

The Foundation Phase and Early Years Curricula

ECEY6001/C

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Section 1

Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports.

The Welsh Government highlights the importance of working within what is best for children, for children to thrive, reach their full potential and have the best opportunities in life. This is supported by the Welsh Government's 7 core aims (Gov.Wales, 2015). These 7 core aims are part of a Welsh Government programme that supports children and young people in Wales that is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and uses the Convention as the foundation for all its work for children and young people in Wales (Playwales, 2021). In order for children to thrive and reach their full potential, they need a positive learning journey of development through their early years. In Wales the early years for children are seen as the most important years of their development. The Welsh government defines the early years as 'the period of life from birth to the end of the foundation phase or 0 -7 years of age' (childreninWales, no date). For children, the early years lay the foundations for future development, and over recent years there has become an increasing awareness that the learning experiences in children's early years has a great impact on their future and lifelong learning (early-education.org, no date).

Over recent years, early years education in Wales has received a great amount of attention as a result of the theories of early years educators and continuous studies that highlight the importance and value of education and development for children through their early years. In 2008, the Welsh Government started the journey of implementing a new holistic play based learning framework for children ages Three to Seven, this was the beginning of the foundation phase (Tandfonline, no date). With increasing awareness, past researchers identified the importance of physical literacy, and the value that it holds in children's development. Wainwright et.al (2006) wrote an article that discusses a study that examined what the Foundation Phase was and how it was carried out in schools. Mixed methods were used as part of the study to determine the standard of curriculum implementation in schools that identified as showing good practice. The outcome of the study was that most schools were implementing the Foundation Phase in line with policies, and due to this children were independent, motivated active learners and were progressing in the development of physical literacy (Wainwright et al, 2006).

It is important to know how children develop, then create an appropriate curriculum that takes into consideration children's development needs, that support them in being confident learners (early years.wales, 2015). This began back in 2001, when the National Assembly for Wales created a vision document that set out the intention of building stronger foundations in education for learners in primary schools with great improvement for early years provision. Due to the National Assembly for Wales vision document 'The Learning Country', the Foundation Phase 3 - 7 years was born (Waters, J. 2016). The Learning Country document set out the details for the Foundation Phase aged 3 - 7 years, which included developing a curriculum that linked and strengthened the principles and practice already embedded within the existing curriculum document, for children aged 3-5 years. Waters (2016) states that with this improved programme of study a rich curriculum under seven Areas of Learning for children in the Foundation Phase would be created (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). The Foundation Phase ages 3 - 7 years is where play and experiential learning are the pedagogical priorities, steering away from the more formal approaches. Waters (2016) stated that within these initial more formal approaches, there was concern, supported by research literature (Welsh Assembly, 2001) about the 'detrimental' effect of an overly formal approach to early years education for children below the age of 6. So along with the evolution of education with the creation of The Foundation Phase came the play-based approach to learning for 3-7 year olds with an emphasis on personal development and well-being of the children.

At the base of the Foundation Phase are important theories that link to early childhood development and education. The links from the theories of early educators from the early twentieth century are still related to the aspects and approaches in education and play today (Open.edu, no date).

Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasised the need for children to explore and experiment for themselves (Macblain, 2018). In his theory Piaget suggested that play was a means that gave children the opportunity to develop and process concepts before they have the ability to think in the abstract.

In addition to Piaget, Friedrich Froebel is another early educator, and one of the most influential pioneers of early childhood education and care. Froebel argues that children learn best through self activity and play (Macblain, 2018).

Friedrich Froebel was one of the first theorists to fully acknowledge the value of play and its importance for children's learning and social and emotional development.

Froebel believed strongly in the importance of children being active and learning through engaging in tasks that are purposeful. Aspects of Froebel's original ideas continue to influence thinking and practice within the early years today. His thoughts and ideas about the importance of play in the early years are very much still used to help add structure to learning and activities. With heavy influence from these early educators, education for children has continued to gain significant amounts of attention over recent years, with the most recent focus on the approach of play based learning, and the importance of play based learning in the early years.

