

Early Years Curricula

Section 1

According to UNESCO (2022) education is a continuous process that helps people acquire attitudes, abilities, and information needed to properly engage in society. Education is the cornerstone of holistic development in early childhood, which includes the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children (Bruce, Meggitt and Grenier, 2010). Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron (2016) argue that the curriculum is the organised framework specifying what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is supported and evaluated. It guarantees meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning experiences by offering coherence and progression. Thus, a curriculum's quality plays a crucial role in determining how students learn throughout their lives. The Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) promotes child-centered, experiential learning that fosters creativity, curiosity, and well-being in Wales.

Play is positioned as the primary means of learning and growth in a curriculum that emphasises play as recognized by Bruce (1991). Rooted in constructivist and sociocultural theories, sees children as active learners who build knowledge by inquiry, engagement, and introspection (Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978). Play supports academic and personal development by encouraging problem solving, language development, and emotional management (Brodie, 2018). Play based learning emphasises the child's autonomy and the process of discovery rather than just quantifiable results.

This assignment investigates the use and assessment of play-based curricula in early childhood education. It necessitates a critical examination of the problems associated with implementing play based learning methodologies, a study of assessment procedures and the concept of the "Unique Child," and the creation of a specialised blog addressing real-world curriculum reform concerns.

Reggio Emilia approach

The Reggio Emilia approach was created under the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi due to the concept that children may build knowledge from social cooperation and discovery (Tijnagel-Schoenaker, 2018). The method is a concept of education that sees children as competent, inquisitive and imaginative learners rather than a fixed curriculum. Constructivist and sociocultural theories form their

foundations and propose that learning happens from social interactions and collective meaning-making.

The idea of the “hundred languages of children”, which acknowledges that children express themselves in a variety of ways, including through play, art, movement and voice, is a fundamental tenet of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2011). According to Vecchi (2010), the learning environment is seen as the “third teacher” and it is thoughtfully planned to stimulate inquiry, discovery and teamwork. In order to inform ongoing projects and conversations, teachers observe and record children’s learning as co-learners and researchers rather than as instructors (Rinaldi, 2021). In addition to serving as a tool for assessment and reflection, documentation such as photos, transcript and student work – makes learning visible to children, parents and the professionals.

A democratic vision of education where learning is shared and negotiated among all participants is reflected in the approach’s strong priority placed on community involvement noticed by Thornton and Brunton (2015). Despite being well-known for its creativity and child-centered approach, Reggio Emilia necessitates a great deal of teamwork, professional development, and resources. It is frequently difficult to preserve its integrity while integrating into structured policy contexts when modified outside of its original Italian context (Cadwell, 2003).

Curriculum for Wales

A significant change in Welsh education is represented by the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022), which replaces the foundation phase with a more adaptable, learner-centered framework. The four main goals are to cultivate students who are capable, ambitious, enterprising, creative, ethical and healthy. Particularly in the early years, when play is seen as essential to growth and development, the curriculum encourages experiential play-based learning.

Rather than teaching discrete subjects, the Curriculum for Wales promotes integrated approaches to learning through its six areas of learning and experience. Instead of using strict age-based objectives to measure progress, educators can use broad progression steps to customize learning experiences to each child’s unique developmental path. This demonstrates a commitment to holistic development, student voice, and inclusivity (Welsh Government, 2022). To assist each child’s growth, practitioners are urged to employ professional judgement, observation and reflective planning. By allowing teachers to interpret instructions in ways that are appropriate for their local environment, the curriculum encourages autonomy (Estyn, 2025).

However, there are drawbacks to this flexibility as well, mainly in the areas of consistency, evaluation, and practitioner confidence (Bruce, 1991). Overall, the Curriculum for Wales emphasis on experiential learning and child autonomy is the line with global play-based philosophies. Although it functions under national accountability structures as a regulatory framework forcing educators to strike a balance between curricular requirements and documentation and play.

