

ECEY 6010_BIRM

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Part 1 - Early Years Curricula a comparison of the Early Years Foundation Stage and Reggio Emilia Approach

Introduction

Early childhood education curriculum is the most comprehensive yet misinterpreted. Our modern ideas are based upon respected academic theory and empirical evidence. The Philosophers (including Jean Jacques Rousseau, Loris Malaguzzi, and John Lock), theorists (Eric Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, Uri Bronfenbrenner), and educationalists (Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner) have all made significant contributions to the early year's education. Their work has informed practitioners on how children develop, learn, and play and has shaped approaches and curriculums around the globe. In recent years, there has been an increased interest in understanding play and how it links to early years education (Saracho, 2021).

This article will examine two different approaches to curriculum and examine how theory has influenced them and how this relates to the role of adults and the educational environment.

Beginnings

The REA was developed shortly after World War II by Loris Malaguzzi, who collaborated with parents and the local community of Reggio Emilia to bring together an educational approach that was child-centred and community-centred. This municipal approach meant that settings were influenced by the surrounding culture and its values (Biroli et al., 2018). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England became statutory in 2008 and set standards for learning and welfare for all settings that cared for children from birth to five years and were in response to findings from the adequate provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project longitudinal study which highlighted the significance of good quality childcare and its impact on learning and development (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2008). The EYFS framework standardised approach to

assessment and age-related learning goals provides consistency for the curriculum and assessment. However, settings that use only the EYFS to guide their practice may not always reflect the community and cultural nuances in which they exist because of the standardised approach of the EYFS.

Theories and Influence

According to Guo and Rouse (2024), the REA is founded upon a constructivist philosophy where children are seen as capable and co-constructors of knowledge where children's learning emerges from their interests, analysis and self-reflection. Indeed, Malaguzzi had worked with Ernesto Codignola, who had translated and disseminated John Dewey's 'Democracy in Education' (Cagliari *et al.*, 2016; Cambi, 2016). Later, Malaguzzi collaborated with Bruno Ciari, who had implanted Dewey's model in Bologna; the two would create the 'municipal school revolution' emphasising democratic participation and social activism (Biroli *et al.* 2018).

Malaguzzi's approach to emergent education through its interconnectivity with the community complements Dewey's concept of 'freedom of intelligence' based on individual fulfilment whilst contributing to society (Cambi, 2016). Malaguzzi's ecological perspective of collaboration with children, family, and community can be linked to the theory of later theorist Bronfenbrenner and his ecological systems theory (Ladi, 2021). Jones's (2021) MUSIC model of motivation posits that children have five key perceptions of motivation linked to learning, these being empowerment, usefulness, success, interest and caring; using his model about REA, it is possible to identify other theories which impact Reggio settings including Bandura's social learning theory and Bowlby's attachment theory.

Compared to the EYFS framework, the structured curriculum is influenced by Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and government policy, including school readiness and Early Learning Goals; the theory emphasises the importance of social interaction and cultural context. However, while a core principle of the EYFS is the 'unique child' summative assessments, such as the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) potentially undermine the use of Vygotsky's theory due to progress tracking and datafication constraints (Bolea, 2020; Williamson, 2019). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory can also be linked to the EYFS and the concept of the unique child and demonstrates the downward pressures felt by practitioners because of the legislative nature of the EYFS and the requirement to have summative data to demonstrate processes in learning.

These different theoretical differences affect the role that adults play within these approaches. Reggio Practitioners and ateliers are advocates for children working in collaboration with the community; they are aware of child-related policies and speak up for children's needs. Additionally, they support children and families' social and emotional needs through reciprocal relationships ((Rinaldi, 2021). In some ways, the adult's role in the EYFS is not dissimilar to that of REA, as practitioners are expected to observe and respond to a child's interests. However, this can be compromised when practitioners face curriculum restrictions around the formal teaching of phonics, guided reading and maths and progression targets, such as sound level of development 'GLD' expectations for children by the end of reception; these pressures take the focus away from the child redirected teaching it to measurable targets (Tassone, 2025; Olusoga and Pierlejewski, 2018). There is a clear difference between the theoretical intention or underpinning and policy drivers in the EYFS. At the same time, the REA has a consistent approach to developing emergent learning, where children are seen as capable learners and the environment as the third teacher; these core values can be observed and absorbed into everyday practice without the downward pressure of meeting national targets.