As young children are naturally curious and inspired to play, a play based learning programme builds on this by adopting play as a context for learning. Research shows that play based learning supports and enhances children's developmental and academic outcomes (Fleer, 2017). But alongside this, it can support children and young people for success in the 21st century, by teaching them relevant life skills. Implementing play based learning approaches into education will allow many opportunities for children to experiment, discover, explore and solve problems in playful ways. Implementing play based learning approaches, and successfully integrating play into classrooms has its challenges. The Evaluation of the Foundation Phase report (2015) highlights that the introduction of the Foundation Phase has largely improved children's educational achievements and well-being, and with this progress, there is potential for children to reach even greater educational success as they continue to grow up and develop. However, recommendations made within the document identify that many practitioners did not understand play or the importance of it. Recommendation 5 from the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase report (2015) states that through training and guidance for practitioners, specific attention should be given to practitioners on how to use the Foundation Phase pedagogies. The particular areas of uncertainty were highlighted as the following areas: Learning through play, formal and informal teaching, child-initiated activities, practitioner-initiated and practitioner-directed activities and observation (Wales.gov, 2015). Recommendations made by the report highlight that there were issues in implementing the foundation phase, due to inconsistencies in the understanding of play from teachers and practitioners. Recommendation 11 of the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase states that there is need for extra follow-up of training in the Foundation Phase, meaning that training support officers need to routinely visit teachers and practitioners in their schools after participation in training programmes to further support implementation within the Foundation Phase.

Since 2015, Wales has been on the journey to remake and improve the curriculum in Wales. Since 2014 this reform has been put in place to reshape, improve and re-organise education in Wales (Gov.Wales, 2020). In order to move forward with education in Wales, it is important to know where we have been in order to progress. As the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase highlighted issues with implementation of play based learning in the Foundation Phase the was an early years curriculum that was based on active learning through play and seemed capable of increasing the engagement, enjoyment, creativity and achievement of young children. The motivation behind the New Curriculum for Wales is for practitioners to decide on appropriate content for the curriculum and its delivery so that they could provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children (early years.Wales, 2020). Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

The new curriculum for Wales gives opportunities to schools to have much more freedom to design their curriculum through pedagogical approaches and the learning needs of pupils.

The new curriculum will require all practitioners to re-visit and refresh their skills and knowledge to successfully deliver a new curriculum.

The main aims of the New Curriculum for Wales set out by professor Donaldson's report 'Successful Futures' are set out to raise children's standards of achievement, enhance positive attitudes to learning, enable all learners to benefit from educational opportunities later in their lives, and to help them become an active citizen within their community (Gov.Wales, 2018).

Whilst looking at the new curriculum for Wales as a whole, we know that it is made in Wales but shaped from the best around the world, and that there are theories that underpin it.

Wales has put a considerably large amount of effort into being internationally connected, learning from the best education systems from around the world to be the best. Drawing specific attention to early years education in Italy. This is where the Reggio Emilia approach is used.

According to an article 'Through a different lens: exploring Reggio Emilia in a Welsh context, 2010' following a travel exhibition where teachers secured funding for a project to explore Reggio Emilia philosophy and practice to gain insight into their way of thinking, practices and pedagogy. The article concluded that moving away from a subject centred approach, especially when Framework includes guided learning outcomes, may be extremely challenging for teachers (Maynard, 2010). The Reggio Emilia approach to early years education means children are in charge of their own learning, it sees children as curious individuals that hold both power and potential to develop and learn from their surrounding environment and the relationships they build within it (day nurseries, 2021). The Reggio Emilia approach puts the child central to the philosophy. And instead of viewing children as having needs that need to be fulfilled, they are viewed as strong and intelligent individuals that should be given every opportunity to reach their full potential. This is in line with the UNCRC. Article 6, which states that Governments must do all they can to ensure that all children survive and develop to their full potential (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

'Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before' (Malaguzzi).

