

Part 1

Comparative Analysis: Reggio Emilia vs. Curriculum for Wales in Early Years Education.

The Curriculum for Wales is deeply embedded within national policy frameworks, ensuring consistency, accountability, and structured learning pathways (Welsh Government, 2024a). It aligns with statutory guidance, particularly the Early Childhood Play, Learning, and Care Framework, which emphasizes holistic development, well-being, and child-centered learning (Welsh Government, 2023). In contrast, the Reggio Emilia approach according to Manera (2022) and Brodie (2024) is not a formalized national curriculum but rather a philosophy that guides practice. It relies on local interpretations and adaptations, allowing educators to co-construct learning experiences with children. Unlike Wales, which mandates structured assessment and accountability measures, Reggio Emilia prioritizes emergent learning, where the curriculum evolves based on children's interests (Edwards and Gandini, 2018).

Bodie (2024) suggests The Reggio Emilia approach embraces an emergent, child-led curriculum where learning is shaped by children's interests and inquiries rather than predetermined goals. Edwards, Gandini and Forman (2011) said central to this philosophy is the Hundred Languages of Children, a concept according to Edwards and Gandini (2018) that values diverse modes of expression, including art, movement, storytelling, and sensory experiences, rather than adhering to rigid subject divisions. According to Manera (2022) and Bodie (2024) the physical environment plays a crucial role, referred to as the "Third Teacher", as spaces are intentionally designed to provoke curiosity, creativity, and meaningful interactions . Edwards and Gandini (2018) say assessment in Reggio Emilia are qualitative and documentation-based, relying on portfolios, photographs, and narrative observations rather than standardized testing, ensuring that children's learning experiences are authentically captured without imposing rigid benchmarks.

In contrast, the Curriculum for Wales follows a structured framework with defined learning outcomes mapped to developmental milestones to ensure progression and accountability (Welsh Government, 2023). Learning is organized into six Areas of Learning and Experience. These are Expressive Arts, Health and Well-being,

Humanities, Languages, Mathematics, and Science, each designed to provide a comprehensive educational experience (Welsh Government, 2024). While play-based learning is integrated into the curriculum, there remains a stronger emphasis on structured objectives compared to the fluid, inquiry-driven nature of Reggio Emilia (NDNA Cymru, 2024). Assessment in the Curriculum for Wales combines observational tracking and developmental pathways to monitor progress, although concerns persist about the rigidity of these models, which may limit educators' ability to recognize diverse learning trajectories (Furlong, 2021).

Key Differences in Implementation (Edwards and Gandini, 2018) and (Welsh Government, 2024).

Aspect	Reggio Emilia	Curriculum for Wales
Curriculum Design	Emergent, child-led	Structured, policy-driven
Assessment Methods	Documentation, portfolios	Observational tracking, developmental milestones
Role of Educator	Co-learner, facilitator	Instructor, balancing play with structured learning
Environment	Aesthetic, interactive spaces	Play-based but often constrained by resources
Parental Involvement	Deeply integrated into curriculum design	Encouraged but less embedded

According to Brodie (2024) both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales recognize play-based learning as a fundamental element in early childhood education, acknowledging its crucial role in supporting cognitive, social, and emotional development. Both frameworks emphasize child-led exploration, fostering

autonomy and allowing children to shape their learning experiences in ways that reflect their interests and capabilities (Brodie, 2024). While the Curriculum for Wales Welsh Government (2023) integrates structured learning objectives within its play-based pedagogy, Brodie (2024) states the Reggio Emilia approach maintains a more fluid and emergent curriculum, driven entirely by children's inquiries. Additionally, collaboration with families is a key principle in both approaches, though its implementation varies. The Reggio Emilia philosophy places a particularly strong emphasis on co-constructing learning with families, positioning parents as active participants in shaping the educational experience (Rodríguez et al., 2012). In Wales, while parental engagement is encouraged according to Welsh Government (2023), it remains more structured within policy guidelines rather than fully integrated into curriculum design. These shared principles underscore the importance of fostering inclusive, play-driven environments, yet differences in practical application highlight the need for deeper integration of family engagement and flexible learning pathways to support the unique developmental trajectories of young learners.

