reggio Emilia approach similarly regards the child as capable and full of potential. It is emphasized by the Reggio Emilia community that children should be seen as having both rights and responsibilities that are personal to them (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012). Most countries support this idea, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) includes every child’s right to play and education, showing that children and their needs are valued (Gray & Crittenden, 2025). For this reason, assessments ought to be designed for each child individually and address various areas of development.

2.3 Assessment in Play-Based Curricula:

Assessment in this context is not about standardised testing but about understanding the child through continuous observation and reflection. It is formative, embedded in daily interactions, and used to inform responsive teaching. However, research by Cade (2023) highlights a critical tension: while the intent is inclusive, assessments can inadvertently marginalize children with special needs if educators unconsciously focus on normative development.

It is not easy to measure the progress that the “unique child” concept aims to achieve in practice. Early childhood assessments are usually based on developmental milestones or lists. For instance, to illustrate this concept, Piaget’s stages and the UK Development Matters use age band charts with typical abilities at certain ages. Even though such tools predict student learning, they sometimes overlook the benefits of diversity. Usually, play-based schools prefer to assess children by watching their actions during play.

In places inspired by Reggio Emilia, this is often shown through stories that demonstrate how children learn, instead of focusing on assessing finished outcomes (Carr & Lee, 2012). The observer can see where the child needs help and use that information to assist in the right areas. Using this approach matches the unique child ethos, as it focuses on a child’s abilities and areas of interest.

Within the Foundation Phase, the main focus is on observation, yet this is based on government policies. Teachers have to check how a child is doing regularly and depend on activities from play to judge their placement on the 0–7 scale (WAG, 2015; Waters, 2016). In 2014, the Welsh Government introduced an Early Years Development and Assessment Framework (EYDAF) for ages 0–7 to help monitor each child’s development using a single framework. Observation by teachers is highlighted by the EYDAF as the principal method for assessment, which supports the documentation of each child’s individuality. It is less formal than traditional tests since it invites the use of portfolios, notes, and information from parents.

2.4 Progress Tracking and Age/Stage Models: Even so, age/stage models continue to impact how students are assessed. Some play-based approaches, even Reggio ones, rely on broad expectations to show parents and teachers that a child is growing and/or as a way to document their learning for inspection purposes. In Wales, teachers need to outline what students have learned at age 7 in a summary. In the United Kingdom, per age, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Cambridgeshire's profiles include developmental statements (Early Education, n.d.; Cambridgeshire County Council, 2021). Some critics say that these tools disagree with the idea of allowing each child to learn at their own pace.

Brooker (2008) mentioned that these EYFS bands had led some British teachers to make all children reach the same standard by a particular age, which is uncomfortable with the reality that every child learns differently. In fact, according to Brooker (2008), these statements are opposite to the ideas behind the Unique Child.

According to Stephen (2010), most early years curricula are still influenced by theories from Piaget and developmental psychology, assuming all children will progress through common stages on time. According to him, using the same criteria for all children can put pressure on them early and make play less natural. Such a framework, according to Wright (2014), encourages educators to make learning objectives for play.

It has been observed that, for teachers, the unexpected outcomes of child-led play can make them hesitant to link what's happening to the organised curriculum (Hipkins et al., 2002). This aspect is particularly clear in the Foundation Phase: government advice states that play should include both literacy and numeracy (WAG, 2015). Even when a child's play doesn't include writing or math, a teacher has to decide whether to add them.

2.5 Tools and Technology: Today, there are tools available to deal with these challenges. With learning journals (like Tapestry and Classroom Monitor), teachers are able to associate observations with learning goals and create reports to see each

child's progress. Even though these tools help make progress monitoring interactive, they still require development models (Flewitt and Cowan, 2019).

Some teachers appreciate the support of these systems, but others fear they can reduce a child's education to nothing more than statistics. Another option is approaches like New Zealand's "Mosaic" or "Learning Stories" (Peters and Kelly, 2015), which allow for diversified forms of assessment. Hayes (2023) encourages collecting photos and documents of physical, social, and creative achievements to support every child. Critics claim the scale better shows all the learning that takes place than merely awarding points.

