

1. Critically analyse the implementation of play-based Early Years Curriculum referring to evaluative research evidence and reports.

A play-based curriculum is an educational approach which centres around the use of play as a primary method for children's learning and development. It emphasises hands-on, experiential learning through activities that are enjoyable and engaging for the child. Play is recognised through this approach as a crucial avenue for children to explore, experiment, and develop various skills such as social, emotional, cognitive and physical abilities. The works of Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) support this approach.

Early Years Practitioners often have a good understanding of what play-based learning is, drawing on research and theories by prominent theorists such as Piaget (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) to inform their approach to play-based curriculum. Piaget (1962) highlighted the role of play in the cognitive development of children and Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the social and cultural aspects of playing supporting cognitive development. Erikson (1963) discussed the psychosocial development facilitated by play during different stages of childhood whereas the article by Ginsburg (2007) provides insights into the broader health benefits of play.

Continuous professional development and keeping up to date on current research and literature contributes to the Early Years Practitioners' understanding and application of play-based methodologies and understanding the role of play in fostering holistic child development according to Nutbrown *et al.* (2013), UK Government (2017) and UK Government (no date). Play is fundamental to children's development, and through play is a positive way to engage with the child and to help them learn about the world around them.

If children do not choose it, it is not play and does not align with the idea that genuine play is often self-directed and driven by the child's interests. This is consistent with the theories of renowned educators and theorists. Indeed, Sutton-Smith (1997) and Vygotsky (1978) acknowledge the role of play in

fostering natural learning and development and the importance of self-directed and voluntary aspects in play.

Long before the Foundation Phase was developed, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2003) and Elking (1987) discussed the risks of pushing academic skills too early in early childhood education. They emphasised the importance of play in early education whilst criticising the trend towards early academic pressure as well as discussing the potential risks of pushing academic skills too early in childhood education.

According to Wightwick (2016), in the PISA ranking, Wales was the lowest scoring country as in 2016 out of 72 countries Wales was 39th in Maths, 40th in Reading and 35th in Science.

However, in 2018, Wales was just below the average for developed nations (OECD) in reading, just below in Maths and just below in Science according to Wightwick (2019).

According to Munson (2024), comparisons can be made of the Foundation Phase and the new curriculum for funded non-maintained settings. There are a number of key differences between the new Curriculum and the Foundation Phase. The new four core purposes outline the intentions of learning for all children. Indeed, the new six Areas of Learning have further highlighted the importance of all learning experiences by replacing core subjects. As a result, there is more flexibility allowed for Early Years Practitioners to be flexible with creativity in their teaching. As schools have the control to create a unique curriculum following the new curriculum for Wales, it allows for more autonomy within learning environments. In September 2022, the new Curriculum for Wales came into effect and the principles of the Foundation Phase have remained the same with an emphasis on hands on learning. The new Curriculum for Wales has four purposes, five developmental pathways and six areas of learning from ages 3-16 years to provide guidance on learning experiences so that a child's education is consistent and built upon throughout.

According to Waters (2016), lessons are learnt from the Foundation Phase to scaffold learning going forward. Issues and challenges were discussed with a view as to what could be done differently. A main concern was that the development of high quality professional learning must be a priority so that

Early Years Practitioners understand the way forward. It is important that the practitioner's leaders take time to spend with the children to understand and implement the new ideas developing.

According to Welsh Government (2014), The Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales was carried out from September 2013 – March 2014 which produced findings and a plan to give commitment to ensuring that getting it right in the early years is paramount and essential to each and every child's achievements. Welsh Government (2013) produced Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan, which sets out the commitment from Welsh Government to make improvements to life chances for children in Wales. In 2013, the Welsh Government gave Professor Siraj the role of undertaking an independent short-term Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales as it was acknowledged that it was effective but there were some shortfalls. Recommendations were given to provide training and support to all staff in enhancing the quality of the teaching they give. This would then provide the children with learning experiences and high quality teaching that they can understand well and in turn improve their personal achievements (Siraj & Kingston, 2014). Practitioners need to understand how children learn best and provide the teaching in a way that benefits each and every individual.

Another important point was Recommendation 3 of the Stocktake; the sharing of good practice from settings and schools of excellence with other providers so that all providers deliver the same quality. This helps develop the training of the staff but also enables all children experience the same opportunities. This goes together with Recommendation 2 of The Stocktake; having the Care Inspectorate for Wales (CIW) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn) carrying out joint inspections over the Foundation Phase settings. This is to ensure that all providers are being treated equally and that expectations and standards are equal across the board.