While both models of early years education value child-centred learning, REA's core values of democracy and community mean it has been able to resist standardisation. However, the EYFS exists within a policy framework that is directed by neoliberal obligations, such as summative assessments, which put practitioners into a position of accountability to demonstrate their impact on learning and development (Tassone, 2025) even with recent modifications to the EYFS in 2024 to move away from datafication. During these times of flux and flexibility in policy and potentially less top-down pressures, more English early years settings could adopt REA values. However, this might come with some concerns about the dilution of the approach. The REA offers a different lens on early years education, which might enable practitioners to genuinely respond to children's learning needs and put children at the centre of their practice.

Implementation of the EYFS and REA

How early years professionals interpret and implement either the EYFS framework or Reggio Emilia Approach is shaped by and lies within the different concepts of child-centred pedagogies, the purpose of the learning environment and the role of the adults. Some of these have already been discussed through a theoretical lens; this section will

examine the roles each plays in the implantation of child-centred education and using the environment to support learning.

The EYFS positions adults as pedagogues of learning within a structured framework, with defined Early Learning Goals (ELGs) and statutory assessments such as the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFP). However, Reggio Emilia practitioners have autonomy as co-constructors and researchers alongside children. They can construct their curriculum organically with the child adapting it to the child's interests, thoughts and ideas, and the environment is seen as the third teacher (Guo and Rouse, 2025; Rinaldi, 2021). Practitioners in REA document the children's learning processes and progress in detail, using learning boards as visual displays of children's learning, which acknowledge the child's voice; these displays are open to collaborative interpretation and reflection by children, their families and practitioners alike (Rinaldi, 2021). Malaguzzi once said that knowledge is like a 'tangle of spaghetti' and learning happens when children can take their interests in many directions. This is evident in project work carried out in REA settings where children can follow their ideas in any direction (Rinaldi, 2021; Gandini *et al.*, 2015). This concept challenges ideals of progression and knowledge acquisition, such as those found in the EYFS and supporting guidance Development Matters that might be used to benchmark children or define milestones of development and linear progress tracking models which used terms, such as on track, off track and good level of development (GLD) (Bradbury and Robert-Homes, 2016).

Under the EYFS, 'enabling environments' are encouraged, yet educators often experience a conflict between maintaining exploratory, play-rich spaces and ensuring progress in literacy and numeracy (Saracho, 2021). A setting following the EYFS might have clearly defined areas of learning and specific task or topic resources rather than open-ended resources. Professionals may feel pressure to use classroom environments to support "school readiness" rather than sustained inquiry. By contrast, the Reggio Emilia approach treats the environment as the 'third teacher', a co-constructive agent in the learning process. Spaces are fluid and aesthetically pleasing, designed to provoke wonder and sustained investigation (Thornton, 2014). Practitioners of REA settings identify with the environment as an active participant in learning that evolves in response to children's learning and development. This approach supports REA's slower, more deliberate pedagogy that contrasts with the data-driven expectations embedded in the EYFS (Moss, 2019).

Conclusion

In examining the REA and the EYFS approaches and curriculum of early education, we can uncover the core societal values that are often embedded but not explicitly acknowledged. A setting's curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping and reflecting our collective identity as a civil society, as it communicates the values and goals we prioritise through the content and methods we choose to pass on to children (Chicken, 2023). While Reggio Emilia emphasises democratic participation, creativity, and children as capable citizens, the EYFS concept of the 'unique child' is evaluated against neoliberal priorities such as school readiness, accountability, and measurable outcomes. These different approaches reveal contrasting societal visions of childhood, education, and what is deemed valuable for young children and their learning and development.

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Part 2 - The Unique Child and Assessment

How a child develops in the early years is unique to the individual. Each child's identity is a combination of how they relate and interact with experiences they encounter and their genetic programming, and it is the influence of nurture on nature determines the characteristics of the unique child (Palaiologou, 2024). Bradbury and Swailes (2024), in the context of early years education, state that the unique child is a fundamental concept in the Early Yearly Foundation Stage (EYFS) and overarching principle (DfE, 2024. P 7).