2.6 Critique of Models vs. Child-Centred Philosophy: Can these methods fit within the principles of child-centred learning? This approach is supported by observations and stories, as it can be changed to suit every child's progress. The world of the Foundation Phase suggests focusing on development, not on how old someone is (Waters, 2016).

Waters (2016) points out that practitioners should use children's experiences than to only care about their age. The change was meant to move away from the inflexible structure of Wales's previous curriculum. In successful situations, teachers recognize and applaud students' unique successes by using stories and journeys, instead of pointing out how others perform.

Even so, any method used to check progress can create a standard for what is considered to be true or false. Even the Foundation Phase's idea of a continuum may be misunderstood as falling back into using benchmarks. At the beginning, a few teachers did not realize that the curriculum aimed for higher learning standards, while others focused only on aligning with age groups. Therefore, Welsh guidance has often emphasized that continua should be seen as flexible by teachers (WAG, 2015; Siraj, 2014). The unique child principle was again emphasized in Donaldson's (2015) study, which highlighted that reforms in the future must guarantee this.

Many educators (especially Stephen and Wright) suggest that assessment done in a play-based setting must be non-invasive and take an all-around approach. As an example, Wright (2014) points out that artistic play gives children an understanding that test scores may not reflect. Even if a child is happily drawing in the sand, the common metric could be “pre-writing not achieved,” and yet, considering the child’s needs, might recognize the skills they are building. Therefore, the argument is that standard stage models may overlook the whole child by concentrating on small segments of skill requirements.

2.7 - Progress, within a child-centred framework, is viewed holistically. It encompasses emotional, social, physical, and cognitive growth, and is understood to be non-linear. Nilsson et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of exploration and agency in learning, showing that when children are empowered to lead their learning, they engage more deeply and meaningfully.

Despite its strengths, the child-centred approach faces challenges. Langford (2010) critiques the traditional model for rendering educators invisible, arguing instead for a democratic pedagogy where both children and teachers are active participants. Additionally, accountability pressures and curriculum demands can conflict with the flexibility needed to truly honour each child’s uniqueness.

Conclusion: supporting the unique child requires a balanced approach—one that values inclusive, reflective assessment, recognizes the professional role of educators, and fosters environments where all children can thrive. By embracing these principles, early years education can become more equitable, responsive, and empowering for every learner

To sum up, education through play should consider the individual child and find ways to show their development. Such assessments are generally preferred by child-centred educators since they are designed to fit a child’s abilities. Wales took this approach by not relying solely on children’s ages. Even so, any formal tracking, including continua or digital journals, might push educators to judge children based on average norms.

Authors such as Stephen (2010) and Wright (2014) argue that this might oppose truly believing in individual paths. Many parents agree that being flexible works best: relying on milestones less strictly and valuing what children can do themselves. In short, using assessment to enhance play-led learning is how the “unique child” can truly be valued, not by bringing unnecessary rules or regulations. The following section focuses on what teachers can do to strengthen children’s literacy skills.

3. Implementing Play-Based Curriculum – Practical Insights (Blog Article)

There are both benefits and difficulties involved in switching to a play-based approach in early childhood education. Making it effective requires leaders and teams to work on staff skills, involve family members, set up classrooms well, and organize the curriculum properly. It provides helpful advice based on both studies and the experiences of professionals (Siraj, Blatchford et al., 2002; EEF, 2025; Gray & Crittenden, 2025).

1. Clarify Your Vision and Values

First, explain the key role of play. While it is obvious to early years practitioners, a statement that everyone can relate to is still important for leaders, parents, and team members. For instance: “Play is important for building creativity, problem-solving skills, and happy learning.” Making play an important part of the setting’s vision means it’s simpler to teach staff and explain the program to visitors. Some early education experts found that making their play-based approach clear helped people understand that children are still being taught. Explain how play helps develop self-control, cognitive abilities, and happiness at workshops and meetings.

2. Invest in Staff Training and Collaboration

Success in play-based practice is possible only with staff who are skilled and confident. Assistance may be required for teachers and assistants to properly observe how children play, design projects that align with children's plans, and learn when to offer guidance. The EEF (2025) suggests offering training that concentrates on play pedagogy to teachers. A good way to do this is through guided play, where adults prepare play ideas that contain age-appropriate topics and offer support, but don’t take over the learning. Pair new staff members with experienced coworkers who can guide them in play-based methods. Help staff improve together by encouraging them to observe and discuss one another’s teaching. If students are used to a more structured way of learning, reassure them and make sure they feel comfortable with the approach.

