

Early Years Curricula Module Assignment

Section One

Waters (2015) explains how after devolution, in 2008, and in a shift from UK Government policy the Welsh Government strived to build stronger foundations for early years children, with a deviation from their previous more formal teaching approach. Welsh Government (2015) define that this involved a play based, experiential learning pedagogy at the heart of the Foundation Phase curriculum, with the child at the centre of that curriculum and focusing on the wellbeing of children, linking with such 'good practice' approaches Te Whariki. Although Jenkin (2016) notes that there are some barriers to such 'good practices' by suggesting that practitioners are not yet competent in delivering the bi-cultural curriculum and stress that newly qualified practitioners need better preparation and fuller training to ensure they are proficient in Māori language, customs and knowledge.

Maynard *et al.* (2013) further state that the Foundation Phase had set ambitious targets and Wincott (2006) declared that after devolution the Foundation Phase was the most 'innovative' of all UK nations. Taylor *et al.* (2014) suggest that the foundation phase was a 'radical departure' from the outcome driven, assessment led education system that had been previously seen and focused more on a play-based teaching approach to learning, aligning with such approaches as Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki.

Welsh Government (2018) places great emphasis on play and the value of it for Childrens holistic development, further stating that the Foundation Phase is built on the principles of learning through play, which is an essential tool in the deliverance of the curriculum.

With Donaldson (2015) Successful Futures report suggesting a complete education overhaul was needed and a New Curriculum for Wales being commissioned did the Foundation Phase fail, or was it not implemented as intended. As Wainwright *et al.* (2016) research concluded that in settings where the Foundation phase had been implemented correctly it should be deemed as 'successful'. However, Taylor *et al.* (2014) research found that settings which had piloted the Foundation Phase achieved lower educational attainment levels than children in settings that did not attend a foundation phase pilot school. Further suggesting that this new approach might be over optimistic as children were found to have less levels of well-being and a lower level of enthusiasm for learning. It must however be noted that these setting were piloting the foundation phase, and this was not the final roll out of the foundation phase.

However, considering play to be such a fundamental part of the curriculum, Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation of the Foundation Phase research suggested that practitioners interviewed, regarding the implementation of the foundation phase, suggested the information received was often overwhelming with a vagueness to some key terms, such as the understanding of play-based learning. Further stating that this caused a variation in settings interpretation of the curriculum causing anxiety to practitioners, stating that a clear need for further and frequent training for all was necessary. However, Baldwin and Beauchamp (2014) research found that teacher confidence had improved since the Foundation Phase had been implemented and suggested that this was due to clear expectations being set out by the Foundation Phase. Although it must be stated that this research was carried out on only a small number of teachers in four settings. OECD (2018) state that investment in a Childs early years will pay dividends in a Childs later life. Further suggesting that professional development resulted in higher quality child, staff interactions and improved learning and development for children.

The benefits to a play-based curriculum such as The Foundation Phase is agreed by policy and theorists alike to have benefits to a Childs learning and development with Dewey, Montessori and Piaget all agreeing on the importance of learning through first hand experiential play experiences, as researched by Aubrey and Riley (2019) This aligns with Welsh Government (2008) who state that play has significantly led to the evolutionary development of our species. The Welsh Government (2014) further state that play is essential to enriching a Childs learning and development as this is when they master the world around them. Agreed by Brown (2011) who declares that self-directed play stimulates the brain, rousing creativity and problem-solving skills which allow Children an understanding of their world. Furthermore, Froebel as discussed by Tovey (2017) agreed that play is an essential tool to understand the world around children and is the principle means of learning in early childhood, through first-hand experiential experiences which deepen a Childs learning and understanding, as discussed by Moyles (2013). Brown and Patte (2012) researched how even early theorists such as Locke thought that a Childs development would be richer if learning were more play based. Play Wales (2018) further describe how play contributes to the resilience and welfare of children and must be personally directed and freely chosen to support their holistic development.

