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PART 1

A comparative analysis of Reggio Emilia and Forest School Play-Based Approaches

As stated by Johnson, *et al.* (2019) play is a fundamental element in early childhood education, not only as a mode of learning but as a means of nurturing holistic development. This is supported by Henderson and Edwards (2020) who suggest that among the varied pedagogical approaches advocating for play-based learning, Reggio Emilia and Forest School stand out for their contrasting yet complementary philosophies. This literature review critically compares these two approaches, examining their theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and alignment with contemporary curriculum guidance, particularly the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2025). In accordance with current research and theoretical frameworks, the review analyses the strengths, limitations, and implications of each approach for practice in a Welsh educational context.

Theoretical foundations of Play-Based Learning

The idea of using play as a real way to teach is based on the theory that children learn best by interacting with others and their environment, particularly those of Vygotsky, who emphasised social interaction and scaffolding in the Zone of Proximal Development (Eun, 2019). Similarly, according to Robson (2019) Piaget's stages of cognitive development underpin the importance of active exploration and discovery in early learning. Contemporary researchers such as Baker, Courtois, and Eberhart (2021) and Abebe (2019) argue that a more integrated and dynamic model of play-based pedagogy is essential, highlighting the importance of adult interaction, child agency, and contextual learning.

Both Reggio Emilia and Forest School utilise these theories, though they differ in application. As Badham (2020) explains Reggio Emilia, for instance, centres around child-led curiosity within designed indoor environments, while Nair (2019) insists that Forest School promotes learner-centred experiences based on nature and risk-based exploration. Therefore, each offer valuable, yet disparate interpretations of how play contributes to development, learning, and well-being.

The Reggio Emilia Approach

Principles and Practices

Originating in post-war Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach founded by Loris Malaguzzi, was established on the image of the child as competent, curious, and capable of constructing their own learning

(Senent, Kelley, and Zena, 2022). Moreover, Mitchiner, Batamula, and Kite (2018) argue that central to this approach is the 'Hundred Languages of Children', a metaphor representing the multitude of ways children express themselves—through art, music, movement, and play. Additionally, as stated by Rosalinda and Garzia (2022) the environment is referred to as the 'third teacher', therefore carefully created to provoke curiosity, communication, and creativity. Documentation is also essential, as Edwards, Hamel, Miller, and Ren (2020) argue that educators engage in pedagogical documentation to make learning visible, facilitating, and reflective. Furthermore, Rinaldi (2021) maintains this by suggesting that relationships are highly valued, with a strong emphasis on collaboration between children, educators, and families.

Critical Evaluation

While widely praised for its respect for children's autonomy, Reggio Emilia has been critiqued for its cultural particularity and resource intensity as Jones (2025) argues that implementing the approach in diverse socio-economic or rural Welsh settings may be constrained by limited funding and space. Furthermore, Cigala, Venturelli, and Bassetti (2019) state that the high demands placed on educator training and reflective practice require significant institutional support.

Nevertheless, Reggio Emilia's alignment with the Curriculum for Wales is clear, for instance Stewart, MacDonald, and Davies (2024) insist that the Curriculum for Wales places emphasis on creativity, child agency, and multifaceted learning, closely echoing Reggio's principles. Specifically, the AoLEs (Areas of Learning and Experience) such as Expressive Arts and Health and Well-being resonate with Reggio's commitment to the holistic development of the child (Edwards and Gandini, 2018).

The Forest School Approach

Principles and Practices

According to Dean (2019) Forest School is a nature-based pedagogical approach that emerged in Scandinavia and gained recognition in the UK in the 1990s, grounded in outdoor learning often in woodland or natural settings. Moreover, Stavrianos (2024) states that key principles include learner-led exploration, risk-taking, and long-term engagement with the environment. Furthermore, as suggested by Dean (2019) the approach is influenced by Froebelian principles, particularly the belief in the educative value of nature and outdoor play. Bullard (2024) maintains this by arguing that Forest School encourages resilience, confidence, and independence through carefully managed risk and active problem-solving, where according to Speldewinde and Campbell (2024) sessions are facilitated by

qualified Forest School practitioners, who adopt a non-intrusive, supportive role, allowing children to direct their own learning.

