

Section 1

Welsh Government (2013) explains The Foundation Phase as a radical departure from a competency-based, more formal approach that was previously associated with Key Stage 1 curriculum, strongly influenced by the success of international early years curriculum in New Zealand (Te Whariki), Reggio Emilia and Scandinavia. The Foundation Phase was designed to provide a play-based, experiential approach to teaching and learning. UNESCO's (2004) considered improvements like the Foundation Phase across the world and gathered that these changes would require a strong lead from the government, including a long-term vision while providing sufficient support for staff. UNESCO also noted that the impact of a new education policy may not be apparent until several years after it has been rolled out. The independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase conducted by the Welsh Government (2014a) states that the implementation of the Foundation Phase was variable between different settings and the Monitoring and Evaluation of the Effective Implementation of the Foundation Phase (MEEIFP) Project found that only 10% of the pilot Foundation Phase settings were implementing the Foundation Phase well at that time. In result of this stocktake, there were twenty-three recommendations made to support the implementation.

The Foundation Phase Action Plan (Welsh Government 2016a) acknowledges that one of the integral recommendations from the Independent stocktake was that an action plan should be developed to provide a prominent level of support for the continuing implementation of effective practice across The Foundation Phase. Professor Graham Donaldson (2015) noted The Foundation Phase as a particular strength of the curriculum in Wales and he stated that there is much to be learned from it as the new curriculum is developed. A Guide to Curriculum for Wales 2022 (2019) state that The Foundation Phase ethos, principles, and pedagogy will continue to be essential to the implementation and delivery of early years education and will be incorporated across Curriculum for Wales 2022. However, National Day Nurseries Association (2021) state that it was recognised, following the consultation period, that additional guidance will be required for learners who are pre progression step 1. The Enabling Pathways Guidance (2021) has now been developed to support settings with education of learners aged 3-5 as well as learners with additional learning needs (ALN) or profound or multiple learning difficulties (PMLD).

This guidance is part of the Curriculum for Wales framework, which has been designed to be inclusive for all. The guidance focusses on principles which are essential for holistic and meaningful for all learners. Included in this are three 'enablers' which are described as Enabling Adults, Enabling Experiences and Enabling Environments.

The Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013) acknowledged the importance of the need to improve the flexibility and accessibility of early education. The ambition was to lead the way internationally in terms of free hours of early education provided, flexibility of the offer and the quality of the curriculum and outcomes. The Foundation Phase guidance for local authorities allows for provision to be provided based on assessment. However, parents raised the concern for limited morning or afternoon session could be a barrier to uptake. Following the concern for the lack of flexibility in early education, the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase Flexibility Pilot Scheme: Final Report (2016a) acknowledges how the Welsh Government (2014b) invited local authorities to apply to participate in a Pilot scheme which would allow each Local Authority to deliver their own versions of flexible provision based on demand and local issues. Between the period 1 January to 31 August each of those Local Authorities were given up to £100,000 to facilitate their individual initiatives to increase the flexibility of the provision of the Foundation Phase. Parents who were employed had the most difficulty with the initial morning or afternoon sessions. The Welsh Government (2016a) acknowledges that children not accessing their pre-school educational entitlement obviously represent a challenge for the Welsh Government in fully implementing its early years strategy. The issue was also raised that there may be a correlation between the opportunity to access pre-school settings such as flying start and the lack of parents taking up the Foundation Phase offer in school. However, the Welsh Government (2019) undertook a pilot project to test the impact of a consistent funding rate for early education and childcare withing the Childcare Offer for Wales and following an evaluation, The Education Minister for Wales (2020) announced that from January 2021 additional funds will be made available to local authorities to enable them to increase funding to non-maintained settings to ensure equity across Wales.

Welsh Government (2008) states that 'Educational provision for young children should be holistic with the child at the heart of any planned curriculum'. Power et al.

(2018) acknowledges that the verb 'to teach' is entirely absent from the curriculum guidance and that it is the child who is at the centre of their learning, whilst highlighting that play is privileged over 'work'. In a debate about how child-centred education favours certain learners more than others, Power et al. (2018) finds evidence from Wales's Foundation Phase policy that suggest that the child-centred approach of the Foundation Phase has clearly improved the well-being and learning outcomes in early years education. However, it has shown that unfortunately the learners that benefit least from this approach were boys and poorer children. Bernstein (1977) shares similar characteristics to those of Piaget and Chomsky where they recognise 'stage theories', that learning is sequential and will only develop when the child reaches the appropriate stage. In all these theories, the child plays an integral role as the investigator in their own learning. However, Bernstein highlights that these theories exclude the child's cultural and social background. Bernstein argues that that child-centred pedagogies require more time, space and resources which gives disadvantaged areas a narrower experience. Taylor et al. (2015) supports this view by suggesting that even though there were certain schools that were implementing the Foundation Phase very well, it did not provide any evidence of a reduction in inequalities in attainment across Wales, between the children of families from different social backgrounds

