

Section 1

In Wales in 1988, the national curriculum was first implemented. It was created to help young children develop the skills they need to make the most of their lives (Welsh Government, 2022d). Although despite the Welsh Government's succession of changes and initiatives, there are several practical and fundamental concerns with the national curriculum and assessment structures in Wales. There is evidence from the programme for international student assessment (PISA) surveys, stating the relative performance of children in Wales in national qualifications, and Estyn reports ratings all show that levels of achievement are not as high as they should be (Donaldson, 2015b). Therefore, the assessment arrangements are not making the necessary contribution to improve learning and the national curriculum and assessment arrangements no longer fulfil the needs of children in Wales. In relation to this there is a strong belief that the existing method to evaluation and assessment must be modified and the case for major reform is compelling (Donaldson, 2015b). To support this the review report of the foundation phase encourages the Welsh government to continue developing and improving the foundation phase and curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015b). Therefore, in 2008 the Welsh Assembly Government launched the foundation phase, a holistic play-based learning continuum for children aged three- to seven-year-olds. It is a statutory curriculum in maintained and non-supported settings and was created to give a progressive, experimental play-based learning strategy (Power *et al.*, 2018; Welsh Government, 2015b; Wainwright *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, for many years, philosophers such as Rousseau (1911) and Frobel (1826) believed that play is the purest and most natural form of learning, and theorists such as Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1962) highlighted the importance of play in children's cognitive and social development and recognised the importance of play in children's learning and development. Their perspectives, along with those of other philosophers, have affected the evolution of early childhood practice and the awareness that play should be central to early childhood curriculum (Beckley, 2011). According to the Early years learning framework guidance, sustaining play is important for learning and development (Ridgway and Quinones, 2012). Furthermore, play is thought to be important for how young children learn and serves as the foundation for curricular guidance across the UK (Welsh Assembly Government 2008; NCCA 2009). Therefore, the foundation phase is founded on the premise that early childhood education should provide a solid foundation for learning and achievement through a developmentally appropriate curriculum that is tailored to the child's specific needs and interests. In relation to this the foundation phase advocated a play-based approach to learning with an emphasis on the importance of personal development and well-being (Wainwright *et al.*, 2019). However, for the foundation phase to be effective in Wales, a fundamental shift in culture is required in both maintained and non-maintained contexts (Donaldson, 2015b; Welsh Government, 2013). Moreso, a fundamental premise that applies to all contexts is that the curriculum is developmentally appropriate learning for all children (UNICEF, 2018). Furthermore, in the early years, a curriculum that emphasises inquiry and intentional teaching of vital subject through exciting interactions and play, dynamic learning experiences is likely to enhance progress in all areas of development and learning (UNICEF, 2018). In accordance with this, the Welsh Government (2008a) believed that children learn through firsthand experience activities, with play serving as the vehicle and there must be a balance between structured

learning through child-initiated activities and those supervised by practitioners. Therefore, the interaction between the adult and the child is important to the learning process, with specific sorts of interaction highlighted, including practitioner involvement in children's play, and shared and sustained thinking (Welsh Government, 2008a). As stated by Murray (2018) practitioners who are confident in their knowledge of their children and the environment of their free play are in a strong position to comprehend play and communicate its importance to others. UNICEF (2018) highlights how a play-based curriculum works effective in the foundation phase when children transition from adult-led activities to more freely chosen ones. Furthermore, Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) points out how teacher-led tasks are inherently playful, resulting in an approach that can be defined as playful pedagogy. In relation to this practitioner appeared to believe that more playful learning experiences were appropriate for children, this was evident from Crowther, Blake, and Webster (2022) observations which showed 81% of their respondents expanded their use of play in September 2020, and in most schools, play was newly introduced in September 2020. Moreover, within the play-based curriculum there are varies types of play which include symbolic, social, and educational play. These types of play develop children's diverse talents and abilities (Kajdi, 2024; Saracho, 2020). Vygotsky (1978) was a strong believer in symbolic play for children's cognitive development and abstract thinking, this was supported by Piaget (1936) theory demonstrating that children's play boosts cognitive development in the setting of culture's social framework. Moreso, Vygotsky's (1978) work was later continued by Bruner (1915) he believed that children learnt more effectively when they discovered things for themselves rather than being taught. Therefore, the play-based curriculum plays an important part in children's overall development (Saracho, 2020). Moreso, a study discovered that in addition to improving play skills and narrative language ability a play-based curriculum had a positive influence on the acquisition of grammar. Neuroscientists have discovered that play activates the brain in ways that rote memory, testing, workbooks, and typical classroom tactics do not (Resilient Educator, 2018). Moreover, play-based learning provides various advantages for the development of children. It fosters imagination and creativity which has numerous benefits for their social-emotional and cognitive development (UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, a play-based curriculum allows children to choose their learning, particularly in connection to achievement goals. It allows them to express their thoughts and feelings, symbolise and test their knowledge of the world, and obtain appropriate support for academic development (Saracho, 2020). In addition to this play is more effective when viewed as a method of approaching a task and when defined from the child's point of view (McInnes *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, children's play is influenced by their immediate surroundings as they use the resources at their disposal to acquire and master abilities (Canning and Reed, 2012). Moreover, according to Loris Malaguzzi (1920) the classroom is an important part of learning and serves as the third teacher, the learning environment should be pleasant, visually appealing, and culturally representative of its surroundings. Therefore, when play-based learning is done well, the classroom transforms naturally into a teacher (The Share Team, 2018). Education Endowment Foundation (2023) points out how it is the practitioner's responsibility to design and establish the learning provision, as well as offering resources and tools to increase learning and facilitate play. Furthermore, the practitioner will interact with intention and a clear aim in mind, but need to remember the child will

