

Part 1

Challenges of implementing play-based curricula

Early childhood education plays a significant role in supporting children's learning, development and well-being. A curriculum provides a framework for educational experiences, guiding practitioners in planning, delivering and evaluating learning opportunities. Within early years education, play-based approaches recognise children as active participants in their learning, encouraging exploration, creativity and meaningful interactions (Welsh Government, 2022).

The Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach both promote child centred learning, although they differ in their underlying principles, structure and approaches to implementation. While the Curriculum for Wales provides a statutory framework for education in Wales, Reggio Emilia is an educational philosophy rooted in the social and cultural context of northern Italy (Reggio Children, n.d.).

This assignment will critically compare the pedagogical principles of both approaches, focusing on the role of practitioners and the learning environment. It will also evaluate the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing these principles within Welsh early years settings.

The curriculum for Wales, a child centered approach to learning

Introduced in 2022, the Curriculum for Wales provides a statutory framework for learners aged 3–16, promoting a holistic, child-centred approach to education. It is underpinned by four purposes, aiming to develop ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2022).

Within early years education, the curriculum places significant emphasis on play-based learning, exploration and meaningful experiences. The Welsh Government's (2023) *Enabling learning* guidance identifies three interconnected elements: enabling

adults, engaging experiences and effective environments. These highlight the importance of responsive practitioners, stimulating learning opportunities and environments that support children's independence, curiosity and development.

A key strength of the curriculum is the flexibility it provides practitioners to design learning experiences around children's individual interests, abilities and developmental needs (Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020). This allows opportunities for child-led play, outdoor exploration and practical learning, rather than relying exclusively on prescriptive teaching approaches.

However, this flexibility also presents challenges. As practitioners are responsible for interpreting guidance and designing appropriate learning experiences, implementation may vary depending on professional knowledge, confidence and available resources (Evans, 2025). Consequently, although the curriculum promotes inclusive and developmentally appropriate practice, its effectiveness depends on how successfully these principles are translated into everyday teaching.

This raises questions about whether all practitioners have sufficient support and professional development to implement the curriculum consistently.

The Reggio Emilia Approach: Children as active participants

Originating in northern Italy, the Reggio Emilia approach is a child-centred educational philosophy influenced by the work of Loris Malaguzzi. Unlike the Curriculum for Wales, it is not a statutory curriculum but an approach that views children as capable, curious and active participants in constructing their own learning (Reggio Children, n.d.).

A central principle is the 'hundred languages of children', recognising that children communicate and express their understanding through various forms, including art, movement, play and exploration. Rather than following predetermined activities, practitioners observe children's interests and collaborate with them to develop meaningful learning experiences (North American Reggio Emilia Alliance, n.d.).

The learning environment is often described as the 'third teacher', reflecting the importance of carefully designed spaces that encourage independence, creativity and discovery. Practitioners also use pedagogical documentation, including observations, photographs and children's work, to make learning visible and inform future experiences (Reggio Children, n.d.).

However, implementing these principles can present challenges. Creating stimulating environments and maintaining detailed documentation requires time, resources and professional knowledge. Furthermore, the approach originated within a particular cultural and educational context, raising questions about whether its principles can be transferred directly into Welsh early years settings (Albin-Clark, 2021).

Therefore, although Reggio Emilia offers valuable opportunities for child-centred learning, adopting its physical environments or resources alone may not reproduce its underlying philosophy. Meaningful implementation requires practitioners to understand the relationships, collaboration and reflective practices that support children's learning.

Comparing and contrasting the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia

Both the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia promote child-centred pedagogy, recognising children as active participants in their learning. However, differences emerge in how these principles are implemented. The Curriculum for Wales provides a statutory framework with expectations for progression, whereas Reggio Emilia adopts a more emergent approach, allowing learning experiences to develop through children's interests, questions and interactions (Welsh Government, 2023; Reggio Emilia Welcome, n.d.).

Both approaches recognise the importance of stimulating learning environments. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises effective environments that encourage exploration, independence and outdoor learning (Welsh Government, 2023). Similarly, Reggio Emilia views the environment as the 'third teacher', with spaces intentionally organised to encourage creativity, collaboration and discovery.

