

Section 1

The right to play is clearly stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef 1989). The importance of ensuring children have opportunities, time and space to play freely and safely is now widely accepted. Play is in fact considered fundamental to children's development and education in the early years and underpins curriculum guidance across the United Kingdom. Play is defined by Welsh Government Wales (2014) as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated with no goal or reward.

Similarly, Bottril (2018) describes play as the most vital component for development, insisting that play should be open ended and personally chosen, offering endless possibilities and interpretations. Additionally, Pyle and Danniels (2017) stated that children's play should be freely chosen, actively engaging, opportunistic, pleasurable, creative, and concerned more with the actual play than an end goal.

In an attempt to move away from a more formal approach of the National Curriculum, The Foundation Phase made a shift away from a subject-based curriculum to an areas of learning approach providing a play-based approach to teaching and learning (Welsh Government 2015). The curriculum for Wales continued to see education make a significant move from children learning about things to actually learning to do things, creating positive dispositions towards learning. The aim of the Curriculum for Wales is to support each child to be an effective contributor, successful learner, a confident individual and a responsible citizen.

Central to the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings are five key developmental pathways. The five developmental pathways are: belonging, communication, exploration, physical development, well-being. These have been developed to support children to make progress at their own pace and in their preferred way.

In order to successfully achieve development within and across the five developmental pathways, practitioners must create enabling environments, ensure quality interactions and learning experiences.

Furthermore, Kingston and Siraj (2017) identified child centered, Well-trained staff together with Warm, responsive Adult-child interactions as particularly important for enhancing children's development.

The implementation of a play-based curriculum has both advantages and challenges. The curriculum for Wales (2020) has been designed to provide practitioners scope to develop meaningful learning through hands-on, purposeful experiences in a suitable way that meet the needs of the children. The curriculum offers schools, settings and practitioners the freedom to tailor learning to the individual needs and backgrounds of the children. This freedom allows for different support to be provided for different children, this gives autonomy to facilitators to tailor the curriculum to suit individual needs.

When the foundation phase was first introduced a positive impact on the children was evident. The aim was to ensure that all children had access to high quality opportunities to learn and experience a positive start of their education. There were, however, inconsistency issues in the delivery of the Foundation Phase across schools in Wales. According to the Welsh Government's evaluation of the Foundation phase (2015) revised training could have improved these issues. It recommended that, to improve the consistency in the quality of teaching and learning, training should be revised to improve practitioners' understanding of the play based approach. The independent stocktake of the foundation phase in Wales supported the need to enhance the quality of teaching. Ensuring practitioners have sufficient knowledge and experience to understand the principles and practices of the foundation phase, ensuring that there is a good understanding of how children learn and develop and how they can be supported.

Additionally, Van Oersa and Pompert (2021) It is important to provide practitioners with up-to-date knowledge and skills When implementing a new curriculum, Practitioners and children should be guided and supported by more knowledgeable others. The teachers and practitioners need assistance and information from knowledgeable others and the children need stimulating support from their teachers and practitioners.

The independent stocktake (2015) insisted that schools should be doing more than simply imparting knowledge. A play based curriculum means that Children learn through first-hand experiential activities through their play (Waters 2016). The Foundation Phase encouraged experiential learning, problem-solving and exploration. Gouëdard *et al.* (2020) believed that to successfully implement effective educational reform there is a need for professional learning and development to ensure everyone shares in the understanding of the curriculum. However, recognising the 'implementation gap' where there is still a challenge in regard to how to initiate change in the most suitable and effective way.

In order to reduce apprehension when implementing a play based curriculum Ashiabi (2007) explains that It is fundamental that practitioners understand the importance of play, promoting learning and development. McInnes and Birdsey (2014) state that research has shown a mismatch between how practitioners' understanding and interpretation of play reflects in practice. This identifies the likelihood of inconsistencies in terms of the role of the adult, as play facilitator. To gain understanding of play and when or how and if the adult should become part of the play is a skill. Practitioners who have a clear understanding of the Play Cycle can only improve professional practice. (King, P. and Sturrock, G. 2019) Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012) discuss that through play, children can experience and learn to adapt to a wide variety of situations. Play is fundamental to a child's holistic development, health and well-being, through play, friendships are formed and attachments can be made to adults and the surrounding environment. however ,

However, play is often not prioritised, meaning children are denied the freedom, space and time to act on their natural instincts. This is supported by Brown (2009) who states that play is not necessarily always freely chosen, personally directed or intrinsically motivated.