Compare and contrast

Both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach are dedicated to comprehensive, play-based, child-centered education. Children are competent learners who flourish when they explore, engage with peers, and express their creativity (Edwards et al, 2011; Welsh Government, 2022). Both approaches cherish the educational setting as a place for exploration, cooperation and expression.

Despite their shared principles, they differ in their structure, application, and place of origin. The concept of Reggio Emilia is centered on emergent, project based learning and community values (Malaguzzi, 1998). It evolves naturally based on the interests of children and the environment. The Curriculum for Wales, on the other hand, is a national policy framework intended to direct instruction in a variety of educational contexts. Although its adaptability permits its local interpretation, it nonetheless adheres to the government's standards for accountability and advancement (Estyn, 2025).

Assessment is a major point of divergence. Using instructional documentation, Reggio Emilia prioritises narrative assessment and introspection of standardized tests (Rinaldi, 2021). According to the stages of developmental progression, the Curriculum for Wales encourages formative, observational based assessment (Welsh Government, 2022). Reggio's open-ended approach contrasts with Wales's need for structure and national coherence, yet both seek and comprehend the child holistically.

Both frameworks emphasize the role of the practitioners as thoughtful facilitators who foster independence, creativity, and curiosity in spite of these distinctions. Their shared emphasis on play shows they believe that children can take charge of their own education.

Critical analysis of implementation

There are various philosophical and practical obstacles to overcome when implementing play-based curricula. The disparity in practitioner comprehension is among the most important. Although many

educators acknowledge the importance of play, research shows that opinions on what exactly qualifies as “play based learning” can vary greatly (Briggs and Hansen, 2012). There could be a conflict between the needs of formal evaluation and child-led inquiry if some practitioners find it difficult to match open-ended play with curricular objectives (Estyn, 2023).

The flexibility of the Curriculum for Wales exacerbates this issue in the Welsh settings. Although autonomy gives teachers greater control, it can also lead to uncertainty, especially for those who are used to more rigid frameworks (Waller, Whitmarsh and Clarke, 2021). Therefore, professional development, teamwork, and reflective practice are essential for effective implementation.

Resources intensity and the requirements for in depth philosophical knowledge are the main causes of difficulties in Reggio inspired settings. Documentation, co-construction, and democratic pedagogy are necessary for authentic adoption stated by Thornton and burton (2015). Instead of meaningful practice, there is a risk of shallow imitation in the absence of proper instruction and reflection time (Rinaldi, 2021).

Finding a balance between creativity and accountability is another significant difficulty. While policy environments frequently need quantifiable results, play based learning places a higher priority on process and discovery (Stephen, 2010). As a result, practitioners are under pressure to demonstrate learning in ways that can limit genuine play. Similarly, possibilities for unstructured play may be limited by staffing and environmental conditions, such as high adult-to-child ratios, limited space and limited resources (Estyn, 2025).

The key to successful implementation in both systems is practitioners. They have to be mindful of cultural settings and individual differences while observing, planning, and scaffolding learning (Bruce, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative to continue professional growth in order to maintain high-quality play based pedagogy

Conclusion

Play-based learning is a powerful pedagogical approach that promotes young children’s overall development and cultivates a lifetime love of learning. The Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach both acknowledge the value of play, creativity, and the child agency in early education. However, implementing such programs into practice necessitates that practitioners handle a number of difficult issues, such as accountability requirements, financial needs and philosophical interpretation. Ultimately, reflective practice, supporting leadership, and practitioner skills are

necessary for successful implementation. Play-based curricula can thrive when practitioners are respected as experts and given time for cooperation and introspection.

Section 2

According to Doherty and Langston (2012), each child is born with distinct traits, skills, and life experiences that shape their development and learning. This belief underpins early childhood education and serves as the basis for the notion of the “Unique Child”. This the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) support this, advocating for a comprehensive approach to education that prioritises uniqueness, inclusivity, and personal growth over standardised performances. Understanding each child’s individuality guarantees that instruction and evaluation are fair, relevant and responsive.