According to Brodie (2024) despite the strong policy emphasis on play-based learning in Wales, educators often face significant implementation challenges. One major barrier is assessment pressures, as standardized tracking tools can restrict flexibility in recognizing the diverse developmental trajectories of young learners (NDNA Cymru, 2024). While the Curriculum for Wales aims to support child-centered progress, educators frequently report difficulties in balancing structured assessment requirements with individualized learning approaches. NDNA (2024) say similarly, resource limitations hinder the effectiveness of play-based pedagogy. Owen, Thomas and Davies (2020) along with Devarakonda (2013) believe many early years settings struggle with inadequate funding, reducing access to enriched environments that foster creativity, exploration, and sensory engagement. Without sufficient financial and material support, practitioners may find it difficult to fully implement dynamic play-based learning models (Devarakonda, 2013). Owen, Thomas and Davies (2020) believe that practitioner confidence also plays a critical role in successful implementation. The shift from traditional instructional methods to play-based approaches require specialized training, yet many educators feel

underprepared due to limited professional development opportunities. Hasson et al., (2022) and Owen, Thomas and Davies (2020) say without ongoing support, there is a risk that play-based learning remains inconsistently applied, undermining its intended benefits.

Similarly, according to Manera (2022) while the Reggio Emilia approach theoretically provides greater flexibility and creativity, effective implementation depends on well-trained practitioners. A key requirement is the presence of highly skilled educators capable of facilitating inquiry-based exploration and documentation processes, yet training gaps and financial constraints can make this difficult to achieve in many settings Edwards and Gandini (2018). Additionally, Manera (2022) and Edwards and Gandini (2018) believe extensive documentation is a hallmark of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, involving continuous observation, photographic records, and detailed portfolios to capture children's learning journeys. Although this approach offers a rich and holistic perspective on development, it is time-intensive and requires significant practitioner expertise, which can be difficult to sustain, especially in underfunded contexts.

These practical realities highlight the gap between policy expectations and classroom implementation. While both models advocate for child-centered and play-based learning, systemic barriers such as assessment demands, resource constraints, and educator preparedness must be addressed to ensure effective and equitable early years education (Owen, Thomas and Davies, 2020).

According to Furlong *et al.* (2021) Improving the implementation of play-based learning in Wales requires several key adjustments. Enhancing teacher training is essential, as many educators lack specialized knowledge in play-based methodologies, limiting their ability to effectively translate policy into practice (Hasson et al., 2022). Professional development should focus on inquiry-based facilitation, drawing from Reggio Emilia principles according to Brodie (2024) to allow educators to support child-led learning without rigid instructional constraints. Additionally, flexible assessment strategies are needed to recognize non-traditional indicators of progress, ensuring that children's unique developmental trajectories are

acknowledged rather than measured against predefined milestones. Reforming assessment models is also crucial, as moving toward portfolio-based evaluations would provide a more nuanced understanding of children's growth, reducing the reliance on age-based milestones that often fail to capture diverse learning experiences (Guldberg et al., 2020). Beyond assessment and pedagogy, resource allocation must be addressed to support effective implementation. Increased funding would enable environmental enhancements according to Brodie (2024) inspired by Reggio Emilia's focus on interactive and aesthetically stimulating spaces, which are known to foster curiosity and creativity. Similarly, investment in ongoing professional development would ensure educators are equipped with the skills needed to maximize the benefits of play-based learning (Welsh Government, 2024). Finally, strengthening family engagement could bridge gaps between policy expectations and classroom realities. Wales could adopt Reggio Emilia's collaborative approach, integrating parents more deeply into curriculum design and assessment, recognizing their role as key contributors to their children's educational experiences (Rodríguez et al., 2012) and (Brodie, 2024). According to Welsh Government (2024) Rodríguez et al., (2012) and (Brodie, 2024) by addressing these areas, play-based learning in Wales could more effectively align with its intended goals, ensuring greater inclusivity and meaningful learning experiences for all children.

