

Early Years Curricula

Section 1

According to Waters (2015) there was a play-based learning approach for 3–7 year olds in the Foundation Phase. Welsh Government (2008, cited in Waters, 2015) state that learning is consolidated through play and first-hand experiential activities which allow children to problem solve, experiment and take risks. This enables them to gain an understanding of themselves and the world around them. However, Wood (2009, cited in Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016) believed that when the Foundation Phase was implemented there was a limited research base on the pedagogy of play as this was a new area of learning and teaching. Therefore, it was difficult for practitioners to define, understand and implement 'best' practice. Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2015a) maintain that practitioners, teachers and headteachers should have been supported and trained in the Foundation Phase, alongside guidelines on how other policy directions like the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework linked and could be implemented within the curriculum.

Welsh Government (2023a) maintain in the New Curriculum for Wales that play and playful experiences enable learners to gain knowledge of the world they share with others and experience a variety of emotions. Welsh Government (2022a) and Welsh Government (2015b) state that through the school's play-based curriculum learners should become: healthy, confident individuals, ethical, informed citizens, enterprising, creative contributors and ambitious, capable learners. According to Gatley (2020) what makes the New Welsh Curriculum different from predecessors is that it provides aims-based education, with the aims being to ensure individuals lead fulfilling civic, personal and professional lives.

Nevertheless, OECD (2020) point out that there is a risk of disadvantaged schools facing challenges when implementing the new curriculum which emphasises the importance of clarifying the resources that are available to schools. Welsh Government (2020) states that a priority was to warrant equality for all students with regards to availability of resources. Similarly, Donaldson (2015) believes with regards to the Foundation Phase that a barrier was that disadvantaged children's personal well-being and educational achievement could be negatively affected. This meant that the Foundation Phase curriculum needed to be engaging for all children, with sufficient resources, to increase the chance of achievement. Demirbaga (2018)

states that Vygotsky believed that play is a learning tool, and the environmental opportunities have an impact on the quality of development for a child. Welsh Government (2015a) maintains that schools have additional resources for example Pupil Deprivation Grants which can mitigate the effect of poverty on educational achievement.

However, according to Welsh Government (2014) some staff delivering the Foundation Phase curriculum had low expectations towards deprived children and their families. They also showed exclusionary attitudes and blamed the parents and community, whilst others failed to engage with parents and communicate effectively. Haslip and Gullo (2017) point out that to respond better to family diversity educators need the dispositions and skills that social workers display, with the ability to connect families to community resources such as counselling services, health care and after-school care.

Fernández Santín and Feliu Torruella (2017) say that the Reggio Emilia approach places emphasis on the learning environment and views the environment as the third teacher, alongside the student and the teacher. A lot of time and effort is put into the organization of the classroom to ensure it is inviting for children to experiment, explore and investigate. Welsh Government (2014) point out that some classrooms in the Foundation Phase had a chaotic free-for-all play environment, which was ineffective due to school's lack of understanding of how to support children whilst learning through play and not structuring the environment effectively. Welsh Government (2015a) recommended in the final evaluation of the Foundation Phase that schools should be supported to re-structure and re-design their learning environments, with specialist consultants assisting with this. According to Welsh Government (2023a) for children to reach their full potential with the New Curriculum for Wales they need to learn in effective environments, which gives children varied experiences and opportunities to follow their interests whilst expressing themselves imaginatively, creatively and physically.

Welsh Government (2015a) maintains that when the Foundation Phase was introduced it enabled staff/child ratios to be improved for three to seven-year-olds. It was changed to one adult to eight children for three – five year olds and one adult to fifteen children for five - seven year olds. However, Welsh Government (2014) states

that the adult to child ratio in the reception classes needed to be reviewed as it could potentially be increased from one adult to eight children to one adult to ten children without the quality of learning being affected.