'Every child is unique, constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured.'

Children need opportunities to develop their pace and autonomy through play and independent exploration. They also need practitioners to 'scaffold' their learning with care and consideration by giving them just enough to build their children's resilience, independence, curiosity and motivation to explore and learn. Supporting children in thinking, questioning, and planning would be providing all the resources to make playdough, flour, water, and salt and then allowing them to make it. Activities such as this enable children to develop the characteristics of effective learning.

The EYFS document gives practitioners the knowledge they need to support all children's holistic learning and development. However, this article explores summative and formative assessment to see if the (EYSF) enables practitioners to do this and, if not, what needs to be done to recognise the needs of our unique children.

Formative and summative assessments are essential to measuring children's learning and development in early years settings, yet they serve fundamentally different purposes. Formative assessment refers to the continuous process of collecting evidence of a child's knowledge and understanding of learning, usually through play but sometimes during intervention or specific group activities, to inform instruction and support ongoing progress. It is diagnostic and responsive, allowing practitioners to adapt their teaching strategies to meet individual learner needs better. In contrast,

summative assessment is typically conducted after a unit or course. It is used to evaluate overall student achievement, often through formal methods such as standardised assessments, Reception Assessment Baseline or time-specific such as the two-year development check. While both assessment forms are important, Grenier and Vollans (2023) highlights a problematic overemphasis on summative assessment within contemporary education systems. This dominance, he argues, can undermine creative learning by prioritising measurable outcomes and accountability pressures to meet or exceed national levels, such as phonic screening. Consequently, the potential of formative assessment is to enhance an individual child's development and learning and promote a more open-ended and experienced education which celebrates the unique child. A more balanced approach that values both types of assessment for their strengths and weaknesses is therefore essential to support not only academic achievement but also the development of young children.

Downward pressures from local and national governments on settings and settings' own cultures around tracking data and 'Good Level of Development' targets meant to demonstrate the progression of a child over during a specific timeframe has meant that settings are enticed to programmes in phonics and maths schemes in reception, such as Little Wandle and Maths Mastery, add additional assessment to what is already an assessment heavy time for young children and practitioners (Moss, 2019, Roberts-Holmes, 2015). These performative summative assessments and accountability cultures of tracking in settings also take away a practitioner's autonomy and further limit a practitioner's time engaged in high-quality interactions, such as sustained shared thinking, which supports metacognition and holistic learning experiences (Moss, 2019; Roberts-Holmes, 2015). They further steer practitioners away from seeing the unique characteristics of a child as often the 'bands' which children are marked against are too broad and restrictive. They do not reflect that children might have a special educational need or, in this particular year or earlier years, can have up to an eleven-month age difference. Additionally, these assessments have a health warning because it might be tempting for practitioners to start dividing a cohort into ability; rather than nurturing positive attitudes to learning, children could start identifying themselves as not being successful learners (Glazzard, 20224). These summative assessments also undermine the EYFS, which states, 'Assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children or require excessive paperwork' (EYFS, 2021. P 18), reducing children to data points rather than acknowledging the unique child because there is less

time to be present and learn at the moment and allowing practitioners to follow the child's interests (Bradbury, 2014). There are further concerns around the phonics summative assessments; empirical evidence shows that 94% of practitioners did not think these assessments provided them with any helpful information about children's learning (Glazzard, 2024).

Suppose delays are identified at the summative Progress Check at Age Two or from formative ongoing observations. In that case, assessment practitioners may wish to adopt an assessment tool that focuses on the four broad areas of needs identified in the SEND code of practice (DfE, 2024). For children with potential or known special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), these assessments can create a starting point for a graduated response in line with the assess, plan, do, review cycle, whereby practitioners, families, and other professionals, including SENCOs, can come together to agree on next steps to support a child's development and learning (DfE, 2024).

Formative assessment

In recent years, there has been a notable shift, possibly off the back of recent updates to the EYFSP, which asserts that practitioners should spend more time in play with children rather than explicit teaching sessions or carrying out targeted observations and assessments. Approaches such as floor books and learning journey displays have become increasingly prominent, emphasising collective reflection and the inclusion of children's voices in the assessment process. These methods align with the principles of the Mosaic Approach, in which children actively contribute to documenting their experiences by taking photographs, annotating their work, and engaging in reflective dialogue (Clark and Moss, 2017). This participatory practice enhances children's sense of agency and ownership over their learning and supports the development of metacognitive skills. Through engaging in these processes, young learners begin to reflect on what they have learned, how they have taught it, and how they can build on that learning and promote deeper cognitive development and self-awareness.