Critical Evaluation

Garden (2021) shows that Forest School is renowned for its positive impact on mental health, physical well-being, and social-emotional skills. However, Stavrianos (2024) argues that it faces critique over accessibility and inclusivity, weather conditions, and health and safety concerns may limit universal implementation. The Curriculum for Wales aligns with Forest School's emphasis on experiential, place-based learning, where Knight and Crick (2022) insist that area of learning for Science and Technology, for instance, encourages curiosity and investigation, much like the Forest School ethos. In addition, Evans (2023) states the Curriculum for Wales' commitment to developing ethical, informed citizens who value sustainability also complements Forest School's environmental focus.

Comparative Analysis

Child Agency and Voice

Farini and Scollan (2023) show that both approaches deeply value child agency, although utilised differently, for instance Reggio Emilia applies agency through project-based curiosity and collaborative learning, where children develop knowledge with peers and adults. In contrast, Cudworth and Tymms (2024) suggest Forest School emphasises individual exploration and autonomy within a loosely structured environment. Moreover, research by Cerino (2023) suggests that both approaches enhance children's ability to direct their own learning, however, Hauwa (2024) argues that Reggio Emilia's model offers greater support for communication and social skills, while Forest School promotes self-regulation and independence (Coates and Wilson, 2019).

Role of the Environment

The environment plays an essential role in both models, where Reggio Emilia designs indoor environments to attract curiosity (Senent and Kelley, 2022), whereas Forest School takes advantage of the unpredictability and sensory opportunities provided by the outdoors (O'Brien, 2020). Manera (2022) continues by arguing that each engages children using different methods, for instance Reggio Emilia utilises symbolic representation and aesthetic expression, while Forest School explores sensory experiences as maintained by Stavrianos (2024). Therefore, Rinaldi (2021) shows the environment in

Reggio Emilia settings requires extensive planning and arrangement, which may not be practical in all Welsh contexts, especially in underfunded areas. In contrast, Waite and Goodenough (2018) claim that Forest School is more resource-light, although the model is subject to ecological and geographical limitations.

Role of the Adult and Pedagogy

Both approaches place educators as facilitators yet differ in their pedagogical strategies, with Reggio Emilia practitioners according to Hardison (2020) are highly involved in documentation, using observational data to inform planning and share learning journeys with families. This aligns with the Curriculum for Wales' emphasis on formative assessment and reflection (Welsh Government, 2022). In contrast Harris (2022) states that Forest School practitioners adopt a more hands-off approach, observing without directing. Coates and Wilson (2019) claim that this therefore supports children's independence but may risk missing learning opportunities without the use of reflective practice. Additionally, Hatch (2025) shows that integrating Reggio-style documentation could enhance Forest School practice, provide evidence of progression and support professional development.

Curriculum for Wales: A Synthesis

Four Purposes of CfW	Reggio Emilia	Forest School
Ambitious, capable learners	Project-based, inquiry-led learning	Problem-solving in natural environments
Enterprising, creative contributors	Emphasis on expressive arts and symbolic languages	Creativity through exploration and adaptability
Ethical, informed citizens	Democratic participation in learning	Sustainability and environmental stewardship
Healthy, confident individuals	Emotional well-being through co-constructed learning	Physical and emotional resilience in nature

The Curriculum for Wales advocates for purpose-driven learning, grounded in four purposes: ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2022). Both Reggio Emilia and Forest School align with these aims, although through different pedagogical methods. However, the Curriculum for Wales' flexible, non-prescriptive framework offers the opportunity to blend elements of both approaches. A hybrid model

that combines Reggio Emilia's emphasis on representation and community with Forest School's risk-based, outdoor learning could provide a rich, responsive pedagogy attuned to children's diverse needs and contexts in Wales.

Limitations

There remains limited evidence on the long-term impacts of either approach on academic attainment, particularly in the UK and Welsh contexts. Furthermore, Nami (2023) maintains that teacher training and implementation methods are under-researched areas. Therefore, given the high professional demands of both models, further investigation into sustainable training pathways and community partnerships is necessary. Additionally, Danniels and Pyle (2023) argue that inclusivity in play-based pedagogy remain underexplored, where studies by Olusoga (2018) consider the need for more attention on how gender, culture, and ability relate to children's experiences in play-based environments.

