

Part 1

According to (infed.org 2025), education is a continuous process through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values needed for personal development and social contribution. It enables learners to think critically, communicate effectively, and engage meaningfully with the world. In contrast, (Department for Education, 2014) suggests that the curriculum is a structured framework outlining what should be learned, how learning occurs, and how progress is assessed, providing a clear foundation for effective teaching and learning.

(Nord Anglia, 2025) supports that together, education and curriculum serve as interdependent elements within the wider educational landscape. They not only support intellectual and emotional development but also preserve cultural heritage, prepare individuals for future employment, and promote values of equity, inclusion, and civic responsibility. In unison, they ensure that the learning process remains purposeful, structured, and responsive to the evolving needs of both individuals and society.

According to Whitebread et al. (2012), a play-based curriculum is an educational approach that positions play as the central vehicle for learning in early childhood. It recognises that young children learn most effectively through hands-on, meaningful, and enjoyable experiences. In this model, play is not separate from learning but functions as a powerful medium through which children explore ideas, solve problems, develop social competence, and construct knowledge. The approach is inherently child-centred, enabling learners to pursue their interests while practitioners skilfully guide and extend understanding through purposeful interaction and observation. By fostering autonomy and curiosity, a play-based curriculum promotes holistic development supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth while cultivating creativity, confidence, and independence.

This assignment is structured into three distinct sections. Section One provides an in-depth exploration of the Reggio Emilia curriculum, examining its key strengths as well as potential areas for enhancement to further enrich early years education and optimise children's learning experiences while comparing to the curriculum for Wales and critically analysing strengths and limitations in both curricula's. Section Two focuses on the concept of the 'unique child', offering a critical evaluation of various assessment methods and approaches to progress tracking, including age- and stage-related developmental models within play-based curricula. Finally, Section Three takes the form of a reflective blog that investigates the impact of poverty on children's development and learning during the early years.

(Reggio children, 2022) states that the Reggio Emilia approach is an innovative, child-centred educational philosophy that originated in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia after World War II, under the leadership of educator Loris Malaguzzi and the local community. Rooted in a strong belief in children's innate potential, curiosity, and competence, this approach positions the child as an active protagonist in their own learning journey, rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

(Hall et al., 2014 and Mussini et al., 2001) suggest that central to the Reggio Emilia philosophy is the concept of the “hundred languages of children”, which recognises that children express themselves and construct understanding through multiple modes of communication such as drawing, movement, play, sculpture, and dialogue. Educators in Reggio-inspired settings act as co-researchers and facilitators, working collaboratively with children to explore ideas, solve problems, and make meaning through inquiry-based learning.

(Strong-Wilson, T. and Ellis, J. 2007) supports that the learning environment, often described as the “third teacher”, plays a pivotal role in supporting this pedagogy. Spaces are intentionally designed to be aesthetically engaging, flexible, and rich in resources, reflecting the value placed on beauty, order, and connection to the natural world. Documentation, including photographs, transcripts, and displays of children’s work, is used not only to celebrate learning but also as a reflective tool for assessment and curriculum planning.

(Biermeier, M.A. 2015) also adds that collaboration and relationships are also foundational to the Reggio Emilia approach. Strong partnerships between educators, children, and families are viewed as essential to fostering a sense of community and shared responsibility for learning. This collective engagement supports the development of democratic values, empathy, and respect for diverse perspectives.

(The Curriculum for Wales 2022) represents a transformative and holistic framework for education across Wales, designed to equip learners aged three to sixteen with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Rooted in the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales Act 2021), it seeks to move beyond prescriptive subject teaching towards a more flexible, learner-centred model that promotes progression, creativity, and well-being. At its core are the Four Purposes, which define the aspirations for all Welsh learners to become ambitious and capable learners, enterprising and creative contributors, ethical and informed citizens, and healthy, confident individuals.

(NSEAD, 2019) also adds that learning is structured around six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs): Languages, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; Science and Technology; Health and Well-being; Humanities; and Expressive Arts. These interconnected areas encourage interdisciplinary learning and coherence across the curriculum. Cross-curricular responsibilities including literacy, numeracy, and digital competence are embedded throughout, ensuring that essential skills are developed in all contexts of learning.

A distinctive feature of the Curriculum for Wales is its emphasis on autonomy and local relevance. (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2019) supports that schools are empowered to design and implement curricula that reflect their learners’ specific needs, cultural backgrounds, and community contexts, within the parameters of national guidance. Assessment and progression are viewed as

continuous processes, focusing on the depth and breadth of understanding rather than age-related benchmarks. This shift aims to foster intrinsic motivation and sustained learning.