McInnes *et al.* (2011) maintains that a pedagogy that is based on a clear understanding of both learning and play, how they affect one another and the practitioner's role in facilitating learning and play is advantageous. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002, cited in McInnes *et al.*, 2013) found from the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project that a combination of child-led and adult-led activities are used in effective settings and the engagement and interactions that adults have with children should be built upon the child's own interests and activities. Bruce (2011, cited in Smedley and Hoskins, 2020) believes that Froebel's principles highlight that children's learning, development and well-being are best developed through creativity and play which is 'child-directed'. However, Bennett, Wood and Rogers (1997 cited in McInnes *et al.*, 2013) say that studies have consistently revealed that many educators are uncomfortable with play and child-led activities, and that play is regarded as inferior compared to activities regarded as work. Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland and Wollscheid (2019) point out that some teachers view curricular delivery and policy mandates as barriers when pursuing play-based learning.

Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) maintain that practitioners must understand that there are no 'simple' ways for policy-makers to create and deliver a good education system, and that understanding, identifying and responding to new pedagogical challenges is part of their ongoing professional development. Siraj and Kingston (2017) state that effective professional development enables educators the time and opportunity to link theory with practice. According to Welsh Government (2022a) it is critical that practitioners partake in professional learning and networks, this enables development of their skills, knowledge and capabilities. Welsh Government (2020) and OECD (2019a) point out that significant changes have been made to initial teacher education. Investments have been made in the national approach to educational research and enquiry, professional learning and coaching and mentoring. This ensures educators are experienced in various forms of learning and development. Smedley and Hoskins (2020) say that practitioners understanding of

learning through play would be improved if theoretical understanding is built upon through training and reflective practice, this is based on Froebel's theory.

Margolis (2020) points out that Bruner constructed the concept of scaffolding, he saw it as a teacher supporting a student to complete a task which they may not be able to accomplish independently. Also, Vygotsky (1933, cited in Margolis, 2020) introduced the 'Zone of Proximal Development' which is the gap between the actual degree of development determined by problem solving independently, and the potential level of development determined by problem solving under adult supervision or with academically advanced peers. According to Donaldson (2015) teachers need to actively engage in 'scaffolding'. Part of the 'scaffolding' process is to create environments in which learners can authenticate their ability to apply what they have learnt independently, in unfamiliar situations. Welsh Government (2023a) state that enabling adults should have the ability to know how and when to intervene to support students in constructing meaning. They should expand on children's existing knowledge and support the children's understanding through skilful interactions.

Welsh Government (2017, cited in Aldous, Evans and Penney, 2022) say that the main aim of the curriculum reform is to raise standards by reducing the achievement gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. Also, to provide an education system that inspires pride and confidence. According to Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber (2010) to develop and implement an improvement journey leaders must incorporate three aspects. The performance stage is when pupil outcomes are studied to identify where the system currently stands. Then the intervention cluster are interventions that need to be implemented to improve student outcomes. The third aspect is how the system adapts to the intervention cluster to the prevailing context. OECD (2024) maintains that three dimensions to effectively implement the Curriculum for Wales are: policy design, stakeholder engagement and policy context. It suggests building on previous progress and outlining future measures for the successful implementation of the new curriculum. It provides recommendations based on the research and develops them from a logical implementation standpoint, along with suggestions for making them actionable.

Section 2

According to Else (2014, p. 32) genetic material and the experience children have in their lives shape the fact that they are unique individuals. Connections continue to be built throughout life, although there is a 'sensitive period' in adolescence and early growth. Welsh Government (2015c) say that practitioners need an understanding of how children develop at different paces, with the ability to plan an appropriate curriculum whilst considering the skills children need to encompass to become confident learners. Dalton (2018, p. 2) states that each child has individual interests, needs and stages of development. Practitioners should consider these and utilise the information to construct enjoyable but challenging experiences for every child linking with the areas of learning. Welsh Government (2015c) maintains that children should be given the opportunity to develop at their own individual, unique pace. They develop and acquire skills at varying rates and should be given the chance to practise new skills learnt in different situations and evaluate and reflect upon their work.