Assessment in early childhood education entails monitoring, analysing, and reacting to the learning of the children (Dubiel, 2016). A thorough assessment gives teachers information about each child’s growth, allowing them to modify their instructions and build on previous learning experiences. The complex and non-linear character of learning that takes place through play, discovery, and interaction must be captured by evaluation in play-based curriculum. Instead of concentrating only on measurable results, authentic evaluation, as argued by Carr and Lee (2012), appreciates the depth and quality of children’s engagement. Assessment must consider the “Unique Child” as it promotes inclusive practice, acknowledges variety, and guarantees that each child’s unique needs, interests, and skills inform planning (Casey, 2010).

Assessment in the Curriculum for Wales

A major change in educational philosophy is represented by the Curriculum for Wales, which moved away from rigid attainment targets and towards a more adaptable, child centered approach (Welsh Government, 2022). Its foundations are in constructivists and sociocultural theories (Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978), which see learning as an active process influenced by experience, environment, and social interaction. Instead of comparing children to national standards, the Curriculum for Wales advocates assessment as a continuous formative assessment that guides instruction and fosters holistic child development.

The Curriculum for Wales assessment methodology is based on progression milestones, which define general expectations for all development stages as opposed to set specific results. This paradigm is in line with the unique child philosophy, which acknowledges that children develop at varying rates as noted by Siegel and Bryson (2011). To document each child’s unique experience, practitioners are urged to employ a variety of observational, conversational, and reflective evaluation methods. Instead

of depending on assessments or standardised metrics, these approaches allow educators to interpret learning through play and real-world experiences (Faragher, 2014).

In this methodology, formative assessment is essential. Formative assessment, according to Clarke (2008), is a reflective process in which professionals watch, talk about, and react to children's behavior, modifying their instruction as necessary. According to the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is therefore integrated into learning rather than existing outside of it, assisting practitioners in creating a narrative about each child's growth. This is consistent with the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), which acknowledges that a variety of interrelated elements, including family, community, culture, and policy, have an impact of children's development.

Despite these advantages, the Curriculum for Wales adaptability has drawbacks. Blanford and Knowles (2013) contends that although autonomy enables professionals to address the requirements of each individual, it may result in disparities in the interpretation and use of evaluation in various contexts. According to Estyn (2025), some teachers also find it difficult to strike a balance between the curriculum's open-ended character and the need for accountability for quantifiable development. Specifically, practitioners' express challenges in meeting documentation and monitoring requirements while demonstrating learning through play (Wood, 2019).

By encouraging practitioners to recognize different learning styles, the Curriculum for Wales promotes diversity. Children who are neurodivergent or have additional learning needs (ALN), whose developmental paths may not align with typical models (Donaldson, 2015). To guarantee that assessments are fair and sensitive to context, the Welsh Government (2022) encourages the use of flexible observation and reflective discussion. However, practitioner confidence and professional growth are critical to the success of this inclusive strategy. Teachers may resort to checklist-style evaluation methods if they are not adequately trained, which could compromise the curriculums of child-centered philosophy.

Taking everything into account, the Curriculum for Wales's assessment practices demonstrate a strong dedication to acknowledging each child's uniqueness. It views play as a legitimate and crucial form of evaluation and places the child in the role of an active participant in their own educational process. However, maintaining authentic evaluation within policy driven frameworks that need accountability and uniformity continues to be a difficulty.

Assessment in the Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia Approach provides an alternative viewpoint on evaluation that is philosophically similar. It was founded in northern Italy under the guidance of Malaguzzi and is based on the idea that children are capable, competent learners who build knowledge through creativity, interaction, and exploration (Gandini, 2005). In Reggio-inspired environments, assessment is viewed as documentation – a method of bringing learning into the open instead of comparing it to preset standards.