According to Donaldson (2015), the Foundation Phase has a strong base to build the new Curriculum on and is a success in Welsh education. Some of the areas that caused concern and confusion were practice issues including learning through play. Practitioners need to have training on learning through

play and how to have the best learning outcome through this method of teaching to take them forward to the new Curriculum. Some of the learning and assessments were too reliant on the child's age and specific wording of statements according to WISERD (2015). Also according to WISERD (2015), approaching a new pedagogy, including the constructivist theories of learning, are to be included in the new Curriculum as statutory. Going forward with the new Curriculum children are to be supported in developing at their own personal rate and are encouraged to reach their potential by fulfilling the four core purposes of learning. With regards to the New curriculum for funded non-maintained settings, this has taken on board the evaluation from the Foundation Phase as to what worked and made adjustments to what did not. Consideration was made to the type of teaching such as formal and informal, learning through play, continuous, enhanced and focussed provision, activities and types of observation, as well as child-initiated, practitioner-initiated and practitioner-directed play (Welsh Government, 2020).

With the new curriculum, the six areas of learning and experience are expressive arts, health and well-being, humanities, languages, literacy and communication, mathematics and numeracy and science and technology (Welsh Government, 2020). There are cross-curricular responsibilities, including literacy, numeracy and digital competence. However, an essential element of this new curriculum is to ensure that all areas of learning and experience are valued equally.

The progression steps for the new Curriculum allow the children to make progress within a certain area or skill without being compared to or marked against their peers. They are encouraged and supported to make progress at their own rate. Age and levels are not a factor and the statements are much broader to allow practitioners to tailor the experiences and skills to suit the needs of the children Welsh Government (2020).

Learning through play with practitioner support is a way of ensuring children are developing at their own rate. It is important that assessments do not take over, as many forms of assessment do not necessarily provide the correct outcome. All staff need to be on board and all encouraging the children to learn through play and experience. Each classroom should have the same equipment throughout the Foundation phase as a formal classroom can

provide limitations to a child's imaginative play and development (Welsh Government, 2020)

Through analysing the Foundation Phase and the new Curriculum it can be seen that there were elements of the Foundation Phase that worked and were successful. These have been taken forward to the new Curriculum, but there are many new additions to help enhance effective and authentic learning. This includes learning through play, encouraging practitioner training and new forms of assessment. The new Curriculum is the way forward to encourage child centred learning with lifelong skills (Welsh Government, 2014, Welsh Government, 2015, Welsh Government, 2020).

2. Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child', critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula.

Considering the unique characteristics of each child during assessment is crucial because it recognises that every child is an individual and that children have diverse needs, distinct strengths, challenges and learning styles.

Tailoring assessments to individual differences ensures a more accurate understanding of a child's abilities, preferences, challenges and potential area of growth. This approach to the unique child supports personalised learning strategies, support systems and interventions fostering an environment that values and addresses individual differences for effective educational and developmental outcomes.

A method of assessment to consider is the Foundation Phase profile (FPP). This method is a tool used to assess early years learning in areas such as literacy and numeracy.

Standardised testing within the FPP can offer some benefits to the unique child. It provides a structured and consistent way to measure a child's progress, helping identify areas of strength and areas that may require additional support. Standardised tests can also facilitate more objective comparisons, ensuring a fair assessment across diverse backgrounds. Additionally the data generated from standardised testing can inform targeted

interventions and support tailored to the individual needs of the child.

(Department for Education, 2018).

However the FPP has faced criticism for its perceived limitations in capturing a comprehensive view of a child's abilities. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) questioned the reliability and validity of observational assessments like the FPP.

There are concerns with standardisation. Standardising assessments do not necessarily capture the full range of the unique child's abilities, as it may not align with diverse learning styles and individual strengths. Moyles (2014) had concerns with this as the FPP may not adequately reflect individual differences so potentially overlooking specific strengths or challenges unique to each child.

Wood (2007) identified an issue with the FPP for the unique child being an age/stage related tracker as being the potential for overlooking individual variations in development. By emphasising specific age-related milestones, the FPP may not fully acknowledge the diverse and unique trajectories of children, potentially leading to misalignments between the assessment and an individual child's capabilities and needs.