By giving Wales a new curriculum that makes learning more experience-based, and by giving teachers the flexibility to deliver in more creative ways that suit the learners, so teachers will have more freedom to teach in ways they feel will have the best outcomes for their learners.

Section 2

Critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play based curricula.

In 2004 the foundation phase approach to early years education was introduced in Wales, this was fully implemented in 2008. This was a major development for education in Wales and marked the departure from the assessment driven, competency based programme to early years education that existed via the national curriculum prior to the foundation phase. The Foundation Phase was developed as a form of summative assessment, using observations and formative assessments to build up a whole picture of children's development and abilities in key areas. The Foundation Phase Profile handbook (2017) mentions that in order to support children at their different developmental stages throughout the Foundation Phase, they need practitioners that observe, assess and plan carefully for their developmental needs and interests and to include children in the process (Gov.Wales 2018). Within the Foundation Phase, observation plays a key role in everyday practice, the main reasons for observing children are to decide where they are on the learning continuum to be able to progress them, and to identify strengths and weaknesses. It is said that through observation, practitioners can gather evidence before and after children have been taught skills as well as over a period of time. This allows practitioners to assess the progress that children make and whether they need further opportunities to support and reinforce their learning.

According to Estyn (2019) a method of assessment that is currently used by many schools in Wales is a progress tracking system that supports pupils to achieve targets. An example school that uses this method is Pentrehafod school, and Estyn (2019) highlights that the progress tracking system that Pentrehafod School has developed coordinates well with attainment levels and well-being, that provides a more rounded approach to learners progress, and stated that this method of assessment allows teachers to identify and issues early on then apply the most effective intervention at the earliest opportunity to support the learners. The system continually gathers a wide range of information to ensure targeted support to raise individual's aspirations. Estyn (2019) then mentions that this progress tracking method promotes a more holistic approach, and has contributed to an improvement in academic outcomes and increased a sense of well-being for pupils. Pentrehafod School developed this tracking system as a whole school approach. The school has a very diverse range of pupils, this includes 29% of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. Around 34% of pupils are on the special educational needs register, of whom 5% have statements of special educational needs. Very few pupils speak Welsh at home, around 84% of pupils are from a White British ethnic background,

and around 15% of learners speak English as an additional language. So given the diversity of pupils at the school, the school states that this approach has contributed to an improvement in academic outcomes for students and an improved sense of wellbeing for many (Pentrehafod, no date).

A current theorist that supports gaining outcomes over a long period for children is Reuven Feuerstein, within his theory of Instrumental and Enrichment. A great strength of Feuerstein's theory is that he places children's potential for learning at the heart of it (Feuerstein, R., Rand, Y., Hoffman, M. & Miller, R., 1980). Feuerstein highlighted the importance of adults creating a purposeful learning environment where children have the opportunity to realize their potential, rather than working towards anticipated abilities (MacBlain, 2018). Anticipated abilities or age and stage models

As well as this, there were other aspects of Feuerstein's theory that are relevant today; he highlighted the important distinction between Two different assessment methods. These are 'static' assessment and 'dynamic' assessment methods. Static assessment refers to a test situation where children are tested on a particular day at a particular time and for a specific duration, with results being accepted as an accurate measure of children's ability (MacBlain, 2014). However, he states that with dynamic assessment it takes place over time with more emphasis on children's potential to learn with the right environment and the right guidance. With dynamic assessment a child could be asked to attempt a task, and afterwards the outcome is recorded and they would then be given a number of strategies by their teacher or practitioner to support the ongoing development of skills for the task. As the dynamic assessment method is used over a long period of time and sets strategies to work towards, this provides learners with the chance to remain focussed, motivated and determined to succeed and reach their highest potential.