Following the Foundation Phase independent stock take, The Welsh Foundation Phase Expert Group (Welsh Government, 2016b) identified four main strategic areas for development including, The curriculum and assessment, Professional Learning, Narrowing gaps in achievement, regulation, and inspection. Kingston and Siraj (2015) acknowledge that the importance of focussing on Professional Development could impact all four strategic areas. The Teaching and Learning Research Programme in Wales (2019) conducted research on the implementation of The Foundation Phase. It was highlighted that quality training and high-level qualifications are essential in providing and achieving the best cognitive outcomes and provision for all children. The independent stocktake (2014a) also recommend that teaching assistant benefit from continues professional development as well as being involved in the planning, observing, and assessing within the foundation phase classrooms. As the Foundation Phase should include practitioners who use a wide range of pedagogic strategies in their individual settings. The Welsh Government

(2017) Early Years Workforce Plan, state that the childcare and early years education workforce is highly regarded as a profession and career choice and as of 2017 there were around 23,300 people work with our early years in both maintained and non-maintained settings. The Early Years Workforce Plan (2017) acknowledges the need to challenge the perception of careers in childcare and early years. As it can be misleading to be considered a suitable employment route for school leavers who are less academic. It commits to providing help to the sector to retain quality staff whilst supporting them to achieve ambitious standards of childcare and continue to develop a skilled workforce that can meet the changing curriculum and challenges that Early Education and Care may face in the next decade and beyond. One of the Long-term action points were to make sure that higher education institutions ensure that all study that includes qualified teacher status must include a delivery of child development to support the play-based curriculum of the Foundation Phase along. As well as making sure that all early year's practitioners are aware of the ALN Transformation Programme (2017) to be able to provide support children with additional learning needs. In the Foundation Phase, from April 2016, learning support workers in schools were required to be registered with the Education Workforce Council (EWC) which means, they are bound by a Code of Conduct. In 2018, There were professional standards for learning support workers put into place that would help in raising and maintaining high quality standards in teaching to support and raise learner outcomes across Wales.

A suggestion in the independent stocktake (2014a) to make improvement was staff confidence and sharing practice. It emphasises how staff should feel confident when delivering the Foundation Phase whilst having a deep understand of child development. Another recommendation suggested that promoting and funding excellent examples of practice to function as models which would support this learning. Hopkins (2013) affirms that when an educational system is considered 'outstanding' it has usually strategically used models of good practice to support improvement. Welsh Government (2018) introduced The Foundation Phase Excellence Network that has combined leading figures from the educational system to support Foundation Phase practitioners. Also creating online resources and events to share good practice and embed the effective Foundation Phase Pedagogy across Wales.

'This development goes to the heart of what our national mission and the new curriculum is about – raising standards, reducing the attainment gap and delivering an education system that is a source of national pride and confidence'

Kirsty Williams, Minister of Education (2018)

Reed and Canning (2012) ask the question, 'What is Quality?' which they argue is difficult to define. However, they acknowledge the importance of self-reflection and gaining knowledge from the quality that comes from everyday practice. As well as sharing good practice. The Reggio Emilia approach also prides itself on sharing good practice. It promotes study groups that offer support for the investigation of the concept, contents, and values of the educational project of the Reggio Emilia preschool project (Reggio Children 2022).

There was a concern raised by staff whilst gathering evidence during the stocktake (2014) who were concerned about the future of Foundation Phase and whether the approach and funding would continue. This was related to the concerns about effective implementation as well as the baseline being withdrawn and the introduction of formal literacy and numeracy test in Year two which signalled that it was the government moving away from the play-based Foundation Phase pedagogy. However, The Welsh Government (2018) planned to continue using observational assessment as the prominent assessment tool in the Foundation Phase such as the Foundation Phase Profile. As well as introducing computerised adaptive tests for literacy and numeracy in year two as of 2019. As previously mentions, the Foundation Phase was inspired by other play-based curriculums around the world, including Te Wahriki that use narrative forms of assessment such as learning stories and sequential observational assessment: noticing, recognising, responding, recording, and revisiting valued learning. The knowledge that is gathered during these assessments is to make the teaching and learning more effective to enhance the implementation of the curriculum (New Zealand Government 2020). Like the revised Foundation Phase Framework (2015) which implement continuous and enhanced provision following observational assessments. Although an Evaluation of the Foundation Phase Key Findings on Pedagogy and Understanding, Welsh

Government (2014c) found that overall, continuous, and enhanced provision along with outdoor learning were observed the least often.