However, while the Curriculum for Wales identifies effective environments as one of three interconnected elements supporting learning (Welsh Government, 2023), Reggio Emilia places particular emphasis on how the environment influences children's relationships and developing ideas (Westerberg and Vandermaas-Peeler, 2021). This suggests that the educational value of an environment depends not only on the resources provided, but also on how spaces support children's independence, communication and collaboration.

Practitioners play a significant role in both approaches, although the extent of adult involvement requires critical consideration. Pyle and Danniels (2017) identified differing interpretations of play-based pedagogy, with some practitioners separating play from academic learning while others incorporated adult guidance. Similarly, Pyle, DeLuca and Danniels (2017) found contrasting perspectives on whether practitioners should primarily observe children's play or actively participate to extend learning. This suggests that implementing child-centred pedagogy requires professional judgement rather than simply allowing children to play independently.

Furthermore, Skene et al. (2022) found that guided play supported certain learning outcomes, particularly early mathematics, although evidence of benefits was less consistent across other developmental areas. This challenges the assumption that either child-led or adult-directed approaches are universally more effective, highlighting the importance of balancing children's autonomy with appropriate practitioner guidance.

Therefore, although both approaches value children's agency, the Curriculum for Wales requires practitioners to balance responsive learning experiences with statutory progression expectations, while Reggio Emilia places greater emphasis on emergent inquiry and collaborative documentation. These differences highlight how the wider educational framework can influence the extent to which child-centred principles are realised in practice.

Challenges of implementing play-based curricula in Wales

Despite the benefits of child-centred approaches, implementing play-based curricula presents challenges relating to professional development, resources, assessment and inclusion. Although the Curriculum for Wales promotes flexibility, its effectiveness depends on practitioners having the knowledge and confidence to translate pedagogical principles into meaningful experiences.

Professional development is a significant consideration. Research commissioned by the Welsh Government (2026) identified inconsistencies in practitioners' access to early years training, particularly in play-based pedagogy, observation and supporting learners with additional learning needs (ALN). Similarly, Johnstone (2022) highlights the importance of practitioners understanding the pedagogical principles underpinning play-based learning. This suggests that effective implementation requires sustained, context-specific professional development rather than relying solely on curriculum guidance or practitioners' existing knowledge.

Staffing and financial constraints also influence the quality of provision. Welsh Government (2026) found that increasing learner needs, alongside limited staffing and budgets, restricted some schools' ability to provide developmentally appropriate and inclusive experiences. These pressures may be particularly challenging when adopting Reggio Emilia principles, where observation, collaboration and pedagogical documentation require substantial practitioner involvement. Consequently, settings with fewer resources may struggle to provide the same opportunities for individualised learning.

Another challenge involves balancing child-led exploration with expectations for assessment and progression. Welsh Government (2026) identified uncertainty among some practitioners about evidencing children's progress through observation, with some expressing preferences for clearer benchmarks. This creates a potential tension between developmentally appropriate practice and the perceived need to demonstrate measurable outcomes. Although assessment is necessary to identify learning needs, excessive emphasis on predetermined outcomes risks reducing opportunities for spontaneous exploration.

However, these challenges do not necessarily indicate that play-based approaches are impractical. Estyn (2023) provides examples of Welsh schools successfully combining purposeful play, outdoor experiences and children's interests with opportunities to develop curriculum skills. This demonstrates that child-centred learning and educational expectations need not be incompatible, provided practitioners have appropriate support.

Nevertheless, evidence of successful practice in individual schools cannot establish that all settings have equal capacity to implement these approaches. Furthermore, the Welsh Government's (2026) qualitative study involved only 19 schools, limiting the generalisability of its findings. Therefore, successful implementation requires not only commitment to child-centred principles, but also equitable access to professional learning, appropriate staffing and effective environments, ensuring that children's educational opportunities are not disproportionately influenced by the resources available to individual settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach recognise the importance of child-centred pedagogy, stimulating learning environments and responsive practitioners. However, differences in their structure and expectations influence how these principles are implemented in practice.