It is an important role of the practitioner, to use their professional knowledge to know when to join in with the child's play. by observing children's actions and language, recognising cues or invitations to join in play the practitioner can enhance the play and learning. Observations can be made, providing valuable information to be gathered to guide and support the child further (Van Oers and Pompert 2021)

Curriculum for Wales introduced the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework in 2013. This caused confusion as the focus seemed to be on children's progression being measured and scored, contradicting the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase.

Holistic development , encourages creativity and problem solving enhances language through interactions

Some challenges associated with implementing a play based curriculum in the early years include difficulty in assessing children's development and progress

Concern about meeting inspection

Resistance from traditional teaching methods

Teacher training and observation, assessment is pivotal in successful implementation

Vygotsky (1926), Piaget (1935) and Dewey (1938) had different views on learning and development, however they shared the same belief of the importance of interaction and the view of the child as a constructor of knowledge. The theorists believed that the children gain new understanding of themselves and the world around them, constructing knowledge through play, building on previous experience.

Furthermore Bruner (2009) stressed the importance of support from an adult to scaffold learning and enable progression. Adding that for scaffolding to be effective the practitioner needs to know the child, their interests, what they already know and understand to be able to build on.

A real Challenge when implementing a play based curriculum is in educating, and training early years practitioners to be knowledgeable and skillful in facilitating purposeful play. According to McInnes et al. (2011) many Early years practitioners admit to a lack of knowledge regarding play and how play relates to pedagogy meaning that although the importance and benefits of play and a play based curriculum is understood, differences in perceptions of play by practitioners could make the curriculum inconsistent in practice.

Howard and McInnes (2012) when children view an activity as play, they show signs of greater emotional well-being than when they perceive the same activity as not playing. By considering how children view experiences, practitioners can successfully create playful environments. An independent stocktake of the Foundation and Evaluating the Foundation Phase, Estyn and Welsh Government all agree that training and continued professional development for early years practitioners should recognise the importance of play and also ensure practitioners are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to reflect on the experiences of the children in their care to further enhance learning opportunities through play.

As well as training and clear knowledge and understanding by all other challenges recognised when implementing a play based curriculum include Parental understanding,

adequate resources, which may rely on funding. Recommendations suggest funding should be made available to settings who need to make outdoor space available and accessible for example, outdoor learning is a crucial component to the play based curriculum.

Melhuish et al. (2015) describes an effective educator as someone who engages in experiential, playful activities and provides stimulating, challenging environments to support children's play, exploration and curiosity. According to Abbott and Rodger (1994) many studies have recognised that the quality of Early years education and care is not so dependent on physical resources, but on the quality of the workforce working with the children and their families.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (OECD)(2012) Curriculum or learning standards can ensure even quality for Early Childhood Education and Care provision across different settings, help staff to enhance pedagogical strategies and help parents to better understand child development.

Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development,

Wales can be attributed in part to the PISA scoring 2 system (Programme for International Student Assessment). Currently Wales are scoring significantly below the World leading countries such as Singapore

Section 2

The arrangements for assessment for the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings use observations to gain information in regard to the provision that supports children's progress, taking into account the individual needs of the young children. The unique child's, language, background, ability, background are all recognised.

Practitioners should understand that all children are unique and be knowledgeable about the progression steps in children's learning (Welsh Government 2020) To support practitioners in funded non-maintained nursery settings which have adopted the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. The arrangements take account of the needs of all learners and recognise that their identity, language, ability, background and prior learning, as well as the support they may need, will differ according to their particular circumstances.

These arrangements recognise that every child is unique. Children's holistic development is supported by keeping the needs of all children at the forefront of pedagogical practice.

Assessment plays a critical role in enabling us to support children to progress at a pace that is appropriate to them, ensuring they are supported and challenged as appropriate. A holistic picture of the child, to include their strengths, the ways in which they learn and their areas for development, provide information to support further learning and teaching. Assessment should not be used to make a one-off judgment on overall achievement at a set age.

The foundation phase worked with age and stage related assessments in the early years. These are seen as a fair test as all children are assessed the same however, this can be problematic as children are not all the same, they develop at different rates. These assessments also focus on what the child cannot do rather than what the child can do, focusing on the child's weaknesses rather than their strengths. This type of assessment does not take into consideration the unique child.

According to Barber and Paul-Smith(2010) observations are pivotal in an early years setting. Practitioners can begin to understand and learn about the child's individuality by watching the children at play, supporting where necessary.