Section 2

Early Years Matters (2022) acknowledge that all children are unique, constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, self-assured, and confident.

Thomas and Lewis (2016) affirm that assessment *must* have a purpose within the Foundation Phase curriculum and observation is the most reliable way to form the most accurate information and overall picture of what a child can or cannot do. The Welsh Government's (2008) guidance on observation states that when observing children and carefully noting their progress when they are involved and enjoying their playing and learning as well as focussing in on attainment of 'predetermined outcomes', it allows practitioners to be able to plan a curriculum which is appropriate to support children's learning depending on their individual needs. Not only is observation at the heart of the Foundation Phase but it is a statutory requirement for all practitioners working with children. Thomas and Lewis (2016) highlight the importance of observation for the learning and development of a child but also acknowledge that systematic recording of observations will provide evidence for practitioners to identify behaviour or developmental problems both positive and negative. The Foundation Phase, The Foundation Stage and the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence have all been influenced by some of the good practices of Maria Montessori (1870-1952) such as the idea that adults should only make appropriate interventions, the belief that learning is best when conducted in a practical situation, to view the child as a unique person and the need to observe children. Miller and Pound (2014) explain the practitioner's role in a Montessori classroom is to be considered as the third element and stress the importance of providing an environment based on observations to meet their needs and development without imposing adult ideas. John Dewey (1859-1952) also argued that children learn better through a first-hand approach with children learning best by doing, Dewey became associated with a child-centred, play-based curriculum which the Foundation Phase shares the same ethos. Even though, the Montessori use of observation is considered good practice, there are some barriers in modern education that would prevent it being conducted as well as it should be such as the current adult to child

ratio and class sizes. An evaluation of Foundation Phase staffing (2014) found that most practitioners that were interviewed believed that adult: child ratios needed to improve as it would be essential to implementing the Foundation Phase well. The evaluation acknowledged the difficulty in Wales because of the substantial proportion of children in mixed age classes due to the class sizes which included mixing Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2.

Observations cannot tell the whole story; and even when extended over time, it can only incorporate a narrow section of evolution of a group, a culture or an individual.(Gillham,2008)

Thomas and Lewis (2016) acknowledge how the importance of observing children is recognized worldwide from Reggio Emilia approach to Te Whariki. The Reggio Emilia approach is to collect evidence about the child through photographs and videos and create a portfolio to give an overall picture of the child which is then used to plan the next steps of the child's learning based on their individual needs (Carr,2001). Like Reggio Emilia's formative approach, McLachlen (2018) explains the Te Whariki curriculum as viewing observations and assessment as a continuous process. They create learning stories for each child where the continuous observation, conducted minute by minute will provide the basis of information for a more in-depth assessment and evaluation to allow better decision making to plan for the child's individual needs. Even though the Foundation Phase also using methods of continuous observation to plan for a child's individual needs, the method of assessment is a summative approach, using a Foundation Phase Profile (2017) which 'summative assessments of children's skills using observations and formative assessments that produces outcomes expressed in four Areas of Learning'.

Thomas and Lewis (2016) acknowledge the importance of considering and respecting the children when conducting observations and ensuring that the parents or caregivers have a clear idea of any observations made about their children. In line with the UN convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Articles 3 and 12 set the standards for listening to children's voices and promoting their involvement in decisions that involve them.

Thomas and Lewis (2016) highlight that even though observations have many benefits and can be used as a useful tool to support planning and assessment, they stress the importance of remembering that an observation is only a moment in time and not the whole picture of what happened before and after. Estyn (2017) state that they do not have a view on the exact amount of assessment evidence that is required, and it is the individual settings to decide how much evidence they need to support the Foundation Phase profile (2017) of an individual child.

