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Section 1

In section 1 early years curricular will be discussed, compared and contrast the curriculum for Wales and the foundation phase.

When compared to the Foundation Phase, the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales signifies significant transition in educational thought. The Curriculum for Wales makes more emphasis on flexibility, practitioner freedom and progression, which then presents both opportunities and problems for practitioners, even though both frameworks acknowledge the benefits of experiential learning and share child-centered principles, because of this early childhood educators have to manage shifting expectations while managing practical issues such as staffing ratios, time restraints, the availability of outdoor learning and growing accountability demands. Determining how the curriculum may be applied successfully and consistently across settings requires an understanding of these variations.

The range of professional independence granted to practitioners is one of the biggest differences between the Curriculum for Wales and the Foundation Phase. Practitioners were able to conform to established frameworks more consistently because to the Foundation Phase's clearer planning and assessment framework. The Curriculum for Wales, on the other hand, encourages educators to create learning opportunities that take into account the unique requirements, the child's interest and the environments of the children (Welsh Government, 2022). Although this flexibility makes learning more individualised, it can also leave practitioners unsure about what should be taught and how to determine the success.

The practitioner's role has changed significantly as a result. Practitioners frequently served as facilitators within a framework that provided clearer direction during the Foundation Phase. In accordance with the Curriculum for Wales, practitioners are expected to take on the role of curriculum designers, making big decisions regarding learning opportunities, evaluation and progression (Donaldson, 2015). As a result of this teachers need to have a deeper comprehension of child development, progress and pedagogy than they could have had in the past. Although this more responsibility can be encouraging, it can also result in inconsistencies between settings, especially when staff members have different levels of confidence, experience and training.

The method of assessment is another major difference. The Foundation Phase was frequently linked to monitoring particular results and developmental phases. The Curriculum for Wales takes a more comprehensive approach to development which urges educators to concentrate on the children's growth over time rather than meeting predefined goals (Welsh Government, 2022). Although this method more accurately captures the non-linear character of children's

learning, it might provide difficulties for professionals trying to regularly evaluate progress. In the absence of defined milestones, professional judgment, which varies depending on the individual and the context, is more heavily relied upon.

When taking into account implementation throughout Wales, the difficulty of consistency becomes evident. The Curriculum for Wales was created to enable educational organisations to create curriculum that are representative of their local communities and children. But variation is inevitably created through this flexibility. Variation may lead to inconsistencies in children's educational experiences, even though it can be seen favourably as a response to local demands. Although many settings are implementing the curriculum's principles, Estyn (2023) discovered that practitioners' confidence and comprehension of progression and curriculum design are still inconsistent. Similar concerns regarding consistency and educational reform across Wales have been identified by the OECD (2020).

For implementation to be successful, it is essential to fully understand the role of the practitioner. Practitioners now actively shape curricula rather than merely delivering them. This calls for continuous professional development, teamwork and reflective practice. While striking a balance between child-led and adult-directed learning opportunities, practitioners must make well informed decisions on how learning experiences contribute to children's long-term development. Practitioners are at the center of curriculum creation due to the increased emphasis on professional judgement, making their knowledge and skills essential to success.

However, there are a number of everyday difficulties in putting the Curriculum for Wales into practice. Staffing ratios are one important problem. For implementation to be effective, practitioners must keep observations on the children, evaluate their development, react to new interests and fully engage in meaningful interactions. When staffing numbers are stretched, it is challenging to meet these requirements. Early childhood educators frequently supervise several tasks at once, such as administrative work, family communication, assessment and safety. As a result there might not be enough time for the curriculum's required reflective planning and observation.

Collaboration among practitioners is also impacted by time restrictions. The Curriculum for Wales places a strong emphasis on professional communication and mutual understanding of progress. Developing shared interpretations of learning and assessment among practitioners is essential to consistency. However, workload pressures frequently limit the amount of time set up for collaboration. Because of this, practitioners could rely on personal interpretations, which could result in inconsistent assessment and practice.

Another illustration of the divide between curriculum goals and practical use is found in outdoor learning. While both the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales acknowledge the importance of outdoor activities, the Curriculum for Wales prioritises authentic, hands-on learning in all developmental domains. Theoretically, allowing children to freely move between indoor and outdoor spaces allows them to take charge of their education, grow in self-reliance and to participate in meaningful inquiry. In practice, adequate staffing, suitable outside areas and resource availability are necessary to ensure efficient free-flow provision. Funding, weather,

space constraints and risk management are issues that many settings must deal with. As a result, the curriculum's goals might not always be fully achieved.