Formative assessment, as outlined in the West Sussex Formative Assessment Guidance (2020), is presented as a vital tool for supporting responsive and personalised teaching. It emphasises the importance of understanding where each pupil is in their learning journey and adapting teaching to meet their needs. The guidance defines formative assessment not as a static measurement but as a fluid, diagnostic process that occurs through observation, dialogue, and interaction, an approach supported by Ashbrook (2021), who preferred "responsive teaching" to reflect

its dynamic nature better. One of its greatest strengths lies in its potential to immediately address misconceptions and gaps in learning and offering real-time feedback to improve children's levels of learning and development and enabling teachers to adapt planning and the learning environment meaningfully.

However, the flexibility and informal nature of formative assessment can lead to ambiguity, with Booth (2017) noting that it often fails in schools due to a lack of clarity in implementation. Moreover, there is a risk that, without careful distinction, interim assessments can blur the lines between formative and summative functions, undermining their developmental intent. This lack of precision can result in the misuse of formative practices for accountability rather than pupil progress (Wiliam, 2013). Furthermore, the success of formative assessment depends heavily on teacher skill and confidence, highlighting the need for continuous professional development. The current EYFS as a stand-alone document is not sufficient in supporting new practitioners understand where children need to be in their learning and development for this, practitioners need to use the EYFS in conjunction with Development Matters (2023) to support their judgements.

Importantly, formative assessment should include the child's voice and self-reflection to be integral to assessment processes, promoting metacognition and ownership of learning (Grienier and Vollans, 2023). However, systemic pressures for measurable data can sideline these practices in favour of performance metrics. Ultimately, formative assessment is most effective when understood as a collaborative, low-stakes, and intentional process embedded in daily pedagogy and supported by a school-wide culture of reflective practice.

Observation and assessment in early childhood education are most effective when grounded in relationship-based practice and informed by various developmental theories. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a contextual framework for understanding how various environmental systems influence a child's development. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory highlights the importance of emotional and social development across stages, while Attachment Theory emphasises the critical role of secure relationships in supporting learning and well-being. Together, these theories offer a holistic foundation for assessing children's development in a way sensitive to their individual needs and their environment (Taggart, 2016,; Pound, 2014). An understanding of the theme of 'cultural capital' is relatively new. It was introduced to the EYFS in 2021; a basic definition is recognising what experiences and opportunities

children may be missing when they arrive at your setting and providing opportunities to fill these. Understanding 'cultural capital' and the role of assessment in these theories supports practitioners in seeing what makes a child unique but also what makes us as practitioners unique and how this can influence assessment as we all come with our own bias due to our cultural capital (Wilson-Thomas and Brooks, 2024; Bal and Akman, 2024).

Understanding each child's uniqueness comes from ongoing observations during play and formal teaching. Relationships with the child, their family, and multi-agency support strengthen a holistic view of development. Bias-free assessment enables more empathetic, inclusive planning and a child-centred learning approach. When current assessment practices fall short, practitioners should reflect, review, and realign with core early years principles to ensure that their methods support every child's diverse needs and potential.

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Part 3 - Blog

Joy

‘If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don’t hesitate. Give in to it.’

This is an extract from ‘Don’t hesitate’ by Mary Oliver (2023), a poem acknowledging that it is often hard to be in and enjoy the moment. Sometimes, in our busy days, it is easy to dismiss the importance of allowing ourselves to be carried away by a moment. This blog is all about seeking out moments, particularly those of joy.

Joy and play are inextricably linked. When we observe children in their play, we often observe them experiencing happiness and joy, and joy drives and extends playful exploration (Lund Fasting and Hoyem, 2024). To truly foster the holistic development of children in early years settings, practitioners must provide enabled environments where children are safe to explore play and experience moments of joy.

