

Section 1

According to the Welsh Government, (2015) in 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government began the implementation of a new holistic play-based learning curriculum for children aged three to seven called the Foundation Phase. This was a significant change from the previous Key Stage 1 of the National Curriculum that was based on more formal teaching and assessing children to specific competences (Tyler, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Therefore, this new curriculum was in line with NAFW (2003) who suggested that the introduction of formal learning too soon before some pupils are ready could result in children underachieving and attaining lower standards and losing both confidence and a love for learning. Therefore, the Foundation Phase was designed on a developmentally appropriate pedagogy which balanced child-led and adult-led learning, which was cross curricular built on interlinking areas of learning, delivered through indoor and outdoor play (Waters, 2016). In doing so the Foundation Phase encouraged learning where children could be creative and imaginative making learning more enjoyable and more effective. This supported the broader aim of the Government to ensure that all children had the best possible start in life for their future growth and development (Welsh Government 2015). The Government wanted children to have access to a comprehensive range of education, learning, personal and social skills. The Welsh Government policy and legislation is also underpinned by the UNCRC, (no date) in terms of a children's rights based approach providing physical and mental, social and emotional health, including freedom from abuse, victimisation and exploitation.

The Foundation Phase when it was introduced was intended to have a wide range of impacts on children and their learning, including attendance, classroom, wellbeing and involvement and benefits for practitioners, parents and children themselves (Taylor et al., 2015). According to Bryn Hafod Primary School, (no date) The Foundation Phase wanted children to be given more opportunities to explore the world around them and understand how things work by taking part in practical activities that are relevant to their developmental stage. The children are challenged with open-ended questions and given opportunities to explore and share their ideas for solving problems. However, the evaluation of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government 2015) suggest that the implementation of the Foundation phase may not have been consistent. This was related in part to funding limitations allowing settings to retain the high adult to

child ratio required in practice to support the curriculum. The independent body, Estyn in 2011 acknowledged that many practitioners made better use of the outdoors environment but were not using it enough to develop children's reading and writing, welsh language, creativity or information and communication technology. (Donaldson, 2015). Early years practitioners may have their own personal perceptions regarding play and learning within the use of the outdoors. Some practitioners who have an attitude of authority may constrain learning as they may be less likely to adopt a pedagogy that can recognise learning from a child's viewpoint and see any value in outdoor learning. (Humberstone and Stan, 2011). Another challenge for implementing the curriculum Knight (2011) and Glazzard (2014) argue that there is a lack of specialised training in Wales for practitioners, including senior management and this has led to ineffective outdoor learning environments.

When practitioners were asked what made it difficult to assess children in the outdoors, practitioners identified: staff attitude and expertise; quality of appropriate resources; the degree of risk involved; adverse weather; staffing ratios; and changes to curriculum policy which emphasise the formal assessment of children. (Davies & Hamilton, 2018). But the overwhelming concern with regards the implementation of the Foundation Phase relates to funding. 46% of lead practitioners in the funded non-maintained settings and 43% of school head teachers said that funding for the Foundation Phase had not been adequate. (Welsh Government, 2015).

The Foundation Phase was developed by Welsh Government, (2018a) based on several early years theoretical contexts including Piaget (cited in Pentagon, 2018) who viewed play as integral to the development of intelligence in children. His theory of play argues that as the child matures, their environment and play should encourage further cognitive and language development. (Pentagon, 2018). Therefore, play can help children to develop and extend their language and communication skills. Play allows them to be creative, to investigate and explore different materials, and gives them opportunities to experiment and predict outcomes. It can also help them to develop their confidence, self-motivation and control of their own thoughts and actions. Vygotsky (1978) states that children's cognitive development happens from social interaction and guided learning from peers and others around them within the zone of proximal development. The environment around children will influence how they see things and think about things, Vygotsky says that adults have an important role to play

alongside children's learning and development. (SimplyPsychology, 2018). In contrast to Vygotsky, Piaget maintains that cognitive development in children comes largely from independent exploring in which children construct knowledge of their own and he believed children will only learn when they are ready. (getrevising, 2017).

Play also allows children to test their abilities, use initiative, take risks and make mistakes without fear of failure. Through play, children learn the skills of negotiation and the art of forming relationships with their peers. In line with the Froebelian and Scandinavian approach outdoor play was given a high status in the Foundation Phase (Waters, 2016) However, the focus on a play based curriculum was also a challenge for some settings and practitioners (Welsh Government, 2015). For example, Waters (2015) suggests that training that gives practitioners consistent information on what a play-based curriculum was, did not always happen. Therefore, how play-based was interpreted could vary between practitioners. Also, Taylor et al., (2015) suggests that developing a play-based curriculum, when, at the of Year 2, the Government still focus on standardisation tests also creates a tension. Welsh Government (2015) highlighted this with evidence that play based learning decreases in year 1 and 2 in some settings. The Welsh Government are now introducing the Successful Futures curriculum based on the Donaldson, (2015a) report. This report says the implementation of the new 2022 curriculum will be presented in three main parts. Firstly, these are changes to the teaching workforce, the training required to improve teaching and learning environments. The second part outlines the changes to the curriculum and the attempt to guide all involved to adopt new practices. The third part concentrates on the 'learning' impact on pupils and the challenges they may face. Due to some of the challenges faced by the current Foundation Phase in terms of consistently delivering a play based curriculum and research by Foundation Phase stocktake (Welsh Government, 2015) which highlight the significance of having highly trained staff, the three parts of implementing a new curriculum could be essential.

The Foundation Phase places great emphasis on children learning by doing. Young children will be given more opportunities to gain first-hand experiences through play and active involvement rather than using books. They will be given time to develop their speaking and listening skills and to become confident in their reading and writing abilities.

Maths will be more practical for children and they can see how problems are solved and how important maths is in their everyday lives. There will be more emphasis on children understanding how things work and on finding different ways to solve problems. The curriculum is set out to focus on experiential learning, active involvement and developing each child's:

Skills and understanding.

Personal, social, emotional, physical and intellectual wellbeing.

Children's attitude to learning and enjoyment.

Self-esteem and self-confidence to learn new things and form new friendships.

To encourage creativeness, observing and support individual's development in different situations.

To experience outdoor activities and to problem solve.

The Welsh Government, (2018) says play is one of the main ways in which children learn. They recognise the importance of play in children's lives. 'The Welsh Government places great value on play and its importance in the lives of children in our society. They also believe that play is essential for the growth in children's cognitive; physical; social and emotional development.'

Learning through play was the basis the Foundation Phase was built and is one of the key ingredients in the curriculum. Learning through play can be a powerful tool for children learning in education. Unicef, (2018) agrees that play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills. For this reason, play opportunities and environments that promote play, exploration and hands-on learning are at the core of effective pre-primary programmes.

Reference

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