As well as the Foundation Phase Profile (2015) begin conducted from Nursery to Year 2. As of May 2013, children in Wales aged between seven and fourteen are required to sit national tests in literacy and numeracy. This following Estyn's Annual Report (2011) where there was unmistakable evidence provided that the literacy and numeracy skills of children and young people were not good enough in Wales. The Minister for Education and Skills (2011) announced the new National Literacy and Numeracy Framework for all learners aged five to fourteen. Raising literacy and numeracy standards in school was made a priority. Welsh Government (2018) highlight the importance of good literacy and numeracy skills and how they are essential for children to reach their potential whether in higher education or employment. However, Thomas and Lewis (2016) argue that these tests have had an impact on the implementation of the Foundation Phase for Year 2 children, with reports of children feeling stressed and some practitioners feeling pressure to teach the test at the expense of a play-based curriculum. As the ethos of the Foundation Phase (2008) is related to finding the individual needs of the child and refers to stage not age. PACEY (2018) acknowledges the impact that Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and his constructivist theory has on the Foundation Phase. He believed the children 'construct' their own learning based on their experiences and the world around them, as well as the four stages of development. Welsh Government (2008) states that the role of the practitioner can develop children's independent thinking and learning through the processes of planning, developing, and reflecting to help them gain a deeper understanding of the world around them. Early Years Matters (2022) state from birth, babies and children will develop at their own pace and in their own way. It stresses the importance of inclusion and valuing every child and family from all social and cultural backgrounds. The ARG (1999) argue that 'the use of assessments to help pupils learn is one of the weakest aspects of practice in classrooms across the

UK'. Thomas and Lewis (2016) highlight the importance of using other forms of assessment to be testing, as testing is a form of summative assessment which measures children against set, fixed criteria. Edmiston (2002) argues that 'focussing on the end products, which are norm-referenced and criterion-referenced, is inappropriate for young children'. Thomas and Lewis (2016) acknowledge that there is much to learn from Te Wahriki and the Reggio Emilia approach as they emphasise the process of children's learning and development as a continuum, rather than focusing on end product such as a test. Black and William (1998) explain assessment in education as a fundamental part of teacher's classroom practice and how when it is used effectively, can significantly improve learning. However, Mthembu (2015) on behalf of the South African Journal of Childhood Education criticised this view by acknowledging the need to address the diverse needs of all children and how teachers must use assessment for both summative and formative purposes. Specifically in the Early Years of school, because children begin to further their development, knowledge, and skills at a different pace. Therefore, combining these two forms of assessment allows a broader view of the individual child's needs and planning for future development.

The New Curriculum for Wales (2022) are introducing a single continuum of progression from ages three to six to provide a smoother learning journey for all learners. The role of assessment remains prominent; however, it may look different with the summative end of phase/stage assessments being removed to ensure a smoother transition through the academic years. The New Curriculum acknowledges that assessments should support each individual learner at an appropriate pace to ensure they reach their potential and fulfil the four core purposes. Welsh Government (2019) explain that the new formative assessment will have priority to ensure that all learners understand how they are progressing and what they need to do next. It should also provide practitioners with a clear picture of learner's achievements which will allow them to plan appropriately and identify and request additional support if needed. Following a report from ESTYN (2014) from a primary school in Swansea who had developed a framework of values that promote tolerance, diversity, and citizenship .By promoting this inclusive ethos and culture it has promoted effective pupil participation with a noticeable impact on pupils' behaviour and learning. With a thorough knowledge and understanding of their own

rights and values it has helped them value themselves , others, and their environment.

Nutbrown (2006) discusses inclusion and how it can look different in different setting as everybody has their own idea of what inclusion means. Nutbrown explains inclusion as making sure that everyone belongs, including the children and their parents as well as the practitioners and outside agencies. Welsh Government (2021) Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code state that the principles that underpin the ALN system that support a fully inclusive education system, where all children are provided with an opportunity to succeed and access an education that meet their individual needs and enjoy their learning. There are five main principles that underpin the system, which are a rights-based approach, early identification, collaboration and integration, inclusive education, and a bilingual system. IT is also important to ensure that all early year's practitioners will be involved in the teaching and support of learners with ALN. The responsibility for regular professional learning in relation to ALN lies with the individual. As part of the new ALN transformation programme (2020) the aim is to increased participation of learners and their views should always be considered. Individual Development Plans will also support practitioners to create provision to promote the development and progress by creating tangible outcomes that will contribute to the young child or persons full potential being reached. Donaldson (2015) describes the new curriculum as A Curriculum for Life as affirms that with the discourse of equity, equality of opportunity and inclusiveness, presenting good practice of that which supports the learning of *all* pupils.

Section 3 – Blog:

The Importance of Outdoor Learning for Children's Mental Well-being

‘A high level of health and well-being is associated with positive functioning, which includes creative thinking, productivity, good interpersonal relationships and

resilience in the face of adversity, as well as good physical health and life expectancy.’ RSPB (2022)

As an experienced Early Years practitioner, I have always enjoyed teaching, observing, and experiencing children learning and developing in an outdoor environment. Particularly, after the recent school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic, outdoor learning may be more important than ever. As we transition from home, online learning to providing a safe and engaging outdoor space where children can thrive, connect, and engage could be critical for their overall wellbeing.