Conclusion

Both Reggio Emilia and Forest School offer rich, research-informed frameworks for play-based learning, each with distinct yet overlapping pedagogical strengths. Reggio Emilia excels in symbolic, collaborative learning and documentation, aligning well with expressive and interdisciplinary elements of the Curriculum for Wales. Forest School provides a compelling model for embodied, experiential learning, fostering resilience, independence, and ecological awareness.

Furthermore, the Curriculum for Wales' values-driven and flexible structure allows for the integration of these diverse approaches, encouraging educators to adopt context-sensitive, child-centred pedagogies. A blended model that draws on the strengths of both could potentially offer a more equitable, creative, and holistic education for young learners across Wales.

PART 2

A critical evaluation of assessment, progress tracking, and developmental models in Play-Based Curricula

Early childhood education is increasingly embracing the concept of the 'Unique Child,' which according to Bjorklund (2022) recognises that each child develops along their own individual path, shaped by

personal interests, experiences, and patterns of growth. Rimpfeld, *et al.* (2019) agree by stating that this perspective challenges standardised approaches to assessment and tracking progress. Moreover, Pyle, *et al.* (2023) continue by claiming that it highlights the need for more flexible, reflective methods, particularly within play-based learning environments, where development tends to be arbitrary, context-dependent, and not always immediately measurable.

The 'Unique Child'

The Unique Child principle is foundational in many early years' frameworks, including the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2024) and the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). It acknowledges that children develop at different rates and in different ways, influenced by a range of biological, social, and cultural factors which is supported by Music (2024). This view aligns with the socio-cultural theories of Vygotsky (Tzuriel, 2021) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Crawford, 2020), which emphasise the interaction between the child and their environment. The Curriculum for Wales reinforces this stance by promoting learner progression as a continuous process of developing and improving skills and knowledge, rather than a checklist of standardised outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022). This focus as maintained by Pyle, *et al.* (2023) requires flexible, continuous, and reflective assessment practices, capable of capturing the diversity and complexity of children's development.

Assessment in Play-Based Curricula

Formative Assessment: Observing Learning in Action

According to Hargreaves (2018) in play-based curricula, formative assessment, particularly through observation, is the primary method for understanding children's learning and development. McCoy (2019) argues that meaningful assessment emerges from closely observing children in the context of their everyday play, attentively listening to their ideas, and interpreting their behaviours within relationships and social interactions. Moreover, Devaki (2024) states that this approach shifts the focus from fixed knowledge to learning dispositions such as curiosity, creativity, perseverance, and collaboration. Pedagogical documentation, central to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, utilises a more sophisticated form of formative assessment that seeks to make children's thinking visible (Rinaldi, 2021). Therefore, as suggested by Han (2024) it allows educators and families to collaboratively construct learning journeys, offering personalised insights aligned with the Unique Child principle.

However, formative assessment is not without critique, as Bradbury (2019) notes that pressures to meet certain targets can change the way it is used within settings that are dissimilar to its original purpose, encouraging educators to frame observations in ways that meet external performance demands, rather than focusing on the individual child. In addition, Luff (2023) argues that the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile has frequently been criticised for reducing essential observational insights into simplistic data points. In contrast, the Curriculum for Wales (2022) distances from such summative, checklist-style assessments and instead, promotes assessment as a continuous and integrated part of teaching and learning, aiming to support more ethical, child-centred practices that respect the individuality and complexity of each learner.

Summative Assessment: Limitations with Play-Based Learning

Summative assessments, often standardised and age-based, pose significant challenges within play-based frameworks, as Darling-Hammond (2018) suggests that these assessments risk undermining the very idea of the Unique Child by comparing individual learners to a normative standard, rather than recognising diverse developmental processes. The early years baseline assessments for example, have been criticised for being developmentally inappropriate and detrimental to child well-being (British Educational Research Association, 2019). Moreover, as play is fundamentally non-linear and symbolic, Hall and Sheehy (2018) argue that traditional summative tools often fail to capture the learning that occurs in play contexts.

Some research has attempted to reconcile summative needs with play-based learning through tools like Learning Stories (Carr and Lee, 2019) or The Leuven Scales of Well-being and Involvement (MacRae and Jones (2023), which assess engagement as a proxy for learning. While promising, these methods require high levels of practitioner skill and time investment, which may not be universally feasible.

