

Portfolio

Section 1

Settings across Wales began their implementation of Donaldson's new Successful Futures Curriculum in September 2022 (Welsh Government, 2015a). This marked the beginning of the end of the Foundation Phase in Wales which was first implemented in 2010 (Welsh Government, 2015b), in line with the Education Reform Act 1988. The Foundation Phase aimed to encourage children by learning through play and exploring the world around them, broadening their imagination and creativity and making learning exciting and effective (Early Years Wales, 2020). However, it can be argued that this did not necessarily happen in all settings across Wales, as suggested by the Evaluation Report (Welsh Government, 2015c). This portfolio will critically analyse how effectively the Foundation Phase was implemented as a play based curriculum and explore the factors that may have resulted in its breakdown.

The Foundation Phase is an example of a play based curriculum in Wales. In the Foundation Phase Framework document (Welsh Government, 2015b, p.3) it is outlined that the curriculum should support children's first hand learning experiences, with 'the very serious business of 'play' providing the vehicle'. This means that children's learning should be supported by practitioners in the form of play where possible. In addition to this, it acknowledges that progress and development is not the same for every child, (this is also supported by the Life Start Foundation, 2022) thus one of the core focuses of the curriculum is to support the ranging needs of all children (Welsh Government, 2015b). This is a stark contrast in approach to learning compared with the previously implemented National Curriculum which expected all settings to teach the same subjects and content with limited flexibility. This was a more regimented system with the idea of play not even acknowledged as a method of learning, regardless of a child's ability (STEM, No Date).

The Evaluation report on the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015c) suggests that there have been overall improvements regarding children's development as a result of the Foundation Phase implementation. However, Wightwick (2016) explains that the 2016 PISA results for Wales shows that the improvements within schools has not been as positive as it may seem. Welsh Parliament (2021) further supports Wightwick's idea, by explaining that even in the 2018 PISA results, Wales continued to rank the lowest of the UK countries. Although these assessments involve young people of 15 years old, do these results indicate poor foundations of early years curriculum implementation in these children's early childhood?

Sylva et al. (2014) and Allen (2011) supports this suggestion by explaining it is widely understood that early childhood education is crucial for the continuation of impactful learning in the later stages of life. However, Winckler (2016) argues that PISA results are not as useful and enlightening as they statistically appear. In fact, she explains that they do not measure the 7 areas of learning in regards to child exploration and play, or what the new Successful Futures Curriculum considers to be the most important objectives of teaching and learning - the four purposes and the new areas of learning (Welsh Government, 2015d).

Another example of play based curriculum implementation for comparison is the Reggio Emilia Approach. It's philosophy and pedagogy is centred around the child and their learning within the community (Reggio Emilia, 2022). This follows a socio-constructivist approach, similar to Te Whariki and its Vygotskian influence (New Zealand Government, 2020). Children are able to explore and learn by creating their own work, they build relationships through play and explore the natural world with the encouragement of practitioners to use a hands-on approach. In addition, Malaguzzi (the founder of the Reggio Emilia Approach) believed children have 100 languages and ways in which to learn (Reggio Emilia Australia, 2021). Therefore, the Reggio Emilia approach in comparison to the Foundation Phase as a 'play based' curriculum differs significantly.

The Evaluation Report on the foundation phase outlines that there are contradictions and incompetency's between its pledge of creating experiential learning experiences through play for every child verses the reality of how settings have struggled to meet its expectations (Welsh Government, 2015c). Evans (2013) supports this by describing how an independent review into the implementation of the Foundation Phase shows differing attitudes and levels of understanding from headteachers and practitioners concerning what was required of them in order to implement the curriculum successfully. ESTYN (2011) further supports Evans (2013) and Welsh Government (2015c) by saying in some primary schools, practitioners have not taken the time to fully understand the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase Curriculum. This has led to staff not having full confidence in its educational value for children (Welsh Government, 2015c).

As a result of these findings, the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales found that there were differing variations in the quality of delivery of the foundation phase as a play based curriculum across settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014). This supports the

idea that the overall implementation of the Foundation Phase as a play based curriculum did not quite have the roll out and impact the Welsh Government intended.

