Part 1 – Word Count = 1,600

Critically Analysing Play-Based Curricula and Child Agency

Curriculum plays a significant role in influencing children's educational experiences by offering a framework for what is valued, how learning is understood, and how practitioners promote children's development. A curriculum includes the organised experiences, information, beliefs and learning opportunities offered within an educational context. In the early years, play-based learning allows children to learn through creativity, interaction, exploration and meaningful experiences rather than being passive recipients of adult-directed instruction (NAEYC,2007). Children's agency and voice are particularly important in play-based education. Child agency refers to children's ability to make decisions, communicate their thoughts and influence aspects of their education (Baker and Le Courtois, 2022). Children's voice includes verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing their preferences, viewpoints and interests. However, children's opportunities to exercise agency are influenced by relationships, culture, adult expectations and educational settings (Clark, A. and Moss, P 2017).

This assignment critically examines how Curriculum for Wales (CfW) and the Reggio Emilia approach influence children's agency. It compares their views of practitioners, relationships and learning environments before analysing implementation challenges, including school readiness, inclusion, assessment, staffing and professional responsibilities (Welsh Government,2023).

Curriculum for Wales is a statutory framework outlining the knowledge, skills, experiences and values that support children's learning and development. It recognises play, discovery, observation and authentic learning experiences as important aspects of pedagogy, placing children's development, well-being and learning at the centre of provision (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). CFW's emphasis on children as active learners helps explain child agency. Giving children opportunities to make decisions about their surroundings and experiences supports independence and participation. Children's voice is not limited to spoken communication, it also includes play, behaviour, interests, preferences and emotional

expressions (Welsh Government, 2023). Practitioners must therefore understand how individual children communicate and provide meaningful opportunities for their contributions to influence learning. Practitioners play an important role in creating environments where agency can flourish. Through responsive relationships, engaging experiences and observation, they can recognise children's interests and support their development. Play provides opportunities for children to investigate, test ideas and make decisions, allowing them to exercise autonomy in their learning. However, children's agency operates within a wider curriculum structure. Practitioners remain responsible for supporting learning, development, safety and well-being. Therefore, although CfW encourages active participation, practitioners must balance children's decisions with adult guidance and curriculum expectations. This creates tension between child-led learning and professional accountability, particularly when practitioners feel pressure to demonstrate progress. (Clark, 2017).

The Reggio Emilia approach views children as capable, inquisitive and competent learners who actively construct knowledge through interactions and experiences. Rather than seeing children as passive recipients of information, it recognises their ideas, beliefs and perspectives (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). The concept of the “competent child” highlights the importance of respecting children's abilities, communication and participation in learning decisions. The learning environment is central to Reggio Emilia and is often described as the “third teacher”. Spaces and resources are purposefully arranged to encourage inquiry, independence, communication and collaboration (Catalano et al, 2023). These environments allow children to explore interests, make decisions and develop their own ideas. Relationships are equally important because learning is understood as co-constructed between children, practitioners, peers and the wider community (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012).

Practitioners are encouraged to listen carefully, observe children's interests and respond to their ideas rather than simply deliver predetermined knowledge. Through observation and documentation, they can reflect on children's thinking and provide opportunities for further investigation. However, implementing this approach can be challenging. Creating stimulating

environments and providing open-ended resources requires planning time, funding and professional expertise. Limited space, staffing pressures and insufficient resources may restrict opportunities for exploration. Documentation can also become focused on recording progress rather than responding to children's ideas. Therefore, although Reggio Emilia offers valuable opportunities to support agency, its implementation depends on the resources and organisational support available (The Department for Education 2021).

Both approaches recognise children as competent learners and value their interests, relationships and experiences. However, they differ in how child agency is positioned. CFW encourages agency within a statutory curriculum framework, where children's choices coexist with expectations for learning and progression. Agency may therefore be guided by wider curriculum objectives (OECD, 2020). In contrast, Reggio Emilia emphasises agency as a co-constructed process in which children's theories, interests and ideas influence the direction of learning alongside practitioners and peers. The practitioner also has a different emphasis within each approach. Under CFW, practitioners support, extend and evaluate learning, whereas Reggio Emilia places greater emphasis on practitioners as co-learners, listeners and researchers.

Neither approach removes adult influence. Practitioners remain responsible for children's safety, inclusion and development. Both approaches also recognise the importance of environments that encourage exploration and discovery, although Reggio Emilia places particular emphasis on the environment as an active influence on learning. These similarities demonstrate that meaningful agency requires responsive adults and appropriate learning environments, while their differences highlight the various ways children's participation can be supported within curriculum expectations.