Welsh Government (2017) and Welsh Government (2016) say that the Foundation Phase profiles main purpose is to provide a baseline assessment which is nationally consistent and affiliates with the end of phase outcomes. The profile also supports early identification of possible Special Educational Needs, developmental delay or additional learning needs and enables support to be put into place for children who need it. Welsh Government (2019) maintain that the baseline assessment must be done during the first six weeks of a child entering Reception and the teachers must use the compact profile scoring methods when carrying them out. However, Welsh Government (2015a) point out that initially a Child Development Assessment Profile was used for the baseline assessments but was quickly removed due to involving too much paperwork and being too time consuming.

Welsh Government (2014) states that the youngest children should be assessed only by observational practitioner or teacher assessments. Wainwright *et al.* (2016) maintain that by observing children playing in the continuous provision it assists identification of skills that need to be further developed. Welsh Government (2019) and Welsh Government (2017) state that practitioners should also carry out an end of Foundation Phase assessment against the three areas of learning within the

Foundation Phase: Language, Literacy and Communication skills, Mathematical development and Personal and Social Development, Well-Being and Cultural Diversity. Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2015a) evaluated that there needed to be more guidance materials and training, with an emphasis on assessment within the Foundation Phase. ESTYN (2011) suggests that practitioners should engage widely in professional learning and sharing good practice to strengthen their capacity to improve their teaching.

According to Welsh Government (2022a) in the new Curriculum for Wales, assessment plays an important role in making sure that each individual learner is challenged and supported accordingly. It aims to enable learner progression by supporting each learner individually, on an ongoing daily basis. Also, capturing, identifying, and reflecting on each learner's progress over time and reflecting on practice by understanding group progress. Welsh Government (2021) state that assessment arrangements support learners' progression and enables them to progress at their individual pace, whilst considering their diverse needs. According to Mistry and Sood (2015, p. 63) the formats and criteria of assessments may need to be adjusted for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to display the starting point of the learner is different. Each pupil with EAL has specific needs and should be treated as a unique individual. OECD (2020) say that adaptive online personalised assessments that align with the new Curriculum for Wales were being piloted, however the guidance on student assessment needed to be developed further. Welsh Government (2022b) maintains that online personalised assessments improved students' wellbeing, whilst letting them move at their own pace. Although there were a few issues with the Information Technology competency of the learners, in turn affecting the assessments.

Welsh Government (2022a) points out that the first step in the assessment process are 'on entry' assessments. They enable practitioners to gain knowledge about individual learners, identify where support may be needed and highlight each child's strengths. These assessments are carried out at a similar time to the baseline assessments in the Foundation Phase, therefore assessments carried out at this time must be beneficial. ESTYN (2022) believes that assessment information should be used for teachers to adapt their teaching to challenge and support pupils appropriately. Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2019)

recommended that the scoring of the assessments carried out at the end of the Foundation Phase should be reconsidered. Mathematics development, personal and social development, language, literacy and communication skills and wellbeing and cultural diversity should be assessed in year two. The personal and social development should be scored separately, rather than as a composite with other areas.

Welsh Government (2015a) and Welsh Government (2015c) point out that Foundation Phase aimed to encourage developmentally appropriate practice and the guidance refers to educating children by stage not age of development in the Literacy and Numeracy Framework. However, it continued to establish year-by-year expectation statements and involved national statutory assessments that created a score that is age-related for each child. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) maintain that each student is graded with an age adjusted score based on the national numeracy and literacy assessments. The outcome of this was that fifty percent of all students would continually be 'below average' and re-inforces that learners are expected to achieve certain levels of ability, not based on their stage of development but their age. Nevertheless, Welsh Government (2013) and Welsh Government (2023b) say that tests offer valuable information that can be engaging and encourages learners to ask questions, think carefully and review and explore ideas.