The Welsh Government (2008) stated that practitioners should be facilitators of learning, providing children with environments that support Childrens play and offering engaging, stimulating activities. Rymanowicz (2015) agree that an adult's role is to facilitate self-directed play in a safe, nurtured, rich and stimulating environment. Aligning with Froebel, as discussed by Bruce (2015) who declare that adults and children have different perceptions about play, with children only considering themselves at play when that play is self-directed and self-led which is when, as stated by Isaacs (2013), a Childs true potential is revealed and deep learning transpires. Furthermore, Montessori states that play allows a child to unlock their desire to learn, imploring that self-led play can lead to a Childs self-mastery (Islands Children Montessori School and Kindergarten, 2017) Howard and Mcinnes (2012) research found that when a child actually considers themselves at play, when it is self-led, self-directed and self-choosen, it increases a childs motivation, focus and well-being, providing important evidence for the value of play for Childrens wellbeing, learning and development.

However Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation stated that there were initial reservations to the implementation of the Foundation phase and a lack of sufficient understanding of key terms such as child led play and play based learning, which would have implications on a practitioner delivering the curriculum as intended. It was essential for practitioners to transform their practice to deliver The Foundation Phase as intended and support play-based learning. However, Welsh Government (2013) Evaluation previously agreed that practitioners struggled with such key terms as 'child initiated' and 'practitioner led', suggesting that these issues have not been resolved. Furthermore, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2007) highlighted that further support was needed to support practitioners in the deliverance of the pedagogy and that practitioners must be aware of child development theories to comprehend the reasons behind such a pedagogy. Donaldson (2015) agreed that a 'sound pedagogy' was pivotal in the successful deliverance of a curriculum. Waters (2015) further states that mixed messages are being received regarding the concept of play within the Foundation Phase, which can cause tensions if the idea of play is not understood, and a definition remains elusive. Further stating that if practitioners do not understand the new practice, they will revert into previous practice, meaning things will not change.

The confusion regarding definitions of key terms within the pedagogy should have been clarified with guidance and training, however both the Welsh Government (2014) Independent Stocktake, and the Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation cited further training and guidance for all involved within the Foundation Phase was needed to ensure implementation was as intended. Wainwright *et al.* (2016) agreed that practitioners need to be aware of and understand theories to fully appreciate the curriculum further stating that a pivotal issue for curriculum reform is implementing the curriculum as intended. The Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation research found that although there was a general satisfaction with training only 50% of all teachers and 30% of other practitioners in the maintained sector had completed all eight Foundation Phase training modules, however it must be noted that these figures were higher in the non-maintained sector. With the suggestions of confusion with such key terms in the Foundation Phase as 'play-based', Welsh Government (2013) Evaluation report suggested that completion targets or reports might have aided completion of this training by more practitioners. This training if delivered successfully could have ensured a consistent deliverance of the play-based Foundation Phase. Macdonald (2018) demonstrates the different layers of pedagogy interpretation as the information is passed down from Welsh Government policy level to a practitioner, demonstrating how many different interpretations there can be of the curriculum before it is delivered in practice. All layers of the model should receive the same information to ensure the intention of the curriculum is delivered correctly.

The Welsh Government (2014b) Independent Stocktake stated that there was a considerable variation of deliverance of the Foundation phase, aligned with The Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation who stated that practice varied considerably which can be partly explained by staff attitudes towards the Foundation Phase with adult led provision being observed more than child led, further stating that adults reverted back to more formal teaching to ensure end of year outcomes were met, especially during year 2 of the foundation phase where literacy and numeracy tests were completed. National Assembly for Wales (2013) declared that the Literacy and Numeracy Framework would become a statutory requirement from 2013 in a bid to drive up standards for both literacy and numeracy after concern from the PISA rankings. However, The Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation suggested this new statutory requirement was a contradiction to the Foundation phase as this type of age and stage related formal assessment did not fit with the play based, experiential learning pedagogy of the Foundation Phase. Furthermore, stating that the least observed changes to the curriculum were observed in year two, potentially due to pressures of testing. As teachers opted to remain as a more formal approach to ensure outcomes were met, due to misconceptions about play based learning being insufficient to achieve these outcomes. Statistics show that only 9% of nursery practitioners questioned found the Foundation phase curriculum different to previous systems compared to 65% of year 2 practitioners, suggesting that the variation to practice is reliant on perceptions of the Foundation Phase.

