

Section 1

This section of the assignment will compare the two curricula, The Welsh Foundation phase (FP) that was launched in 2008, a statutory curriculum that is in line with section 102,105 of the Education Act 2002 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), This curriculum is play-based learning with expected outcomes for children aged 3 to 7, that are focused in the 7 areas of learning which aims to support the development of the whole child (Welsh Government, 2015).

This will be compared to the Curriculum for Wales for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery settings (CFW) that was implemented in 2022 replacing the foundation phase to create a consistent learning pathway for children aged 3-16 years old. With the aim to provide a consistent educational experience across all stages of learning. The Welsh Government 2022 in line with this vision introduced the curriculum to support learning in the early stages for non-maintained childcare settings that ensures that children have a developmentally appropriate approach and sets the foundation for their educational journey (Welsh Government, 2024).

Firstly, there is a shared focal point in early years education in the Welsh Foundation phase Curriculum (2008) and the Curriculum for Wales for funded non-maintained nursery Settings (2022). However, their structure and emphasis on key areas are different. Learning was organised into seven key areas in the Foundation Phase (2008), while the Curriculum for Wales (2022) has six areas of learning and experience. The Foundation Phase gave greater emphasis on distinct areas such as the development of Welsh language, whereas the Curriculum for Wales (2022) has a more holistic approach encompassing all areas.

The Curriculum of Wales for funded non-maintained nursery Setting, (CfW), (2022) focuses on learning through play, hands-on experiences and play opportunity, and methods that are holistic. Similarly, the focus of the Foundation Phase (FP) (2008) was on the development of a variety of skills and knowledge and understanding via a curriculum with more structure. It was organised into seven subject areas such as mathematics, literacy, personal and social development, Welsh language development, physical, creative development, and knowledge and understanding of the world (Welsh Government, 2015). Therefore, the FP was linking with various international approaches such as Scandinavian, New Zealand (Te Whariki) and Reggio Emilia, all developed to have a clear focus on the individual child. However, the FP had a different direction from these approaches, stated above and linked the framework, with a strong focus on children learning skills or outcomes, and had adult lead teaching (Taylor, alt, 2016).

In contrast, the CfW focusses on the Four Purposes of ambitious capable learners, enterprising creative contributors, ethical informed citizens and healthy confident individuals these four purposes support children holistic development providing a clear vision for children's development, as well as having five developmental pathways which include belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and well-being(Welsh Government,2024). In addition, Donaldson (2015) summarises the four purposes to provide a clear and continuous view of learning and places children at the centre (Donaldson, 2015). However, these four purposes are open to interpretation, and some practitioners are unsure how to put these four purposes into learning outcomes. As the Welsh government has highlighted the fact that early year's practitioners and schools should consider what the four purposes mean for children's learning and how the curriculum will support learning to realise them (Welsh Government(A) ,2022).

The FP assesses children's learning more formally and evaluates this aligned with expected results. Whereas the CfW assessment is based on observations of individual children's progress and needs. The key principles being enjoyment of learning, engagement and child led exploration, creativity and outdoor learning. In addition, Estyn highlighted that practitioners in early years settings reported that play is the most effective tool for progression (Estyn, 2023). Moreover, the CfW play based approach comes away from age-related outcomes and fixed key stages and has introduced progression steps for children aged 5-8 years old. This benefits early years practitioners who can support children's individual learning styles and provide environments that incite children's curiosity so learning can take place (Welsh Government,2025).

On the other hand, the FP principles are on the development of skills, acquisition of knowledge and the readiness of children for their next stages of education and preparation for life (Welsh Government, 2015).

To summarise the FP emphasizes learning through play and experiences, and the CfW gives priority to greater structure in teaching and learning to develop children's knowledge and skills.

Moreover the CfW shared the same principles as the FP promoting a pedagogic approach, which has been developed into the enabling learning guidance in the CfW in which the curriculum stresses the importance of the right of the children and pedagogies (University of Wales Trinity Saint David ,2025).However, the FP had its limitations Taylor et al's (2016)

evaluation report was published by the Welsh Government in 2015 and they made 29 recommendations, one of the limitations are the wide difference in quality and lack of understanding of play-based pedagogy across early year settings and schools, and in some cases some practitioners lacked training in developmentally appropriate approaches in early childhood education.