Teachers observe children's play, conversation and artistic expression closely as co-researchers. Photographs, transcripts, drawings and artefacts are used to document learning moments, which are subsequently discussed cooperatively with parents, coworkers, and children stated by Rinaldi (2021). Carr and Lee's (2012) idea of learning tales, which highlight children's accomplishments, interests, and dispositions rather than their shortcomings or gaps, is highly compatible with this narrative method of assessment. Therefore, documentation serves as an instructional method and an assessment tool, enhancing comprehension of the child's thought process and directing future planning.

The concept of the "hundred languages of children", which explores the various ways children express themselves through play is fundamental to the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, 2011). This idea guarantees evaluation that respects a variety of expressions and values both creativity and cognitive growth. The setting, which is often referred to as the "third teacher" (Vecchi, 2010), is purposefully created to encourage inquiry, teamwork, and introspection. As a result, assessment becomes a collaborative process that is ingrained in everyday life and represents the community's overall educational path.

Reggio's evaluation methodology, which rejects one-size-fits-all paradigms, strongly supports the idea of the "unique child". Every documentation portfolio reflects the child's uniqueness and narrates a personal learning story. Furthermore, because the method emphasises connections, interests, and strength over reaching developmental milestones, it naturally accommodates neurodiversity (Thornton, 2005).

However, there are real-world restrictions, authentic documentation implementation calls for a significant investment of effort, teamwork and professional knowledge. Practitioners run the risk of reducing documentation to ornamental displays rather than insightful observations in the absence of sufficient support stated by Rinaldi (2021). Reggio-inspired evaluation could potentially clash with national accountability frameworks that place a higher priority on quantifiable results if it is implemented outside of its original cultural setting (Wood, 2019). Teachers may have to choose between adhering to policy requirements for data-given proof and preserving the open-ended character of documentation. However, the Reggio Emilia approach offers a potent framework for

comprehending evaluation as a democratic, reflective and participatory process that perfectly complements the concept of the unique child.

Critical comparison

The Reggio Emilia approach and the Curriculum of Wales both have strong commitment to play-based, holistic assessment that acknowledges children as capable, engaged learners. Each framework challenged the conventional idea of assessment as measurement by valuing uniqueness, creativity and relational knowledge. However, their practical applications differ substantially.

Operating within a national policy framework, the Curriculum for Wales aims to strike a balance between accountability and flexibility. It offers structure while preserving individuality through the use of progression milestones and formative assessments. The Reggio Emilia approach, on the other hand, is an emergent, community led system that completely opposes standardisation. Although it may be less practical in large scale educational institutions, its emphasis on documentation and co-constructed meaning provides a purer interpretation of child-centered evaluation (Maarit Alasuttari, Ann-Marie Markström and Ann-Christine Vallberg-Roth, 2014).

Both models support the principles of inclusive education when viewed through the lens of inclusion. They value different methods of knowing and expressing information in order to serve children with ALN and neurodivergent learners (Nutbrown, 2018). To achieve national expectations, the Curriculum for Wales must, however, also guarantee uniformity across settings, which may unintentionally reduce the freedom for personalized evaluation. Reggio's strength is its ability to accurately capture the child's "voice", yet in order to be sustained, it needs highly introspective practitioners and nurturing surroundings noticed by Harris and Manatakis (2013).

Through progression milestones, the Curriculum for Wales provides a logical national framework for tracking progress, assisting practitioners in tracking advancements overtime. Despite being extremely intimate and significant, Reggio Emiliass narrative record could not provide the comparative information that policymakers frequently need (Cadwell, 1997). This demonstrates a recurring conflict in play-based evaluation between systemic accountability and pedagogical authenticity.

Ultimately, both frameworks offer an insightful perspective on how evaluation can support the unique child concept. Reggio Emilia represents authenticity and depth, whereas the Curriculum for Wales provides scalability and policy alignment (Lewis, 2018). Therefore, the best evaluation practices might incorporate aspects of both – using organized frameworks to direct professional reflection while maintaining the child agency and narrative richness that are essential.