One of the biggest issues that practitioners face is the difference between idealistic and the realistic. Aspirational ideas of adaptable, child-centered and responsive learning settings are frequently supported by educational policy. Practitioners must, however, work within practical limitations. It may be challenging to deliver the rich learning experiences that curricular guidelines foresee due to tight funds, growing administrative duties and staffing shortages. Consequently, there may be a disconnect between the goals of the curriculum and the realities of the classroom (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, practice is still influenced by accountability pressures. The Curriculum for Wales encourages professional autonomy and flexibility, but practitioners are nonetheless answerable to stakeholders, inspectors and leaders. Innovative practice and perceived standards for proof, evaluation and progress monitoring could conflict as a result. In order to demonstrate learning, some practitioners might feel pressured to create copious amounts of documentation, which could cut into their time for meaningful interactions with children.

Professional confidence is another issue. Due to the Foundation Phase's enduring integration within Welsh education, practitioners were able to gain experience and skills. The Curriculum for Wales is an example of a cultural transition that calls for new approaches to planning, assessment and progression. During implementation, not every practitioner has received the same degree of professional development or assistance. As a result, confidence levels differ significantly, which may have an impact on consistency both within and between settings (Estyn, 2023). Although these obstacles, a number of tactics can facilitate more regular application. Firstly, continual professional development is crucial. Practitioners need chances to learn more about curriculum design, progression and successful teaching strategies (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). Second, shared expectations and interpretations of learning can be established through cooperative planning and moderating. Thirdly, building a culture of reflection and ongoing development requires strong leadership. Effective implementation is more likely to be supported by leaders that place a high priority on professional communication and set aside time for teamwork (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

In the end, the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales have many fundamental principles in common, especially with the regard to holistic development and child-centered learning. The Curriculum for Wales, however gives practitioners more authority to plan, carry out and evaluate learning activities. This change presents issues with consideration of consistency, workload, staffing and confidence, but it also presents opportunity for creativity and response. Although there is broad agreement for the curriculum's goals, realistic awareness of the practical limitations faced by practitioners, professional development and adequate resources are needed to achieve them. Therefore, acknowledging and addressing the realities of early years practice is just as important to successful implementation as comprehending curriculum principles.

Part 2- Considering the Concept of the 'Unique Child': A Critical Evaluation of Assessment Methods, Progress Tracking and Development Models within Play-Based Curricula

A key concept of modern early childhood education is the idea of the "Unique Child." It acknowledges that each child grows at their own rate and has unique needs, interests, experiences and strengths. The Curriculum for Wales, which promotes progress, individuality and the holistic development of children, reflects this idea, which has its foundation in child-centered methods to education (Welsh Government, 2022). When practitioners see children as unique, they are challenged to go beyond standardised expectations and acknowledge the variety of learning and development routes.

The process of obtaining data regarding children's learning, growth and their development in order to facilitate future educational opportunities is known as assessment (Carr, 2001). Assessment in play-based curriculum is meant to be formative, continuous and responsive rather than just measuring performance in relation to predefined targets. Practitioners can develop relevant learning experiences, identify strengths and areas for support and comprehend children's interests through effective evaluation.

Since development is not always predictable, it is especially crucial to take the unique child into account when evaluating young children. Children's learning can be influenced by a variety of factors, including language development, neurodiversity, culture, family experiences and also Additional Learning Needs (ALN). As a result, evaluation techniques should be adaptable enough to acknowledge various learning styles while avoiding limited definitions of progress. This essay examines the idea of the individual child in the context of Reggio Emilia and the Curriculum for Wales, critically analysing their approaches to progress tracking and assessment. The degree to which these methods assist children with ALN and neurodiverse children is given special consideration.

What is the concept of the 'unique child'?

Constructivist theories of learning form the idea of the unique child. While Vygotsky (1978) stressed the value of social relationships and the role of adults in assisting learning through scaffolding, Piaget (1952) contended that children actively generate knowledge through interactions with their environment. When taken as a whole, these ideas argue that learning is contextual, personal and impacted by experiences rather than just from the child's age.

These ideas are reflected in the Curriculum for Wales, which prioritises advancement over age-related achievement. The framework acknowledges that learning should be tailored to each child's requirements and that children develop at varying rates (Welsh Government, 2022). According to Edwards, Gandini and Forman (2012), the Reggio Emilia approach also sees children as capable, resourceful and competent individuals who actively create meaning from their experiences. Both methods encourage children's voices, interests and action rather than seeing them as passive recipients of knowledge.