Although schools and early years settings that piloted the foundation phase research had shown that early years practitioners had a lack of understanding and depth of knowledge of the educational theories underpinning the FP, the key group of pilot schools and early years settings still need support and clear guidance on matters such as Areas of learning and related to pedagogy and needed better planning and training funding (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2005, p3). Highlighting that this issue was not addressed by the Welsh government Maynard et al, Six years later raised some ongoing issues of training and guidance within the FP (2008). Furthermore, the CfW has been identified as one of the key enablers of high-quality learning. Practitioners are expected to observe and support children in their play to meet their holistic learning and development needs. They need to create safe and effective environments indoors and outdoors that nurture child-led curiosity, learning and well-being with joyful learning opportunities that encourage awareness and compassion, engaging children in teachable moments with strong links with the community and home life (Welsh Government, 2024). Similarly, the CfW has strong connections with Froebel theory of the enabling adult focusing on the importance of the role of the early years' practitioner to support 'freedom with guidance' by noticing, observing and responding sensitively to children's learning (Froebel trust, 2024). In addition, the implications to enabling adults in practice are that practitioners need a greater understanding of children's developmental and educational theories to be able to look after each child's individual development needs and interests. However, research has shown that practitioners reported challenges and lacked confidence in interpreting the four purposes especially difficulties with practitioners in measuring well-being (Lewis, 2023).

To conclude, both the Foundation phase (2008) and the Curriculum for Wales for maintained and non-maintained settings (2022) have a strong emphasis on early childhood development and learning through play. While the FP focused on seven areas of learning influenced by international pedagogies, the CfW promotes a more holistic purpose with five development pathways that are integrated throughout the framework with a flexible child-centred approach. It has a strong focus on the role of the enabling adult. Despite shared values, both curricula have faced challenges particularly around practitioner training and understanding learning theories and children's development. The CfW is aimed to address past limitations of the FP by giving

clear structure for supporting practitioners in looking after children's individual learning needs and wellbeing, through ongoing support and professional development training is essential.

Section 2

This section will discuss the unique child and the methods of assessment within a play-based curricula. The principle for the unique child is the fact that every child can develop and learn from birth, every child's development journey is unique with their own learning styles experiences and interests. Children develop in different ways and rates throughout their life that is influenced by the child's culture, environment and background. In which their individual needs and interests are at the heart of their early years learning journey (Department of education, 2024). Following the principles from the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC) article 28 states that every child has the right to education, schools should respect children's rights and dignity, and article 29 goals of education every child's education must develop their personality, talent and abilities, the children's human rights need to be respected and as well as their parents and the own and others environment and cultures (Unicef, no date).

In addition, the Curriculum for Wales 2022 framework is designed to meet each child's needs by having a curriculum that is flexible and unique to all children learning so no two schools have the same curriculum (Welsh Government (B), 2022). Similarly, the Curriculum for Wales for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022) value the uniqueness of each child and through child-led learning, personalised progressions and recognising each child's individual development

needs and pedagogy style have this progressive child-centred approach to assessment these progressions are assessed by ongoing observations children where the practitioner is looking at the whole child holistically the practitioner can analyse, respond on the analysis from the observations and make decisions on what are the next steps for progression (Education Wales,2023).