One reason for the varied implementation of a 'play based' curriculum across settings is the possible lack of training opportunities for practitioners. Siraj states in the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2014), that although the curriculum was implemented well in the majority of settings, in the minority, practitioners were expected to understand the Foundation Phase curriculum documents without appropriate support from the people who created them. Siraj said about the findings, the future development of the Foundation Phase will continue to be problematic with further professional development implications (Welsh Government, 2014). This suggested that without intervention and support for practitioners on implementing the Foundation Phase, it would continue to lack its full potential in settings.

Waters (2015) agrees with Siraj's findings, by stating further support was needed for staff to enforce implementation, but without this support practitioners reverted back to more formal ways of teaching and did not fully pursue the expectations of the Foundation Phase. She further suggests that in moving forwards with the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2015a), it is important for the government to provide high-quality training and continuous professional development opportunities for staff to ensure the curriculum is effectively implemented at all times.

However, it is not just practitioners and early years settings staff that need the relevant training in implementing a play based curriculum. The Stocktake report showed inconsistencies and variabilities between maintained and non-maintained settings across Wales regarding ESTYN inspection results (Welsh Government, 2014). This is because education and care settings have historically been kept separate and therefore have different procedures for curriculum development and inspections (ESTYN, 2014 and McDonald, 2018). Therefore, stakeholders and officials without 'boots on the ground' should also have the appropriate training to ensure everybody is on the same page when it comes to curriculum policies and implementation. This is supported by the OECD (No Date) who explain one element such as assessment methods or curriculum implementation may only be useful if other areas are also changed as well.

An improvement on education and care settings working together can be observed in ESTYN (2019)'s report, as it states that in 2019, ESTYN and CIW began using a joint inspection framework to inspect their settings. This ensures the quality of care and education for all

children up to the age of 12, including examining the quality of leadership and support in these settings. Therefore, this enforces new training for both ESTYN and CIW inspectors, and inspections going forward for the new Successful Futures Curriculum should intertwine across all settings in Wales to help implement a play based curriculum.

Overall, the implementation of a 'play based' Foundation Phase had its implications which reduced the effectiveness of the curriculum for children. Due to lack of training and support, practitioners across settings in Wales regressed back to previous ways of teaching children as they struggled to understand what a 'play based' curriculum really meant (Welsh Government, 2014). Donaldson's refresh of the 'out of date' Foundation Phase offers solutions to the problems embedded within the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015a), and he states 'schools should be doing more than just imparting knowledge' (Welsh Government, 2015a, p.17).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the Foundation Phase roll out of a 'play based' curriculum was not fully understood the same by all schools and practitioners. This resulted in varied implementation methods and mixed messages being relayed in settings across Wales and in some cases, a regression back to more formal implementation methods of the previous National Curriculum. Therefore, the new Successful Futures curriculum rollout must be clearer for all settings to have a mutual understanding on what implementing a 'play based' curriculum means.

Section 2

Early Years Matters (2022) explains that the 'unique child' matures and develops in their own individual way and in their own time. Because of this, the core holistic approach of a play-based curriculum such as the Foundation Phase aims to support children with differing needs and levels of development (Welsh Government, 2015b). The Centre for Educational Neuroscience (No Date) supports the idea of the 'unique child' by saying that every child has a different learning style, and therefore they develop at different rates physically, socially and emotionally. However, Piaget's theory of cognitive development contradicts this view, as he believes there are 4 stages of growth that children should reach by a certain age (McLeod, 2022a), suggesting a lack of acknowledgement towards the idea that all children develop and learn differently.

A practitioner's role in early years settings is to support every child and their individual needs, by providing the resources and tools for them to further their learning. In addition, practitioners should provide an interesting and enabling environment for children to explore and learn

through the medium of play (Learning Through Landscapes, 2013). Rose and Rogers (2012) supports this view by explaining that an early years practitioner consists of ‘7 selves’, including being a creator, facilitator, observer, assessor, communicator, carer and critical reflector. Therefore, it is the adult’s responsibility to provide all children with equal opportunities to learning regardless of their abilities, their backgrounds, race or beliefs - to name a few. This is in line with the Equality Act 2010 which is further supported by the Department for Education (2014).