Although both approaches promote active participation, implementing their principles in daily practice can create challenges. A major difficulty is balancing children's interests with expectations for learning, progression and school readiness. For example, a practitioner may observe children building a tower, allowing them to experiment with materials, negotiate with peers and solve problems independently. However, pressure to demonstrate specific learning outcomes may lead the practitioner to interrupt play and introduce predetermined tasks.

Although adult guidance can extend learning, excessive direction may reduce children's opportunities to make decisions and develop their own ideas. This raises questions about whether children's agency is genuinely prioritised when adults are expected to demonstrate progress. Practitioners need to use observation and professional judgement to recognise learning within play and provide appropriate challenges without taking control away from children. Therefore, although Reggio Emilia offers valuable opportunities to support agency, its implementation depends on the resources and organisational support available (Department for Education, 2021). Similarly, the OECD (2020) highlights the importance of considering the practical challenges of implementing curriculum change within educational settings.

According to (*Person-Centred Practice in Education)* we can determine that Inclusion and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) create further challenges. Some children may require adapted resources, visual prompts, additional processing time or adult support to participate meaningfully. For example, a child who communicates non-verbally may express preferences through gestures, movement or their choice of materials. If practitioners rely mainly on spoken responses, the child's voice may be overlooked. However, excessive adult intervention can also restrict independence if practitioners make decisions on children's behalf. Practitioners must therefore recognise when support enables participation and when it limits agency. This requires knowledge of individual children, collaboration with families and, where appropriate, specialist professionals. Limited training, time and access to specialist support may make this difficult, demonstrating that inclusive practice requires more than positive curriculum principles (Early Years Alliance, 2026).

Assessment, observation and documentation can also influence children's agency. Practitioners can learn about children's interests and development through observation, but pressure to demonstrate progress may encourage adults to interrupt play to collect evidence. This creates tension between accountability and genuine child-led learning. Nevertheless, observation can support agency when used to understand children's interests rather than simply measure predetermined outcomes (Carr, 2001). For example, if children repeatedly

explore insects outdoors, practitioners could introduce resources about habitats while allowing children to direct their investigations. In this situation, assessment extends learning without taking control away from children. The challenge is ensuring documentation informs responsive planning rather than becoming an administrative task that prioritises recording over children's experiences (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Practical constraints, including staffing, time, funding and resources, can further affect implementation. Child-led learning requires practitioners to observe children carefully, respond to emerging interests and provide suitable experiences. However, large groups, staff shortages and limited planning time may make individual attention difficult. Limited funding or restricted indoor and outdoor spaces may also reduce opportunities for exploration (Hildebrandt et al., 2026). These challenges are relevant to both approaches, particularly Reggio Emilia's emphasis on carefully prepared environments and collaborative investigation (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007).

Although practitioners can use everyday materials creatively, individual effort cannot fully overcome structural limitations. Settings must therefore provide appropriate resources, planning time and professional support to help practitioners implement play-based principles effectively (Frontiers in Education, 2019).

Finally, children's agency involves more than listening to their opinions or offering choices. Children may experience only limited participation if adults have already decided the activities, resources and expected outcomes (Manyukhina and Wyse, 2025). For example, choosing between two adult-planned activities offers some independence, but allowing children to influence future planning may provide more meaningful agency (UNICEF, n.d). Nevertheless, complete child control is neither realistic nor always appropriate because practitioners remain responsible for safety, inclusion and well-being. The challenge is to share decision-making while maintaining professional responsibilities and ensuring children's contributions genuinely influence their educational experiences (Welsh Government, n.d).

Both Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach recognise children as competent and active participants in learning, although they understand agency differently. CFW

positions agency within a statutory curriculum framework and expectations for progression, whereas Reggio Emilia emphasises relationships, expression and the environment as foundations for co-constructed learning (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012).

However, implementing these principles is challenging. School readiness, ALN, assessment, staffing, resources and practitioner expertise can create differences between curriculum intentions and children's actual experiences (OECD, 2023). Meaningful child agency therefore requires more than offering choices or asking for opinions. Practitioners must create inclusive environments where children's interests influence learning while maintaining their professional responsibilities (Manyukhina, 2022). Ultimately, curricula significantly shape children's educational experiences, but their impact depends on how effectively their principles are translated into everyday practice.