This analysis has highlighted that successful implementation depends not only on educational philosophies but also on professional knowledge, available resources and institutional support. Welsh Government (2026) identifies challenges surrounding staffing, professional development and assessment, demonstrating how practical constraints can influence the delivery of play-based learning.

Ultimately, neither approach guarantees effective learning experiences simply through its adoption. Instead, practitioners must balance children's interests and autonomy with their educational responsibilities. Therefore, sustained investment in professional development and inclusive learning environments is essential to

ensuring that play-based education remains meaningful and accessible to all children.

Part 2 – The concept of the 'unique child.'

Introduction

The concept of the 'Unique Child' recognises that every child possesses individual strengths, interests, experiences and developmental needs, and learns at their own pace (Department for Education, 2026). Within play-based curricula, assessment involves observing, interpreting and documenting children's learning to inform future experiences and support individual progression. However, assessing children presents challenges, particularly when developmental expectations or practitioner judgements fail to reflect the diversity of children's abilities. Tierney (2013) emphasises the importance of fairness in assessment, raising questions about whether standardised expectations provide equitable opportunities for all learners.

This essay critically evaluates assessment practices within the Curriculum for Wales and the Reggio Emilia approach, focusing on formative assessment and pedagogical documentation. It considers how effectively these approaches recognise the Unique Child, particularly regarding additional learning needs, neurodiversity and cultural differences, while examining the potential tensions between monitoring progression and respecting individual developmental pathways.

Understanding the Unique Child: Theoretical Perspectives and Individual Development

The concept of the 'Unique Child' is underpinned by the understanding that children develop at different rates and possess individual abilities, interests and experiences that influence their learning (Department for Education, 2026). This perspective challenges the assumption that children of the same chronological age should demonstrate identical developmental achievements. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports an individualised approach, suggesting that children's learning is influenced by social interactions and the support available within their environment. Consequently, assessment should consider not only what children can achieve independently but also their emerging abilities when supported by others.

Within the Curriculum for Wales, this understanding is reflected in the recognition that progression is not necessarily linear and that learners may develop at different rates (Welsh Government, 2020). Assessment should therefore establish a holistic understanding of each child's strengths, experiences and areas for development rather than measure achievement solely against predetermined age-related expectations.

However, recognising individuality does not eliminate the need to monitor developmental progress. Assessment can identify children requiring additional support, but overly rigid interpretations of developmental expectations risk positioning differences as deficits. Parekh (2017) challenges the assumption that ability is a fixed characteristic, highlighting how educational judgements can reinforce inequalities. This raises important questions about whether assessment practices genuinely recognise children's potential or unintentionally categorise them according to normative expectations. Supporting the Unique Child therefore requires a balance between recognising individual developmental pathways and identifying appropriate opportunities for progression.

Assessment and Learner Progression within the Curriculum for Wales

Within the Curriculum for Wales, assessment is an ongoing process intended to support individual learner progression rather than measure achievement against fixed developmental expectations. Welsh Government (2020) emphasises that assessment should be embedded within everyday learning experiences, enabling practitioners to identify children's strengths, emerging abilities and areas requiring further support. In play-based environments, observations, conversations and interactions provide opportunities to assess learning and inform future provision.

Progression steps and descriptions of learning provide a framework for understanding children's development without functioning as rigid age-related checklists (Welsh Government, 2020). This flexibility supports the concept of the Unique Child by recognising individual developmental pathways. Research by Braund et al. (2021) demonstrates how formative assessment in kindergarten

involves interactions between practitioners and children, highlighting the importance of involving learners in the assessment process.

Similarly, Grimmond, Neilsen-Hewett and Howard (2022) examine the use of formative play-based assessment to inform intentional teaching, suggesting that observation can support purposeful educational decisions without removing learning from its natural context. However, the effectiveness of these approaches depends upon practitioners' ability to recognise meaningful evidence of learning. Although the Curriculum for Wales promotes individualised progression, the flexibility of observational assessment may also create inconsistencies in how children's abilities are interpreted (Hosoya et al., 2021). Consequently, supporting the Unique Child requires professional judgement that balances responsiveness to individual development with reliable evidence of progression.

