

Comparing Early Years Education in England and Scandinavian countries: What is the best approach to learning, through play or Formal Assessment

Early education for children is crucial in providing a role that shapes a child's development, fundamentally influencing their academic, social, and emotional growth. This paper aims to explore the strengths and limitations from two curricular approaches from the EYFS in England and the Scandinavian Early Years Education. Exploring the difference between these two educational models and how their best approaches through formal assessment or observation support children in practice.

Exploring Foundations: EYFS and Scandinavian Early Years Education

The Scandinavian early years embraces outdoor learning that is known as forest kindergartens, Frobel (1837), created the institution that was focused on play-based learning, and then renaming it Kindergartens in (1840), this early year's education was developed originally in Germany and was later adopted by Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. This approach to learning is rooted in Froebelian principles which focus on emphasising play, creativity and a deep connection with the natural world. Frobel (1837) expressed that children should engage in nature and outdoor learning. The Scandinavian Early Years Education is to encourage children to explore nature, develop their independence, and learn to take calculated risks in a safe environment. Froebel (1837) suggested that child-led play is the basis for physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual development. According to Bruce (2012), citing Frobel's remark, 'begin where the learner is, not where the learner ought to be', (p.30). (Bruce, 2012: 30) also stated that Frobel suggested that the 'children should be recognised in their essential nature and be allowed to use their energy freely in all their aspects'. The role of the adult is to act as a facilitator, to observe and to encourage and enable children to play and explore. In the forest kindergarten adults in the setting believe that children are able to naturally assess their own limits and rarely intervene. Piaget's (1920), theory of cognitive development, believed that children learn more effectively when they are exploring the world around them and making use of all of their senses. Allowing for child-led activities that are created by the enabling environment just as much as the practitioner, being out in the natural world results in longer physical activity, creating positive interactions with their peers and educators, encouraging the engagement of exploration in the natural environment. Piaget (1919) suggested that a child's play and intellectual development are entwined, he believed as children grow so should their environment. This all has a positive impact on supporting children's physical,

cognitive, social, and emotional development. Forest school in the Scandinavian early years is a separate program unlike the EYFS that has a structured program that practitioners follow. The Scandinavian countries have an early years curriculum. The curriculum is completely different from the structured and assessment model unlike that of the EYFS curriculum. Play is considered to be the foundation of learning and is highly valued as the route to self-expression, creativity, imagination and independent learning. Children from the Scandinavian countries will start school from the age of 6 or 7 years, this gives the children a longer time in the early years setting, particularly focusing on social, emotional and physical development. Froebel (1837) believed that 'children develop at their own rate and this should be respected'. This curriculum is a national framework that is flexible, and teachers are able to adapt learning to the needs and interests of the children; they do not tend to follow structured and rigid lesson plans. According to the 'Nordic Model' (2022) of the (ECEC) has become synonymous with a holistic approach, children's rights are based on the approach to pedagogy. The philosophy of the curriculum is rooted in play-based, child-centered learning and is a flexible framework. Sweden's Education Act (2010) also known as Skollagen (2010:800) and Swedish parliament, (2011), outlines the framework for the entire Swedish education. The focus of the curriculum greatly emphasises social-emotional development and creativity. Independence and outdoor learning and exploration. Outdoor learning is daily and the whole focus on the curriculum, forest kindergartens are commonly known as the early years education that is provided. There is minimal formal assessment, and the practitioners are there to observe and support development and not test the children on their development. According to the Swedish Education Act (2010) only the teacher will make assessments of the children, the educators in this early year's setting are highly trained and trusted to adapt learning to the individual child's learning and pace. (Skollagen 2010:800) An action plan must be put in place by the teachers, in consultation with learners, their parents and specialist support teachers if needs are identified. The Scandinavian early years has a family centered approach, according to journal (Supporting families in the early years in Scandinavian) (2015).

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

(GOV. UK, no date) the Early Years foundation Stage sets the standards for learning and development for children from birth to 5 years of age. Building a secure foundation, promoting teaching and learning to ensure a child's 'school readiness' (EYFS) statutory framework, (2024). The curriculum in the EYFS is what the setting wants children to learn, by referring to the framework of the early years foundation stage, practitioners can judge the