lead the play. Moreso, practitioners should observe and listen to children while they play, as well as give physical and social space for children to make decisions and use their initiative (Kingston, D. and Siraj, I. 2017). However, there are some barriers seen by practitioners which are; children differ in their personalities and strengths, and some may not feel at ease in a less structured play-based learning setting. There may be pushbacks from practitioners and families who prefer a strong academic approach with a more traditional approach to teaching, learning, and measuring abilities and some children who have participated in a play-based learning curriculum may struggle to adjust to a standard primary school curriculum (Gregory, 2022). There is also an emphasis on academic skills lowers the value of play, this is unfortunate because play is an important technique for assisting young children's learning (Saracho, 2020). Furthermore, practitioners lack the necessary training to integrate play-based learning in their settings. They consider learning resources to be merely workbooks, rather than objects that children can explore and utilise to learn. However, if practitioners recognise the need for such hands-on tools, there are frequently insufficient resources and little training to assist practitioners in locating play activities from low-cost locally accessible materials (UNICEF, 2018). Moreover, to support practitioners to implement the play-based curriculum they need user-friendly guidelines that explain what to do and why to integrate learning through play and require training and should be given assistance in remodelling and reconstructing their environments (Kingston and Siraj, 2017; UNICEF, 2018; Welsh Government, 2015b). Furthermore, practitioners need to appreciate the value of play and child-centred pedagogy in early childhood education and be prepared with the essential skills and dispositions to implement play-based learning (UNICEF, 2018). Moreover, to support practitioner's clear models of practice must be identified and accessible within the foundation phase throughout all sectors (Welsh Government, 2013) and more emphasis should be placed in training materials on observation, assessment, and child development (Welsh Government, 2015b). Moreso, the foundation phase's underlying pedagogy and practice are recognised to have a favourable impact on practitioners work and contribute to an improvement in the quality of care for children (Welsh Government, 2013). Settings that use foundation phase pedagogies more frequently have high levels of observed pupil involvement and well-being during learning. These enhancements have the potential to lead to even greater success as children develop (Welsh Government, 2015b). Moreover, researchers agree the term play is difficult to define (Reed and Canning, 2010; Saracho, 2020) as play entails so many qualities that monolinguists offer diverse perspectives on the element that is significant to them, whether it is cognitive development Piaget (1962), emotional well-being MacMahon (1992), learning Vygotsky (1978) or socialisation Bandura, (1989) (Reed and Canning, 2010). Therefore, when we understand that play is about more than just cognitive development or physical activity, we can see how important play is to the children's development (Else, 2014). Furthermore, play has been defined as a pedagogy that promotes holistic child development by enhancing social abilities, emotional awareness and regulation, behavioural norm awareness and spatial reasoning, and motor development (Graue, Whyte and Karabon, 2015). According to John Dewey (1938) play was intrinsic rather than accidental in education (Saracho, 2020). Moreso, according to research, play is not only associated with social and emotional development, cognition,

creativity, and physical growth, but also with academic development, including literacy, mathematics, and physical science (Nancy Ed File, Ed and Basler, 2012).