Progress Tracking and Individualised Learning Journeys

Practitioners are often required to demonstrate progress through linear or numerical systems, such as Development Matters (Department of Education, 2024) which attempts to categorise development into predictable sequences. While offering helpful benchmarks, they risk promoting negative perspectives, focusing on what children 'cannot do' rather than what they are exploring or expressing uniquely (Laere and Vandenbroeck, 2020).

In contrast, the Curriculum for Wales (2022) uses a narrative, teacher-led way to track children's progress. Instead of setting fixed expectations based on age, it talks about what is broadly expected, giving teachers more freedom to use their professional judgement and consider each child's unique background (Welsh Government, 2022). Epstein (2018) supports this approach, suggesting that it encourages more meaningful conversations between children, teachers, and families. However, concerns remain around fairness, consistency, and workload, especially in settings with limited professional development resources.

Developmental Models: Age, Stage, and Pathways

Age-related norms and the risk of standardisation

Traditional models in developmental psychology, such as those proposed by Piaget have long established age-based expectations for child development. While Hens and Goidsenhoven (2023) sustains that these models provide a general framework, but often overlook the complexities introduced by neurodiversity, cultural differences, and trauma-informed developmental delays. Hens and Goidsenhoven (2023) continues by arguing that therefore, applying these age-normed expectations can lead to misinterpretations of children's development, especially when they do not align with the dominant developmental timelines.

Contemporary research by Nelson, Sullivan, and Engelstad (2023) emphasises the importance of recognising individual developmental approaches. For instance, Leeuw (2020) highlights how cultural values and expectations can influence the identification and treatment of developmental disorders, suggesting that behaviours considered atypical in one culture may be viewed differently in another. Additionally, Hauser (2021) states that early life adversities, including trauma, can significantly impact brain development and functioning, underscoring the need for trauma-informed approaches in understanding children's development.

Developmental Pathways

For many years, developmental psychology has used models that describe how children are supposed to grow and learn at certain ages, like those from Piaget (Hens and Goidsenhoven, 2023). While these models can offer a general idea of what to expect, Epstein (2018) insists that they do not always consider the differences between children. Research by Bjorklund (2022) shows that each child has their own pace of development, shaped by aspects such as relationships, personality, and life experiences. Nelson, Sullivan, and Engelstad (2023) maintains this by showing how cultural

backgrounds and early life challenges, such as trauma, can influence how children grow and learn. A neurodiversity-informed approach also reaffirms that differences in development are normal and should be understood and supported, and not seen as deficits (Hens and Goidsenhoven, 2023).

Blog

In early years education, play is often described as a child's natural language, a tool for thinking, expressing, and imagining. As more educational systems embrace play-based learning, including the Curriculum for Wales (2022), there's growing excitement about what this means for deeper engagement, creativity, and holistic development.

This movement also raises important questions: What does play-based learning look like for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or other Additional Learning Needs? How do we ensure that *inclusive pedagogy* isn't just a buzzword, but a reality, especially when play itself can be socially and sensory complex for neurodiverse children?

This blog explores the critical considerations needed to ensure that play-based curricula are truly inclusive of all children, particularly those with ASD and ALN. It draws on the latest research, professional guidance, and real-world practice to offer a clear perspective of both opportunities and challenges.

Rethinking inclusion: It's not about fitting in, it's about belonging

Too often, inclusion is viewed as helping a child with ALN fit in with existing routines, environments, or peer groups. But true inclusion means adapting the environment and curriculum so that every child can belong, participate, and thrive in ways that are authentic to them (Music, 2024).

For children with ASD or other neurodivergent profiles, this means recognising that:

- Communication may be non-verbal or unconventional.
- Social interaction preferences may differ
- Sensory processing differences may affect how play spaces are utilised and experienced
- Repetitive play may be a form of deep learning, not a deficit. **(Change & Shire, 2019)**

Recognising these variations through a strengths-based lens is crucial. As the Curriculum for Wales (2022) emphasises, every learner is entitled to a curriculum that meets their needs and nurtures their ability to engage with learning in a meaningful way.

The role of play in learning for children with ASD and ALN

Research by Gibson and Pritchard (2021) shows that play is just as important for children with ALN as it is for neurotypical children, but the forms and functions of play may differ.