best way on how to deliver teaching by creating a curriculum that will serve a purpose, meeting the needs of all children in the cohort. To have an effective curriculum the practitioners must create and plan activities, play, and teaching experiences to ensure that their children are developing. Practitioners should refer to scaffolding to ensure children are able to meet their learning goals, Interventions and challenges can be put into place to allow for further progression supporting the level of development for each child and encouraging ambition. (GOV.UK, no date). Providing effective pedagogy, to teach what practitioners want children to learn, enables children to become ambitious and practitioners should consider what children know, what they can do and build on their strengths and weaknesses. Vygotsky (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) under an adult's guidance allows for the child's actual development level. According to the (EYFS, 2024), Statutory framework practitioners should be reflective to make their teaching adaptive as, their children in the EYFS are expected that they should meet their early learning goals (ELGs). Achieving these goals helps to support the practitioner to determine if a child will meet the criteria for their readiness for 'being year one ready'. The early years statutory framework (2024) states that it is the education providers that decide how they deliver learning and development requirements. While the framework also states that the government curricular guidance for the EYFS, can be supported by Development Matters, this guidance is non-statutory, and is in place to help early years practitioners to design an effective early years curriculum. To meet the needs of the child, building on the strengths that are observed from the adult and setting out guidance in pathways and stages of the child's development. According to the guidance of Development Matters (2021), practitioners can use this guidance to make sure the children are secure in their earlier steps before moving on to the next step. The role of the adult in the EYFS is to model and adult-guided learning and to observe throughout, according to (Behrend,1990), there is shared understanding emerges between a student and teacher when they work together on a task. Vygotsky (1979) "the more knowledgeable other" believed that children learned from social interaction. Also, suggesting that imaginary play was vital for a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Enabling the children the chance to learn the ability to think for themselves. The philosophy of the EYFS is a structured framework with specific set early learning goals (ELGs) across the seven areas of learning. The EYFS aims to have a balance between academic readiness and personal, social, and emotional development. The EYFS uses assessment to record the progression of development and use the results from the assessment to put in place intervention and keep striving for each child to meet their ELG's to aim for a secure mark ready for when they move to year one.

Practitioners from the EYFS follow the statutory guidance of the Early Years Foundation Stage (2024) and are also responsible and accountable for the children in their cohort in achieving their ELG's. The progress is tracked by the practitioners using the EYFS Framework (2021) according to the DfE

Development Matters Statements, giving guidance on where a child should be in their stage of development.

How can assessment support the unique child

In the early years foundation stage children are continually being assessed, allowing for practitioners to use methods of assessment to track a child's progress of development within a play-based curriculum. According to Brooks-Gunn Lewis (1981), Screening with measures can identify children of their needs by identifying their accomplishments and milestones. Children in the early years are assessed by formative and summative assessment. Responsive pedagogy is needed to ensure that practitioners can recognise what children understand and what they can do. Froebel (1837) 'Education should focus on what children can do not what they cannot do'. The unique child is "constantly learning" children learn from experiences not just from lessons or activities that have been planned.

Birth to five Matters (no date) states that 'each unique child has their own pathway of development and learning; this pathway involves many elements that are all considered together in a holistic form'. This holistic view is formed through observation, assessment, and planning.

There are three EYFS statutory assessments point:

- Progress check at two years
- Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA)
- Early Years Foundation Stage Point (EYFSP)

Practitioners can assess children through formative assessment that is carried out by observation through play and how the child interacts, also alongside the practitioners knowing the child and their capabilities. Observation of children as formative assessment is to understand how a child is learning and developing, informing practitioners with the information that they can use to help with their planning in lessons, interventions can be set out and planned for children to meet the needs of that child. According to, birth to five matters (no date) practitioners can use observation to assess if the child is meeting their characteristic of learning. Observation is viewed positively as a critical tool for understanding and supporting a child's development. However, practitioners should be aware that they should not influence the observation and interrupt the child at play as they may change the course of the child's intentions of the activity they are leading in.

Another form of assessment is the Reception Baseline Assessment, which is a form of summative assessment, this is carried out through evidence that is recorded and documented as a basis for the starting point and to form an idea of where the child is and if they are meeting an expected level. This is a short, interactive practical assessment of a child's early literacy, communication, language, and mathematics skills that will take place at the beginning of school. The Baseline assessment is for the purpose of measuring where a child is when they start school, providing an idea of the child's skills and abilities. Once the child reaches the end of year 6, they will then be assessed again to see the progression that they have made. The Department of education uses this assessment data when the child has reached the end of year 6, to measure their progress. However, there is an argument that this test is not necessary as the data is not published or has an impact on the school or national level. It is suggested that the Reception Baseline is flawed, and the purpose of this test cannot be justified.

