

In Wales, the early years curriculum is implemented through the Foundation Phase framework. The Foundation Phase curriculum has seven areas of learning, personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity, language, literacy and communication, mathematical development, Welsh language development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development (Welsh Government, 2015). Although these seven areas of learning are somewhat traditional, there is a greater overarching emphasis on active participation, holistic development and an overall play-based approach to learning. The Foundation Phase framework aims to put the child at the centre of every learning experience. The emphasis on having a play-based approach lends itself to the developmental stage of young children and the experiential learning experiences brings a holistic development approach, which aligns with the natural curiosity to learning that young children have (Bustamante, 2017). Arguably, The Welsh government took inspiration from 'Te Whariki', the early childhood curriculum used in New Zealand, in terms of its child centred approach. The Te Whariki curriculum is built on four key principles: empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships. Within those principles there are five strands: well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration. These principles and strands are then incorporated into learning programmes, uniquely designed by educators themselves (NZ Ministry of Education, 2017). Both curriculum frameworks put heavy value on the unique child, with a child centred, play based approach. Children are valued for learning at differing and individual paces and are put at the centre of their learning experiences. There is also an obvious importance of developing the whole child, not just valuing their academic attainment. Moreover, both curriculum frameworks value and promote the ethos of having a collaborative approach in a child's development. It is understood to be a necessity, where children, educators, outside agencies, families and carers work together to support a child's overall development and have optimum positive outcomes (Gaffney and McAnelly, 2021).

A major criticism of the Te Whariki curriculum is that there are inconsistencies in implementation, due to a lack of specificity of learning outcomes. Additionally, it has been suggested that the nature of the Te Whariki curriculum is too subjective, which

directly impacts educators' abilities in consistent tracking and comparing of learning achievement and outcomes (Stover, 2014). Similarly, the Foundation Phase has faced criticism for being open to interpretation, creating inconsistencies both in implementation of learning provision and assessment (Welsh Government, 2022).

Nonetheless, the cross overs in curriculum ideas within both the Te Whariki and Foundation Phase curriculum, is a successful example of how an international approach to building education curriculums can be both insightful and overall beneficial practice. The Welsh Government analysed successful early years practice from around the world and decided to incorporate elements of best practice from another educational system, ensuring a more adaptable framework. This positively reflects the Welsh Governments understanding of the interconnectedness of different societies, cultures and the value diversity offers (Welsh Government, 2022).

Since the Foundation Phase was introduced by Welsh Government in 2010, the implementation of the framework has been both praised and criticised. Unlike more traditional approaches used in the past, the Foundation Phase values more flexible and in the moment planning. Teaching staff have been required to adapt their teaching plans according to the interests and needs of the children in their class. Teachers have had to regularly assess their provision and ensure that the environment is aligning with their needs as the learning evolves (Welsh Government, 2016).

In the context of the Foundation Phase curriculum in Wales, continuous provision and enhanced provision are two distinct but complementary approaches used within the classroom throughout the early years. Continuous provision is where learning experiences are accessed independently by children, where they can engage with learning without the need for adult interventions. Specific examples of continuous provision include outside mud kitchen, water play tray, role play home corner area and creative station with paint, paintbrushes and paper readily available to use. The aim of continuous provision is to create a classroom environment where children are encouraged to explore with their natural curiosity for their environments, develop confidence in accessing resources independently, practicing making decisions and growing a sense of self and the world around them as they discover each area and learning experience (Bottrill, 2018). It is the responsibility of the teacher and

supporting classroom staff to ensure that the flow of the classroom is set up in a way which lends itself well to the aim of a child centred approach. Considerations need to be made when designing each area. For example, if a child goes to the creative station to paint a picture, however they realise they cannot reach the paintbrushes or paper themselves, straight away they will need to ask for an adult's assistance, taking an element of their independence away unnecessarily. When setting up the area, all resources a child may wish to use must be on their level and accessible (Daniels, 2021).