Part 2

The Unique Child in Early Years Education: A Critical Evaluation of Assessment Approaches

In early years education, the concept of the "unique child" is fundamental to ensuring that assessment practices are meaningful, inclusive, and responsive to each child's individual developmental trajectory (Celinska, 2023). This section will critically evaluate assessment methods in early years education, especially in relation to play-based curricula such as those implemented in Wales, and how these methods interact with the notion of the unique child. This will include examining progress tracking, age vs. stage scenarios, and relevant development models in the context of Welsh policy.

What is the Unique Child?

According to Celinska, (2023) and Grenier (2025) the *unique child* is a central concept within early years education that refers to the belief that every child is distinct and has their own patterns of development, needs, interests, and ways of learning. The *Curriculum for Wales* explicitly recognizes the importance of viewing each child as a unique individual, acknowledging that their early experiences, environment, and relationships shape their learning and development (Welsh Government, 2020). This concept aligns with the social-constructivist theories of Vygotsky (1978) cited by Smolucha (2022) who argued that children develop within specific social and cultural contexts, meaning their learning should be viewed as highly individual and context specific.

Recognizing the unique child is important according to Grenier (2025) because it underpins a more personalized approach to learning. This means that assessment should not only track academic progress but also consider the emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of a child's development (Hughes, 2018a). If assessment is done in a way that disregards the uniqueness of each child, it can lead to an over-generalized, "one-size-fits-all" approach that fails to capture individual development.

Assessment in Early Years

Welsh Government (2022) and Owen et al., (2020) suggest early years assessment involves observing, documenting, and evaluating children's development to tailor teaching strategies. It should be dynamic highlighting a child's developmental stage, interests, and strengths to create responsive learning opportunities.

In Wales, early years assessment within the Foundation Phase prioritizes observational assessment and play-based learning. This aligns with the belief that young children's learning is best understood in natural settings, where they engage in activities reflecting their interests and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2020; Taylor, Rhys, & Waldron, 2019).

According to Titley, Davies, and Atherton (2020) and Hughes (2018a) effective assessment should be flexible and responsive, allowing educators to adapt their teaching strategies to support each child's next steps in learning. It also involves collaboration with parents and carers to ensure that assessment is holistic, capturing a complete picture of the child's progress across various domains.

What Should Assessment Look Like?

According to Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2007) assessment in the early years is essential for understanding and supporting the unique child, ensuring tailored learning experiences and early intervention when needed. By identifying individual strengths and developmental needs, educators can personalize teaching approaches, fostering inclusivity and responsive support. However, Professor Graham Donaldson's Successful Futures report (2015) reviewed curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, including the Foundation Phase. His findings emphasized the strengths of the Foundation Phase, particularly its experiential, play-based approach to early years education. However, concerns were raised about assessment arrangements and the need for greater coherence across the curriculum.

Donaldson proposed a radical overhaul of the Welsh curriculum, introducing four core purposes to shape learners. His recommendations led to the development of the Curriculum for Wales, which built on the Foundation Phase while integrating broader reforms (Welsh Government, 2022).

In the context of the *Curriculum for Wales* Welsh Government (2022) assessment should align with the curriculum's emphasis on the four purposes: to develop ambitious learners, creative contributors, ethical citizens, and healthy individuals. This means that assessment should not solely focus on cognitive achievements but should also consider social, emotional, and physical development. Hughes *et al* (2018b) suggests assessment tools should be diverse, utilizing both qualitative methods (e.g., observations, conversations, and documentation of children's work) and quantitative methods (e.g., tracking milestones, portfolios) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the child's progress.