The Scandinavian Early childhood education does not use formal testing in their curriculum; they generally avoid assessment. Focusing on continuous evaluation through observations, practitioners in this setting record and document a child's learning and development. Putting an emphasis on the holistic growth of the child, their wellbeing and how they learn through play, Froebel (1837) stated that, 'Children's emotional, mental and physical development are of vital importance'. Play is at the center of the curriculum. Staff monitor the development of children unlike the EYFS, where it is more structured and teachers are striving for the children to reach 'secure or emerging' in their learning objectives. The Nordica approach does not assess the children regarding their learning objectives. The objectives and purpose of quality assessment are linked to objectives in the curriculum with a focus on holistic growth, all-day pedagogy, wellbeing, democracy, equality, and participation. It is seen that learning and playing are seen as interwoven processes and childhood has an intrinsic value. However minor variations between the countries, evaluation and child development, such as the Finnish curriculum requires individual ECEC plans for each child and is updated regularly to follow the child's development. Sweden, the curriculum requires the ECEC teachers to document each child's learning and development. In Norway children are monitored if a staff member has concerns and in Denmark the objectives and guidelines are set by the municipal council. According to the Journal, Nordic approaches to evaluation and assessment in early childhood education and care (2023). The Scandinavian or Nordic countries use the Nordic approach, between the countries consisting of shared values and principles including well-being, child-centeredness, play, learning, professionalism and reducing inequalities. Information shared between countries is relevant to improving the quality of the ECEC system. According to the, (Ministry of

culture,2020) there is a comparative approach: Learning with each other, the Nordic countries have a coherent view on evaluating and assessment is linked to the quality and development of early childhood using pedagogical practices aimed at the wellbeing, development and learning of children. Staff monitor the development of the children unlike the EYFS; the Nordica approach does not assess the children regarding their learning objectives.

Children develop at their own unique rates and not all children will follow the 'typical pattern' of progression development. This however, does not influence the child's ability to make progress or take away any focus from the child's individual strengths. According to the Early Years Statutory Framework (2004), the EYFS is about how children learn, as well as what they learn. Practitioners should be prepared to use adaptive approaches and allow children to learn through play, by adults modelling and observing through adult-guided play. Liebschner (1991) stated that 'education, instruction and teaching should in the first instance be passive and watchful, following and not dictatorial and interfering'. Froebel (1837), argued that the intention of his principles was to develop the adults' understanding of young children's learning.

To further develop the holistic child, the environment setting plays an integral part, Practitioners must build on the enabling environment that can support, challenge, and stimulate learning. The environment must provide opportunities to enable children to take part in and build on child-led activity. In the EYFS children are modelled to by the adult to show the child what is expected in an adult-led activity. Once the child has seen what the expected outcome can look like, they are encouraged to carry out the activity demonstrated. Vygotsky's Zone of proximal development (ZPD) (1978, 1986) interaction between a child and adult leads to the adult showing the direction that the child is expected to take, allowing the child to explore themselves. (Schaffer, 1996) the adult's presence provides the child with a secure learning environment. Montessori (1900s) also believed in child-led play, stating that "play is the work for the child". She stated that 'play was key for allowing children to make active choices'. She believed that the environment helped the child to play, and real-world objects were the best resources.

Should the EYFS take the same approach to learning as the Scandinavian Forest school

The EYFS Framework allows for children to explore and learn through play, at the end of reception year these children are expected to be either at a level of 'emerging' towards the expected level of development, 'working' at the expected level or 'exceeding' the level. For a child to be able to achieve a Good Level of development of their age-related expectations they must obtain the expected levels in all prime areas of learning. As children in the reception transition into year one and 'school readiness', this time can become an extremely distressing transition for some children.

Does the EYFS really prepare children for being 'school ready'?

When children have transitioned into the year one classroom, they are no longer expected to be their unique self. Creativity is suppressed and they are expected to sit quietly for extremely long periods of time. Children of the age of 5 years old, are no longer able to explore and play, but have to sit and write, to be expected to be able to concentrate on subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, History and Geography, in total there are nine subjects that the children in year one have to learn and become familiar with by the end of the year. The children are constantly tested on what they have learnt in English and Mathematics and are tested on their phonics screening they can seem confused as they realise that they no longer play at school. Some children struggle to come in this classroom environment and feel the pressure of the classroom setting and really struggle with their emotions, it could be taken into perspective that children from the EYFS are taken from the play setting too early, could it be that the curriculum and adult-led learning has had a negative impact on the development of building the skill of emotional resilience. Could it be a possibility that the English way of schooling has failed the unique child, that is a question to think about. Froebel (1837) A child's emotional, mental and physical development are of vital importance. Physical activity during the day is now confined to breaktime and physical education classes twice a week.