For example:

- A child with ASD may engage in parallel play or enjoy sensory exploration more than imaginative role-play
- Children with communication needs may use objects, actions, or signs rather than words to initiate interaction
- Some children may prefer structured play with clear rules, finding open-ended tasks overwhelming (**Gibson & Pritchard, 2021**)

A truly inclusive play-based curriculum must celebrate these diverse play preferences and understand them as valid forms of expression, learning, and communication. It also requires practitioners to move beyond developmental “norms” and create multifaceted opportunities for participation (MacBlain, 2021).

Practical considerations for inclusive play-based implementation

1. Environment Design: Sensory-Friendly and Predictable

Boyd (2024) maintains that many children with ASD experience the world sensory-first. Loud noises, bright lights, cluttered spaces, or unexpected transitions can be overstimulating and lead to anxiety or shutdowns.

To support inclusive play:

- Create calm zones or sensory corners where children can regulate without leaving the play environment

- Use visual supports (e.g. symbols, photos, schedules) to structure the day and allow children to anticipate what's next
- Keep areas clearly defined and clutter-free, using colour coding, rugs, or partitions to support understanding of space and purpose **(Boyd, 2024)**

2. Adult Role: Sensitive, Skilled, and Flexible

Adults play a pivotal role in facilitating access to play for children with ASD and ALN. Kelly (2023) states that the adult's sensitivity to each child's communication style, sensory needs, and learning preferences determines whether play feels welcoming or exclusionary.

Practitioners must:

- Model and scaffold play, entering into children's world on their terms (even if it doesn't look like typical play)
- Use tools like Intensive Interaction to build connection and trust through shared attention and mirroring
- Respect children's choices to observe, withdraw, or engage differently, without leading those choices **(Kelly, 2023)**

A key part of the Curriculum for Wales (2022) is empowering learners to "develop as independent, capable learners who are curious and motivated", which means trusting that learning happens even when it looks different.

3. Communication Supports: Enabling Voices and Choices

For children with limited or no verbal communication, access to play depends on the ability to make choices, share preferences, and express ideas.

- Introduce AAC tools (augmentative and alternative communication), such as communication boards, or apps like Proloquo2Go
- Use visual timetables or now/next boards to structure routines and reduce anxiety
- Offer multiple modes of expression—movement, music, mark-making, or objects of reference **(Baker & Mills, 2022)**

Crucially, staff need training not just in using these tools, but in understanding the communication culture of each child. Without this, children risk being physically present but socially and emotionally excluded from play opportunities.

Assessment and progress

One of the most persistent challenges in implementing inclusive play-based curricula is assessment. Evans (2022) sustains that traditional tracking systems often rely on neurotypical developmental milestones, failing to reflect the true learning journeys of children with ALN.

Instead of asking, “Is this child behind?”, inclusive assessment asks:

- “What progress is meaningful for this child?”
- “What strengths are emerging, and how are they expressed?”
- “How does this child use play to make sense of their world?”

The Curriculum for Wales (2022) embraces this ethos, stating that learner progression should be a holistic, learner-focused approach, underpinned by observation, relationships, and professional judgment. Using narrative-based assessment, such as Learning Stories (Carr & Lee, 2019), allows practitioners to document success in ways that reflect each child’s unique profile.

Partnership with Families

Parents and carers of children with ASD and ALN often hold vital knowledge about what helps and obstructs their child’s engagement, therefore, as maintains by Grant and Ray (2018) their involvement in designing strategies, sharing insights, and celebrating progress is essential.

Building strong partnerships involves:

- Regular, respectful communication, not just incident reporting
- Cultural humility and recognising the diverse ways families understand and support learning and play
- Shared decision-making in goal setting, provision planning, and transitions (**Grant & Ray, 2018**)

Final Thoughts: inclusion isn't a box to tick—It's a mindset

Implementing a play-based curriculum that genuinely includes children with ASD and ALN is not a technical task, it is a moral and pedagogical commitment. It means believing that all children have a right to joyful, meaningful learning through play.

It also means disregarding that inclusion is just about adding supports. Rather, it's about reimagining play environments, relationships, and assessments so that difference is seen as progress and improvement and not a problem to fix.

As we continue to embrace play as the core of early learning, let's make sure we also embrace every learner who plays, learns, and lives in their own unique way.

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