The unique child concept when considering children with ALN and neurodiverse children. Children advance through predictable stages, according to traditional developmental frameworks. Nonetheless, a lot of children could be strong in certain areas and need more help in others. For instance, a child with speech and language impairments could have a complex conceptual grasp yet find it challenging to express it orally. As a result, evaluation techniques that primarily focus on language or age-related expectations may not fairly represent a child's abilities.

Assessment within the Curriculum for Wales

As opposed to measuring children assessment in the Curriculum for Wales is intended to promote advancement and individual development. Formal assessment, practitioner observation and professional judgement are prioritised in the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022). Through regular encounters, observations and the conversations with families, practitioners are urged to develop a comprehensive understanding of every child. The Curriculum for Wales encourages progress as an ongoing process, in contrast to earlier assessment systems that concentrated on age-related criteria. The goal of assessment is to assist practitioners in determining where children are in their development and what kind of assistance might be needed to enhance future learning. This works because it recognises that children may complete developmental milestones at different times, this approach closely correlates with the idea of the individual child.

An important part of this evaluation observation. Through children's play, interactions, talks and their participation in educational activities, practitioners collect evidence. Planning and the selection of suitable next steps are then informed by these observations. This is instead of depending only on established measurements, this adaptable approach enables practitioners to take into account the child's unique circumstances and learning style. However, practitioner knowledge and professional judgement play a major role in this approach's efficacy. Although flexibility can make it possible to customise assessments for specific students, it also may result in inconsistent results across all settings (Welsh Government, 2023). The reliability of assessments may be impacted by different practitioners' interpretations of progress.

Assessment within the Reggio Emilia Approach

The Reggio Emilia approach to assessment from conventional methods. Assessment is focused on pedagogical documentation rather than preset targets or developmental stages (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012). Photographs, observations, conversation transcripts, artwork and using reflective notes are all used to document children's learning. Documentation serves the dual function of making learning visible and measuring progress. Over time, practitioners examine how children think, what attracts them and how they would solve problems. After that, this data is utilised to guide future educational initiatives and promote introspection among professionals, children and families.

The Reggio Emilia approach's various ways of expressing understanding is one of its main advantages. According to Malaguzzi's (1998) description of the "hundred languages of children,"

children express themselves through movement, art, play, construction, music and many other mediums. This viewpoint acknowledges that written assignments or vocal responses may not always adequately convey the learning. As a result, the idea of the individual child is strongly supported by evaluation in Reggio Emilia. Children are seen as unique individuals whose learning arises from interactions, experiences and discovery rather than being evaluated according to universal developmental standards. Children's viewpoints are valued and practitioners are encouraged to evaluate learning in a variety of ways through the collaborative process of assessment. However, documenting might take time and expertise from practitioners. Documentation collection, analysis and their reflection require a significant investment of time and expertise. It might be difficult to maintain high-quality documentation in environments with limited staffing and time.

Critical Analysis of Assessment Methods

Reggio Emilia and the Curriculum both support child-centered evaluation methods that are consistent with the idea of the unique child. But there are drawbacks to their methods as well, especially when taking age-related developmental models, neurodiversity and ALN into account. Traditional developmental assessment models are criticised for frequently assuming a linear progression of development. Age-and-stage frameworks and developmental checklists can be helpful in spotting possible delays and guiding assistance plans. However, when children's development deviates from established norms, they may unintentionally place them as "behind" (Bruce, 2011).

Children with ALN and neurodiverse children are most affected by this problem, such as speech and language screening programs like WellComm can offer insightful data on communication development. Assessments that primarily rely on verbal responses, however, may present challenges. When engaging in outdoor jumping activities, a child may show complete comprehension even though they are unable to vocally identify a picture of a boy 'jumping' during a WellComm evaluation, this is because verbal expression is given more weight than other kinds of communication in this case, the assessment may underestimate the child's understanding.

This example draws attention to a significant flaw in several standardised tests. Children don't always exhibit learning in the same way. Children with autism, speech and language impairments or children with selective mutism may have intelligence and understanding that is difficult to measure using traditional evaluation techniques. As a result, when assessing progress, practitioners need to take into account a variety of evidence sources. This issue is addressed by the Reggio Emilia method, this method acknowledges various modes of expression. Assessment becomes more inclusive and sensitive to varied children when children's "hundred languages" are valued. Instead of depending only on spoken language, children can show their knowledge through play, movement, art, construction or through their social interaction. This adaptability encourages a more comprehensive view of the individual child.

Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales promotes the use of professional judgement and a variety of assessment techniques by practitioners. Playtime observations of children can reveal a lot about their knowledge, problem-solving skills and their social growth. These observations may highlight capabilities in children with ALN that official evaluations are unable to identify. However, as previously stated there may be issues with both techniques' reliance on practitioner judgement. Assessment results may be impacted by bias, divergent interpretations and various degrees of professional confidence. Inconsistencies in practitioners' knowledge of progression and assessment within the Curriculum for Wales were noted by Estyn (2023). This implies that, whereas flexibility encourages customisation, it may also affect uniformity in certain contexts.

Moreover, another challenge is finding balance between accountability and individualisation. Evidence of achievement and growth is becoming more and more important in educational institutions. In order to show results, practitioners could feel under pressure to document learning in great detail. This may lead to conflicts between obligations for external responsibility and genuine child-centered assessment. In certain situations, practitioners may prioritise paperwork over meaningful relationships with children due to the requirement for quantifiable evidence. Additionally, children with ALN frequently need highly customised methods of assessment. Although both curricula encourage flexibility, practitioner training, expert collaboration and encourage sufficient resources are necessary for effective implementation. Without these resources, it's possible that children's special needs and strengths won't be completely acknowledged.

Do These Assessment Approaches Support the Unique Child?

The concept of the unique child is strongly aligned with both Reggio Emilia and the Curriculum for Wales. They prioritise observation, relationships and responsiveness above standardised measurement because they acknowledge that children learn in diverse ways. With its emphasis on advancement, holistic development and professional judgement, the Curriculum for Wales promotes the individual child. It recognises that children's developmental journeys are unique and unpredictable by avoiding strict age-related expectations. However, practitioner confidence and consistency are necessary for successful adoption.

The Reggio Emilia approach with its focus on documentation, child agency and many different forms of expression, the Reggio Emilia approach may offer an even greater dedication to the individual child. The identification of children's "hundred languages" makes it possible for assessments to record learning that could otherwise go unnoticed, especially for children with communication issues or ALN. Despite these advantages, there are drawbacks to both strategies. Both call for highly qualified professionals who can accurately and sensitively analyse children's learning. Implementation may also be impacted by real-world limitations including workload, staffing levels and accountability demands. Ultimately, assessment practices that genuinely support the unique child are those that recognise children's individual strengths, respect diverse developmental pathways and value learning in all its forms.

Part 3- Blog

Why the Curriculum for Wales Can Be Difficult to Implement: The Challenge of Change in Early Years and Educational Settings

One of the biggest educational revolutions in a generation was announced with the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales. The curriculum marked a shift away from prescriptive teaching and toward more professional freedom. It was based on the idea of creating ambitious, capable children and promoting creativity, critical thinking and real-world learning experiences. Although the reform's guiding concepts are universally acclaimed, its actual execution has proven to be much more difficult. The culture that dominates many educational environments is one of the biggest obstacles to successful implementation, not the curriculum itself. Some leaders and practitioners in particular continue to rely largely on conventional teaching and learning techniques. Their resistance to change could delay the Curriculum for Wales's transformative potential and pose challenges for new practitioners.

A Curriculum Built on Flexibility

The Curriculum for Wales was created to allow educational institutions more flexibility in their methods of instruction. In contrast to earlier frameworks, it encourages practitioners to create experiences based on the needs of children rather than just adhering to a strict set of goals. The curriculum, according to the Welsh Government (2022), promotes progression rather than age-related attainment targets while supporting holistic development through six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs). This method demands that practitioners embrace new perspectives on teaching, planning and assessment. But freedom includes responsibility. It can be challenging for many practitioners who have worked in highly structured systems for years to adjust to a new model that calls for more professional judgement and flexibility.

The Challenge of Established Practice

Long-standing customs and practices can influence educational environments. Experience is important, but when big changes are made, it can occasionally cause resistance. Throughout their careers, many practitioners have created teaching strategies that have worked successfully for them and because of this, some people could be reluctant to abandon tried-and-true techniques, even when new guidelines promote creativity. This hesitancy is a normal reaction to uncertainty rather than a sign of a lack of commitment.