Defining Joy

Kingston-Hughes (2023) asserts that joy is associated with play, imagination, wonder and secure relationships in early childhood and is critical for developing resilience and motivation. Joy can be found in ordinary, unpredictable and absurd moments, not in structured and intentional practice (Nordstrom, 2024). However, as early years practitioners, we can practice openness and allow ourselves and our children to be transformed by joy and its unpredictable, fragile and, at the same time, powerful force (Ehret and Rowell, 2021) through play.

A basic definition of joy is a response or connection to a personal moment that can also be experienced within a social context. As a concept, joy is both an effect and an emotion. It can be motivating or a way of being and can be experienced on multiple levels and in various ways (Nordstrom, 2024).

We do not experience joy emotionally in the same way as happiness, according to Van Cappellen *et al.* (2020). Instead, joy ‘connects us to our core identity, values, and priorities’. It satiates us in the moment.

All of us experience a unique and important period in our lives called childhood. During this period, we have an innate urge to understand the world, ourselves, and others. Our brains are ready and set to solve and understand the new problems and relationships and qualities that we encounter in our experience. Nothing could be more important to the lives of children than the joy, freedom, and growth that characterises this kind of play.

Joy is a right

Wellbeing in early years is in the spotlight, driven by concerns about child play, mental health, and the impact of policies and societal change.

A recent inquiry by the Raising the Nation Play Commission¹ found that more and more children in England are increasingly 'sedentary, scrolling and alone' with limited play opportunities, contributing to physical and mental health concerns (Grant, 2025). As a result, the commission calls for a national play strategy, for a Play Sufficiency Duty to be introduced in England in line with Wales and Scotland, and for Article 31 of the UNCRC to be enshrined into domestic law (Play Commission, 2025).

From an international perspective, play is a fundamental right and necessity for all children, irrespective of where they live or their personal circumstances. Children have the right to be respected, trusted, and loved by adults. When we afford children the right to play, we afford them the right to joy and profound, rich learning experiences intrinsically motivated by their autonomy. Our responsibility as practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and advocates of children's well-being and play is to protect these rights and the right to joy.

A very special moment

Sports Day is one of my favourite times of the year because families, children and practitioners all come together. A few years ago, the parents of a child with special educational needs, suspected of autism, were cautious about their daughter's ability to access sports events for several reasons. However, on the day she shined, not only did she take part in all of her races, but she also pulled her father up for the parent and practitioner race. The parents were overjoyed and so proud that their daughter had flourished and enjoyed an event that they thought could be the source of anxiety and overwhelm for her.

It has been my experience that often, on these occasions, when families are invited into our settings, they see new attributes of their child's character emerging, such as

bravery, compassion, responsibility, curiosity and collaboration. They also see them as able to self-regulate, problem-solve and take risks. By inviting our parents to participate in play, they can begin to understand some of the challenges and complexities play has and that children need to use their brains, resolve, and heart. Sometimes, we forget these attributes of play as we grow up.

The power of joy

A vital aspect of joy is its biochemical impact (Kingston-Huges, 2023). There is empirical evidence that serotonin, oxytocin, and dopamine are produced in moments of happiness and joy (McClung *et al.*, 2024). When a child experiences joy, their emotional well-being is boosted. As practitioners, one of our most potent tools is increasing levels of joy through play.

Dopamine production increases significantly when happiness arises unexpectedly or in surprising contexts. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to early years pedagogy, where unstructured, self-directed play often creates spontaneous moments of joy, such as a child discovering a new sound, a kind gesture from a friend, or inventing stories with peers. These unplanned, emotionally rich experiences generate pleasure, reinforce neural connections and well-being, and foster intrinsic motivation.

To conclude, joy requires space and flexibility. If we are to grow from moments of joy, we need to go with the flow and spontaneity of joyful moments. Early childhood represents a distinct and formative phase of human development, marked by an intrinsic drive to make sense of the world, oneself, and others. The brain develops exponentially during this period, engaging with new experiences, problem-solving, and forming emotional attachments with families and friends. A few elements are vital to a child's well-being and development, such as joy and autonomy through free play. Play nurtures children cognitively and emotionally and lays the foundation for lifelong learning. The way forward for practitioners in early years education is to commit to seeking out joy and affirming the positive impact of joy.

"Joy is not made to be a crumb. . ." (Oliver, 2023)

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