Section 2

The unique child is one of the four guiding concepts that guide early year's practice (Worcester Gov, n.d.). According to Canning and Reed (2012) and Early Years Matters (2021) each child is unique, they have their own learning styles and grow at their own pace. This is evident in the foundation phase profile and non-maintained curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022b). According to Froebel (1782) he was the first to propose that the early years of a child's existence were the most important (Brodie, 2013). Therefore, it is important to recognise the need for additional assistance, without it children may not receive the necessary assistance when required (Early Years Matters, 2021). According to Allen (2011); Melhuish *et al.*, (2010); Sylva *et al.*, (2014) every experience lays the groundwork for all subsequent learning (Kingston, D. and Siraj, I. 2017). Moreso, understanding each child as unique in their own way is the foundation of inclusive practice, every child is learning to be, capable, confident, and self-assured (Bradbury, 2013; Worcester Gov, n.d.). In addition to this we must not only determine what each child can accomplish, but also know and comprehend what their learning interests are at each stage of development. Therefore, looking at each individual child through the lens of schematic play can be beneficial (Celinska, 2023). As stated by Kettleborough (2023) understanding patterns in children's play helps us grasp the themes they are exploring. Similarly, Bruce (1991) explains how practitioners can utilise observations as a variety of lenses to understand the development and learning of the children (Brodie, 2013). In relation to this the non-maintained curriculum assessment is based on observations focusing on what children can do (Welsh Government, 2022), whereas the foundation phase profile focuses on a baseline assessment on entry to reception which aligns with end of phase outcomes (Welsh Government, 2017b). However, this type of assessment is believed to be time-consuming, a check-box procedure, and not personalised to the individual's needs, whereas the non-maintained curriculum is very dependent on what the child is capable of and is heavy focused on the child's abilities through play (Welsh Government, 2017a; Welsh Government, 2022). Although according to research, the foundation phase profile was not employed in some schools after the statutory time and schools have used their own assessment system, whereas the foundation phase profile should be used until the end of year 2 (Welsh Government, 2022e). It has also been noted how activities are frequently setup for children to take part in to assess specific skills and specific skills were not easily seen through play (Welsh Government, 2022e). Furthermore, Welsh Government (2022b) points out how the foundation phase outcomes have been created to allow for summative assessment of learning at the start and end of the foundation phase. They indicate the type and extent of achievement that children working towards a specific goal should exhibit, whereas the non-maintained assessment sets a clear course for future assessment procedures, including essential activities such as building a shared concept of growth, transitioning along the 3 to 16 continuum, and communicating and engaging with parents (Welsh Government, 2022a). Although as pointed out by Siraj (2015) in Wales, there is no consistent evaluation methodology to guide and assist progression and transition within the foundation phase.

Moreover, research by Cross and Conn-Powers (2013) points out that using a curriculum is important but its effectiveness determines how much children learn. Therefore, assessments must be integrated into the curriculum plan if we want to measure the impact of the curriculum being taught on learning and progression, formative and summative assessment must be balanced, and the unique child will need to be always considered (Frater, 2021). Moreover, the foundation phase profile is developed for children ages six to eighty-four months to support assessment and development and consist of a compact file and a full profile supporting practitioners (Welsh Government, 2017c; Welsh Government, 2022b; Welsh Government, 2015a). However, the curriculum for non-maintained settings incorporates mandatory elements within a pedagogical framework, focusing on five developmental pathways: belonging, communication, exploration, physical development, and well-being and is for children aged 3- to 16-year-olds (Welsh Government, 2017a). Moreso, the foundation phase profile includes four areas of learning compared to non-maintained curriculum which focused on five developmental pathways for children, although it is evident both curriculums are part of a holistic, integrated, and cross-curricular approach that places the child at the centre of any planned curriculum (Wainwright *et al.*, 2016; Welsh Government, 2017;). Furthermore, the foundation phase profile assists in assessing children's learning and development throughout the foundation phase. The primary goal is to produce a nationally consistent baseline assessment that corresponds to end-of-phase outcomes. Therefore, the profile assists practitioners in providing a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children by utilising observations and formative evaluations (Welsh Government, 2017). Therefore, the baseline assessment should be based on observations made within the first six weeks, as mandated by law in September 2015. Settings are obliged to record the outcomes for each of these areas of learning using standard data reporting techniques, and they will be gathered for the first time by the Welsh Government in June 2016 (Government, 2019). Moreover, the non-maintained curriculum assessment plays three major functions in the process of facilitating progression by supporting the individual child daily, identifying, recording, and reflecting on individual improvement over time, and understanding group progress to reflect on practice. However, because the foundation phase profile is assessing all children against the same outcomes it can become time intensive, whereas the non-maintained curriculum is observation focused and you are not restricted to looking at specific skill (Welsh Government, 2019; Welsh Government, 2022a). Therefore, with the new curriculum assessment arrangements will be moving from a deficit model and will be working with a model where the curriculum design concepts are real, responsive, inclusive, engaging, and manageable. These principles have been used to evaluate present practice as well as to guide and test future initiatives (Donaldson, 2015b). Moreover, the non-maintained curriculum includes 27 statements of what matters and was co-construction by practitioners. The non maintained curriculum aims to cultivate positive learning dispositions in children, providing a strong foundation for them to achieve the four purposes of the new curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022a). In January 2020, the new curriculum for Wales was introduced to assist schools in creating their own curriculum, to ensure a consistency approach to learning across Wales and ongoing development for assessment arrangements for children (Welsh Government, 2020). The Welsh government implemented the new curriculum for Wales, co-designed with teachers