There is a strong case for change for education in Wales (Donaldson, 2015) as firstly, the current curriculum does not seem effective to guarantee the quality of learning experiences for all students in Wales for the future. And Professor Donaldson's report 'Successful Futures' explains that the review process for the New Curriculum for Wales proposes simplification of assessment arrangements as well as a stronger role for assessment to support children's learning (Gov.Wales,2018). The successful Futures report also mentioned that assessment is an essential part of effective learning and reporting on learners' achievement, and that the current assessment arrangements are seen as confusing. Effective assessment arrangements need to be put in place to give clear understanding on what needs to be learned and best ways to gather evidence about achievement. The report also suggests that the Welsh Government should develop its own assessment and evaluation framework, and shouldn't depend on external or internal tests which can fail to reflect the curriculum (gov.Wales, 2018). Ideally future assessment arrangements should involve all learners within it, this will encourage them to take greater responsibility for their own learning if they are involved and encourage future

development. With the New Curriculum for Wales upon us, educational settings in Wales are working hard to promote holistic well-being and positive learning experiences within children's education in Wales. Central to the New Curriculum for Wales is continuous learner progression from ages 3 to 16. There is an awareness that every pupil will be on an individual journey, with progression steps along the way, meaning every pupil should experience a sense of progress through their time in education, and therefore suggests that the way the current curriculum Foundation Phase is separated into phases and key stages is no longer appropriate (Gov.Wales, 2018). The progression steps approach to assessment should be identified within each Area of Learning and Experience for the New Curriculum, and should be designed for all learners. It should offer opportunities for learners that develop skills and knowledge earlier and support learners whose progress is slower. Achievements will then be characterized from the learner's point of view, using 'I have', for experiences and 'I can' for outcomes. As the New Curriculum for Wales has led education giving the opportunity to place children at the heart of it, it will be operating effectively in line with the UNCRC article that states all children have a voice (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). The concept of the unique child is based on children's well-being and recognises that from the earliest age children are competent learners and they develop in individual ways (Warwick, 2019). And it is because of this 'unique child' concept that children will be respected and valued for who they are. It is inclusive to all children from all backgrounds and will promote diversity in education and classrooms for all children in Wales. Drawing specific attention to the concept of the unique child and recognizing international influences??? Te whariki, New Zealand's national early years curriculum. where Learning and teaching is individualised for children.

"Children are competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society." (Aka.org.nz, 2020). New Zealand have a 'Learning Stories' approach to early years assessment, and this is mainly in the format of observation and documentation. Within this approach, the role of practitioners is to observe and listen as children explore through play based learning, then create a story about what has been seen to share with children and their families (naeyc.org, 2016). For individual children a story about themselves can be very powerful and meaningful, and can display more than a score or a checklist of skills for young children. Because a learning story is written specifically to an individual child, it is easy for teachers and practitioners to write and for both the child and their families to understand. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) 2016, a learning story is always a positive one about children's strengths, good ideas, qualities and character. Learning stories can be a way that the Welsh Government can promote the unique and individual child within the New Curriculum for Wales. To replace current assessment arrangements in Wales with the approach of learning stories would give an enormous shift to education in Wales. And with the New Curriculum for Wales

upon us with children at the heart of it, learning stories would be an ideal way that children could progress in their development and learning as it promotes the 'unique child' alongside promoting play based learning. However, this may mean that teachers and practitioners would need more training and gain more knowledge in order for it to be implemented appropriately and successfully. Successful implementation of the learning stories approach would mean that teachers and practitioners would be able to strengthen relationships with children by empowering them and connecting with their families.

Section 3

Write a blog suitable for a professional publication Linked to considerations needed when implementing a play based curriculum.

Play based learning: and why we should consider more outdoor learning in the curriculum within early years settings, to improve the holistic wellbeing of children.

As early years settings are now opening up for all children after the COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown, now would be a convenient time for practitioners in the early years settings to consider more outdoor play based learning. I for one have certainly spent more time doing play based learning activities outside with my child, and have seen a great positive impact on his development and wellbeing. However we have been fortunate with living in a non deprived area, those in more deprived areas may have had less experience being outdoors with nature. And since the pandemic there has been an increase in learning via screen time.