Welsh Government (2014) Stocktake and Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation both stated that professional learning was needed for a shared understanding of key terms such as play based learning. Waters and Payler (2015) further state that if professional learning is to be implemented effectively, it needs to be transformative to ensure a transformation to practice, further suggesting the professional development needs to be sustainable and systematic too. To ensure this happens Welsh Government (2014) stocktake which state that all leaders should have compulsory training on the foundation phase across the sector including head teachers, inspectors and local authority decision makers. Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation also

highlighted the importance of professional learning stating that clear guidance is required to clarify the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, to ensure practitioners have a clear understanding of children and child development. Further recommending that specific training be provided especially for those in years one and two on how to implement the Foundation Phase with a clarification and explanation of key terms. Kingston and Siraj (2017) further agree that appropriate professional learning would have helped with the implementation of the foundation phase. Welsh Government (2015) evaluation further recommended that training modules be revised to improve practitioner understanding of the pedagogy. The New Curriculum must ensure that these lessons are learned, and mandatory training or minimum levels of qualifications are acquired for practitioners to ensure that the New Curriculum is implemented as intended.

However, Evans (2022) questions how ready settings will be to practice the New Curriculum for Wales without a 'implementation phase' to support practitioners in delivering it. Further stating that without a national professional learning programme, designed to give everyone involved in delivering the New Curriculum the same consistent training and guidance, teachers and practitioners will revert to previous practice, as was seen with the foundation phase. This aligns with the findings from the Welsh Government (2014) Stocktake and Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation which found that there was a lack of clear consistent training and guidance, which highlights how lessons have not been learned and recommendations have not been acted on if the same issues are still being identified seven years later.

Donaldson (2015) stated that the current system is no longer fit for purpose and practitioners need to refrain from the idea that they are just telling children information to learn, stating Children need to learn through hands on experimental challenges. Which aligns with Robinson (2016) who agreed that the current education system is out of date and was designed with the thoughts of enlightening children, further stating that the education system needs to completely come away from the idea of standardisation including standardized testing. However, Donaldson (2015) further recognises that the Foundation Phase was a real strength in which the New Curriculum is built, suggesting that where the Foundation Phase was implemented correctly, there will be little change seen in practice when implementing the New Curriculum. One of the catalysts for education reform in Wales is that Wales remains the lowest UK country in the Pisa ranking systems. OECD (2017) acknowledges how the poor PISA results in 2011 sparked an ambitious educational reform, further stating that the 2015 PISA results were too soon to acknowledge whether any positives had started to develop from the changes. However, Wightwick (2019) states in his report that although Wales have made improvements in reading, maths and science, they were still below average of 'developed nations' The report also declared a decrease to the levels of Childrens wellbeing in comparison to other countries, with 54% of Welsh children 'feeling miserable' compared to 39% internationally. A Childs wellbeing is imperative to a Childs learning as demonstrated by Maslow (2013) hierarchy of needs who discuss how a Childs basic needs must be fulfilled to reach a level of self-actualization suggesting that children learn and develop best when their wellbeing levels are high. It also must be noted that the Pisa ratings are yet to be released which coincides with children who have completed the Foundation Phase to fully understand the effect of the Foundation phase on the Welsh education system.

Mourshed *et al.* (2010) stated that to reform the education system, everything must fundamentally change, not just the curriculum as happened with the Foundation phase but the training, the assessment process, the inspections, the teaching practice as otherwise nothing

will change. Aligned with the OECD (no date) which state that all related elements of the curriculum must change to ensure success as is happening with the New Curriculum for Wales. As previously mentioned, Welsh Government (2015) stated that play was a fundamental part of the foundation phase and without full understanding of a play-based curriculum and the theoretical learnings behind that, the curriculum was unable to be delivered as intended. OECD (2017) further state that to ensure this educational reform is effective and although improvements have been made, Wales must continue to strengthen the implementation process and invest in key policy areas.