Also there can be overemphasis on focussing too much on literacy and numeracy in the early years which in turn means that other developmental aspects such as social and emotional skills are neglected. Morgan (2007) raised concerns that the FPP might not adequately address socio-economic and cultural factors influencing a child's development. The FPP faces challenges accounting for different rates of development among unique children. Nutbrown (2011) argues that standardised assessments within the FPP might not sufficiently accommodate the variability in individual developmental timelines, potentially leading to misrepresentations of a child's capabilities. Putting too much pressure on assessments can create unnecessary stress for both the Early Years Practitioners and the children. However the holistic approach tends to be used more with the new assessments arrangements in the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings. These include observations, learning journeys and collaboration with parents and carers. The outcome that is aimed for is the creation of a tailored

assessment framework which addresses the unique child's strengths, needs and developmental milestones. (Welsh Government, 2020)

Using learning stories as an assessment tool for a unique child involves capturing and documenting their experiences, development and achievements in a narrative format. (Carr *et al*, 2005). Carr and Lee (2012) a pioneer in learning stories explored and supported the use of this method in assessing young children.

Learning journeys provide a holistic approach to assessment by documenting a child's progress across various developmental domains, including cognitive, social, emotional and physical. Learning journeys involve parents in their child's education as they can easily understand and appreciate their child's development through visual and narrative documentation. They can also give feedback to the practitioner before the learning journey is completed and afterwards. (Ephgrave, 2018., Ephgrave, 2020.)

Davies (2014) emphasises how important it is that practitioners listen to children and the narrative approaches, proving valuable insights into creating learning stories. The effective understanding and implementation of learning stories is important in assessing the unique development of the children. By listening to the children and understanding them, practitioners can gain insights into their experiences, thoughts and feelings. It advocates for creating an environment where children's voices are valued and contributes towards the child-centred approaches in settings and education. Learning stories are described as important moments that are captured in the day to day experiences of a child which are developed to enable the practitioner to gather an insight into the holistic development of the child. (Carr *et al*, 2005) Practitioners do this assessment by finding something of interest to the unique child and allow the voice of the child too be heard so the child can take ownership of the development and learning hence reflecting a positive construction of the child's competencies. (Carr *et al*, 2005)

Learning stories according to Kelly (2016) can sometimes be down to the practitioner's imagination due to the fact that the practitioner may not have been working during the period of time the learning journey took place so they are going on the notes of another practitioner when they are writing it up. They could therefore be filling the gaps with what they think may have

happened so it is not a true reflection. However practitioners have different ways of writing things up so may interpret what they see differently and record it in a different way to how another practitioner may have perceived the same observation.

Learning journeys can be time consuming as the practitioners need non-contact time to write them up which is not always possible. Due to the amount of time it takes to write them up it could mean that it is done days or weeks later. The practitioner is expected to remember exactly what happened which after a period of time could prove difficult especially if the practitioner has many other children to care for and do learning journeys for. Therefore it is true to say that the learning journeys written after a period of time may not actually be a true reflection of what actually took place. (Ephgrave, 2018)

Each child is unique and should be allowed to be themselves and practitioners should ensure this happens by giving children their own voice. Through inclusive practice children gain confidence and feel secure in the setting. The parents and carers feel valued and are welcomed into the setting with a smile and are listened to. Parents, carers and children receive a positive ethos together with positive feedback about their child as much as possible. (Teacher's TV, 2015)

Children need to feel safe but also need to be allowed to do risk-taking and each child will develop differently as each child is unique. (Ephgrave, 2018., Ephgrave, 2020)

According to Welsh Government (2015) children are allowed to develop at their own unique, individual pace. However this is not the case as the Foundation Phase does not allow children to work at their own pace. They are expected to hit certain targets at certain times and are underachieving if they do not.

The Welsh Government (2022) suggests that no two schools will have the same curriculum anymore, they will all be individual to suit the needs of the children attending. Schools and settings plan their own curriculum and the purpose of this is to do subjects that the children are interested in so they will want to learn and also this will encourage them to develop. Children are more likely to achieve and progress if they are enjoying what they are doing.

Welsh Government (2015) does not take into account Additional Learning Needs (ALN) or English as an additional language (EAL).

According to Allen (2020), practitioners need to be properly trained in the early years including the need to understand the different cultures. There is no purpose in delivering sessions about certain festivals if the practitioner has not found out the details about that festival with an understanding as to how the child celebrates it. The practitioner needs to discuss in advance the importance of the understanding or the background of that festival to the families and could even ask the families into the setting to explain to the practitioners so they can understand fully. (Devarakonda, 2013). According to Mcleod (2024), Vygotsky emphasises the importance of culture on cognitive factors and also that he believed that the community plays an important part in understanding and making meaning. Morton and Guerin (2017) recognised learning as sociocultural and that everyone learns from each other. According to Dweck (1991) it is important that children are not labelled, that they are not made to feel that they aren't any good as this leads to a fixed mind set and when this happens it means that the child will not get any better.

