

Section 1

Every child as stated in article 28 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 2019) has the right to an education. A National curriculum is important as it provides a standardised framework for education and ensuring consistency what children learn across regions. A National curriculum is fabricated by the input from teachers, practitioners, the wider community and shaped by the best ideas from around the world, for example Te Whariki approach from New Zealand where children are seen as competent learners from birth and learn by engaging in meaningful interactions with people, places and things and a process that continues through life (Welsh Government, no date).

Many more young children in today's society are being enrolled in various form of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) due to parental working commitments; it is therefore important a child's well-being and development are nurtured from an early age (Wyslowska and Slot, 2020). The implementation of a play based early years curriculum is a positive continued commitment by the Welsh Government. It allows settings to implement age-appropriate activities that are tailored to each child's needs, supporting holistic development, curiosity, and lifelong learning (Welsh Government, 2019).

A curriculum needs to be reformed to meet the needs of an evolving world we live in. The process involves accessing, reviewing, and implementing changes and adopting planned and unplanned changes to the current curriculum with the intent of making teaching and learning more effective, meaningful, and improving children's outcomes (Cambridge, 2020). This section will highlight the importance of a play-based curriculum, its strengths, weaknesses and why a curriculum reform is needed in Wales.

Wales during the PISA ranking system (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2023 run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) scored the lowest out of the other three UK nations at 466 and significantly lower than countries such as Singapore, Macao and Taiwan ranking first, second and third out of 81 participating countries.

These results have prompted Education Minister, Jeremy Miles to announce in December 2023 plans to bring together education leaders across Wales to drive up standards in reading, maths and science through supporting schools (Welsh Government, 2023). These plans along with the recommendations in Education 2030 (OECD, no date) outlines the competencies and areas of learning also identified in 'Successful Futures' such as knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills to enable the New Curriculum for Wales to succeed and giving children the tools needed to adapt in a fast-paced developing world.

The Welsh Government (2017a) identified early years education as one of the areas that has the potential to make a great contribution to long term prosperity and well-being to children. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2017b) identified, early intervention can have a positive outcome to children's lives however these outcomes can only be achieved by learning and adapting together. Results demonstrated from

Ladwig and McPherson (cited in Parekh, 2017) is that practitioners shape the curriculum around the children's ability and pedagogical approaches and strategies for example, to learn mathematics successfully it requires activities and exercises that encourages a high degree of cognitive engagement, this can be extended to outside the classroom.

According to the recommendations of the Donaldson report and Welsh Government (2019) the new curriculum has benefited from the strengths of the Foundation Phase, enabling improvements. However, the Donaldson report identified sixty-eight recommendations. such as extending teachers' development and training to create a more challenging and interesting educational experience that will help the children to thrive and succeed (Donaldson, 2015). This is demonstrated in the study by Aukerman and Schuldt (cited in Parekh, 2017) where a teacher taught outside the regimented curriculum by engaging children in a dialogic pedagogy, this had a positive impact where students interaction in class increased and new knowledge learnt were used confidently, making the learning experience a positive one.

Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2015) reports both highlighted that further training was needed, nine out of the twenty-three were relating to training for leaders and practitioners to understand what the role of the adult is within the curriculum and to develop appropriate pedagogies that will support progression for all children. Furthermore, a research report by Social Mobility Commission (2020) states it is not always possible to allow the time for training due to time, budgets, staff ratios within the settings and staff lack of confidence to participate.

Bottrill (2022. p. 25) suggests play is fundamental within early years for learning and development. Furthermore, McInnes *et al* (2013) states that play is central to teaching and learning and is most beneficial when it is considered as an approach by the child's perspective. Moreover, research by Grindheim (2017) suggests that these can only be achieved by allowing multiple ways of play, such as indoors, outdoors, and messy play, giving the children the freedom to choose and to be challenged, to extend experiences and learning opportunities. This should minimise the impact of transitions, however this may take time as practitioners are used to the old system and therefore need to transition the way of observing and accessing children (Welsh Government, 2019).

McInnes *et al*. (2011) research suggested that using children's perceptions of play as a basis for understanding may be helpful and beneficial to practitioners by using a pedagogy that co-constructs activities with children. This may be achieved according to Welsh Government (2019) and the study by Howard and McInnes (2012) by observations, gaining knowledge of the children's likes and dislikes. Children may also be asked to reflect on the play experiences giving the practitioner a further insight to the children's thoughts and feelings. This will give a firm foundation in implementing suitable resources and activities for children to enjoy, learn and help with appropriate pedagogies that support progression for all children.

The Welsh Government (2014) report highlighted Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and ESTYN may need to become joint, as both inspectorates work differently. CIW offer settings support and guidance to improve, however ESTYN are less friendly

and has more of an authoritative approach. The differences may influence how settings implement changes needed to improve a curriculum, procedures, and policies.

According to Welsh Government (2019) the fundamental difference between the old and new curriculum for Wales is the four purposes. It also states that all children and young people should have the same support and consistency for a successful future by becoming, ambitious, aiming high, competent students who are eager to learn, Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world, enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work, and healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society, (Donaldson, 2015, p. 31). The curriculum is influenced by Bronfenbrenner Ecological System Theory where the child must be in the centre of any decisions made (Bradbury and Swailes 2022, p,19).

The Welsh Government (2023) states improving education is a national mission and believes it is crucial to how practitioners teach and the reason they are teaching. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2014) recommended in The Foundation Phase final report for Wales it is important practitioners need to experts and understand how young children learn. This success can only be achieved through developing suitable training that ensures all staff have a good understanding of how to support children's development and the important role of the adult (Donaldson, 2015). Furthermore, Alsubaie (2015) agrees training is important, but practitioners should also be provided with professional development opportunities and provided with the knowledge of several cultures that will help teach how to assess, train in a multicultural classroom. This will help build a positive relationship and make children feel respected and safe.

Furthermore, Peterson-Katz, *et al.* (2023) and Oberhuemer (2015) states training on its own is not enough, continual coaching and work-placed learning after training from managers or team leaders has demonstrated to be beneficial through continually gaining knowledge, confidence and strengthening the role of the practitioner in the early years setting. However, with many practitioners and teachers leaving the profession due to poor pay and increasing workload a wealth of experience and knowledge is being lost and the education sector is currently in crisis and immediate action is needed to keep experienced staff and recruit new staff (PACEY, 2023).

In conclusion, the implementation of a play-based early years curriculum is pivotal for fostering holistic child development. By emphasising experiential learning and social interaction, this approach not only supports academic growth but also nurtures essential life skills. As we reflect on the significance of play in early education, it becomes evident that a well-designed, play-centric curriculum lays the foundation for a long love of learning, encouraging creativity, curiosity, and collaboration in young minds. However, this may only be achieved if professional training of the highest calibre is made a priority.