Moreover, *The Curriculum for Wales* (2022) places strong emphasis on equity, inclusion, and well-being, aligning with Wales's commitment to supporting diverse learners, including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). (Welsh Government, 2022) also supports that it promotes a sense of identity and belonging through the inclusion of Welsh history, language, and multicultural perspectives. Overall, the Curriculum for Wales embodies a forward-thinking vision of education one that values holistic development, learner agency, and social responsibility, preparing young people to participate meaningfully in an evolving global society.

(Reggio Children 2022 and *The Curriculum for Wales* 2022) suggest that The Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales share a learner-centred philosophy that views children as active participants in their own learning. Both prioritise holistic development, creativity, and critical thinking, aiming to nurture confident, reflective, and socially responsible learners. Each values individuality while promoting collaboration, communication, and community engagement. However, they differ in their origins, structure, and degree of flexibility.

(Hartley, M.P. 2010 and Stokes-Eley, S. 2007) suggests that pedagogically, both emphasise inquiry-based and experiential learning. Reggio Emilia is rooted in constructivist and socio-cultural theory, positioning children as co-constructors of knowledge through exploration, play, and dialogue. Educators act as co-researchers who guide learning rather than deliver prescribed content. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales promotes active engagement, encouraging teachers to design experiences aligned with the *Four Purposes* to develop independence, creativity, and ethical citizenship. Yet, while Reggio Emilia's curriculum is entirely emergent and fluid, the Curriculum for Wales operates within a statutory national framework, offering local flexibility but maintaining national consistency.

(Reggio Children 2022 and Welsh Government 2022) agrees both frameworks recognise the significance of the learning environment. Reggio Emilia defines it as the "third teacher" a carefully designed, aesthetic, and interactive space that inspires exploration and expression. The Curriculum for Wales also values the environment's role in supporting curiosity and well-being, particularly through its Health and Well-being and Expressive Arts areas, promoting outdoor and inclusive learning. However, environmental design in the Welsh framework serves broader educational aims rather than functioning as an explicit pedagogical principle, as it does in Reggio Emilia.

In terms of assessment, (Crockett, 2016) states that Reggio Emilia favours documentation and reflection over formal evaluation, celebrating learning as an evolving process. Whereas (Legislation.gov.uk, 2021) states that the Curriculum for Wales adopts a similar developmental focus but incorporates statutory assessment to ensure coherence and accountability across schools.

In essence, both models champion creativity, agency, and holistic growth. Reggio Emilia offers a deeply philosophical, community-driven approach grounded in relational pedagogy, while the Curriculum for Wales seeks to combine autonomy with equity and structure. Together, they illustrate complementary pathways toward empowering learners to think critically, act ethically, and contribute meaningfully to society.

(Department for Education, 2021) suggests that implementing both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales in early years settings offer strong potential for innovation but also presents practical challenges. Both are child-centred and inquiry-based, viewing children as capable learners who build understanding through exploration and collaboration. Each promotes creativity and holistic development the Curriculum for Wales through its Four Purposes and Reggio Emilia through the “hundred languages of children.” However, this shared flexibility and reflective pedagogy require significant time, resources, and professional expertise, which can be limited in Welsh settings.

A key strength of both approaches is their adaptability to children’s interests and community contexts. However, (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024) argues that the expectation for practitioners to continually design, reflect, and adapt learning adds to existing workload and time pressures. Without adequate planning and collaboration, Reggio-inspired practices such as documentation and reflective dialogue risk becoming superficial, while the Curriculum for Wales’s flexibility can lead to inconsistency where staff confidence or experience is limited.

(Save the Children UK, 2025) also adds that funding and resources are another major challenge. Both frameworks advocate rich, stimulating environments that support creativity and exploration, yet many Welsh schools face tight budgets. Reggio Emilia’s emphasis on high-quality materials and aesthetically engaging spaces is difficult to replicate without significant investment, and inequalities in funding can result in inconsistent provision across regions undermining the curriculum’s equity goals.

Staffing and class sizes further impact implementation. (National Education Union, 2024) argues that both models depend on skilled, reflective practitioners who can facilitate inquiry and provide individualised support. However, high pupil–teacher ratios and recruitment difficulties limit the depth of interaction and observation central to these pedagogies. While Reggio Emilia typically benefits from small group learning and collaborative staff teams, Welsh classrooms often face larger groups and fewer adults, constraining the ability to deliver truly responsive learning experiences.