With this in mind, current assessment methods within the Foundation Phase may conflict with the idea that all children are unique and develop at different stages and times. For example, the Foundation Phase Profile is a guide to assessing young children’s development in different educational areas such as oracy, literacy, reading and writing (Welsh Government, 2017). It sets out age and stage related outcomes that children are expected to reach by certain ages or classes within schools. This goes against the principles and ideas of the ‘play based’ curriculum first set out by the Welsh Government (2015b). Data collected from practitioners in schools supports the idea that the Foundation Phase Profile is contradictory with the Foundation Phase Framework and its principles (Welsh Government, 2022). Staff raised concerns over the pressure and expectations of teachers to get children to reach specific stages by certain ages. They continued by stating that due to pressure, limited time and resources, children were often sitting at desks with work sheets in an attempt to ensure that targets were met for both teachers and pupils. Therefore, this is not an inclusive method of assessment when considering the ‘unique’ child.

In contrast, Te Whariki is the Curriculum for the Early Years followed by practitioners in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2022). It is a play based curriculum focussed on ensuring children can feel safe, feel a sense of belonging, can focus on building relationships, are able to play and are encouraged to understand their feelings and the world around them (New Zealand Government, 2020).

Their methods of assessment include using learning stories, which allows practitioners to observe children from a distance and record what learning has taken place. In addition, the children’s work is not interfered with by staff and no child is judged based on their ability in relation to their age or stage of development. By assessing children this way in a more relaxed approach, there is no pressure on practitioners or children to reach targets – it is tailored to meet

the needs of every child. Observations are often kept in a portfolio alongside children's work for reference and to share their progression with their parents (The Education Hub, 2020).

Te Whariki assessment methods keep in line with their original principles, allowing children to grow and learn freely, enabling the voice of the child (UNICEF, 2019). By using learning stories, the unique child and their abilities are fully considered in the eyes of the practitioner and the government. McLeod (2022b) describes Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of which Te Whariki follows. He says that the unique child will learn with the encouragement of other knowledgeable adults. Practitioners implementing the Te Whariki curriculum facilitate the development of children's wellbeing, learning and desire to lead and explore.

It is important to note that the children learning through the Te Whariki curriculum do not realise they are being assessed and observed as it is done through watching and looking at their work. Perera (2021) explains that this is the best method of assessment, as children can change their behaviour or level of effort if they know they are being observed. This is known as the Hawthorne Effect and this approach allows all children to be themselves, and to be observed and assessed equally.

There are similarities between Donaldson's Successful Futures Curriculum and the Te Whariki curriculum in New Zealand. For example, both curriculums encourage practitioners to guide and teach children and learn through experiences (Welsh Government, 2015a and New Zealand Government, 2020). The new Curriculum for Wales intends to change the way children are observed and assessed in settings to a more flexible approach of using progression steps within areas of learning. Practitioners have voiced their support for this change as they believe this relieves the pressure on staff and children to meet specific targets (Wavehill, 2015). Progression steps for the 6 areas of learning all consist of words such as 'I can' and 'I have'. This shows there is less of a focus on formal achievements in regards to age or school year (Welsh Government, 2015a).

To further support the idea that assessment methods need to change, in 2013 Lewis (2014) announced a two-phase approach towards reviewing the current on-entry assessment arrangements for pupils within schools in Wales in the Foundation Phase. He said that over time, assessment methods should all support and underpin each other.

In conclusion, it is clear that the Foundation Phase curriculum steered towards a more formal approach to assessment, tracking and observation through the Foundation Phase Profile (Welsh Government, 2017). This proved to be a contradiction compared to the Foundation Phase

Framework which specifically stressed the importance of the ‘unique child’ and catering to all abilities and needs (Welsh Government, 2015b). The Curriculum for Wales by Donaldson has similarities to both the Foundation Phase and Te Whariki forms of assessment. For example, there still seems to be an expectation for children to reach a general level of development by a specific stage (albeit with more flexibility on the time scales in which they ‘should’ do so). However, practitioners are being encouraged to step back and facilitate children’s learning in line with the new progression steps for each area of learning within the curriculum, thus accommodating the ‘unique’ child (Welsh Government, 2018).