When observing from afar it is clear and apparent that most children enjoy being outdoors, learning and engaging naturally. It is widely known that the outdoors is beneficial to not only the body but also the mind, as well as that it inspires first-hand problem solving and creative thinking while developing their social skills. Outdoor Learning will significantly support children in fulfilling one of the four core purposes in becoming a healthy, confident individual as part of The New Curriculum for Wales (2022). However, this should be a simple transition into the new curriculum as The Foundation Phase has promoted the importance of outdoor learning since 2008. The Foundation Phase Outdoor Learning Handbook (2009) suggests that early year's settings should promote discovery and independence by using the outdoor environment as a prominent resource for children's learning and stress the importance of allowing the outdoors to become an extension of the indoor classroom and should be considered 'inseparable'. Welsh Government (2015) acknowledged that The Foundation Phase was inspired by various play-based curriculum from around the world such as Reggio Emilia in Italy, Te Wahriki in New Zealand, and the Scandinavian approaches. The Danish 'Forest Schools' possibly having the biggest influence on the outdoor aspect. As Bentsen and Jensen (2012) confirm that Scandinavian countries are often considered pioneers and countries of reference when it comes to outdoor learning. Evidence shows us that there is a long-standing commitment and vast provision provided in these countries. There has been extensive research conducted to promote the benefits of play-based curriculums like this specifically highlighting the time spent outdoors.

When the Foundation Phase was evaluated in 2015, unfortunately there was criticism about not spending enough time outdoors, with practitioners admitting that

outdoor learning often depends on the weather conditions. However, since then there has been an action plan put in place to support professional development which should improve all practitioners' understanding of the importance of outdoor learning and the play-based curriculum. It is important to note that outdoor learning contributes to all seven wellbeing goals by providing an opportunity every day to explore and learn outside. In line with the Environment Act (Wales) 2016 and the Wellbeing of Future Generation Act (Wales) 2015 which have created a more modern legislation to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of Wales. There should not be an excuse of harsh weather, just inappropriate clothing.

Thankfully, since September 2021, there has not been any national school closures, this is the first academic year not to be interrupted since 2018/2019. Now, practitioners need to be supporting the children in more ways than ever before. It is not known the long-term effect on children academically but there has been research conducted regarding their mental health. The Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably affected most people's lives across the world in one way or another. Researchers at York St John University (2021) explored the impact of Covid-19 and it highlighted that a child's main relationship in an early year's setting is their 'key person' and by having that relationship disrupted extensively, it had an impact on the child's emotional security. Woods (2020) states that the pandemic has been recognised as a global trauma that threatens lives and wellbeing across all communities, including children. Smelser (2004) discusses how Sigmund Freud warned that the traumas of childhood 'are even more momentous because they occur in times of incomplete development and are for that reason liable to have traumatic effect'. The NHS (2020) conducted a large study that found significant mental health conditions amongst children had risen by 50% compared to 2017. However, it is unknown the long-term consequences on children's mental health and continued research are needed to understand the effects that the pandemic will have on both adults and children. At this time of continued uncertainty, it is crucial that Early Years settings provide a stable and positive environment for the children to thrive and heal from the global trauma that we have all experienced.

There are many ways in which we can support a child's mental health and well-being, including emotional literacy programmes like ELSA and the Thrive Approach. However, daily opportunities to access outdoor learning has obvious benefits of maintaining a healthy and happy mind. Article 31 of the UNCRC rights of the child, is that a child has a right to play, that play should be fundamental and not an extra. The convention acknowledges the benefits of playing outdoors and its physical and mental benefits. Some of the main benefits of natural outdoor play are:

- Improved self-regulation
- Promotes cognitive development
- Advances physical development
- Improves overall emotional and social well-being

A study from the Open University's OPENspace found extensive evidence that increased time outdoors, reduces symptoms of depression, improves wellbeing, and significantly supports a child's concentration while in school.

For the practitioners or caregivers who may not enjoy being in the outdoors please remember the positive benefits it has on children. Providing them with an opportunity to be free, to climb trees or jump in muddy puddles. Enjoy their happiness and trust in the evidence produced in the Foundation Phase Outdoor Learning Handbook (2015) that enriching, outdoor experiences will have a positive impact on their overall development, especially their mental well-being.

There are plenty of great ideas for lessons and resources that you can find here:

<https://www.ltl.org.uk/free-resources/>

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