In summary, the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia share a powerful vision for holistic, inclusive education that values creativity, reflection, and learner agency. Yet their success in practice relies on adequate time, funding, manageable class sizes, and sustained professional development. Without such systemic support, implementation risks being uneven, reducing innovation to isolated practice rather than a meaningful shift in early years education across Wales.

Part 2

(Grenier, 2025) states that the term “unique child” refers to the understanding that every child is an individual with distinct abilities, interests, and developmental pathways. It emphasises that learning should be personalised and responsive, recognising that children progress at different rates and in diverse ways across social, emotional, cognitive, and physical domains. This concept underpins inclusive, child-centred practice, requiring educators to value each child’s background, culture, and experiences while fostering a sense of belonging and respect. (Worcestershire.gov.uk, 2023) suggests that by acknowledging individuality, practitioners can design learning experiences that nurture curiosity, build confidence, and support holistic development. Ultimately, the principle of the unique child positions each learner as capable and competent, reinforcing the belief that education should adapt to the learner rather than expecting the learner to conform to the system.

(Teachers Institute, 2023) argues that assessment within the early years is the ongoing process of observing, recording, and interpreting children’s learning and development to inform future planning and support individual progress. It emphasises a holistic and formative approach, focusing on what children can do rather than what they cannot. Through play-based observations, practitioners identify each child’s interests, strengths, and next steps, ensuring learning experiences are meaningful and developmentally appropriate. Effective early years assessment values the whole child, celebrates progress over time, and promotes inclusive, child-centred practice that supports both educational and emotional growth.

According to (UNICEF,2022), recognising the unique child in early years assessment is vital to ensuring that evaluation remains fair, inclusive, and representative of each child’s individual development and potential, upholding every child’s fundamental right to quality education. (Grenier, 2025) argues that every child learns at a different pace and through diverse experiences, so assessments must recognise these variations rather than rely solely on age-related expectations or standardised measures. By focusing on the unique child, practitioners can identify individual strengths, interests, and areas for support, creating a more accurate and holistic picture of learning. This approach values children’s cultural backgrounds, languages, and personal circumstances, promoting equity and respect for diversity. Moreover, it enables educators to plan next steps that are meaningful, achievable, and motivating, fostering confidence and a positive sense of self. Ultimately, considering the unique child ensures that assessment informs practice in a way that nurtures individuality, promotes wellbeing, and supports every child to reach their full potential.

The concept of the unique child is central to early years education and aligns closely with the principles of the (curriculum for Wales, 2022), Which emphasises supporting every learner to become an ambitious, capable, healthy, confident, and ethical citizen. Recognising each child as unique means understanding

that development is not linear but shaped by individual experiences, interests, and contexts. The Curriculum for Wales reflects this by promoting learner-centred pedagogy and encouraging practitioners to design flexible, developmentally appropriate experiences that respond to each child's needs and voice. This approach resonates with (Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, 1979), which highlights how a child's learning and wellbeing are influenced by interconnected systems such as family, community, and culture. It also aligns with (Piaget's Constructivist Theory, 1952), which views children as active participants in constructing knowledge through exploration and interaction. By acknowledging the unique child, educators create inclusive environments that value diversity, promote equity, and empower learners to take ownership of their learning. In doing so, both the theory and the Curriculum for Wales position the child as an active, capable agent in their educational journey, ensuring that practice is holistic, responsive, and rooted in respect for individuality.

(Crockett, 2016) argues within the Reggio Emilia approach, assessment is viewed as a collaborative, reflective, and continuous process rather than a means of measuring attainment against fixed standards. Rooted in the belief that children are capable, curious, and active constructors of knowledge, assessment in Reggio Emilia focuses on documentation the careful observation, recording, and interpretation of children's learning experiences. Practitioners use photographs, transcripts, and children's work to make learning visible, allowing both educators and children to reflect on progress and thinking processes. This form of assessment values the learning journey over the outcome, recognising development as dynamic, interconnected, and context dependent. It also promotes dialogue among teachers, children, and families, reinforcing the community's shared role in understanding and supporting each child's growth. Ultimately, Reggio Emilia's approach transforms assessment into a tool for reflection, collaboration, and empowerment, ensuring that every child's individuality and creativity are acknowledged and celebrated within their learning environment.