Although continuous provision holds much evidence to suggest it is a positive form of classroom practice and has benefits within the early years, arguably there are potential drawbacks. Firstly, there is a risk of a child's learning experiences being limited. It is beneficial that children can access learning in areas of their own interest, however, if for example a child is only playing in the construction area daily and they aren't visiting any other learning area, arguably they are having neglected exposure to more diverse learning experiences. Additionally, there can be a lack of more structured adult led learning, which children will have to engage with in future years as they move up through the school. Research has shown that there has been some debate since the Foundation Phase was implemented, as to how easily children will be able to adapt to more structured learning as they get older, when they are having a far more fluid, autonomous learning experience within their Early Years (Donaldson, 2015). Another problem with this approach is, though the foundation phase focuses on putting the child and their interests at the centre of their learning, when they get to juniors and secondary school education, they are still expected to sit compulsory and traditional academic exams. The questions that need to be asked are, are these compulsory exams still an ethical way of judging children's ability? Likewise, why does a child centred, and holistic learning approach stop once a child moves up through the school system, beyond the Foundation Phase? Arguably, this is a topic of discussion amongst current educators and the Welsh Government with the newly published 'Welsh Curriculum' that has been implemented in phases across Wales since 2022. The new Welsh Curriculum aims to be more inclusive of all learners, rather than solely focusing on teaching knowledge, the learning objectives are more diverse, allowing educators to teach skills and attitudes which

can be transferred into a 'real life' context. Nevertheless, it is still unclear how the methods of assessment such as GCSE exams will adapt to complement the new curriculum changes (Knight and Crick, 2022).

In contrast, enhanced provision within the Foundation Phase is where learning experiences are specifically planned by educators and are more focused on set developmental goals or curriculum learning outcomes. Enhanced provision is often guided and observed by a teacher or teaching assistant. Arguably, if enhanced provision isn't executed carefully, there is a risk of it taking an element of the child-centred approach away due to a child's independent play being interrupted. For example, if a child is taken away from their chosen continuous provision activity in the water play tray, to complete a numeracy activity somewhere else with the teacher, they are not at the centre of their own learning. However, if a teacher incorporated the numeracy activity in the form of water play by using numbered shells, they have a way of strategically assessing the child's numeracy ability without interrupting their chosen learning experience. This is an effective way of combining continuous and enhanced provision, by offering children intentional experiences that will help them develop their skills further (Welsh Government, 2015).

Traditionally, educational theorist Jerome Bruner discussed a constructivist theory, highlighting the significance of scaffolding, where educators are providing children with support to enable them to develop a higher level of understanding. Bruner suggested that children need to have practical activities and have regular new experiences to develop their ideas and understanding. Furthermore, Bruner argued that children's development of thought is not necessarily linked to age, but rather their experiences. When enhanced provision is correctly implemented, where children are accessing enriching, hands on provision and educators have carefully led with an experiential approach to their planning, Bruner's ideas and scaffolding theory can be witnessed in action (Bruner, 1985).

According to Welsh Government research of the foundation phase; schools which lead with a strong understanding of the Foundation phase pedagogies have observed growth in their pupil wellbeing and overall improvements in pupil attendance, leading to a beneficial impact on numeracy and literacy achievement (Government Social Research, 2014). It was recommended that educators need to

have further training on how to effectively implement the Foundation Phase pedagogies and there should be more study on the Foundation Phase during initial teacher training, during PGCE qualifications and NQT years (Welsh Government, 2015). A problem with this recommendation, however, is that it does not address the need for training for all school staff. Arguably, teaching assistants are just as valuable for implementing practice within the classroom as a teacher is. One of the limitations with teaching assistant staff not attending training on curriculum, is that there may be a lack of understanding on the aims of provision, which can lead to inconsistencies; particularly in nursery classrooms where there is a much higher staff to child ratio and teaching assistants are so heavily involved with setting up and supporting children throughout provision. Often teaching assistants are overlooked, however, for children to have the highest standard of education, it would be beneficial for all staff to share equal understanding of pedagogies.

The Foundation Phase Profile is a key assessment tool used within the Foundation Phase, to assess and track the learning and developmental progress of children between the ages of three and seven years old. The key methods of assessment within the profile include the seven assessment areas: personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity, language literacy and communication skills, mathematical development, Welsh language development, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development (Welsh Government, 2016). For each area of learning there are descriptive statements that assist educators to assess each child's level of development. These statements provide guidance for educators as to what children should be able to do at each stage of development and outlines progression steps within each area of learning, for educators to identify appropriate resources and activities to align with the children's levels of development and specific needs. The profile encourages educators to work collaboratively with children's significant adults, getting their insights on their understanding of their child in the home environment. This aids educators in leading with a more holistic approach in assessment, by viewing each child as unique; every child is going to develop at different paces, in different areas and stages; every child has strengths, unique interests and areas where they need to develop confidence. The profile aims to move away from simply ticking 'can do'

and 'cannot do' and uses a collective approach of gathering information to make an informed judgement of the whole child, rather than solely viewing academic achievement, which has been the focus more traditionally prior to the implementation of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2016).