Pedagogical Documentation within the Reggio Emilia Approach

Within the Reggio Emilia approach, assessment is closely connected to pedagogical documentation, which seeks to make children's learning processes visible rather than measure achievement against predetermined developmental milestones. Practitioners collect observations, photographs, conversations and examples of children's work to interpret their thinking, interests and developing understanding. Reggio Children (2024) emphasises that documentation makes both individual and collaborative learning visible, allowing practitioners to reflect upon children's experiences and inform future learning opportunities.

This approach reflects the concept of the Unique Child by recognising children as capable individuals who communicate their understanding through multiple forms of expression. Rather than focusing exclusively on developmental outcomes, documentation provides opportunities to recognise children's creativity, relationships and individual approaches to problem-solving. Albin-Clark (2021) explores how documentation of a child's water play can make learning visible while also

contributing to the child's sense of belonging. This suggests that assessment can recognise emotional and relational experiences alongside academic development.

However, pedagogical documentation is not without limitations. Albin-Clark (2021) acknowledges that documentation can be time-consuming and difficult to implement meaningfully within assessment-driven educational environments. Furthermore, the selection and interpretation of evidence remain influenced by practitioners' perspectives, potentially overlooking learning that does not align with their expectations. Consequently, although pedagogical documentation offers a holistic and child-centred approach, its effectiveness depends upon practitioners critically reflecting on their interpretations and ensuring that children's individual learning needs are recognised rather than simply celebrated.

Critical Evaluation: Assessment Fairness, Inclusion and Individual Differences

Both the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia recognise the importance of understanding children as individuals; however, their assessment approaches present different strengths and limitations. The Curriculum for Wales provides progression guidance to support practitioners in identifying learning needs, whereas Reggio Emilia places greater emphasis on interpreting children's experiences through pedagogical documentation. Although both approaches can support the Unique Child, their effectiveness depends on whether assessment practices are inclusive, equitable and responsive to individual differences.

A significant consideration is assessment fairness. Tierney (2013) argues that fairness involves more than treating learners identically, highlighting the importance of equitable opportunities to demonstrate learning. This is particularly relevant for children with additional learning needs (ALN) or neurodivergent children, who may communicate their understanding differently. For example, a child experiencing communication difficulties may demonstrate problem-solving through construction play rather than verbal explanations. Reggio Emilia's emphasis on multiple forms of expression may therefore offer greater opportunities to recognise individual strengths. However, without careful interpretation, documentation may still privilege behaviours and achievements that practitioners consider meaningful.

Similarly, although progression guidance within the Curriculum for Wales can help identify children requiring additional support, developmental expectations must be interpreted sensitively. Parekh (2017) challenges fixed understandings of ability, demonstrating how educational classifications can reinforce inequalities. This raises concerns that practitioners may unintentionally interpret developmental differences as deficiencies rather than recognise children's individual learning pathways. Nevertheless, abandoning developmental expectations entirely could create difficulties in identifying children who would benefit from timely intervention. The Welsh Additional Learning Needs Code emphasises the importance of identifying needs and planning appropriate support (Welsh Government, 2021). Therefore, individualised assessment should not mean avoiding developmental concerns, but interpreting them within each child's circumstances.

Cultural and socioeconomic differences further complicate assessment. Alsubaie (2015) discusses how linguistic and cultural diversity can influence children's educational experiences, suggesting that practitioners must avoid interpreting unfamiliar communication styles as limited understanding. Similarly, Olszewski-Kubilius and Clarenbach (2014) highlight how socioeconomic disadvantage can contribute to children's abilities being overlooked. Applied to play-based assessment, these arguments suggest that children may demonstrate different knowledge and skills because of their previous opportunities and experiences rather than their underlying potential.

However, neither assessment approach automatically eliminates practitioner bias. While pedagogical documentation provides rich evidence of children's experiences, its subjective nature can make interpretations difficult to challenge or compare. Equally, progression frameworks offer greater consistency but risk narrowing attention towards expected outcomes. Wanoa and Johnston (2020) question whether narrative approaches to assessment consistently provide sufficient information for planning children's subsequent learning, reinforcing the importance of evaluating the quality of observational evidence.