The Curriculum for Wales adopts a progression-based approach to assessment, designed to support every learner's individual journey rather than measure attainment through standardised outcomes. Assessment is viewed as an integral part of the learning process, focusing on how children make progress over time in relation to clear descriptions of learning within each Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE). (Welsh Government, 2015) states that this approach emphasises formative, ongoing assessment, where practitioners observe, question, and provide feedback to inform next steps and adapt teaching to meet individual needs. It encourages learners to reflect on their progress, developing metacognitive awareness and ownership of learning. Collaboration between practitioners, learners, and parents ensures assessment is holistic and inclusive, recognising both academic and personal development. Ultimately, the Curriculum for Wales positions assessment as a supportive and developmental tool, ensuring that learning remains purposeful, equitable, and responsive to each child's unique trajectory.

Both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales advocate for assessment as a dynamic, reflective process that supports individual progression rather than standardised comparison. While this shared emphasis on formative and holistic assessment aligns with inclusive principles, its practical implementation presents both strengths and limitations particularly when addressing additional learning needs (ALN) and neurodiversity.

(Gilman, 2007) states that the Reggio Emilia approach excels in recognising the individuality of each learner, using documentation and observation to capture diverse ways of thinking and expressing understanding. This makes it highly responsive to neurodivergent learners, as it values multiple modes of communication the “hundred languages of children.” However, its open-ended nature can create challenges in ensuring consistency, accountability, and progression tracking, particularly for children with ALN who may require structured targets, specialist input, or measurable evidence of progress. Without adequate training or multidisciplinary collaboration, assessment risks becoming subjective or overly interpretive.

(Welsh Government, 2022) adds similarly, the Curriculum for Wales promotes flexibility and learner agency through its progression-based assessment model, enabling teachers to adapt learning to individual needs. This supports inclusion and allows children with ALN to progress according to personal developmental pathways rather than fixed age expectations. Yet, this flexibility can also lead to inconsistencies in assessment practices across settings, especially where staff confidence in differentiating for neurodiversity varies. Moreover, the balance between maintaining high aspirations and providing realistic, tailored support requires skilled professional judgment and sufficient time for reflection.

Both frameworks share the challenge of time, workload, and training demands. High-quality formative assessment, particularly for children with complex needs, requires careful observation, collaboration with families and specialists, and time to reflect resources that are often limited in early years settings. Without systemic support, the inclusive intentions of both approaches risk being undermined by practical constraints. In essence, both assessment models reflect progressive, child-centred values that recognise every learner as unique. However, their success in addressing ALN and neurodiversity depends on the quality of practitioner expertise, access to specialist support, and equitable resource allocation. When effectively implemented, they offer powerful frameworks for inclusive, responsive assessment but without consistent professional development and structural investment, their transformative potential may not be fully realised.

(Maynard and Chicken, 2010) argues that both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales strongly support the concept of the unique child, as each positions the learner at the centre of the assessment process. In Reggio Emilia, assessment through documentation recognises that every child expresses understanding in different ways through art, language, movement, or play reflecting the philosophy of the “hundred languages of children.” This inclusive and interpretive approach values individuality, allowing practitioners to appreciate the depth and diversity of each child’s thinking. Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales embraces a progression-based model, which acknowledges that children develop at different rates and in varied contexts. It encourages educators to assess learning holistically, focusing on personal growth, wellbeing, and achievement relative to each learner’s starting point rather than predetermined benchmarks. Both frameworks therefore promote personalised, responsive assessment that celebrates diversity and encourages equity. However, their effectiveness depends on skilled practitioners who can interpret learning meaningfully and adapt teaching accordingly. When implemented well, these assessment styles not only recognise but actively empower the unique child, ensuring that individuality and potential are at the heart of educational practice.

(NSPCC Learning, n.d.) argues that both the Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum for Wales emphasise assessment as a formative, reflective, and child-centred process that values individuality and supports the concept of the unique child. Reggio Emilia uses documentation to capture children’s diverse ways of learning and expressing ideas, promoting inclusion and recognising multiple forms of intelligence. The Curriculum for Wales adopts a progression-based model, allowing learners to develop at their own pace while focusing on personal growth and holistic development. Both approaches move away from standardised testing, instead prioritising individual progress, creativity, and wellbeing. However, effective implementation relies on skilled practitioners, adequate time, and resources to ensure assessment remains consistent and meaningful, particularly for children with additional learning needs or neurodiversity. Overall, both frameworks champion equity, individuality, and inclusion, ensuring that every child’s learning journey is valued and supported.

Part 3

Why is learning through play essential in the early years?

(UNICEF, 2018) states that learning through play is fundamental to early childhood education because it provides the most natural, meaningful, and effective context for young children to develop essential skills and understanding. Play allows children to actively explore, experiment, and make sense of their world, supporting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth simultaneously.