Play based learning is a key element when planning a curriculum as it is a pedagogical approach, and is becoming a more common approach. It can easily be supported by teachers by creating a conducive atmosphere and stimulating environment, to allow for responsive interaction. The teacher has a part to play in discussing, embedding, and extending the learning with students (Unicef, 2018). It is important when considering implementing this approach to think of the methodological difficulties of assessing methods that are part of multi-component interventions that are, by definition, unstructured. However, more research is needed to fully understand the effects of different play-based approaches (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). I believe that it is important that practitioners have the knowledge needed on the benefits that outdoor play based learning has on a child's holistic wellbeing, especially with the new curriculum for Wales 2022 now upon us, and it has more emphasis on holistic well-being.

Even though the current curriculum for early years (especially foundation phase) has great emphasis on the importance of outdoor activity. And several surveys from the foundation phase Wales across the years say that outdoors is top of the list of places that children want to be (White, 2014). Yet previous research has shown that across the years the majority of schools across Wales were failing to meet 120 minutes of physical activity a week. Let alone participating in play based learning outside. I personally believe that this may be due to the fact there is not enough knowledge and research on the benefits of play based learning outside. I know that many parents' time used for homeschooling through the pandemic were all on screen, there were only two outdoor activities set by the teacher. Parents have also mentioned that they felt that there was no range of provision or balance. It has been said that children who miss the experience of outdoor play based learning are significantly deprived, as it is known as a vital tool to help the progression of development, health and holistic wellbeing.

It goes without saying that health and wellbeing is of paramount importance, more so now during the current changes and challenges we face. I feel that by allowing children to be a part of play based learning outside, they are less likely to show signs of lack of concentration and frustration. I myself feel free when exploring outside, let alone how children feel, my son much prefers to be outside than inside. Studies have suggested that those who participate in more outdoor learning have illustrated greater behavioural, social, emotional and cognitive skills (Siskind et al, 2020). That is without the mental and physical benefits the outdoor environment has on the children. More than 1 in 4 children in Wales age 4-5 is obese, what better opportunity than now to consider this figure when implementing play based learning outside (Senedd.Wales, 2019).

Play based learning enhances development and over 30 years scientific research states that the most important years for development are the early years birth to 8 years. These years are critical for wellbeing, cognitive competence, social physical and mental health, and if we combine this with the benefits of being outside sounds like the perfect combination. In order to implement successful play based learning it is important to give children the time and space to learn and understand the outside environment. One approach that supports pedagogy and play based learning outside is the Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia approach to education came about after the second world war in 1963 in the Northern town of Reggio Emilia in Italy. This approach sees the outdoors as a third teacher, it allows children to be in charge of their own learning by viewing them as curious individuals with the ability and potential to develop and learn from their surrounding environment and the relationships they build within it (daynurseries, 2021). This allows learning to be driven by children by taking an active role in co-constructing their own knowledge and by giving children control over the direction of their learning. This encourages all kinds of learning and development including self-expression, confidence, communication, thinking and problem-solving for children, and all by the means of play, no budget needed. The back garden definitely counts, and they'll never know!

The deliberate focus on establishing an appreciation for the outdoors encourages awe and wonder for the natural world, which also underpins substantive sustainability education while also effectively supporting pupil's wellbeing. From Planting seeds to growing your own herbs, it all counts! And to incorporate this type of approach would have been a great way to promote children's active learning through the Covid-19 pandemic as I remember the first lockdown to be a very sunny one, and this giving great opportunities to be outdoors and explore. Children are influenced by everything that is around them and the environment itself acts as a 'third teacher'. Even now, whilst restrictions are easing, there is still a great opportunity to incorporate an approach such as the Reggio Emilia approach into play based active learning for the early years, it would be a great benefit to our New Curriculum for Wales 2022 as it will enhance and maximise children's learning through offering a balanced, well rounded, holistic approach to education. In conclusion, I'm sure we can all agree that outdoor play and active play has many benefits for children. Not only for their physical health but also for their emotional well-being and promoting a healthy lifestyle. They will gain healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

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