Section Two

Mclachlan *et al.* (2013) state that children have the right to be assessed and for any needs to be supported to extend their learning and development. Tierney (2013) suggest that ideally assessments must be fair for all children, however suggest it arguable in practice, further stating that standardized testing had become the norm. However, through theory and research, educational reform has increased with a focus on authentic, formative assessments designed to consider the individual child. Tierney (2013) further contemplates how these sorts of assessments, such as reflective journals, have barriers such as time constraints and contemplate how they may actually be more unfair due to adult interpretations or perceptions of situations. Taylor *et al.* (2014) stated that the foundation phase had moved away from the more formal assessment-based curriculum and involved a more developmental approach, looking at children developing in stages and not ages. With a particular thought on preparing children for learning and ensuring high levels of wellbeing, as opposed to testing to aid attainment in later years. Welsh Government (2017) state that the current assessment tool, of the foundation phase profile, is to ensure a nationally recognised baseline of Children's development is recorded, to align with end of phase outcomes, which take place through observations and assessments. Therefore, due to this pressure to achieve the end of year outcomes, which dictate a school's reputation and their potential funding, focus is directed towards achieving these outcomes rather than following the current curriculum, as suggested by Welsh Government (2015). Welsh Government (2014) stocktake further recognised that years one and two especially were more formal than the foundation phase intended, suggesting that the outcome driven ideals had prevented teachers from engaging with a play-based curriculum. However, Welsh Government (2022) state that assessments should be used to support learning and development and not to judge schools against.

Howard and McInnes (2012) state that to construct a play-based curriculum practitioners need to understand child development, allow for experiential learning and must be provided with the autonomy to provide that, and agree that the play-based pedagogy of the foundation phase has been misplaced due to outcome pressures. Welsh Government (2015) agree that practitioners need a clear understanding of child development and the individual child. Howard and McInnes (2012) research stated that when a child was observed in an adult led activity negative behaviours were displayed meaning that any observation captured would not be a true reflection of what a child can do. Pacey (2016) agrees that a greater observation will be captured if the child is engaged in self-directed play.

Robinson (2016) states that the categorization of children by age does not allow for the uniqueness of children to be accounted for, as all children are placed into one box and grouped in accordance with their age, whilst not considering that children develop at different rates, at

different times and these children could have 11 months difference between them in one school year. Welsh Government (2015) foundation phase state that children develop at their own individual rate and must be allowed to do so, however an age and stage method of assessing children does not allow for this type of individual development as outcomes are there to be reached at certain milestones, therefore contradicting the message.

However, if there is no standardisation how will it be apparent if a child is not developing or needs additional support? Welsh Government (2017) stated that the aim of the foundation phase profile was to support practitioners to develop an appropriate curriculum for children, whilst supporting early identification of additional learning needs.

OECD (2017) state that although Wales has a comprehensive education system, that emphasises the individual child, practitioners are not always able to adapt to individual learning needs, as differentiative teaching strategies and assessments are underdeveloped. Further stating that Wales must develop a new system of assessment, evaluation and accountability to achieve a successful educational reform.

Welsh Government (2022) state that the assessment purpose is to support each individual child, to progress at a rate that is appropriate to them, whilst being challenged and supported. Further suggesting that the current assessment procedure does not align with the Curriculum for Wales and will therefore be removed from the curriculum, whilst introducing new requirements to support the individual child to learn and progress.

Welsh Government (2020) state that within the new Curriculum for Wales progression steps, year one and year two markers have been introduced as guides to allow for the realisation of any additional support which is needed. Welsh Government (2022) state that the assessment procedure is designed to support each individual child, ensuring a child is progressing and highlighting any additional support which is needed.

Welsh Government (2022) further state that the new curriculum focuses on what a child can do and identifies strengths with the language used, within the progression steps, such as 'I can retell stories' which focuses on the child as a competent learner and is in contrast with the foundation phase, which uses a deficit model of focusing on what children cannot do, which then drove planning to allow those skills to be realised.

Karlsdottir and Garoarsdottir (2010) research, on implementing learning stories as an assessment method in Icelandic schools, states that learning stories enable practitioners to focus on a child capability and the strengths of individual children, which in turn enhances knowledge of the individual child and builds relations. Escamilla (2021) agree that learning stories break away from the deficit model used by such curriculums as the foundation phase.

Karlsdottir and Garoarsdottir (2010) state that practitioners must have an understanding of child development the theory behind that and see the child as a competent member of society valuing their ideas and views as opposed to a deficit model of assessment.