Conclusion

Assessment in play-based curriculum has to consider the uniqueness and complexity of every child's educational path. Through encouraging observation, introspection, and response, the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach both exemplify the idea of the "Unique Child". While Reggio Emilia shows how documentation may turn evaluation into a collaborative, meaning-making process, the Curriculum for Wales provides a national framework that promotes inclusion and professional autonomy.

However, challenges persist preserving authenticity and depth in Reggio-inspired practice and striking a balance between flexibility and accountability in Wales. Practitioners need time, training, and trust to interpret learning holistically in order to guarantee that assessment genuinely benefits the "Unique Child". In addition to acknowledging each child's uniqueness, evaluation that shifts from measurement to understanding enhances the pedagogical integrity of play-based learning.

Section 3

Inclusive Play: Making play-based learning work for every child

“Play is the highest form of research.” – Albert Einstein

(Einstein, No date)



(Union County Schools, 2025)

Play is more than just having fun; it teaches children how to think, communicate, and make sense of their surroundings. Play can be an effective technique for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in terms of confidence building, skills development, and socialization. However, implementing play-based learning that truly incorporates all children isn't always easy.

As educational settings across Wales adapt to the Curriculum for Wales and the ALN Code (Welsh Government, 2021), practitioners are expected to create environments in which all children can thrive. But what does this look like in practice? How can play be utilized to promote inclusivity rather than unintentionally excluding?

Understanding inclusion in play-based learning.

Inclusion goes beyond integration. It's about establishing spaces in which every child feels a sense of belonging and can contribute meaningfully to shared experiences. The Curriculum for Wales underlines that learning should be “authentic, purposeful, and responsive” (Welsh Government, 2022). In a play-based context, this means allowing children with ALN to explore and express themselves while providing the necessary support to succeed.

For some children, this could involve access to visual aids, set routines or predictable transitions as noted by Education Wales (2024). Others may value the freedom to move, repeat, or use sensory items as they see fit. When we look at play through the lens of inclusion, we shift from asking “Can this child join in?” to “How can we make this play work for them?”. In doing so, we move towards genuine inclusion.

As Ainscow (2016) reminds us, inclusive practice begins with reflection: identifying and removing barriers to participate so all children can learn on their own terms. This reflection is more than just a professional activity; it represents a mindset that supports all aspects of inclusive pedagogy.

Designing inclusive environments.

The environment – often referred to as the “third teacher” – plays a crucial role for inclusion. A well-planned room encourages all children to explore, whereas a poor one may exclude without intending to (McArdle, 2021). This emphasises the significance of deliberate preparation and attention to children’s particular needs.

Outdoor learning can be particularly inclusive. Natural settings provide sensory richness, including sights, sounds, textures, and open-ended materials that encourage freedom and inquiry. Children who find the indoor environments overwhelming may thrive in outdoor play as it can provide calmness, space, and movement to support their sensory needs.

Simple environmental changes can have a significant difference:

- Establish clear visual signs and routines.
- Create peaceful or low-arousal environments for children who require calm settings.
- Include a variety of small-world, sensory, and gross-motor play environments.
- Make resources accessible to all children, regardless of mobility or communication issues.

(Welsh Government, 2023).

As Bilton (2010) points out, “An effective play environment is one that adapts to children – not the other way around.” This statement highlights that inclusion is incorporated in design decisions and practitioners’ knowledge, not just resources.

Adapting practice and pedagogy.

True inclusion is based on both relationships as much as resources. Stated by UNESCO (2023) a truly inclusive play-based curriculum emerges from practitioners who observe carefully, listen profoundly, and respond adaptably.