The Foundation Phase Profile emphasises the importance of collecting evidence, taking photos, creating learning journals of work and undertaking ongoing, 'in the moment' observations. Similarly, in New Zealand under the Te Whariki curriculum, assessment is carried out in the same way (NZ Ministry of Education, 2017).

Traditionally, theorists within early years education have highlighted the benefits of observation within the classroom and have advocated this method as a vital tool for understanding all areas of a children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. Theorist Lev Vygotsky valued the observation of children particularly within a social context; Vygotsky suggested this provides an insight into the level of a child's proximal development (Aras, 2016). Furthermore, educator and physician, Maria Montessori, discussed the value of observation when evaluating how an environment is serving a child's needs. By observing children within a learning environment, educators can reflect and adapt their practice accordingly. In turn, educators will be benefiting the children in their classroom by providing learning experiences that are appropriate for the children's stages of development (Adamo and Klauber, 2022). In contrast, though observation and assessment are vital tools in ensuring educators are providing relevant learning support for children, a broader perspective must be adopted. There is a need for sensitivity to culture and diverse backgrounds of children; potentially children come from homes where English is not their first language or alternatively, some children may be living in temporary foster care which has caused emotional trauma. These would be valuable considerations for an educator to approach assessments with. Furthermore, educators must ensure they are up to date with relevant assessment training and are experts in the field of understanding appropriate developmental expectations (Welsh Government, 2014). One question that needs to be asked however, is why educators are still expected to measure ability as regular practice. Research has shown that children find assessment of their abilities to be a form of oppressive practice in their education experience (Bradbury, 2021). Traditionally, measuring ability was to decipher which

children belonged in education and which children did not; the birth of the concepts of 'able' and 'disabled', that either included or excluded children from education.

There is a plethora of evidence to suggest that grouping based on the loose and subjective ideas of ability causes highly negative effects on children (McDool, 2020). Furthermore, society has moved in the positive direction of valuing all people, with all types of abilities and moving away from the historical exclusion of certain people, with more equality legislation in place than ever before; therefore, why does the modern-day school curriculum still require traditional measures of testing and tick boxing? As suggested in the Donaldson report, current methods of assessment are not meeting the needs of children within Wales; it has been discussed that there needs to be an entire systematic reform in how assessment is carried out by educators, for assessment to be beneficial for improving children's learning (Donaldson, 2015). Arguably, something the Welsh Government are looking into achieving with the new Welsh Curriculum 2022.

As discussed by the Welsh Government in an independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales, there are recommendations in place for educators to have further training within the early years; it was advised that leadership skills and reflective practice needs improvement to achieve a high standard. All those working within the Foundation Phase, whether teachers or teaching assistant need an understanding of inequality and the disadvantages children can face depending on their home environment (Welsh Government, 2014). This was a particularly relevant recommendation when schools went through the pandemic, as many educators and families faced the challenges of providing ongoing curriculum provision online, for children to participate in their homes. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly were disproportionately affected by limited access to devices and potential lack of parental support; in turn, posing significant strain on their mental health and challenges in their learning experience that hindered their progress and attitude towards learning (Reimers, 2021).

Blog- Early Years Curriculum– it's not just about play...

Old school ways, in new school days...

I had to take a deep breath before responding to the passive comment a senior colleague and long-standing educator said whilst setting up our continuous provision in a nursery classroom... “Well, we can’t just let the children play all day, they need to learn at some point”.

In my experience, though educators have been through training and have worked within early years classroom settings year upon year since the Foundation Phase framework was implemented in Wales in 2010, some education professionals are still somehow missing the point. Not only has it been evidenced by traditional theorists such as Bruner, as well as countless studies by universities and education professionals across the globe; play based learning been proven to be foundational to everything in the early years of life and needs to be respected as such. I have sat in staff meetings where teachers have argued over the amount of time children are spending doing ‘free play’, and discussing whether nursery children need to be allocated time each day to sit at a table with a pencil and writing book, to copy letter formations. I’ve heard comments of “When I taught nursery in 2004, the children could sit and write their names” and “How are children going to get through life when they aren’t learning properly”. Educators with ‘old school’ mindsets, focusing purely on a child’s traditional academic ability of neat letter formation and sitting at the table with a numeracy worksheet, are very much still practicing and projecting the old standards on current 2024 early years children.