The Welsh Government (2015) foundation phase describe how children are unique, acquire skills and develop at different rates which should be allowed and encouraged. Further stating that a practitioner's role is to afford children opportunities to apply these skills, reflect and evaluate them whilst being respected, valued and encouraged. However, The Dell Primary Schools (2020) state that the new curriculum for Wales affords practitioners the autonomy to design a 'bespoke curriculum' for the needs of each individual child, as every child has their individual wants and needs. This autonomy allows the practitioner to provide meaningful activities to children and is more adaptable to further follow Childrens interests which is in contrast to the set curriculum of the foundation phase.

The Welsh Government (2020) New Curriculum for Wales now aligns with the ideas of Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki, who consider the child as competent and capable and focuses on what the child can do. And include progression steps which are broad statements which can be used in many contexts in many situations allowing for more autonomy for the teacher and allows them to follow the individual Childs interests to help them achieve these steps. Further stating that they are not applied to an age or year group which allows a fluidity of assessment and a more responsive individualized curriculum. Sinnema *et al.* (2020) consider how although autonomy given to practitioners evoke greater job satisfaction it can also increase workload which might be daunting for practitioners and training and guidance will need to ensure that the pedagogy is fully understood, and teachers are confident enough to trust the curriculum to allow the outcomes to reveal themselves.

Te Whariki and their concept of assessment through learning stories share comparisons with the transition between the foundation phase and the curriculum for Wales as suggested by Educational Leadership Project (2019) who state that learning stories were introduced as a method of assessment as the current assessment method did not align with the new curriculum of Te Whariki, which was based on lifelong learning, belonging and well-being. Further stating that if the current assessment procedure continued it would not allow the benefits of the new curriculum to show, as Te Whariki saw the child as capable and competent and no longer allowed for a checklist assessment approach.

Ministry of Education (2017) state that their assessment method is to support planning and the individual child in the form of learning stories, which over time will produce a picture of the Childs development, ensuring any assessment captures strengths, abilities and competencies and include input from the practitioner, the child and parent.

Carr and Lee (2019) state that learning stories provide a resource to document a Childs development and improve planning, based on the interests of individual children. Escamilla (2021) further states that learning stories are a narrative tool to reflect on a Childs education, a story which is written to the child and shared with their family. Which includes observations, photographs and Childrens displays that are organized and displayed to share with the child and their families. With practitioners observing, writing, reflecting and documenting to assess Childrens progress which can be used to identify developmental milestones with links to specific measures, however suggesting that practitioners must see children as competent learners to achieve this. Furthermore, Southcott (2015) state practitioners must choose an appropriate moment to engage in a learning story without constraints of such barriers as time with a genuine interest in exploring a Childs thinking.

Knauf (2018) suggest that the purpose of a learning story is to narrate an important situation for the child. This should be child centred holistic and non-standardized. However, this could arguably be an adults perceived account of an activity based on preconceptions. Alexander (no date) agrees that practitioners need a good knowledge of child development and the individual child to ensure a true reflection of the child is captured and assumptions of language or behaviour are not made. Furthermore, stating that other barriers include time restraints with each story taking time to write up and design, ensuring all children have enough learning stories to form a holistic picture of their development is challenging. However, it must be noted that digital advances are aiding this. Perkins (2013) suggest that there has not been enough training or guidance on observing children and writing effective learning stories for practitioners. Furthermore, the Education Review Office (2007) report suggests that practitioners struggled with the learning story framework however described how sufficient resources were available.

Their research demonstrated that half of the settings did not focus on Childrens learning during observations and only the enjoyment children were getting from the activity.

However, Zhang (2016) suggests that assessment should use multiple methods that depends on the individual child/situation and that using one method could be limiting children and their development. McLachlan (2018) agree that practitioners need to be aware of and be able to use an array of assessment methods which must be based on strong evidence to create a complete holistic picture of a Childs development and to support planning. Further stating that collecting evidence and photos is not enough and this evidence needs analysing and scrutinising to create the assessment.