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Part 2 – Word count = 1,627

Critically Evaluating Assessment and the Unique Child

The idea of the Unique Child acknowledges that each child is a distinct learner with specific skills, interests, experiences and ways of perceiving the world. Children grow at different paces, have diverse strengths and communicate in various ways (Foundation Years, 2008). They should therefore be seen as active contributors to their education rather than passive recipients of adult information. (Woods, 2015).

Assessment involves collecting and analysing information about children's learning and development to understand their progress and guide future decisions (Carr, 2001). Although assessment can help practitioners understand individual children, difficulties may arise when children are measured against fixed developmental expectations (Welsh Government, n.d.). This is particularly important for child agency, as the ways practitioners observe, document and interpret learning influence which children's voices are acknowledged (Clark, 2017). This assignment critically evaluates whether assessment methods within Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia support the concept of the Unique Child, particularly regarding children's agency and expression. The Unique Child recognises children as active, capable and

competent participants whose learning is influenced by their interests, perspectives, relationships and experiences (Carr, 2001). It is incorrect to assume that every child's developmental process is the same (Department for Education, 2024).

Vygotsky's sociocultural approach helps explain the Unique Child because it emphasises how learning develops through interactions with adults, peers and the wider environment. Practitioners should consider what children can achieve independently and what they can achieve with appropriate guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective highlights how family experiences, cultural backgrounds, relationships and educational environments influence children's development. Consequently, assessment should consider children's wider experiences rather than interpreting their abilities solely through developmental expectations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Child agency is closely connected to this concept. If children are viewed as capable participants, assessment should value their perspectives, interests and decisions rather than simply compare them with predefined expectations (Baker and Le Courtois, 2022). Recognising the Unique Child therefore requires practitioners to consider not only what children can do, but also how and why they engage in learning (Clark, 2017).

Formative assessment and observation are important methods for understanding children's learning, development and well-being within Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, n.d.). Practitioners observe children during everyday activities, particularly play, to identify their interests, strengths, interactions and emerging skills. Ongoing observation provides information about how children learn over time and can guide future planning and experiences (Carr, 2001). This approach can support the Unique Child because observations may reveal aspects of learning that standardised assessments miss. Practitioners can identify children's favourite activities, communication, relationships and individual strengths. Observing children in familiar play environments may provide a more meaningful understanding of their abilities. Allowing children's interests to influence future learning opportunities can also promote agency (Clark, 2017).

However, observation is not always objective. What is documented depends on what practitioners notice, consider important and choose to record (Carr, 2001). For example, describing a child as “reluctant to participate” may overlook that they are choosing to observe before joining in, communicating differently or feeling overwhelmed by their surroundings. Although observation can highlight individuality, it can also restrict agency if adult interpretations are accepted without question. Practitioners must therefore remain open to different explanations of children's behaviour and consider their perspectives when planning learning (Clark, 2017). Rather than focusing solely on predefined targets, the Reggio Emilia approach uses observation and pedagogical documentation to make children's learning, thinking and experiences visible (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Practitioners record learning through photographs, children's words, artwork, conversations and interactions. Children and practitioners can revisit this documentation to reflect on experiences, develop ideas and influence future learning. Documentation therefore becomes a process of reflection and co-construction rather than simply a record of achievements (Rinaldi, 2006).

This method supports the Unique Child because children's theories, interests and different forms of expression are valued. Recording children's questions, ideas and responses can highlight perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked (Rinaldi, 2006). Revisiting documentation also provides opportunities for children to reflect on their learning and influence what happens next. This demonstrates how learning develops through relationships between children, adults and their environment (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Nevertheless, pedagogical documentation involves adult decisions about what is photographed, recorded and displayed. Practitioners determine which conversations are important and how children's work is interpreted. Consequently, documentation may make children's voices more visible without giving them full control over how those voices are represented (Clark, 2017). Some aspects of learning may be highlighted while others are overlooked. Although Reggio Emilia offers opportunities for children's ideas to influence learning, documentation cannot be instruction entirely unbiased representation of their experiences.

Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia both use observation to understand children as unique individuals, but they approach assessment and documentation differently. Within Curriculum for Wales, observation helps practitioners understand children's learning, development and progress and use this information to plan future experiences (Welsh Government, n.d.). Assessment operates within a statutory curriculum framework, providing a structure for understanding progression. Reggio Emilia places greater emphasis on pedagogical documentation as a way of displaying children's thinking, expression and learning processes (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Rather than concentrating mainly on progression, documentation highlights relationships, children's theories and the co-construction of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2006). Both approaches depend on practitioner interpretation. Practitioners observe and analyse children's learning within Curriculum for Wales, while those using Reggio Emilia select and interpret photographs, artwork and conversations. Neither approach therefore provides an entirely objective picture of the child (Clark, 2017) Curriculum for Wales offers a clearer framework for understanding progression, whereas Reggio Emilia provides opportunities for children's ideas to influence how learning is represented. Ultimately, the important question is whether children have meaningful influence over how their learning is understood and used to plan future experiences (Welsh Government, n.d.).