in September 2022. It has already been effectively implemented in non-maintained settings and primary schools in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). Furthermore, according to studies, it is unclear why there is a unique curriculum for non-maintained environments as the curriculum should strive to create a set of common curriculum entitlements for all children as all children will progress onto primary school (NASUWT, 2021). In relation to this some of the major changes in the new curriculum for Wales were there the four core purposes, subjects will be and organised into six areas of learning and experience, specific subjects will continue to be taught and assessments will continue daily to assess everyone's development and monitor progress over time. Furthermore, settings will be able to create their own curriculum that is tailored to the needs of each individual while also supporting their well-being (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2022c). Although Gatley (2020) argues if the curriculum is totally driven by the four purposes, then much of the content connected with traditional school topics in the areas of learning and experience becomes obsolete. Moreover, a grasp of child development is required for effective assessment, practitioners will be specific about what they want the children to understand and be able to do (Council, 2023). Although Welsh Government (2022e) points out within the new curriculum for Wales there are potential concerns about the new assessment arrangements including the breadth of the progression steps, the need for more guidance and a standardised assessment system. However, Donaldson (2015) argues that progression articulations in the Welsh curriculum should include more than just narrower measures of attainment. The results should be defined from the learner's perspective, with evaluation utilising a wide repertoire of assessment techniques matched to the various outcomes (Titley, Davies, and Atherton, 2020). Therefore, the transition from assessment to a system that focuses on the needs of individual children through formative assessment and evaluation for learning will be a challenge for the new curriculum implementation (Donaldson, 2015a; Welsh Government, 2017b). Furthermore, Shonkoff and Meisels (2011) suggests how assessment is used to gain a better grasp of a child's abilities. In addition to this, assessments should be a collaborative, continuing process of systematic observations and analysis. Moreso, assessments of children are necessary to monitor their growth and performance and to plan for future steps to improve teaching and learning. According to OECD (2014) assessment and evaluation arrangements that are effective should align with, serve, and progress educational and learning objectives. Moreover, the foundation phase is based on constructivist theories of learning and emphasises socio-cultural ideals of empowerment and play in children's learning. The foundation phase framework can relate to international approaches to early childhood education that are based on a commitment to play (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Wood (2007) identifies that a shift from a pedagogy based on achievement of specific curriculum outcomes to one that requires a play-based approach is significant and full of inherent tensions. Therefore, it draws heavily on early years education in Scandinavia, Te Whāriki and Reggio Emilia. As a result, it promotes a play-based, developmental approach to teaching and learning (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). As highlighted by Julia Bethan Rose (2022) assessments should be celebrations of learning and accomplishments that focus on children's interests and skills through their own unique ways. Furthermore, assessment through play should be age-appropriate and enjoyable, with children's well-being at the forefront. This enables for constructive and effective assessment without putting the child under any stress or

deviating significantly from normal classroom procedures. Play based assessments present a more complete picture of the unique child's growth, considering not only cognitive ability but also social, emotional, and physical development (Starling, 2023).

Section 3

The importance of outdoor play within the early years



Wednesday 2nd January 2024

Why is outdoor play important for young children?