Section Three

Welsh Government (2010) pledges that all children should have access to rich stimulating environments free from inappropriate risk and full of challenge. But are adults taking all the risk out of Childrens play? Thinking back to a treasured childhood memory will probably evoke memories of the be an outdoors, exploring with friends ‘the great unknown’ with the only rules of ‘being home for tea’. However, in the current climate children are supervised to their local playground which has a rubber floor and plastic rubber slides, a lifetime away from scrapping your knee on the gravel floor or grazes from tall metal slides which seemed to radiate heat in the summer!

Risky play increases independence, resilience whilst boosting self confidence and self-esteem and is used across the world in many educational approaches and is the main concept of the Scandinavian approach.

Donaldson (2015) states that the new curriculum will create risk takers and problem solvers, who are ready for challenge. But children must be afforded these opportunities from parents, care givers and practitioners to take risks, test boundaries, to be given the trust to make mistakes and learn from them which will in turn build their resilience for later life, preparing them for adulthood.

Beate *et al.* (2011) consider how parents try to limit risk and risky experiences due to their anxiety's and them linking risk with danger. Perhaps placing their own fears about risk on their children. Brown (2013) further suggests that western societies have become risk averse with play deprivation increasing. With the technological advances and children spending more and more time looking at screens and less time playing outdoors, risky outdoor play activities are becoming ‘old fashioned’. Gill (2007) suggests reasons for parents limiting outdoor play could be media reports of anti-social behaviour, not understanding the benefits of risky play and time restraints due to extra-curricular activities and homework. However, this is limiting children and potentially taking away a Childs freedom, whilst also not giving children the life experience they will need as adults.

Whilst it can be debated that the world has changed and ‘Things were different in my day’, allowing children to take risks does not mean leaving them to it. Brussoni (2021) discusses how a seventeen second rule can give an adult time to see what a child is capable of. If an adult sees a child climbing a tree, instead of shouting ‘stop’ or ‘no’ or ‘get down’ count to seventeen which will give the adult and the child time to see what they can do. Allowing time for the child to test their ideas, process those emotions and problem solve perhaps even with a hint of encouragement from the adult, which could boost self esteem and self confidence. Then maybe the next time they climb a tree it will feel a little easier, or in later life when that child is

attending a job interview, that child will be able to process those nerves, just like he did at that tree.

Little (2013) research found that although mothers realised the benefits of risk taking, they stated that their concerns for their children outweighed the benefits therefore avoiding risk taking situations, whereas Storli and Sanseter (2017) suggested that generally fathers encourage risk taking in children, and took it as their parental role to encourage this.

Brussoni *et al.* (2012) suggest that to keep children safe they must be allowed to take and manage risks in an outdoor risky play environment as this is how children learn, through experience.

Moyles (2013) considers how it isn't only parents but also settings that have become risk adverse, but state how imperative risk taking is to a child's holistic development with settings being the ideal safe space for children to explore risk taking. This risk aversion could also be a lack of knowledge regarding child development, accident concerns or litigation worries.

However, Play Wales (2018) describe how policies and procedures are in place to minimise risk and encourage practitioners to ensure children experience risky play to prepare them for adult life. further suggesting that settings offering a risk and challenge experience will limit children looking for this excitement in less appropriate places or situations.

Storli and Sanseter (2017) even suggest that practitioners intervene and limit risky play at settings when they should be encouraging children and increasing confidence. As practitioners our role is to provide children with opportunities to take risk whilst not placing them in danger this involves practitioners thinking positively, applying common sense and giving plenty of time and opportunity. Health and safety executive (2012) suggest practitioners deal with risk appropriately and a balance is needed to ensure the benefits for children are afforded most weighing up the risks and the benefits recommending the risk benefit approach to play. Bumps cuts and bruises are a beneficial tool to children allowing them to understand their bodies what they can do I'm not they can't most always giving children a story to tell.

Without risk we are setting children up to fail. And whilst it is natural to want to keep children safe, not allowing for any risk taking can stifle social and emotional growth. Meanwhile risk taking is where children learn valuable life lessons, where they learn self-regulation whilst they experiment with how their bodies work and the limits to which they can push it. As adults we need to encourage, reassure and support children to grasp the world with both hands and make use of opportunities that come their way without saddling them with the anxieties and doubts of the adult.

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