Ephgrave (2018) believes that creating a learning journey is the most beneficial assessment method using observation in an early years setting. Ephgrave, (2018)

states that the adult will begin observing the play, then assess and reflect on what they see. Planning follows in response to observations made. This enables teachable moments in a unique way tailored to each child without interrupting their play. These observations and focus will be recorded. Ephgrave (2020) explains that Children learn and develop in the moment therefore actioning their developmental support is actioned immediately. This method is more beneficial to children's holistic development. This method one hundred percent supports the vision of assessing the unique child however, the negative to this method of observation is the time it may take to provide a quality learning journey for all children. Staffing ratios and practitioners confidence may all impact on fairness and consistency of this method. Barber and Paul-Smith (2010) supports this, believing that flexible and in the moment observations result in more meaningful observations. Furthermore, Ephgrave (2020) states that the natural observations do not make the children feel like they are being tested whilst still meeting legal requirements. Ephgrave, (2018) says parents can then receive a copy of their learning journey and can add to it, allowing a positive relationship between childcare setting and home. Froebel's theory of children benefiting holistically when parents are included in their education is another positive here (Pound, 2017).

Both Ephgrave, (2020) and Paul-Smith, (2010) believe it is more beneficial for the child to be observed without adult interference. The benefit of a learning journey observation is that the well-being of the child is priority, the children are leading their own play and being observed naturally.

state staff should be knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of what they are observing Barber and Paul-Smith (2010)

The curriculum for Wales has taken inspiration from other curricula around the world. In New Zealand, Te Whāriki is a curriculum that promotes diversity with the aim to create confident and capable learners, learning journeys are used to record significant moments instead of assessing specific skills. As in the curriculum for Wales, adults look for teaching opportunities. Reflection enables adults to use the knowledge gained to

plan further meaningful experiences, designed specifically to meet the relevant to child's interests.

A guide to the new Curriculum for Wales (2022) aim is that assessment will be part of everyday learning. The children with their teachers and practitioners to understand how well they're doing. Helping the children to understand their learning style, what is important to the child and plan their next learning steps. Allowing for practitioners to become aware of any issues or extra support that may be needed to support the child.

It is crucial for the child's uniqueness to be recognised and supported. Individual diverse learning styles and interests should be seen and used as a strength. When practitioners Understand the concept of the unique child then the child's individual needs can be met.

The Welsh Government (2015) claims that assessment is vital in education. Learning is affected by progress assessment and how results of the assessments are used. However, outcomes should not dominate assessments as this can be damaging for children's learning. Additionally, Estyn reports that assessment practices are developing in schools. Regular interactions with children together with observations are helping practitioners to focus on children's achievements and development.

Section 3

The important role of the early years practitioner facilitating child initiated play in the outdoors

The Welsh Government has designed The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings to place children's well-being and development at the forefront of early childhood play, learning and care in Wales. Successful implementation of the play

based curriculum requires skilled facilitators to Ensure play is purposeful and linked to the educational framework.

The role of the professional practitioner is to support the play process, a more child-centered or child-led consideration of play and not dominate it. Appropriate links to the curriculum can be made by building on the children's interests and extending learning in meaningful ways. Children should have the opportunity to interact with their peers, enabling adults and a stimulating environment Parjono (2002) The interactions of children, the learning experiences provided for them and the environments in which learning takes place all contribute to the development within the five developmental pathways; belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and wellbeing (Welsh Government 2022)

Froebel recognised the importance of play when he opened the first kindergarten for preschool children in 1836. Froebel believed that play is the most important means of learning in early childhood and that children's understanding of the world around them is established through direct play experiences within it (Tovey 2017). Froebel also advocated outdoor learning and open-ended materials believing these encouraged children to represent their ideas, experiences and feelings. Implementing a play based curriculum in the early years involves creating environments that encourage exploration, creativity and social interaction and curiosity. White (2023) believes the adult plays a crucial role in organising an environment that stimulates the children, enabling them to follow their own interests through play.

The outdoors should be used as much if not more than the indoors. This does not mean that the indoor activities are brought outdoors but the uniqueness of the great outdoors natural learning opportunities are embraced (Bottrill 2018).

According to Robinson (2017) playing outside is an important part of enriching the quality of education. Nature is a powerful resource, by actively engaging with the world, children learn through practical, hands-on activities, drawing on their natural curiosities and intrinsic need to play.