3. Plan an Implementation Roadmap

It is better to make improvements in stages. Decide whether you want to use play-based techniques at all times or if you'd rather begin with a small trial. In the transition from preschool to the Foundation Phase, you may want to place importance on outdoor activities that support stories, then shift focus to number games the following term. Regularly check how teaching is progressing through teacher opinions and short examples observed in the classroom. Perfection will take time to achieve. Changing an organization to adopt positive parenting needs to be a slow and ongoing process, not an immediate solution (Gray & Critten, 2025; EEF, 2021).

4. Tackle Space and Resources

To use play-based learning, the environment must be right. Check if there is a marked place for role-playing, making things, reading, using messy materials, and exploring different textures. Different parts of the outdoor spaces should be just as easy to access. Reggio-inspired settings consider the classroom to be a third teacher, making sure that beauty, light, and natural materials enhance play (Pescott, 2017). Try to provide cardboard tubes, fabric scraps, empty boxes, and loose items as playthings instead of ready-made toys. Ensure that items in storage can be reached by children so they can make their own decisions. Having rules about tidiness and care helps manage the active energy present in play-based classrooms.

5. Engage Families and the Community

Some parents may believe letting kids play means they will not learn adequately. Communication can change that perspective. Encourage families to join playtime. Post pictures and videos that reflect what you want students to learn. A pretend shop lets children practice counting, write receipts, and take turns. Newsletters can explain why play is important for learning. Helping parents provide costumes, recycled items, or story contributions can help them feel valued. Respecting cultural differences in play and building mutual respect can resolve issues (Gray & Crittenden, 2025).

6. Balance Child-Led and Adult-Guided

Different types of play are present on a scale. During free play, kids choose what to do, but in a carefully designed setting, some guided games are common. Educators help children understand more by asking thought-provoking questions or offering different tools for learning (Gray & Crittenden, 2025). During block-building, a teacher could suggest adding blocks to reach a higher tower or give the group a measuring tape. Plan the day so it includes some free time the child picks and some guided play you lead. By taking on an emergent curriculum, you connect with what children like, so if they enjoy dinosaurs, plan fun and educational activities in reading and maths.

7. Build a Reflective Assessment Culture

Play-based education calls for ongoing assessment, but it should be adapted to uphold basic principles. Instead of official tests, look at student work and observations. Write brief notes like “Ali explained how his bridge is designed to support more cars,” and review them with the team later. Wales now allows a variety of evidence, such as how-to videos, demonstrations, and spoken words, to support different ways of teaching. With tools like Laevers’ well-being and involvement scales, staff are encouraged to focus on engagement rather than outcomes. Development checklists should be used only as rough guidelines. They are meant to assist each child, not grade them against peers. If a child is drawn to gardening, use this as a sign to include more digging and planting in plans.

8. Address Timetable and Curriculum Pressure

Limited time is a real issue. Try using activities that connect more than one subject area during play. Literacy skills can develop just from playing and pretending to write or narrate stories. Some schools have found it works well to shorten the number of subjects, giving students more time to focus on projects. Make sure all topics on the schedule are necessary, and remove anything less important to allow time for deeper work. The flexible rules provided by the English curriculum (DfE, 2013; Gray & Crittenden, 2025) can be used to organize days with extended play sessions.

9. Foster a Positive Play Culture

For playful learning to happen, the classroom environment must be positive. Children should feel they can test ideas and try unusual things. Compliment the child for being creative and persistent, not just for getting answers right. Join in pretending and having fun—play with them, tell jokes, or add blocks to a tower. Let kids know we are there to paint with creativity, not too much, or we will waste what we have. Share play-based achievements with others at home or display them proudly. If play is important to children, they usually engage more deeply and feel proud.

Conclusion:

To use a play-based curriculum, one must plan carefully, train continually, and work with the local community. When properly done, it helps kids explore independently, become self-reliant, and enjoy learning. To shift how learning happens, educators must get support, parents need guidance, and classrooms should allow flexible inquiry. If staff are patient and share the same vision, play will become a key part of each day in early years settings. Research and child development principles make play-based learning beneficial to every area of a child's life.

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