Crucially, assessment should be formative and ongoing and as Titley, Davies, and Atherton (2020) suggest, capturing the child's development over time rather than making definitive judgments at a specific moment. It should be based on continuous observations of the child in play-based contexts, where the child is an active participant in their learning journey. This approach is consistent with the *Reggio*

Emilia Approach, which advocates for an emergent curriculum based on the child's interests, observed in real-time (Rinaldi, 2013).

Age or Stage: Which Model of Progress Tracking is Most Effective?

The *Curriculum for Wales* Welsh Government (2020 and 2022) provides a flexible model for tracking children's development, which avoids strict age-based assessments. Instead, the CFW emphasizes the importance of *stage* rather than age, which is critical in ensuring that assessments are sensitive to the unique pace of each child's learning journey. This approach is particularly important because children develop at different rates, and age-based assessments can lead to misinterpretations of a child's abilities or needs. For example, if a child is assessed solely based on their age, they may be deemed "behind" or "ahead" in ways that do not reflect their actual progress or potential (Hughes, 2018b).

Becker Rigaud and Epstein (2023) say tracking progress through stages, however, requires a nuanced understanding of child development, with educators focusing on individual milestones that reflect the child's own learning path. This method allows for more personalized, strengths-based assessments, which can lead to more tailored learning experiences. Furthermore, it encourages a focus on *process over product*, reflecting the child's development through the act of learning itself rather than solely through predefined outcomes (Welsh Government, 2020).

What Doesn't Work in the Foundation Phase in Relation to the Unique Child and Assessment?

While the Welsh Government (2015) acknowledges the positive impact of the Foundation Phase on children's achievement and well-being, several challenges arise regarding assessment practices and the recognition of the unique child.

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2007) highlight that standardized assessment methods often fail to capture individual learning trajectories, relying too heavily on cognitive outcomes and neglecting emotional, social, and creative development. Meylani (2023) further argues that age-based measures in a play-based context can result in inaccurate evaluations, as they may overlook non-traditional indicators of progress such as social interaction and problem-solving.

Additionally, rigid age-related assessment timelines limit educators' ability to accommodate the varied developmental pace of children (Furlong, 2021). This inflexible model risks undermining the child's self-esteem when comparisons are made based on standardized expectations rather than personalized growth. These challenges suggest the need for more dynamic and holistic assessment approaches that account for the diversity of children's development within play-based learning environments.

Assessment barriers in Wales stem from inconsistent leadership, a lack of professional development, and an over-reliance on quantitative measures. Weak leadership, especially in non-maintained settings, results in unclear assessment practices, leading to fragmented implementation (Owen et al., 2020). Many educators receive insufficient training in individualized, play-based assessment, limiting their ability to fully apply the Curriculum for Wales (Hughes, 2018b). Additionally, numerical tracking systems often fail to capture the broader developmental aspects necessary for understanding each child holistically (Furlong, 2020). A more balanced approach integrating qualitative insights is essential for effective assessment.

What Can We Do to Make It Work in Wales?

To improve the assessment of the unique child in Wales, consideration to strengthening leadership according to Power, Newton and Taylor (2020) and Owen et al., (2020) is a must, there needs to be a stronger focus on training leaders in settings and schools to effectively manage and implement assessment practices. Leaders must have a clear understanding of the principles behind the *Curriculum for Wales* and ensure that assessment methods are personalized and aligned with the curriculum's goals and a change in mindset for better outcomes is required. (Dweck, 2017) .

According to Devarakonda (2013) and Bornman. *et al* (2010) cultural differences and language barriers can significantly impact the accuracy and fairness of early years assessments. Standardized tools often reflect dominant cultural norms, potentially misinterpreting the abilities of children from diverse backgrounds. Language barriers

also pose challenges, as bilingual children may perform differently due to linguistic processing rather than cognitive ability, and translations of assessments can sometimes alter meaning.