The world has changed; have the children changed too?

There have been incredible shifts in society over the past 20 years, changes that have impacted every aspect of our society and way of life. Just to name a few; changes in our education system, children’s rights, implementation of equality-based government legislation, massive growth in technology, the economy, changes in choices of careers, a cost-of-living crisis and more recently, a pivotal event in the past century of human history; changes in our perspectives of life, due to a global

pandemic. The pandemic had a multifaceted impact on children, through educational disruption, mental health, social development and inequality. Though it is too soon to understand the long-term effects on children yet, judging by the common conversations happening in staff rooms up and down the country, the pandemic has had more of a lasting effect on our children than we may realise. In my experience, children are coming into school with dysregulated emotions, complex behavioural issues, inability to build relationships and difficulties communicating verbally. Educators are no longer just 'teaching', they are having to foster so many extra responsibilities have not fallen into their role of responsibilities in the past; they are now social workers, behaviour psychologists, safeguarding officers, ALN support workers, parental figures and potty-training experts! More and more nursery children are being dropped off at school glued to their parents' phone, wearing a nappy and barely achieving 12–18-month developmental milestones. When I was a child myself, I couldn't start school until I was toilet trained and deemed 'nursery ready' judged by a test given by the nursery teacher. The overwhelming majority of the nursery children I have worked with over the past three years could not pass that test now. The world has changed; therefore, our children have changed; so, instead of comparing current standards to the past standards, we need to ensure our educational approach aligns with the reality we are living in. It's time to go back to basics. Positively, the play-based approach is everything our children need. The benefits of play are endless; firstly, play is a natural motivation for children, it creates a positive attitude to learning, it also supports the holistic development of children, providing growth of their physical, cognitive, social and emotional needs. Play encourages creativity and imagination, allowing children to express themselves, explore their own unique ideas and develop their problem-solving skills in a light-hearted way. Through play, children engage in situations where they are naturally learning to cooperate and communicate with their peers; this directly impacts their development of essential social skills, including conflict resolution, negotiation and teamwork. Furthermore, play promotes independence and a growing sense of self, through being able to make decisions and using initiative from an early age.

Time to go back to basics...

“The goal of early childhood education should be to activate the child’s own natural desire to learn”. – Maria Montessori

We as educators, are the enablers. Our primary goal should be to create an enriching environment where children can get in touch with their innate curiosity for understanding the world around them. Our children should have free access to exploration of their interests and be exposed to new experiences to grow new interests. The overall wellbeing of child should be kept at the centre of every day; a child who cannot regulate their angry emotions are not going to be as open to new learning experiences. Children need to feel safe and valued. Make the time for building relationships with your children, allocate snack time as a designated half an hour to check in with each child, take a genuine interest in their home life, practice active listening; children have thoughts, feelings and worries they’d like to share given the opportunity, we just aren’t always making the space to listen. Active listening is the starting point for building positive relationships; these relationships between educators and children, are foundational for building trust and respect.

I have witnessed some educators believing they haven’t got the ‘right’ classroom setting to provide free-play provision Foundation Phase requires. With relentless budget cuts in state education, for educators it can feel exasperating with the constant scraping of the barrel for fresh and relevant resources. The pretty classroom with beige soft rugs, natural wooden cabinets and wicker storage baskets is all too much of a dream, particularly when you work in a school where you’ve ran out of PVA glue but must wait until next terms budget for the next delivery. However, the good news is, it isn’t a requirement to have a perfect classroom to provide an enriching environment; less is more, so much can be achieved with so little... it may just require some extra creativity! You don’t need a specially crafted mud kitchen; you need some old pots and wooden spoons. If you run out of paint, let the children paint with mud. Let the children make puppets out of sticks and build a castle out of the leftover fruit delivery boxes. It’s time to get on the same level as the children you are educating, see the world through their eyes, ask them what they would like to learn, see what sparks their interest and adapt your practice accordingly.

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