The power of play in the early years

Play is often described as the heartbeat of early childhood education, and for good reason. It's through play that children make sense of their world, develop relationships, and build the essential skills they'll carry through life. Far from being "just fun," play is a powerful and purposeful way for young children to learn, grow, and thrive.

Through play, children develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, testing ideas, exploring possibilities, and discovering how things work. It nurtures language and communication, as children collaborate, negotiate, and express their thoughts and

feelings. Play also promotes emotional wellbeing, helping children manage emotions, build resilience, and gain confidence in their abilities.

Physically, play encourages movement, coordination, and strength all crucial for healthy development. Socially, it teaches empathy, cooperation, and respect for others, fostering friendships and a strong sense of belonging.

The Curriculum for Wales (2022) and educational theorists like Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978) remind us that play isn't a break from learning it is learning. When children are free to explore and create, they develop independence, curiosity, and motivation that no worksheet can replicate.

Ultimately, play empowers children to become confident, capable learners. It allows them to follow their interests, express their individuality, and experience the joy of discovery the very essence of meaningful education.

Developmental milestones children learn through play

- **Cognitive development**
- **Language and communication**
- **Social and emotional**
- **Physical development**
- **Creative and imaginative development**

The serious business of play: why play matters in the early years

When a child builds a tower of blocks, they not just stacking wood, they're learning physics, patience, perseverance. Play might look simply, but beneath the laughter and imagination lies powerful learning. Research argues that play builds brains, and what many parents and educators already know, play is vital for healthy brain development. When children explore, imagine, and experiment, they're creating new neural connections that support memory, problem-solving, and emotional understanding.

Through play, children learn how to think creatively and to make sense of the world around them. Whether they're mixing mud pies outdoors, dressing up as doctors, and piecing together puzzles, their minds are hard at work. The Early years Foundation stage (EYFS,2024) emphasizes that play provides the foundation for all areas of learning and development, cognitive, physical, social and emotional. In short, play builds brains.

Inclusion and diversity in early years play

Play is a powerful tool for fostering inclusion and celebrating diversity in early years education. By providing opportunities for all children to participate meaningfully, play helps develop equity, empathy, and social understanding from an early age. Inclusive play recognises that children come with different abilities, backgrounds, languages, cultures, and experiences, and ensures that each child can engage fully, express themselves, and learn alongside peers.

Practitioners play a critical role in designing environments and selecting resources that are representative and accessible. For example, providing multicultural toys, books, and role-play materials enables children to see their own identities reflected while learning about others. Similarly, adapting activities to accommodate additional learning needs (ALN) or neurodiverse learners ensures equitable access to playful learning.

Inclusive play also promotes social and emotional development, teaching children to collaborate, respect differences, and value diverse perspectives. The Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasises the importance of equity, wellbeing, and belonging, aligning with this approach by encouraging child-centred, responsive pedagogy. The Reggio Emilia philosophy further supports inclusion through its focus on the child as competent, capable, and an active participant in their learning community.

By embedding inclusion and diversity in play, early years settings cultivate environments where all children can thrive, develop confidence, and experience learning as relevant, meaningful, and socially rich, laying the foundation for lifelong understanding and respect for others.

Children have a right to play

Play is not simply a leisure activity it is a fundamental right of every child, enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). This right recognises that play is essential for healthy development, wellbeing, and learning. Through play, children explore their environment, develop creativity, problem-solving skills, and social competence, and express emotions and ideas in ways that are meaningful to them.

Acknowledging this right has profound implications for early years practice. It obliges educators and policymakers to provide safe, stimulating, and accessible opportunities for play, ensuring that all children, regardless of ability, background, or socio-economic status, can benefit. It also underscores the importance of child-centred approaches, such as those advocated by the Reggio Emilia philosophy and the Curriculum for Wales (2022), where children's interests, choices, and agency are respected.

Ultimately, recognising play as a right moves it beyond optional activity to a core element of education and development, reinforcing that every child deserves the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive through playful experiences.

In conclusion, play is essential to children's holistic development, supporting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth while fostering creativity, resilience, and independence. Theoretical perspectives, including Piaget and Vygotsky, alongside frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales (2022) and the Reggio Emilia approach, emphasise that play is not optional but central to meaningful learning. Recognising play as a right of every child further underscores its importance in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments. As

educators, policymakers, and communities, we must prioritise and protect opportunities for play, ensuring that every child has access to safe, stimulating, and engaging experiences. How can you, in your setting or community, champion play today to empower children and support their lifelong development?

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