Devarakonda (2013) says to promote inclusivity; educators can adopt culturally responsive assessments that integrate multilingual instructions and familiar scenarios to reduce bias. Non-verbal methods, including observation and play-based evaluations, allow children to demonstrate their abilities without language dependency. Parental and community involvement ensures cultural perspectives according to Bornman. *et al*, (2010) while flexible communication approaches, such as gestures or bilingual support, help mitigate language barriers. Additionally, training for educators in cultural competence strengthens assessment sensitivity and inclusivity (Bornman. *et al*, 2010) (Welsh Government, 2022).

Moving forward to the digital age recent introductions into the new Digital stories offer significant benefits for the unique child and those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) by providing a personalized, multimodal approach to assessment and engagement. *Acorns-digital-stories (2025)* believe they allow children to express themselves through visual, auditory, and narrative elements, making learning more accessible for those who struggle with traditional assessments.

For autistic children and those with ALN, digital storytelling can amplify their voices, ensuring their strengths and preferences are recognized rather than overlooked. Research highlights how digital stories help children communicate their experiences in ways that words alone cannot capture, fostering self-advocacy and confidence. Additionally, structured digital narratives can support predictability and routine, which are crucial for autistic learners (Gao & Drani, 2025).

According to *acorns-digital-stories (2025)* from an assessment perspective, digital stories provide authentic evidence of a child's development, capturing their interactions, problem-solving skills, and engagement in real-world contexts. This approach aligns with play-based and observational assessment, offering a richer understanding of learning progress beyond numerical tracking.

Furthermore, Ongoing Professional Development is required according to Hughes (2018a) and Power, Newton and Taylor (2020) as they believe educators should

receive continuous, in-depth training on observation-based assessment methods, ensuring they are well-equipped to assess children in a way that values their individual progress and learning styles. This training should include an understanding of child development and the need to assess a broad range of skills, not just cognitive outcomes.

Moreover, flexible and holistic approaches to assessment is required, Assessment should be flexible and tailored to individual children's needs. Rather than using standardized measures, assessments should capture a child's development across multiple domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth (Welsh Government, 2020). This holistic approach ensures that assessment practices are truly reflective of the unique child (Power, Newton, and Taylor (2020).

Finally, Increased Parental Involvement. According to Donaldson (2020) and Rinaldi (2013) parents should be actively involved in the assessment process, with opportunities for feedback and collaboration. This ensures that assessments are more comprehensive, reflecting both the child's experiences in school and at home, and that the process is a partnership between educators and families.

Part 3

Call for Change: Ensuring Inclusive Education for Autistic Children in Wales

Can children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) thrive in mainstream education? The answer is yes but achieving true inclusion requires systemic change. This blog critically examines Welsh policy frameworks, their practical implementation, and evidence-based strategies to bridge the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social interaction, communication, and behaviour. As a spectrum disorder, autistic children have diverse strengths and challenges some experience sensory sensitivities and social difficulties, while others excel in pattern recognition, logic, or creativity (Happé & Frith, 2020).

Many autistic children struggle with mainstream education, not due to personal limitations, but because of institutional barriers Kennedy (2023). With tailored support, they can not only cope but thrive, reinforcing the importance of inclusive education.

The Reality of Education in Wales

Half of children born in Wales in 2002-03 were identified with additional learning needs (ALN), with autism being a major component (The Times, 2024). Despite policy commitments, many autistic children face anxiety, limited access to education, and insufficient support. One parent reported her autistic child's severe anxiety and panic attacks, reducing attendance to one day per week yet requests for support were denied, and a rigid timetable was imposed, worsening the condition (The Guardian, 2024).

Research confirms that autistic children struggle with social skills, communication, and adaptive behaviour, making academic success difficult without individualized support (Frontiers in Education, 2024). Teacher preparedness plays a crucial role studies show educators lacking ASD training are less likely to implement inclusive practices (Knight & Crick, 2022).