Ultimately, supporting the Unique Child requires more than selecting a particular assessment method. Practitioners must combine meaningful observations with professional reflection, children's perspectives and appropriate developmental knowledge. A flexible approach that recognises individual strengths while identifying support needs may therefore offer a more equitable balance between celebrating individuality and promoting progression.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the Curriculum for Wales and Reggio Emilia offer assessment approaches that can support the concept of the Unique Child by recognising individual strengths, experiences and developmental pathways. While the Curriculum for Wales provides progression guidance to identify learning needs and inform future teaching, Reggio Emilia's pedagogical documentation offers a more flexible means of recognising children's diverse expressions of learning. However, neither approach guarantees inclusive or equitable assessment. As Tierney (2013) emphasises, fairness requires consideration of individual circumstances rather than identical treatment, while Parekh (2017) challenges assumptions that children's abilities can be understood through fixed classifications. Therefore, effective assessment requires practitioners to balance individualised observations with appropriate developmental knowledge, ensuring that differences are not automatically interpreted as deficits. Ultimately, assessment best supports the Unique Child when it recognises children's existing capabilities, identifies opportunities for further development and remains responsive to their individual needs.

Part 3

Beyond sitting still: Supporting children with ADHD through play-based learning.

What happens when a child who learns best through movement is expected to sit still, remain quiet and concentrate for long periods?

For some children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), traditional classroom expectations can create barriers to learning, participation and well-being. ADHD can affect attention, activity levels and impulse control, although every child experiences it differently. Behaviours such as fidgeting, moving around or becoming distracted should not automatically be viewed as a lack of interest, effort or ability. Instead, they provide an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on how classroom environments and teaching approaches can better support individual needs (McDougal et al., 2023).

Play-based learning offers valuable opportunities for children to explore, move, experiment and develop skills through meaningful experiences. The Department for Education's (2026) Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework provides the wider context for supporting children's learning, development and care. Furthermore, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2018) recommends considering environmental modifications for children with ADHD, including adjustments to seating, lighting, noise levels and opportunities for movement breaks.

By introducing flexible seating, appropriate sensory resources and regular movement opportunities, practitioners can explore ways to make learning more accessible and inclusive (Unwin et al., 2024). This blog examines how early years practitioners can adapt classroom environments and implement responsive, play-based approaches to support children with ADHD, while recognising each child's individual strengths, needs and ways of learning.

More than just play: Why playtime matters

Play is much more than an opportunity for children to have fun. It plays an important role in supporting social, emotional, physical and cognitive development, allowing children to explore their interests, develop relationships and learn through meaningful experiences. Research summarised by the Education Endowment Foundation (2023) suggests that play-based learning can positively influence children's learning outcomes, although the limited evidence highlights the importance of evaluating its effectiveness.

For children with ADHD, play-based learning can provide opportunities to engage in activities that involve movement, creativity and choice, rather than relying solely on traditional adult-directed teaching. Outdoor play may be particularly valuable, providing space for physical activity, exploration and social interaction (Li et al., 2023).

However, simply providing opportunities for play does not automatically create an inclusive learning environment. Wilkes-Gillan et al. (2022) explored a peer-mediated play-based intervention involving children with ADHD, demonstrating the potential value of structured support within social play experiences.

Practitioners must therefore balance children's independence with appropriate adult guidance. Through careful observation and responsive interactions, they can recognise individual strengths, identify potential barriers and adapt play experiences to support meaningful participation.

Movement is not misbehaviour

For some children with ADHD, remaining seated and concentrating for extended periods can be challenging. However, movement is often viewed as disruptive behaviour rather than a potential way of supporting engagement and self-regulation.

Introducing regular movement breaks into classroom routines may help children manage restlessness and return to learning activities feeling more prepared to participate. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2018) recommends environmental modifications for children with ADHD, including shorter periods of concentration and opportunities for movement breaks. Simple activities such as stretching, dancing, outdoor games or incorporating movement into learning experiences can provide opportunities for physical activity without removing children from the learning environment.

Daly-Smith et al. (2018) identified potential improvements in classroom behaviour and engagement through movement breaks, although evidence of improvements in academic performance remains limited. However, as the research examined general school populations rather than specifically children with ADHD, its findings cannot automatically be applied to all children with ADHD.

