

ECEY6010 : EARLY YEARS CURRICULA

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SECTION ONE

A countries education system are scored using the findings, from their programme for international students (PISA) which is an international form of assessment in which children from 15 years old take to assess their level of understanding in math's, English and science. According to Whitewick (2016) Wales is the lowest scoring country in all three disciplines. This triggered the Welsh government to focus more intently on their education systems in order to provide better and more consistent provision. OCED (2018) discusses how Wales set out to reform the education system to tackle concerns regarding student performance. The reforms' intentions were to better the quality of education provision and to develop more inclusive schools by focusing on developing a new curriculum that emphasizes the importance of professional learning. Gouëdard et al. (2020) suggests that the curriculum reform needed to happen in order to better prepare students for the everchanging future. Mourshed et.al. (2010) and OCED (no date) advises that in order for the reform to be implemented effectively the reform must be applied across the whole curriculum. This assignment will analyze potential barriers in the implementation of curriculum reform in Wales and discusses what can be done to avoid difficulties by analyzing past issues.

Play-based learning is defined by Pramling -Samuelsson and Björklund (2022) as an educational method that aims to help holistically develop children through play. The play-based curricula that I will be analyzing are the foundation phase and the curriculum for Wales. The Welsh Government's (2018,2015a) foundation phase framework defines the foundation phase as a curriculum for children aged 3-7 with an emphasis on a child's holistic development, the foundation phase was the first curriculum to have a significant change in the way that children were taught by using a more play-based approach. According to the foundation phase framework (2018,2015a) the way that the curriculum should be delivered was ensuring that the children learned through experiential hands-on learning. Halpenny and Pettersen (2013) highlight how Piaget strongly believed that active learning through free exploration was the most ideal way for a child to learn. This is supported further by Howard and McInnes (2012) who found that the levels of which a child perceived an activity as play, played a significant factor in the engagement level of the children. Donaldson's (2015) report of the foundation highlighted many strengths of the foundation phase suggesting that it was a significant strength of the education system as it provides appropriate curriculum for the development of children aged 3-7 years of age as well as ensuring those skills are developed across the 7 main areas of learning using a holistic approach. The evaluation carried out by WISERD (2015) supports this as they state that the foundation phase has

led to positive improvements in the children's education with increases in achievement wellbeing and engagement.

However, there were issues that were raised with the implementation of the curriculum. According to Siraj and Kingston (2014) independent stock take discusses the weaknesses within the implementation of the foundation phase Wales which highlighted inconsistencies in the delivery of the curriculum. WISERD (2015) and the independent stock take carried out by Siraj and Kingston (2014) highlight that the curriculum is confusing for practitioners to follow which is why it resulted in inconsistencies across settings. As well as issues with practitioners not having the training and developmental knowledge needed for effective delivery of the pedagogy. WISERD (2015) highlighted issues with settings not getting sufficient funding for resources and professional development to help practitioners implement certain aspects of the curriculum. There was inconsistency in practitioners understanding of play based or experiential outdoor learning which resulted in insufficient outdoor environments being provided by practitioners as well as reduced staff and child interactions. Whereas some settings due to uncertainty from the staff in implementing learning opportunities in the outdoors did not use outdoor environments enough or at all. In order for this to work practitioners need further professional development opportunities for them to understand the benefits of play-based and outdoor learning. So they are better equipped to provide sufficient outdoor provision as well as a better balance between structured directed learning and child-led experiential learning.

The curriculum for Wales intended to give schools more autonomy in the development of the curriculum allowing schools to create their own syllabus that suits the needs of their individual school. Drakeford (2019) stated that the new curriculum would be built on the foundations of the foundation phase Wales, suggesting that children regardless of where they go will receive engaging high quality learning experiences. The Welsh Governments (2022) curriculum for Wales framework outlines that schools are able to develop and implement their own curriculum, but they must ensure that the four main principles are at the core of the curriculum as these four purposes are intended to prepare children for the future. Evans (2023) supports this further highlighting how the curriculum for Wales allows schools to cater their curriculums to the specific needs of the students in their schools therefore it is a curriculum that acknowledges that each student is going to develop at their own pace dependent on their specific needs. Curriculum for Wales guidance (2022) holds a lot of the key principles from the foundation phase including the emphasis on play-based experiential learning and a child centered approach as well as promoting use of both indoor and outdoor learning environments. Looking back at the recommendations for the foundation phase from WISERD'S (2015) evaluation the new curriculum has managed to address recommendations provided in the evaluation in several ways. For example, WISERD