Donaldson (2015) believes that the Welsh Government aimed to improve assessment arrangements. Assessments should align with the purposes of learning, the reasons for assessment should be clear and the reports to parents and carers should focus on progress. Also, students should be engaged in their own assessments and the assessment and evaluation framework should be agreed with a clear strategy and vision. According to OECD (2013) students should be placed at the centre of the framework. Students need the ability to assess their own progress, take control of their learning and adjust their understandings to become lifelong learners. ESTYN (2022) maintains that schools should collaborate with parents on a regular basis by providing evidence of their children's progress and creating engaging opportunities to extend their learning at home. Welsh Government (2023a) says that parents should receive termly updates on how their children are progressing. This should include their well-being and key progression needs, with advice on how parents can support their child's progression.

Titley, Davies and Atherton (2020) state that Donaldson recommended a set of achievement outcomes needed to be developed as long-term reference points for each progression step in the new curriculum. Teachers are given scope to carry out assessments and plan learning due to the progression being measured at three yearly intervals. Welsh Government (2022a) maintains that progression steps are expressed through achievement outcomes and can be used as reference points to teach and plan learning. This includes assessment which can be used to monitor progression and identify interventions needed. Nevertheless, Welsh Government (2022a) say that the progression steps can be viewed as too broad by some practitioners. Similarly, according to Ministry of Education (2023) Te Whariki assessments focus on discovering what the children can do and already know, how much progression they are making, their interests and if additional support is required. This way formative assessments are used to enhance learning and support curriculum planning. However, Welsh Government (2015a) maintains that the Foundation Phase profile focused more on what children cannot do and skills that they need to improve, rather than celebrating what they have already achieved.

OECD (2019b) maintains that to build alignment with curriculum and assessment it is important to use consultation with teachers. Maude (2014, cited in OECD, 2019) points out that inclusion of teacher voices and co-construction in the development process can help prevent pitfalls such as different cross-curriculum priorities. Welsh Government (2022a) and Estyn (2022) point out that schools should have a shared understanding of assessment, progression and curriculum design. This may be through professional dialogue and learning. There should be a shared knowledge of learner advancement, including the rate at which learners may progress and expectations of what progression may look like. According to Chapman (2020) teachers working in rural school's face barriers when it comes to collaborative professional learning. They have less networking opportunities due to the time spent travelling to courses and other schools, meaning more time out of the classroom. Networking and collaboration is easier in densely populated areas. Donaldson (2015) states that professional learning courses for teachers should focus on developing their ability to assess curricular purposes and achievement outcomes throughout their careers.

Section 3

I am interested in outdoor play and believe that it is not used enough to support the curriculum, resulting in children missing out on valuable learning opportunities.

Welsh Government (2009) and Welsh Government (2022c) state that experiential learning can take place in the outdoors. The environment offers many opportunities to be noisy, move around, be creative and take risks. It develops children's creative, physical, social, personal and cultural skills. Acar (2014) and Tekakpinar and Tezer (2019) say that when the outdoors is used by children for play purposes, they gain information and learn unconsciously through observation, whilst partaking in their activities they gain experience about the environment.

According to MacQuarrie (2018) practitioners in Sweden took part in a professional development course which displayed that outdoor learning supports delivery of the curriculum. To be able to have an integrated approach to outdoor learning, teachers need to be committed and engage in the provision even though there may be limited training opportunities. Tekakpinar and Tezer (2019) say that when implementing outdoor pedagogies teachers play an important role, although when learning in the outdoors it is important that a child-centred approach is adopted. Waters and Rekers (2019) state that adults that adopt a playful pedagogy approach and direct interactions responsively towards the child's interests enhance learning opportunities. English Outdoor Council (2015) maintain that it is important that pupils engage in the planning of outdoor activities and can take ownership whilst participating. High quality outdoor learning should also involve progression and differentiation which are important aspects of the curriculum, activities should be adapted to challenge children at their appropriate levels.

Ernst (2014) points out that results of a study show that practitioners understood the positive impact outdoor experiences have on children's development, however the use of the natural outdoor setting took place occasionally, rather than regularly.

Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) maintain that despite clear connections between play, development and learning, children's outdoor play is declining. Moss (2012, cited in Waite *et al.*, 2017) says that many children do not experience much outdoor and nature contact which is concerning, especially those from more deprived areas. Brussoni (2021) states that children living in high density apartments and from low-

income households have less opportunities to participate in outdoor play. Therefore, it is important they are given opportunities to partake in outdoor play within the school environment. Bilton (2018) points out that currently children are given fewer opportunities to play outside. If they were to become teachers in the future, with lack of experience in outdoor learning they may not value the importance of it and therefore not deliver it well to future students.



Source: Woodlands Primary School, 2024

Harris (2017) maintains that Forest School takes place in some schools in Wales. It involves learning in the outdoors, often in woodland areas. The aim of Forest School is to raise self-esteem and confidence, whilst nurturing their personal, emotional and social development by partaking in teamwork. Rekers and Waters-Davies (2021, p. 157) states that Forest School is an alternative pedagogy that creates space for experiences with a broader range of socio-material affordances, but the pedagogies should not be inhibited by lack of training or understanding. Ridgers *et al.* (2012, cited in, Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) point out that the play pedagogy that is adopted during Forest School gives children the opportunity to engage in natural free play and explore their curiosity of the natural environment, whilst freely dipping in and out of activities.

According to Tovey (No date) Froebel valued outdoor adventurous play, he said that the benefits of challenging activities should outweigh the risks. Children learn about perspective, distance and height when climbing a tree and it can enable the child to feel a sense of achievement. Sandseter, Kleppe and Sando (2020) maintain that risky play takes place mostly in the outdoors and children are attracted to risky types

of play. Brussoni *et al.* (2015, cited in Sandseter, Kleppe and Sando, 2020) believes that risky play improves physical and motor competence and can lead to increased physical activity. Bento and Dias (2017) suggest that children will experience moments of failure and success in the outdoors by participating in trial and error. If children experience risky situations they learn to cope with unpredictable environments and gain confidence to face challenges.

Brussoni (2021) states that loose parts are an important feature to a high-quality outdoor space. Items like sticks, water, rocks and cardboard boxes allow children to use their imagination to shape their play. Mackley *et al.* (2022) say that Nicholson suggested enhancing outdoor environments with loose parts materials, this was drawn upon affordance theory by Gibson. The opportunities are increased for children's fantasy and creativity, and it makes the play opportunities multi-functional for children. Casey and Robertson (2019) maintain that loose parts are cheap or sometimes free and add random qualities to play, depending on what is provided. According to Piaget (1953, cited in Boulton and Thomas, 2022) schemas contribute to children's development. Children construct knowledge through the cognitive process of schemas and they aid them to actively make meaning of the world in which they live. Boulton and Thomas (2022) point out that loose parts in the outdoors support children's schemas and promote children's holistic development. This includes development of their physical, creative and cognitive abilities, due to children using them in diverse ways.



Source: Thomson, 2016

Tink *et al.* (2020) point out that practitioners often use outdoor play to document if children have received outcomes, which means that they are therefore adult-initiated interactions. They should consider whether children can experience the play as self-directed and freely chosen and if they are facilitating nature play opportunities effectively. Donison and Halsall (2023) state that it is important that practitioners allow outdoor features that interest the children to guide enquiry. This supports the children's curiosity and motivation, whilst also boosting their investment in their own learning. The Curiosity Approach (2019) say that children embark on a journey of connection, curiosity and discovery in the outdoor environment. Through experiences in the natural environment they nurture their senses, learn valuable lessons and appreciate the beauty of the Earth.

There are many valuable learning opportunities and skills that can be developed through outdoor play. As displayed above children are missing out on important experiences due to not being able to participate in outdoor play as much as they should. As the New Curriculum for Wales progresses there is hope that more importance will be placed on this, as outdoor play can link with various areas of learning and experience and help promote the four purposes.

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