Forest schools in the EYFS setting are only a small part of the Early Years Foundation Stage setting, although there is an idea of the focus of forest school should be on child-led learning, holistic development and engage in a regular outdoor setting. With the idea of children gaining confidence, resilience, and practical skills by engaging with nature. Forest school comes with critique in England, as the setting can either be in a manmade environment on the school premises or woodland, however if the forest school setting is in a woodland environment is not the same as the natural woodland in the Scandinavian countries as these spaces are open to all kinds of people in the public. Forest schools in England do not allow children to explore fully, children are given adult-led activities and only a limited amount of time for child-led exploration as the practitioners must keep in time with the school timetable.

The Scandinavian early years recognises that forest school can facilitate a holistic approach to early years learning, taking away the pressure from the year one transition, with children in the Scandinavian countries starting school at the age of 6 or 7 years old they are able to take a path of self-discovery. The Forest School ethos champions the importance of child-led play; children are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning. In Forest School, pedagogy proposes that a child's learning is an ongoing process. Forest School leaders are ready to adapt sessions in order to suit the interest, motivation and the attitude of each unique child. Children learn teamwork and communication skills; they learn to take risks to recognise their own physical capabilities and learn about the natural world around them. Issacs (1900s), believed that play lets children engage in active learning and helps them to feel comfortable in their own skills and abilities, also suggesting that children learn quicker through play. Froebel (1837) Play helps children to learn about the world around them. The most important skills a child can learn is emotional reliance and becoming independent. Issacs (1827) believed that play gives children a safe space for emotional development, learning to navigate their feelings through role play and acting out the world around them. Play allows for expressing and navigating emotions, and feelings allow for a child to build their emotional resilience. Froebel (1837) believed that play is the highest form of human expression in childhood and that children were heavily influenced by their peers and adults around them. Also suggesting the importance of practitioners to understand and build on informed knowledge of the whole child, 'the unique child', practitioners should build parent partnerships as well as building positive relationships with the children in their cohort. The importance of understanding the child's interests, which can build on each child's development and learning to allow for the planning of next steps, and where possible promoting further challenge for each child to build on individual strengths to meet each child's needs.

Parents know their child best, both the EYFS and the Scandinavian early childhood education build partnership with parents. They both work with families throughout the early years, and children are monitored throughout their young lives. In Scandinavian countries it is heavily encouraged; these countries were among the first to sign up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC) in the (1990s). It is suggested that they have a much better integrated policy framework that supports families, within the government thinking, families are valued and the approach to family life, work patterns and children's rights. However, in England settings do work in parent partnership for the welfare of the child but as a family lifestyle parents work longer hours, many children go to before and after school clubs and may also be collected from school by other adults. The kindergartens are open to all parents, providing a gathering place for help or support, building networks and also creating peer support. Open sessions in kindergartens are child-led; this enables an

unstructured time of informal interaction between children, parents, and professionals. In the EYFS parents do not enter the school premises unless they have been invited to attend, at the beginning of school practitioners in some settings visit children on home visits to meet them and their family in their own environment and children and parent will visit the child's new classroom on a stay and play session. For practitioners to build a good relationship with parents, they communicate with them at pick up time and share details of their child's day. This can be done through apps such as EYlog, Marvellous Me and some settings share details on social media. Bronfenbrenner (1917) viewed that children's development relied on the relationships a child has with the community around them and the peers they interact with.

It is vital that throughout school life the unique child is continuing to be built on, children living in England are continually being tested and assessed throughout their school journey, this has quite an impact on the holistic approach for children and can have an impact on a child's learning and behaviour. Children feel the pressure of assessments; they cause stress for the children and staff in the setting and may start to feel as though they dislike school as they are always working in a state of pressure. Children in England are only given a short time to learn through play and exploration in an early childhood setting. Scandinavian countries taking the holistic child at the center of their framework gives a positive view as children are more settled and ready to start school at the ages of 6 and 7 years. These children have built on their skills and are relaxed and ready to learn. Considering the difference in how the unique child is made and how children who are able to explore and play throughout their young childhood, in view the best possible outcome between both educational models that the Scandinavian and kindergartener approach supports the whole child and parent partnership for a better more developed learning outcome. The educational model supports a view on how children develop their learning through observation of formative assessment as practitioners can record exactly what a child does through play and learning. Summative assessment can make children feel under pressure and may not show a true picture of what a child knows and the developments and progression they have made.

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