Play may appear different for children with ALN, and that’s okay. For example, a child with autism may prefer to engage in repetitive or solitary play. Rather than redirecting this, a skilled practitioner might join in, model new ideas, and gradually increase interaction. This technique mirrors Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of scaffolding, in which adults help children learn by joining them in their zone of growth.

Strategies promoting inclusion include:

- Using multi-sensory materials to stimulate various senses and abilities.
- Offering open-ended play with numerous outcomes.
- Providing additional processing time and clear, consistent language.
- Collaborating with ALN specialists and families to provide specialized help.

(University of Oxford, 2024).

Inclusion does not involve doing everything differently; rather, it's about approaching everyday tasks with care and awareness.

Challenges and key considerations for implementation

Creating inclusive play experiences is not an easy task believed by Casey (2005). Practitioners frequently face time constraints, big groups, and inadequate levels of training. It can be challenging to strike a balance between curriculum goals and each child's learning needs.

Assessment can be challenging, traditional monitoring systems may ignore the modest but significant improvements that children with ALN achieve from play, such as a moment of shared attention, a first attempt at turn-taking, or more independence in selecting materials.

Inclusive practice also requires teamwork. When all staff members share responsibility for inclusion, it becomes a part of everyday pedagogy rather than a separate task (Wright, 2014).

When creating a truly inclusive play-based curriculum, several critical criteria must be considered to guarantee that all children, including those with ALN, can thrive in play-based contexts:

1. Environment design: Create adaptable play areas that provide a variety of sensory experiences and are accessible to all children, including those with mobility, sensory or communication challenges according to Craft (2008). This includes clear visual cues, easily accessible resources and quiet locations.
2. Individualised support: Provide specialised assistance as needed, such as communication aids, adapted materials or sensory devices. This is to ensure that all children can fully participate in meaningful play activities.
3. Inclusive interactions: Encourage practitioners to interact with various play patterns. For example, children with autism may prefer isolated or repetitive play and therefore instead of

redirecting, they should take part and model new ideas to encourage social connections (Department for Education, 2024).

4. Flexible routines: Ensure that routines are predictable but flexible enough to meet the changing needs of children with ALN. This could involve providing additional processing time or allowing for increased movement and sensory input as needed.
5. Collaboration with families and specialists: Working closely with these can help ensure that strategies, resources and support are tailored to each child's unique needs. Collaboration ensures that the learning environment is fully responsive and inclusive (Stacey, 2009).
6. Formative, observation-based assessments: these can capture the small but substantial development that children make in play, such as increasing independence, shared attention, or social skills. This enables the practitioner to track and support each child's development more holistically (Department for Education, 2013).

These considerations can help ensure that inclusive play is not an afterthought, but rather woven into the core of the curriculum, fostering situations in which all children, regardless of their ability, can thrive and contribute.

Curriculum changes and opportunities.

The Curriculum for Wales and the ALN Code (Welsh Government, 2021) provide a chance to reimagine inclusion. Both frameworks encourage practitioners to view children as capable and active learners, rather than a passive recipient of support.

Play based learning naturally aligns with this concept – it empowers children to lead, explore, and express themselves, which aligns with Donaldson's (2015) emphasis on creating "ambitious, capable learners." For children with ALN, play provides a secure, flexible entry point into learning that emphasizes strengths rather than weaknesses.

When inclusion is integrated into everyday play, settings move beyond compliance to create enjoyable, empowering experiences in which every child's voice and potential can shine. To put these opportunities into action it is critical to analyse the larger techniques and structures that enable the successful implementation of play-based curriculum.

Conclusion

So how can we make play-based learning accessible to children with additional learning needs?

By knowing that each child is unique.

By creating surroundings that celebrate diversity.

Through reflection, adaptation, and collaboration every day.

Inclusion is not a separate objective; it is the foundation of excellent practice. When play is truly inclusive, all children can participate, contribute, and belong.

As you plan your next activity or organise your learning space, ask yourself;

Who might need an invitation to participate today, and what can I do to make sure they get one?

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