Instead of just providing content, the Curriculum for Wales urges practitioners to develop into curriculum designers, reflective professionals and learning facilitators. Some people view this alteration as a profound transformation of their professional identities. According to research by Fullan (2007), educational transformation frequently fails because people find it difficult to adjust to new ways of thinking and working rather than because the reforms themselves are incorrect. Confidence, encouragement and a readiness to question preconceived notions are necessary for change.

Unfortunately, deeply rooted traditions still control everyday activities in some environments. Opportunities for learner-led inquiry may be scarce, activities are strictly regulated and planning is still excessively restrictive. As a result, there is a gap between the curriculum's goals and reality.

The Impact on New Practitioners

The effect that resistance to change has on new practitioners entering the field may be one of the most neglected outcomes. The Curriculum for Wales' principles are closely aligned with the training that many recently trained teachers and early childhood practitioners receive. They are urged to support inquiry-based learning, value adaptability and design engaging educational opportunities that cater to children's interests. Tensions may arise, though when new practitioners enter environments where long-term employees are still devoted to conventional methods.

Instead of using the innovative methods they have been taught to employ, new practitioners may feel under pressure to follow established practices. Their concepts can be seen as impractical, excessively ambitious or detrimental to the current system. Consequently, enthusiasm may swiftly fade. Practitioners who are creative and self-assured when they first start their careers may grow afraid to express their opinions or question accepted practices. Settings run the danger of missing the new insights that new employees offer over time. This problem is especially important since organisations' capacity to adapt and grow is frequently a prerequisite for improving education. Opportunities for growth could be lost if fresh perspectives are not encouraged.

A Culture of "We've Always Done It This Way"

"We've always done it this way" is a common statement in conversations regarding educational reform. Although consistency has its advantages, this way of thinking can become problematic if it hinders reflection and personal development. The Curriculum for Wales was created to support educational institutions in creating their own curricula that are tailored to the needs of their students and communities. This calls for constant assessment and modification.

Innovation may be perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity when practitioners grow overly tied to comfortable routines. It's possible to reject new concepts before they've been thoroughly investigated. Staff members who are willing to support the curriculum's vision may become frustrated as a result. Additionally, policy documents that support learner-centred practice but daily experiences continue to be highly structured and adult-directed may result in inconsistent implementation.

The Balance Between Structure and Flexibility

Recognising that structure is not fundamentally bad is crucial. Well-organised learning spaces, clear expectations and predictable routines all benefit children, The difficulty is striking a *balance* between flexibility and structure.

While some environments have maintained systems that are so inflexible that substantial change is impossible, others have understood curriculum flexibility as a total elimination of structure. When practitioners realise that flexibility does not imply giving up professional competence, the most successful implementation frequently takes place. Rather, it entails applying that knowledge to make well-informed choices about what students require.

In order to maintain this balance, educational leaders are essential. They need to establish environments where practitioners feel comfortable taking chances, professional discourse is appreciated and experimentation is encouraged.

Professional Development as a Solution

High-quality professional growth is one of the main ways to overcome problems with implementation. Research repeatedly demonstrates that continuous support, as opposed to one-time training sessions, is necessary for long-lasting educational improvement. Practitioners require chances to work together, think critically and gain confidence in new approaches. The gap between seasoned employees and beginner practitioners can be closed with the use of professional learning communities. By establishing areas for collective reflection allows settings to gain from both new insights and well-established knowledge.

Leaders must also acknowledge that uncertainty, not opposition, is frequently the cause of the resistance to change. Practitioners can manage the shift more skilfully if they are given clear direction, mentorship and fair chances for professional conversation.

Looking Forward

An ambitious educational vision is embodied in the Curriculum for Wales. Its focus on professional autonomy, learner agency and creativity has the power to revolutionise educational opportunities for children throughout Wales. However, more than just policy texts and instruction materials are necessary for successful implementation. It necessitates a cultural change in educational environments. The potential of the curriculum may be limited when practitioners become overly committed to routines. Children may lose out on possibilities for deeper educational experiences, new practitioners may feel underappreciated and innovation may be discouraged.

Understanding the curriculum and adopting the mindset that supports it are two of the challenges facing Welsh education. For people who have spent years creating effective processes, change can be unsettling. However, in order to meet the demands of children, education **must** keep changing. Settings must promote cultures that encourage introspection, teamwork and ongoing development if the Curriculum for Wales is to meet its objectives. Educational communities may overcome the constraints of "the way things have always been

done" and fully appreciate the benefits that curricular reform offers by embracing new ideas while honouring professional experience.

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