Movement breaks should therefore not be viewed as a universal solution. While scheduled breaks may benefit some children, others may require more flexible opportunities to move throughout the day. Rather than expecting children to earn movement opportunities through appropriate behaviour, practitioners should consider whether movement can become a natural and accessible part of an inclusive, play-based curriculum (CAST, 2024).

Fidgeting to focus: The role of sensory resources

For some children with ADHD, fidgeting or handling objects may provide an outlet for restlessness while participating in classroom activities (McDougal et al., 2023).

Rather than automatically viewing these behaviours as distractions, practitioners should consider whether sensory resources could support children's engagement and self-regulation (Aspiranti and Hulac, 2022).

Resources such as stress balls, textured objects and fidget toys can be incorporated into classroom environments (Aspiranti and Hulac, 2022). Other adaptations, including resistance bands secured to chair legs to allow discreet leg movement, and alternative seating options such as wobble cushions or standing desks, may provide children with greater flexibility and opportunities for movement (Gochenour and Poskey, 2017).

However, research into the effectiveness of sensory resources presents conflicting findings. Graziano, Garcia and Landis (2020) found that fidget spinners were associated with poorer attention among young children with ADHD. In contrast, Aspiranti and Hulac (2022) identified improvements in on-task behaviour among three pupils with ADHD using fidget spinners. However, the small sample size limits how widely these findings can be applied.

Research by Gochenour and Poskey (2017) suggests that alternative seating may support attention among children with attention difficulties. However, findings remain mixed, highlighting the importance of evaluating whether adaptations genuinely improve children's participation rather than assuming they are universally beneficial.

Practitioners should therefore use observations, children's feedback and communication with families to identify individual preferences and evaluate effectiveness. Sensory resources should not be viewed as a universal solution, but as one possible way of creating a more flexible and inclusive learning environment.

Inclusion or compliance? Rethinking classroom expectations

When implementing an inclusive, play-based curriculum, practitioners must consider whether classroom adaptations are genuinely supporting children's learning and well-being, or simply encouraging behaviours that are more convenient for adults (CAST, 2024).

A child who sits quietly and remains still may appear engaged, but this does not necessarily mean they are learning. Equally, a child who fidgets, moves around or struggles to remain seated may still be actively listening and participating (McDougal et al., 2023). This raises an important question: are practitioners measuring children's engagement through meaningful learning experiences, or through their ability to meet traditional behavioural expectations?

The Universal Design for Learning framework (CAST, 2024) encourages practitioners to recognise individual differences and provide flexible opportunities for engagement, participation and expression. This challenges traditional expectations that all children should demonstrate learning in the same way. Similarly, NICE (2018) recommends environmental modifications based on individual needs, reinforcing the importance of adapting learning environments rather than expecting every child to respond to identical classroom expectations.

However, implementing a flexible and inclusive curriculum is not without challenges. Limited resources, staff training and differing needs within the classroom can make individualised approaches difficult to maintain. The Welsh Government (2021) emphasises person-centred practice and the importance of involving children and families in decisions about additional learning needs.

Practitioners must therefore move beyond simply managing behaviour and use observations, children's voices and reflective practice to inform meaningful adaptations. Ultimately, the success of an inclusive curriculum should be measured by children's participation, progress and well-being, rather than their ability to sit still and remain quiet.

Beyond sitting still: Time to rethink learning?

Creating an inclusive, play-based curriculum is not about expecting every child to learn in the same way, but recognising and responding to individual differences. The Welsh Government's (2022) Enabling learning guidance highlights the importance of engaging experiences, effective environments and responsive practitioners in supporting children's development. Play opportunities, movement breaks and sensory resources can all contribute to more accessible learning environments when implemented thoughtfully and evaluated regularly.

However, meaningful inclusion requires more than introducing new resources or adapting classroom routines. It requires practitioners to reflect on their own expectations, challenge traditional views of behaviour and prioritise children's participation, learning and well-being.

Perhaps it is time to stop asking why some children struggle to sit still and start asking whether sitting still should be an expectation of learning at all.

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