An important aspect of the Unique Child is recognising that children do not all develop, communicate or demonstrate learning in the same way. Children may have different sensory needs, require different support and develop unevenly. This is particularly important for neurodivergent children and those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), as a single developmental model may not fully represent their abilities (Welsh Government, 2026). Curriculum for Wales recognises that children can develop at different rates, while Reggio Emilia's emphasis on multiple forms of expression allows children to communicate beyond spoken language (Welsh Government, n.d.), Observation and documentation can therefore capture learning that more conventional assessments might miss (Clark, 2017). For example, a child may demonstrate complex thinking through construction, painting, movement, gestures or symbolic play, even if they find spoken questions difficult to answer. Recognising these different forms of communication can support children's agency by allowing them to

demonstrate their understanding in ways that suit them (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). However, less formal assessment is not automatically inclusive. Practitioners may bring neurotypical assumptions, cultural expectations and personal biases into their interpretations. Repeated movement, for example, might be interpreted as disengagement when it represents exploration, communication or sensory regulation. The same behaviour may therefore be understood differently depending on the practitioner's perspective.

To support inclusive assessment, practitioners could combine observations across different activities with children's communication preferences and, where appropriate, information from families. A child who finds group discussions difficult might demonstrate understanding through drawing, construction or individual play. Considering different forms of evidence can provide a fuller picture of the child's abilities. However, practitioners must avoid if behaviour has the same meaning for every child. Reflective practice and professional learning are important in challenging bias and recognising individual strengths and support needs (Welsh Government, 2026). Age and stage-related developmental models and progress tracking provide another way of understanding children's development. Unlike ongoing formative observation, which focuses on ever day learning experiences, developmental tracking considers children's progress in relation to expected developmental patterns or milestones. These models can help practitioners identify emerging skills, recognise possible support needs and plan appropriate experiences. When used carefully, developmental tracking can support the Unique Child by identifying changes that might not be immediately noticeable during everyday activities. However, difficulties arise when milestones are treated as rigid expectations of what children should achieve at a particular age. Children develop at different rates, and their progress is not always straightforward. Some may demonstrate advanced skills in one area while requiring additional support in another. Consequently, developmental expectations risk becoming labels rather than useful guidance (NAEYC, n.d.).

The crucial question is whether tracking helps practitioners understand individual children or encourages comparison with a perceived norm. If assessment focuses mainly on how far a child differs from expected developmental patterns, their individuality may be overlooked.

Practitioners may concentrate on what they believe children should be doing rather than listening to their interests, abilities and perspectives (MacDonald, 2007). Progress tracking is therefore most useful when applied flexibly alongside professional judgement, observation and an understanding of each child's circumstances. It should inform support and planning rather than define a child's potential (Welsh Government, n.d.).

Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia can both support the Unique Child through observation, relationships and attention to children's individual interests and learning processes. Compared with assessments based solely on predefined developmental expectations, these approaches can provide a broader understanding of children's abilities, communication and experiences (Cox Suárez and Daniels, 2009). Neither approach completely removes adult influence. Practitioners decide what is observed, recorded and considered meaningful, while developmental expectations may encourage comparison (Rinaldi, 2006). Time, workload and professional expertise can also affect assessment quality, particularly when supporting children with ALN and neurodivergent children.

Ultimately, how critically, sensitively and inclusively practitioners apply assessment is more important than the method alone. Children's perspectives must not only be observed but also influence how their learning is understood, recorded and planned for (MacDonald, 2007). Assessment best supports the Unique Child when it aims to understand children rather than simply measure them (Welsh Government, n.d.).

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Part 3 – word count = 1049

Are We Really Listening? Do we listen to children as much as we should?...

What would happen if we stopped asking children what they wanted to do and listened to what they were already telling us?

Imagine a child who repeatedly builds towers in the construction area. They experiment with different blocks, knock their tower down and start again. Rather than moving them towards the activity we planned, we could pause and wonder: What is this child trying to explore? What are they communicating through their play? What could we learn by following their lead? In early years practice, we often say that children's voices matter. But are children genuinely influencing what happens, or are we simply offering choices within environments that adults have already designed? Children's agency is not just about allowing children to choose between two activities. It is about recognising children as capable participants whose ideas, interests and decisions can influence their learning (Manyukhina, 2022). Yet curriculum expectations, assessment, inclusion and school readiness can sometimes make this more difficult (Baker and Le Courtois, 2022). This blog explores what genuine child agency can look like in everyday play-based practice and how practitioners can move beyond tokenistic "child voice" towards genuinely listening and responding to children.