Furthermore, the Curriculum for Wales moves away from age-related outcomes and moves towards a holistic narrative assessment model and uses methods such as learning stories which is the assessment approach that originated from New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum. Learning stories are a narrative-based assessment that narrates through photos and real-life observations on the child learning experiences, collected into a book. Each learning story reflecting on the unique child by focusing on the child strengths, interests and identity which also includes children's families. Learning stories highlight significant wow learning moments in children's play experiences and focuses on the child's strengths, interests and growth which ensure the child is developing uniquely and to their full potential. These are shared with parents to acknowledge their perspective on their child. Sharing these learning stories captures the children's voices and families' voices (Escomilla et,al 2021). Incorporating family contributions in assessment promote inclusivity and collaboration. This supports the unique child idea by acknowledging 'cynefin' (which means sense of belonging and a deep connection to a place) one of the values in the Curriculum for Wales (2022). In addition, as Ball 2021 cited in Learning stories and children's right: Reimagining assessment in early childhood education, highlight using the approach is a way for noticing and keep records of children's interests and progression and supporting children's identity and holistic development (Boss, 2024). Children's rights are supported through learning stories in three ways, it gives practitioners opportunities to reflect on their practices and the children's beliefs and culture within their development and learning by acknowledging and recognising and respecting children's identity, language and culture the ability to make choices and their decisions can influence matters that affect their lives. For example, children having choices in their own play and experiences taking ownership of their own learning (Boss,2024). With this enhancing practitioner's reflection and deeper understanding of children's learning and the way each child learns with this knowledge, understanding and insight practitioners can respond more sensitively to each child's needs and interests (Carr and Lee ,2012). Aligning with the Reggio Emilia approach where assessments are reflective and documentative to support children's learning journeys (The education hub,2020).

However, learning stories rely on early years practitioners interpretation of what the child is doing when observing, which might be influenced by the practitioners knowledge and skill, As Emilson and Promlin Samuelsson(2014) reported that when observing teachers or early year practitioners may try to see what they want to see. On the other hand, this method is very time consuming for teachers and these wow moments may be missed(Blaikloack 2008).

Furthermore, the Early Years Foundation Stage tracker is a simple to use system for recording and analysing children progress through their time in the early years education setting. This tracker is a way for parents and early years practitioners to support the children in developing their full potential, which ensures that they are making progress in their holistic development through observation, recording and evaluation of child's skills and knowledge (Salford city council, No date). These assessments are intended to identify individual children's needs and if they are needing additional support, to enable the practitioner in planning for each child's needs and abilities. As Drummond (2012) states tracker supports children's ongoing learning and the early identification of needs. Development tracking is a vital tool in early years education, this assessment enables the practitioner to assess, observe and support the individual needs of children allowing the detection of developmental delays or as Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) highlights one of the strengths of development tracking helps the practitioner in providing early interventions once developmental delays or additional learning needs (ALN) are identified which improves long-term outcomes for the child . Reflecting on the concept of the unique child implementing intervention early will provide the best possible opportunity for the child to thrive in your setting (Department for Education, 2021). As Allen and Gillen (2013) noted the framework for assessment allows practitioners to differentiate between the normal range of development and any signs of children with ALN. In addition, tracking information provides evidence and information for the child's individual development plan (IDPs). As the Welsh Government's ALN code (2021) stated the importance in early years practice in using observational information to create meaningful IDPs (Welsh Government ,2021). However, development records should show the children holistically to make sure support is relevant to the child's needs not just their diagnosis (Nutbrown 2011). In addition, early years practitioners using a consistent tracker will support working in partnership and facilitate greater communication between practitioners, multi-agency and parents. However, despite the benefits there are limitations to this checklist method it has the risk of labelling the child rather than understanding them holistically (Wood,2010).

In summary, assessment methods such as learning stories and development trackers can support children's holistic needs and how they develop and help adults understand the

children's learning journey. Practitioners need to be reflective, inclusive and flexible in supporting all children to reach their full potential. Learning stories promote reflection, inclusion and strong partnerships with families, while trackers assist with early identification of developmental needs such as children with ALN. Both offer different but valuable insight on the children's development and progress in learning; however, they also have the challenges such as practitioner bias, time constraints or risks to reduce children to checklist by not seeing each child holistically and uniquely.

Section 3

Yes, it's More than just Messy and it's worth it.

Children are at the happiest when they have paint on their hands and faces, jumping in muddy puddles getting water in their wellies, wet clothes and gloop or shaving foam in-between their little fingers. You might think who is going to clean that up and will the parent be annoyed because again the child has come home with dirty clothes. But look a bit closer it is more than just mess it's deep learning, it's play that deepens curiosity and underpinning learning. Messy play is a vital part of the early years play-based curriculum, offering children play opportunities to meet their holistic and developmental needs. But why do some early years settings not encourage messy play in their settings?