(2015) recommended that the curriculum needed to be adjusted to ensure that it was responsive to a child's individual developmental needs. This has been addressed in the curriculum for Wales guidance with the ability to create their own syllabus. Miles (2022) stated that the new curriculum is designed with the learner's progress and wellbeing at the core allowing teachers to tailor their teaching in a way that challenges and supports every student, so they are better equipped for the future. WISERD (2015) also recommended that practitioners needed to have clearer guidance on outdoor learning and integrating new learning environments into practice. The Welsh government (2023) conducted a study on the state of outdoor learning in Welsh schools to provide further insight for policymakers and local authorities in a bid for further support of outdoor learning. In the study they found that outdoor learning sessions varied in duration from school to school with some schools only partaking in 30 minute sessions to some schools having a full day outdoors. These sessions typically were small groups of children supervised by a teacher. However outdoor learning is not yet clearly defined or consistently implemented across settings. So despite them having an emphasis on the benefits of outdoor learning the Welsh Government (2023) feels that there is still work to be done in practitioners understanding of outdoor learning and improvements need to be made to the implementation of it into school curriculums. Issues with inconsistencies in the delivery across schools has also raised concerns Thomas *et al.* (2023) supports this stating that practitioners had concerns about variations in progression due to differences in the delivery.

Furthermore there has also been barriers in the implementation due to lack of confidence or hesitancy from teachers to change from what they already know. Thomas *et al.* (2023) supports this stating that there was a lack of confidence in practitioners in moving away from the well-established methods of assessment. Suggesting that more support was needed in building practitioners' confidence and ensuring they were well equipped for the change. Welsh Government (2024) highlighted the need for clearer guidance for schools in the area of assessment to better support the development of the curriculum, as well as acknowledging that schools with a more stable leadership and focused staff appeared to have less challenges in the implementation. Another barrier is lack of funding and resources to support schools in providing sufficient outdoor learning environments and experiences Welsh Government (2023) highlighted the need for better budget allocation for settings in order for them to enhance outdoor learning equipment as well as funding for practitioners to obtain further professional learning on outdoor learning so that they are better equipped to provide engaging and enabling outdoor sessions. However, this continues to be an issue as a lot of practitioners feel that relevant training and guidance is being provided for the schools. UNISON (2023) supports this discussing how teaching assistants felt that they were not given adequate training on the new curriculum and felt that they were not confident in being able to deliver the practice efficiently to support students in their progression. In order for this to

work a stronger emphasis on professional development needs to happen in order for practitioners to feel confident that they can deliver the new curriculum and best support their students. As well as better funding and support in the intergration of outdoor and play-based learning so that the students are able to fully develop the four purposes across all subjects.

The concept of the 'unique child' is for practitioners to view each child as an individual who has their own individual needs, interests and ability. The department of education (2024) early years foundation stage framework highlights the 'unique child' as a key principle that is embedded into the guidance for practitioners. The early years foundation stage (2024) recognizes that each child is an individual who develops at their own pace. Appropriate assessment is needed in order to identify areas in which children may require further support, identify any additional learning needs and to help practitioners provide provision that supports each child's individual learning journey. It is also important that we approach assessment in a way that does not hinder a child's approach to learning as this can have damaging effects on a child's mindset to learning and could hinder a child's progression if not done appropriately. As well as being able to effectively identify an individual's developmental needs so we can provide sufficient support to best scaffold their learning journey. In this section I will be critically analyzing assessment methods to see how they support the concept of the unique child as well as how effective they are in ensuring practice is inclusive and fair for the children in their care.

The early years foundation stage framework (2024) defines every child as a 'unique child' who is continuously learning, capable, confident and self-assured. The foundation phase (2015:4) supports this further stating that children must be able to develop at their own unique pace stating that children must have the opportunity to put what they have learnt into practice.