The outdoors is regarded as essential to the holistic development of young children (Bento and Dias, 2017; Honig, 2017). The environment in which children grow has a significant impact on their development. According to psychologists Bloom and Deutsch, children's settings, and experiences, particularly in their early childhood, have a significant impact on their intelligences and development (Acar, 2014). Therefore, outdoor play benefits include better self-regulation, nutrition, cognitive development, academic achievement, self-esteem, and the development of physical and gross motor abilities and without a doubt boosts brain development (Cooper, 2015). Furthermore, a child's natural substances are stimulated by physical exercise to support a greater number of synapses between neurons (Burriss and Burriss, 2011). It is proven that outdoor learning can be traced back to the works of pedagogical classics such as Russo, Froebel, Pestalozzi, and Montessori who are all strong believers of the impact of outdoor learning for children (Golubović-Ilić and Bojana Mikarić, 2023).

Did you know research demonstrates that direct ongoing experiences with nature in relatively familiar settings remain an important source for children's psychological, emotional, and intellectual development. Children who spend more time outside are more inclined to take risks, seek adventure, build self-esteem, and enjoy nature (Cooper, 2015). Would you agree this is a great opportunity for children's development?

It is proven the outdoors provides unique play opportunities that cannot be recreated indoors (Bento and Dias, 2017; Wilkinson, 2013). The outdoors is defined as an open and ever-changing environment in which one can experience freedom, wild and noisy motions, and touch with natural elements. Therefore, children benefit from being exposed to sunlight, natural materials, and open air, which contributes to a better immune system, and physical activity. Being outdoors has a positive

effect on a child's overall health. Moreover, being physically active from a young age is a significant component in obesity and children's physical health (Bento and Dias, 2017). The outdoors provides opportunities for children to move around and exercise. It is evident that physical activity, in conjunction with appropriate diet, is important for weight maintenance, adds to children's psychological well-being, and aids in bone development. Let's help children to develop and grow to the best of our abilities.

Moreover, outdoor play helps to maintain the body's natural circadian rhythms, helping to establish good sleep pattern. We understand how important this is for a child's routine as well as your own as a parent. The natural light throughout the day can also improve the overall quality of sleep at night (Denworth, 2018). Do you agree this is beneficial to children? Yes! A child's behaviour and capacity to learn are influenced by their sleep and routine. When a child has had a good night's sleep, they are ready to learn.

Long term effects of outdoor learning.

It is believed in learning situations that stimulate all the senses such as being outdoors children can record information into their long-term memory (Yıldırım and Akamca, 2017). One of the most natural and powerful techniques of learning for young children has been described as movement combined with play. Children can build on a larger scale outdoors, explore the world firsthand, and see phenomena. Therefore, children who play in flexible natural settings appear to be healthier, with increased motor fitness, balance, and coordination, as well as a higher level of creativity in their play (Maynard and Waters, 2007). In relation to this it is evident the outdoors is a fundamental aspect to children's memory and experiences. Let's provide children with these wonderful opportunities of the awe and wonder of the great outdoors. Did you know outdoor learning expands the possibilities for inclusive activities and general mindset. The outdoors provides more opportunities for all children to be together and participate in the same activities and to be inclusive to all. Therefore, learning outdoors provides memorable, realistic, and contextualised experiences to supplement classroom-based learning in accordance with the new curriculum for Wales framework.

Learning opportunities for children in the outdoor environment.

All elements of the foundation phase can be covered and assessed through observations of the child guiding their own learning environment by offering an open space for outdoor learning and permitting experiences in a rich, natural environment (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). According to Harvey (2022) children thrive when play is led by their own initiative. Would you like to participate in child led play? This can happen when children have access to outdoors and are free to explore. Take a step back and admire all the talents that the children are gaining through play-based learning. When the child is ready, join in on their child-led play and enjoy the nature of the great outdoors (Harvey, 2022). Moreover, when children learn in the outdoors, they show high levels of engagement and enjoyment, and their knowledge and awareness of the world around them (Estyn, 2011). Let's think about what the most effective motivator is for children. Being outdoors! Let us collaborate to encourage outdoor learning for our children to help them reach their full potential in their lives.

Limitations of outdoor learning.

It is believed that access to the natural environment for children is dwindling because of safety concerns, climate, and parental concerns. Research suggest children are spending less time outside because of these reasons and due to the impact of the covid pandemic (Todd, Marchant and Brophy, 2019). In support of this let's work together to change this! As you can see from research outdoor learning is proven to be better for children's overall health, well-being, and development. With the support from practitioners and parents we can change this. Outdoor leaning is valuable to children and all children need to be provided with opportunities to take part in outdoor learning. We want children of the future to grow up to be capable, ambitions, healthy confident learners and develop a sense of belonging with the great outdoors and nature.

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