Messy play opens the door to play opportunities that allow children to use their senses by exploring different types of materials such as mud, paint, water playdough, clay, sand and gloop. These play opportunities are child led, open-ended and having these opportunities plays a vital role in providing the Curriculum for Wales (2022). Giving children hands on, exploratory and holistic learning that places the child at the centre. In addition, messy play gives children a sensory experience that supports and stimulates brain development.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development argues that children learn best through active exploration and different types of materials (Piaget, 1951). Messy play supports children's sensorimotor and preoperational stage of learning that helps children develop a sense of the world through touch, smell, sight and sound. Research shows that sensory play supports children in the early year's neural pathway development in their brain (Goscoyne, 2016).

From pouring water, squeezing playdough and squishing gloop, messy play develops little hand muscles, this movement and actions helps build and develop fine motor skills, which is needed for writing and self-care skills that are needed later in life (Case-Smith and O' Brien,2014). This great messy play improves physical coordination and strength which are developed by lifting, mixing and reaching. As well as developing children physically., it helps develop communication because messy play incites children to have rich conversation. Whether they are talking about the 'sticky' texture or playing with other children making mud cakes, they are building their language and social skills. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), children's learning is a social process, and messy play has a great value in offering children the opportunity to engage in learning and social interactions that are meaningful, within their zone of proximal development supported by adults or peers. For example, practitioners can scaffold language by using descriptive words and open-ended questions such as 'what is happening to the ice?', thereby enhancing vocabulary and cognitive development.

Moreover, children use their creativity and imagination when it comes to messy play which has no limitations using different messy materials, give the children the opportunity to express themselves in non-verbal ways, supporting this is Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence (1993), messy play supports children to learn how to express themselves in different ways. Squishing playdough or playing with water can help children regulate emotions which is essential for their wellbeing, which is one of the great principals in the Curriculum for Wales (2024).

So why do some early years settings avoid messy play despite the clear developmental benefits or fully utilise messy play. This make be due to a few factors, some early years practitioners avoid messy play for a fear about cleanliness, germs and health and safety, playing with mud, paint and water are often seen to be unhygienic or dirty. Supporting this Cooper (2012) highlights the fact of allergies and hygiene that can lead a practitioner to not use these materials. Items such as shaving foam and food ingredients pasta/ rice as a play material in sensory trays. Messy play opportunities are time consuming to set up and practitioners may not have the time to set up these play experiences and clear them away, especially if there are few staff that day and the setting may need to have extra staff time and resources available that some settings may not have. Supporting this Howard and McInnes (2013) research found that many early years practitioners are underfunded or overstretched and favour more structured activities and less messy play opportunities because they are easier to manage. According to Palaiologou (2017) children to practitioner ratios and lack of engaging and supporting staff can directly limit the opportunities for open-ended play such as messy play. In addition, some

children's parents see messy play as a hinderance and practitioners having a lack of supervision with the children. Noted by Robson (2012) that parent perception can influence how freely practitioners provide child-led experiences such as messy play, especially if there are complaints from parents about their children getting dirty or clothes being ruined. Supporting this Nutbrown (2011) observed that early year's settings often must balance learning experiences with parent expectations which leads to less risk taking and cleaner play options.

In summary, messy play is an essential part of a play-based learning, it provides children with hands on experiences, exploratory and holistic learning opportunities. Activities such as splashing in puddles, exploring mud and painting, sand and water, gloop or shaving foam engage children's senses and stimulate and support their brain development. Messy play promotes fine and gross motor skills, physical coordination, language and social skills through exploration (Piaget 1951: Goscoyne 2016: Case-Smith and O' Brien,2014). It also lets children be creative, imaginative and helps them self-regulate that support children's mental health and wellbeing (Gardner, 1993; Curriculum for Wales, 2022).

However, despite these clear benefits some early years settings avoid messy play. Concerned about hygiene and health and safety, as well as time and resources required to manage the messy experience, leading practitioners to limit these experiences (Cooper, 2012; Howard & McInnes, 2013; Palaiologou, 2017). Additionally, some parents dislike messy play, not liking the messy clothes, which can influence the early years practitioner in offering cleaner play experiences (Robson, 2012; Nutbrown, 2011). As a result, while messy play supports children vital part of their development, barriers and perceptions continue to restrict the use in some early years settings.

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