What Do We Actually Mean by Children's Agency?

Children's agency is more than giving children choices. Asking, "Would you like the red paint or the blue paint?" gives a child a choice, but the adult has already decided that painting is

happening and has controlled the available options. Genuine agency goes further. It asks, "What would you like to explore today?" and is prepared to respond to the answer.
Agency means children have some influence over what happens to them and around them (Varpanen, 2019). This influence does not always have to be expressed through words. Children communicate their ideas and preferences through many ways.
This is particularly important when working with children who communicate differently, including children with ALN or who are neurodivergent. A child who does not verbally tell us what they want is still communicating. The challenge for practitioners is to notice these different forms of communication and take them seriously (Clark, 2017). Genuine agency begins when we stop asking only, "What did the child say?" and start asking, "What is the child showing us?"

When Does Children's Voice Become Tokenistic?

Asking children for their opinions does not automatically mean that they have genuine agency. Imagine asking, "What would you like to do today?" The children choose to build, paint or play outside. It sounds child-led, but how much influence did they actually have? The practitioner may have already decided which resources would be available, where children could go, how long they could play and what they were expected to learn. They may even have decided what would be observed and documented. This is where children's voice can become tokenistic. Children are given the opportunity to speak or choose, but their contribution does not necessarily influence what happens next (Lundy, 2007).

Supporting Agency for Children with ALN

But what if a child does not communicate their choices through speech? Children can express agency in many ways, including visual communication, gestures, objects, movement, facial expressions and alternative or augmentative communication (UNICEF, n.d.). Practitioners can also learn from children's behaviour, sensory preferences and patterns of play (Clark, 2017).
Recognising non-verbal communication does not mean that adults should automatically decide what a child is thinking or feeling. There is a risk that practitioners can unintentionally

replace the child's voice with their own interpretation. practitioners need to take time to know each individual child, observe carefully and work alongside families and other professionals who understand the child's communication. Appropriate communication systems should be used, and children should be given enough time to respond without being rushed (Doak, 2021).

Play vs Curriculum and School Readiness

In practice, practitioners cannot simply allow children to decide everything. They have responsibilities for supporting learning and development, meeting curriculum expectations, maintaining safety, completing assessment and helping children develop skills for starting school (Welsh Government, n.d.). This creates a real tension we want children to lead their learning, but adults also have expectations about what children need to learn.
The question is whether preparing children for school means turning play into a series of adult-directed activities (Welsh Government, 2023).
The adult is still supporting learning and extending children's thinking, but the child's play remains the starting point. This approach allows practitioners to meet learning goals without taking control away from children. Genuine agency therefore involves finding a balance between adult guidance and children's interests, ideas and choices (Early Years Alliance, 2025).

Observe, Don't Take Over

Assessment does not have to be the enemy of child agency. In fact, good observation can help protect it (McCracken, 2003). Instead of immediately joining or directing children's play, practitioners can watch first and ask themselves: What is this child interested in? What are they trying to communicate? What are they investigating? What choices are they making? What happens if I do not intervene? How could I extend this learning without taking control? For example, rather than constantly questioning a child during play to collect evidence of learning, a practitioner could step back and observe. They might notice a child repeatedly

testing how many blocks their structure can hold before it falls. This could then be documented and used to plan future experiences around balance, construction and problem-solving.

This approach allows assessment to become part of responsive practice rather than an interruption to play (MacDonald, 2007). Assessment should help us understand the child rather than simply measure the child.

So What Can Practitioners Actually Do?

Making children's agency real does not require completely changing your practice.

- Observe before intervening (NAEYC, n.d.).
- Follow interests (Welsh Government, n.d.).
- Offer genuine choices (Varpanen, 2019).
- Listen beyond words (UNICEF, 1989).
- Ask yourself: "What changed because of the child's voice?" (Lundy, 2007).

Ultimately, supporting agency is about being willing to listen, pause and sometimes change our plans because of what children show us (Baker and Le Courtois, 2022).

Final Call to Action

The next time you plan an activity, pause and ask yourself:

- Whose idea was it?
- Who decided what would happen?
- Could the children change the direction?
- How did you recognise their voice?
- What happened because you listened?

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