Additionally, limited school-family collaboration prevents effective interventions, emphasizing the need for stronger partnerships between parents and educators (Rodríguez et al., 2012a).

Inclusive education is a fundamental right according to Kennedy(2023) yet children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often face systemic barriers that prevent them from fully accessing mainstream schooling. Despite the Curriculum for Wales's emphasis on equity, many autistic students still encounter systemic barriers that limit their access to education (Welsh Government, 2023). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) affirms every child's right to education without discrimination (UNICEF, 2025). Wales has made legislative progress through the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018, but implementation challenges remain (Welsh Government, 2023).

What Needs to Change?

Strengthening teacher training is crucial in ensuring effective support for autistic children in Welsh schools, as NDNA Cymru (2024) found that 60% of educators lack specialized ASD training, leading to misunderstandings and inadequate interventions. Ongoing professional development, as highlighted by Hasson, Smith, and Williams (2022) can build teachers' confidence and competence, equipping them with the necessary skills. Equally important is adapting learning environments to suit autistic learners' needs, incorporating structured routines, sensory-friendly spaces, and visual aids (Happé & Frith, 2020). Gao and Drani (2025) emphasize that clear instructions, predictable schedules, and sensory breaks significantly improve outcomes. Additionally, flexible assessment methods are essential, as rigid evaluations often disadvantage autistic children. Schools should integrate portfolio-based assessments, visual and oral evaluations, and adjusted testing formats to accommodate individualized learning approaches (Guldborg et al., 2020). Strengthening school-family collaboration further enhances educational experiences, with Rodríguez et al. (2012b) advocating for active parental involvement in decision-making and tailored support strategies. Peer inclusion programs also play a vital role in fostering engagement and social connections, with Freud (2024) demonstrating that structured peer mentoring initiatives lead to higher participation and reduced anxiety among children with ASD. Finally, ensuring adequate resources and policy implementation remains a challenge, as funding gaps and inconsistent execution hinder progress despite Wales's strong legislative framework. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 aims to achieve full inclusion, but its effectiveness depends on proper implementation (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). Addressing these areas collectively can significantly enhance educational outcomes for autistic children in Wales.

Seeing the World Through the Eyes of an Autistic Child

Imagine being autistic in a mainstream classroom the chatter, unpredictable interactions, and pressure to conform can be overwhelming. Inclusion is not just a policy goal it is an ethical imperative. Schools must recognize neurodiversity and build environments where all children feel valued and supported (Kennedy, 2023).

What does the data say??

ASD diagnosis rates in Wales are increasing, with 13% of children receiving care and support identified as autistic in March 2023, compared to 2% of all pupils aged 5–15 years (Welsh Government, 2024). Research indicates a 3.4-fold increase in recorded autism cases between 2001 and 2016, with new diagnoses rising by 150% (Underwood et al., 2021).

According to ITV News (2025) the demand for assessments has led to significant delays, with 20,770 children awaiting a neurodevelopmental assessment in September 2024. This figure is projected to rise to between 41,000 and 61,000 by 2027 (Price, 2022). In North Wales, referrals have doubled post-pandemic according to BBC News (2023), yet service expansion remains insufficient, leaving some children waiting over two years for a diagnosis (The Welsh Conservative Party, 2023).

Government Initiatives

To address these challenges, the Welsh Government has committed £13.7 million in 2025 to improve services, reducing wait times and expanding the National Neurodivergence Improvement Programme (Welsh Government, 2025). While this investment is a positive step, continued funding and policy refinement are essential to ensuring timely support for autistic individuals.

Conclusion - Ensuring true inclusion for autistic children requires commitment at every level from teacher training to systemic reform. Schools must adapt to children's needs, rather than expecting autistic learners to fit into inflexible structures. With tailored support, collaboration, and properly implemented policies, autistic children cannot just cope but thrive in mainstream education.

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