To conclude there are many different opinions as to whether the FPP and learning stories should be used as assessment tools in early years settings and schools and both have advantages and disadvantages but the way forward would appear to be the use of learning stories.

2. What is outdoor play in the Early Years

Outdoor play improves health and children of all ages and at all stages of development enjoy it. They develop and learn from every experience that they encounter. (Glassy, 2023) It offers numerous benefits including physical exercise, improved social skills, enhanced creativity, and exposure to nature, promoting overall development and well-being. (Ephgrave, 2018)

The four purposes in the new curriculum can all be achieved in outdoor play. (Welsh Government, 2022)

Over the years if the weather has been too hot children were kept indoors. However now with the new curriculum and the encouragement of outdoor play settings are expected to provide suitable shelters for the children to still be able to play outside. Also sun hats are provided and regular drinks or water

which are accessible at all times. However if the weather is wet then children can wear suitable clothing such as waterproofs and wellington boots. Early years settings can provide these in a variety of sizes and it is useful to have two piece sets that are easy for the children to put on and off with a drying area for the waterproofs and wellington boots to dry afterwards. Parents are asked to supply hat and gloves for their children in the cold weather. Tubs of water are filled with warm water and hot water bottles filled with warm water also are put inside the tubs for the children to use to warm their hands when outside playing.

Making the outdoor area a suitable place for play does not happen overnight. It needs to be considered and risk assessed and risky play needs to be included. Consideration has to be made as to how it is set up and how the space can be used best. All children need to be involved too as going forward involvement is needed from them with the planning and what they want to do. A child led approach is to be adopted with the children leading the way. It is imperative that all early years practitioners are trained in outdoor play and all adopt the same principles and values in ensuring the children are outside as much as possible. Staff need to wear appropriate clothing the same as the children to suit the different weathers so that the weather cannot be blamed for not being able to go outdoors it is the clothing that is unsuitable. It is important before going outside each session that a risk assessment is done. Also if the weather is dangerous such as lightening, thunder, torrential rain or very low temperatures then outdoor play cannot take place in the session but if other weather is displayed then the suitable clothing needs to be worn.

(Welsh Government, 2010., Welsh Government, 2022)

The outdoor environment set up for play is not just a case of taking the indoor activities and equipment outside. It is more using the environment and enhancing it to make it a suitable place for the children using it. (Ephgrave, 2020)

It has been noticed in settings how the children seem more relaxed and play more freely outside. They enjoy playing with loose parts. According to Engelen et al (2013) and Yavuz (2016) loose parts such as wooden planks and crates encourage play, collaboration, imaginative play and concentration. Also having a supply of den making materials such as wooden planks, crates

and material enhances the children's imagination and play. They can transport the materials from one area to another and they can build and construct. Just watching the children do this shows the imagination and team building skills developing. Children are less likely to be stopped from doing things outside as the environment is there for them to do whatever they would like to. They display less anger and aggression (Glassy, 2023). Indeed, Kamp (2015) and Canning (2013) acknowledge that den making has been a popular play activity with children of all ages whilst developing their creative problem-solving skills and imagination. Outdoor play allows all children to find their voice and this is especially encouraging for the quiet children who do not feel comfortable speaking out when indoors. It allows them to attempt risky play and to feel that they are able to have a go and also test their own boundaries without worrying about failing. Feelings and emotions are also displayed more and shown when children are relaxed and this tends to be more when they are outside playing.

Ephgrave (2020) and the Early Years Foundation Phase believe there are many learning opportunities through outdoor play in all areas of development. Bottrill (2022) encourages outdoor play such as areas to include the mud kitchen, water, sand, gravel pit, digging pits, garden plots, obstacle course, dens and rules. Outdoor play offers the ideal place to learn about the natural world, take risks, develop personal and social skills, spatial awareness and self-regulation, to be independent, learn to negotiate, assess dangers and develop communication and language as well as gross motor skills. Both Tovey (2007) and Wilson (2012) agree that outdoor play is important and children look for adventure and challenges whilst exploring and transforming spaces that are in their imaginary worlds.

Engaging in experiences outside gives children the opportunity to develop their life skills. These include confidence, creativity, decision-making, leadership and perseverance and each of the four purposes. (Welsh Government, 2022)

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