Observation-based assessment

According to the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings observation is a key role in early years practice and is something that should be child-centered, suggesting that observation allows us to determine a child's level of engagement their interests and their progress. Which allows us to inform planning of provision that better supports the children's individual learning journey. Making for a more responsive approach to assessment and learning. Practitioners can then adapt teaching to cater to their student's needs. Peterson and Elam (2020) highlight how important observation is in early childhood education suggesting that observation allows practitioners to ensure that their teaching is appropriate to the needs of the children. As it allows practitioners the opportunity to constantly revise and adapt practice in order to get the best possible outcomes for the child's progression. An example of a type of observation is spontaneous observation. Peterson and Elam (2020) define spontaneous observation as observations that happen continuously and without prior planning. Suggesting that when using this form of assessment correctly we can watch a child's progression unfold naturally. Although there are ups and downs to this method Peterson and Elam (2020) highlight that some of the advantages that spontaneous observation provide, one of these being that the practitioner can be fully present with the child and offer positive reinforcements and it is not obvious to the child that they are being assessed so they will feel more relaxed and content in the activity. Therefore, resulting in a more accurate representation of their abilities. This is important because children will act differently if they are aware that they are being assessed and in order for us to get a true representation for their abilities we want them to be able to be as authentic as possible to be able to support their progression as best we can. Furthermore, Peterson and Elam (2020) highlight that while this is a great way of observing children less obviously it can be difficult for practitioner's to remain objective and it can also lead to inaccuracies with the details of exactly what the child said or did therefore having an unclear understanding of where the child excelled and where there was room for improvement. Which makes supporting them to progress difficult as practitioners don't know what they need to teach or adapt to support them.

However, there are barriers in implementing effective observation methods. For example, for a child to be able to be fully authentically themselves they need to be comfortable in their setting and feel safe to express themselves fully. This requires practitioners to build strong relationships with the children, but this is not always a possibility due to a shortage in staff, time or large class sizes. Sancisi and Edgington (2015) support this by stating that children need to be able to feel safe and to trust us to demonstrate their capabilities. This takes time and often settings do not have time to do this therefore resulting in inaccurate recordings of a child's capabilities. Observation as

an assessment method aligns with the unique child concept as they are objective, they are inclusive of children of ALN and children from different cultural backgrounds as they identify the specific needs of a child to practitioners. According to Neaum (2016) observations allow children to be recognized as individuals as we focus on an individual child's interests and tailor a plan to support that child's own needs. However, for observation to continue to align with the unique child concept we need to ensure that observations remain unbiased, and we do not compare observations to set predetermined milestones.

The second assessment method is foundation phase profiles. Welsh government (no date) defines the foundation phase profile as a baseline assessment of a child's ability and development in the first six weeks of reception. The assessment is used on children from ages 3-7. Miller (2022) highlights that although it is generally well aligned with the pedagogical steps and can be useful for identifying additional learning needs through the baseline assessment. There is a lot of concern around the vagueness of the progression steps and many practitioners felt that it was not suitable to tailor to each individual child's own developmental needs. This is then not taking into account the concept of the unique child as if the assessment method does not allow practitioners to tailor learning to the individual developmental needs of a child effectively children may not get the support they need to progress accordingly and if a child's abilities are incorrectly determined through the baseline assessment they can end up in an inappropriate skill grouping even if they are capable of more which can negatively impact a child's approach to learning as well as their progression.

Robert-Holmes *et al.* (2018) suggests that when we group children on ability it can have a negative impact on a child's self-esteem and wellbeing and can also negatively impact their progression as lower ability groups often have less opportunities to progress than higher ability groups. However, Nomi (2009) disagrees with this stating that ability grouping in certain types of schools do not have a negative impact on academic achievement. However, children are able to pick up on which group they are in, and this can affect a child's perception of their abilities and can have an ongoing affect throughout their educational journeys. Boylan (2022) supports this further suggesting that it can negatively impact their perception of their abilities, and some students may only work at a level that is expected within their group even if they are capable of more. Therefore, having a knock-on effect later into their lives. This could result in children having a fixed mindset towards learning and could affect them reaching their full potential. Dweck (2017) defines a fixed mindset as when an individual will avoid challenges and views feedback as personal criticism. So, it is important that

practitioners and assessment methods try to encourage all children to feel capable and confident that they are supported. Boylon (2022) also highlights how it could also unintentionally emphasize already existing divides between certain students and students of minority groups. Miller (2022) also discusses how practitioners found this method of assessment time consuming and too much of a set process with little room for adaptability. Miles (2022) also discusses how practitioners felt that there was a need for clearer guidance with a more consistent and inclusive assessment framework provided.

In conclusion, the method that best supports the concept of the unique child between observations and the foundation phase profile is observations as on a whole they are quite subjective, can be done in a way that the child is unaware they are being assessed as observations can be continual and capture a child's authentic ability whereas foundation stage profiles are a very obvious method of assessment which is quite rigid in where a child should be in their learning journey with very little room for it to be adapted to an individual's developmental needs. As well as been quite time-consuming, observations can be done at any time and does not need an extensive amount of writing to track a child's progress.