It is vital that practitioners in settings develop a shared vision and gain knowledge to understand and appreciate the benefits of the child-led, hands-on approach as well as the holistic learning opportunities in the outdoors.

Training, knowledge and this shared vision should break down any barriers of resistance to change. Rekers and Waters-Davies (2021) points out resistance may arise where nature offers conditions for exploration and experimentation. These activities may be met with a lack of discontentment from practitioners who may feel that these activities are too messy for example rather than seeing the learning opportunities within the child led activity. Another may be the adult who stops children from moving certain items away from specific areas. The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022) states that the role of the adult is pivotal to children's progress. Practitioners should ensure children's natural curiosity is encouraged. with hand-on, authentic and meaningful experiences in which children can deeply engage in. Additionally, Pompert, Van der Meer-Wijnands and De Waard (2022) state that Play is an engaged activity. meaning children should be personally involved and allowed to follow their own ideas and interests. The children make their own choices of activities they would like to participate in. Young children need practitioners who enjoy and understand the value the outdoors has for learning, development and wellbeing. Outdoor learning is an important factor in a play based curriculum. Tinney(2020) believes that Practitioners should create environments where children want to play and engage with the natural world, materials and equipment should be added to support learning and creativity.

Case study 1 - Three children at the early years setting who evidently do not enjoy traditional school methods of schooling, were being asked to sit still, inside on the carpet for a length of time as decided by the settings routine. It was clear that they were not learning, they were being told that they were not doing the right thing, this was not a positive experience. Sitting still listening to a practitioner 'teach' indoors was not how these children were going to learn. The same three children were observed in the

outside area where they were able to lead in their own learning. The outside area provided space, time and open-ended resources for the children to play with. According to Flannigan and Dietse (2018) curiosity engages children in play and children's curiosity is inspired when exposed to interesting loose parts. Loose parts can be stimulating and challenging, encouraging divergent thinking as children make their own decisions as to what resources will work most effectively for the task. Nicholson (1971) believes that all children enjoy play. Experiment, Discovering and investigating with loose parts. Nicholson's theory of loose parts states that the level of inventiveness and creativity in an environment is relative to the amount and range of variables within it. Furthermore, Gibson (1977) explains that loose parts are of high affordance, their play is influenced by what they perceive an item to be.

Furthermore, Houser *et al* (2016) defines loose parts as variable materials that can be used in more than one way. Children can explore, investigate and experiment with the natural or manmade resources available to them. The children in this case study worked together collaborating and communicating, some displaying leadership and listening skills as they decided that they needed to move planks of wood, crates, tyres and foliage from different areas around the setting to make a fox den, for the imaginary fox that was sneaking into the garden during the night. The children were observed problem solving, physically maneuvering items of different shape, size, weight and texture. They were confidently communicating, sharing thoughts, ideas and plans. Independence and resilience were being learnt, and joy shared as the children were seen encouraging each other and celebrating their successes with excitement whilst learning holistically. The role of the adult was to firstly create the opportunity rich stimulating environment for the children to experience. The practitioner would have

made available the loose parts of high affordance. The practitioner would be present, observing, learning about those unique children, their abilities, their strengths, any weaknesses. Observing play enables future planning to suit the children's interests as

well as giving the opportunity to provide any additional support that may be needed. The practitioner will know the children and know if and when they can be involved in the play. The skilled practitioner will be looking for the opportunity for a teachable moment, or realize that the interaction is not needed and may risk hijacking the play and learning experience.

Outdoor play can be most effective in providing unstructured, open-ended play using open ended materials. Self-directed play outdoors gives children the opportunity to demonstrate skills of sustained shared thinking, communication, self awareness and empathy whilst benefiting physically and managing their own risks. (Tremblay, 2015)

Case study 2 - Two children playing together in the mud kitchen. One child took the lead providing the other child with instructions to follow, both children were engaging in roleplay, displaying imagination, and communicating with each other through language as well as facial expressions. They added different materials such as sand, mud and water, pouring different quantities and mixing to different consistencies, describing the process as they did so. Working together and in their own time they proudly served up mud cakes to friends and practitioners. The practitioner facilitated play by providing a resource rich environment. The practitioner felt this play experience needed interrupting for enhancement. The opportunity was taken however, to observe the children engaged in their play enabling assessment of the children's ability, development and progress. The children were under no pressure, unaware that they were being observed/assessed.

Children are influenced by the adults, experiences and environments they encounter. When these three work together successfully, they create a strong sense of well-being for all.

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