Section 3

Outdoor learning and play: the key to children’s education and well-being.

Outdoor learning through play can be difficult to define, however the Institute for Outdoor Learning (2021) explains it as child-led exploration through experiences in the outdoors, which leads to effective learning and understanding of the world around us (This is also support by the Froebel Trust, 2022). As part of the 4 purposes of the new Curriculum for Wales, it outlines the importance of learning outdoors and creating ambitious, capable learners and ethical informed citizens of Wales and the world (Welsh Government, 2015a). This is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31, which states the child’s right to have fun and learn through play (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, it is essential for children to have access to outdoor environments to support their learning in the new Curriculum for Wales.

Learning Through Landscapes (2022) explains the Welsh Government highlights the outdoors as an integral part of a child’s education, which is why it is imbedded into the 4 purposes of the Successful Futures Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015a). Attenborough (2014) supports this view by stating ‘Children need to have contact with nature on a daily basis. Access to open space aids concentration and learning’. So, what are the benefits to learning in the outdoors and why should it be a key part of children’s education?

In line with Froebel’s theory to learning, there are a range of benefits to a child’s learning when they have the opportunity to engage in outdoor self-directed play activities (White, 2020). Howard and McInnes (2012) explains that children learn when they are exploring through play as they are enjoying engaging in the activities without the interference of practitioners. Hollis Montessori School (2018) further supports Howard and McInnes (2012) by explaining children will understand new scientific and mathematical concepts by exploring their outdoor

environments. Therefore, they are more likely to investigate, ask questions and get excited about the learning they are doing. This allows adults to respond to children through sustained-shared thinking by showing their own enthusiasm and interest on the topic, expanding children's knowledge and encourages even deeper learning (National Communication Association, 2014). Therefore, this supports the idea that outdoor learning experiences will help facilitate children's learning if implemented within the new Curriculum for Wales.

Scottish Government (2020) says that outdoor play based learning also improves children's physical health as they are more physically active. This contributes to stronger respiratory health, healthier weight and increased bone density through exposure to vitamin D. Children are also exposed to higher levels of bacteria, which helps strengthen their immune systems. This is in line with Article 24 of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2019). Therefore, this supports one of the new Curriculum for Wales purposes which aims to encourage children to become 'healthy and confident individuals' (Welsh Government, 2015d).

Outdoor learning and play also provides major benefits to children's health and well-being. Prisk and Cusworth (2018) explains that children's lives are influenced by many stress factors much more today than in the past and are under increasing pressure to succeed. These factors include social media pressures, bullying and pressure to reach academic goals. Local Government Association (2022) explains 1 in 6 children have difficulties regarding their mental health and wellbeing and therefore it is crucial according to Aurora Early Education (2022) that adults support the healthy development of children from as early as birth.

Therefore, getting children to learn outdoors and play in nature can help naturally de-clutter the mind and reduce their stress levels. This supports the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales as health and wellbeing is at the centre of importance for children's education. (Welsh Government, 2015a).

In Scandinavian countries, children do not have to start school until they are 6 or 7 years old (Sweden, 2021). They spend their early years mostly outdoors where play and outdoor living is at the forefront of learning and children's individual needs and interests are catered to. The Scandinavian School and Culture Centre (2022) believes pre-school aged children (0-5) should be guided by effective pedagogical approaches through play, allowing them to flourish into confident individuals. This view is in line with the ideas and aims of creating healthy and confident children through learning experiences in the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2015a). Tovey (2016) further supports and encourages outdoor learning as she

states that children are spending too much time in the classroom and are disconnecting with the natural world around them from which they can learn a great amount.

In conclusion, the Successful Futures curriculum highlights the importance of allowing children to learn through outdoor experiences and encourages practitioners to incorporate these experiences into educational activities as part of its implementation in schools from 2022 (Welsh Government, 2015a). It is clear that outdoor learning through play in the outdoors has a wealth of benefits for young children's holistic development as well as their educational growth. Therefore, it is greatly beneficial for outdoor environments to be used as a part of children's learning within the new Curriculum for Wales and practitioners should make use of the available resources and environments to accommodate these aims.

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