

Section 1

The Welsh Government's action plan Education in Wales: Our national mission sets out a complete reform of the education system in Wales covering five policy areas, encompassing four purposes with a cross curriculum approach across six areas of learning and experience (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD, 2023, Welsh Government, 2023a). The need for reform in Wales has been highlighted through independent reviews (Welsh Government 2014, Donaldson 2015, Welsh Government 2015a) and through international sources such as the OECD (2014). All of whom agreed that reforms should cover every aspect of the curriculum. This assignment aims to discuss the roll-out of the new curriculum in Wales, the barriers to making the changes necessary and how the recommendations of reviews on the foundation phase can make the new curriculum a success for all learners.

The new curriculum suggests that to effectively support children in Wales to achieve to their full potential, all six areas of learning and experience should co-exist and blend together through creating a cross curricular approach to learning with the four purposes imbedded into these (Welsh Government, 2021a). Within the early years the curriculum for funded non maintained settings also encompasses every aspect of the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022a) and places the concept of play based learning at the centre of its pedagogical approach. It states that learning should be experiential, child led, set within engaging environments and supported by enabling adults (Welsh Government, 2022b). Whitebread (2012) argues that play is sometimes considered as something children do because they are immature and will grow out of, however, play is as important as language, culture and technology and without play, none of these would be possible. Play can be a means to overcoming problems, learning social skills and improving well-being (Andrews, 2017). There are also five developmental pathways set out to support children from birth to three years, viewed from a child's perspective with the emphasis on enabling adults supporting each child to develop at their own pace (Welsh Government, 2023b).

When looking back at the foundation phase implementation, it was designed as an improvement process to be introduced gradually over ten years (Welsh Government, 2014). UNESCO (2005) argues that changing elements of an education system can be difficult to integrate into existing systems suggesting a complete reform may be easier to implement. McKinsey and Company (2010) suggest that for changes in education to be effective and long lasting, everything within the system should be changed, the OECD (2020) also suggest that reforms may contradict or compete with existing policies therefore a whole system approach should be taken to avoid obstacles to effective implementation.

Key findings from Welsh Government (2014) suggest that practitioners believed the foundation phase was improving children's educational achievements and wellbeing, similarly, Donaldson (2015) stated there were many positives within the education systems in Wales that needed to be built upon, however, the latest OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results, which include

children that have received a full foundation phase education, show that Wales has received its lowest results to date (BBC news, 2023). The OECD tests are only one form of assessment and are carried out by a small percentage of learners across Wales, however, Donaldson (2015) suggests that some countries view poor PISA results as a loss of competitiveness globally which has been a strong driver for the change in Wales.

The original foundation phase, implemented in 2008, placed an emphasis on child led, experiential play, allowing children to develop problem solving skills, learning to work collaboratively and gaining a sense of self within the world that surrounds them (Waters, 2016). Similarly, the new early years curriculum for Wales is play based with the child placed at the centre, viewed as a co-constructor of their learning (Welsh Government, 2022b). Bronfenbrenner believed that the environment a child lives in affects their development, the bioecological model demonstrates the effects different agencies have on a child from immediate family and education settings, local and national values to government policy making (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022, Mac Donald, 2018).

In Ontario Canada, they identified that to make the changes needed, the educators and the students took the lead, giving them ownership over their learning and a vested interest to make the changes a reality and a success (Gallagher, Malloy and Ryerson, 2016), similarly, McInnes *et al.* (2013) ascertain that children should be co-constructors of their learning to enable them to achieve to their full potential, however, McKinsey and Company (2010) argue that every school reform, whether on a large or small scale, moves through stages of interventions depending on what stage of reform they are in and to begin with all interventions must come from a central source.

In Wales, to address this point, creating schools as learning organisations where pupils, staff, families and the local community all have a say on what and how they learn has shown that pupils and staff are happier in their schools, this also has positive effects on the wider community and policy making in government (OECD, no date, Welsh Government, 2022d).

Welsh Government (2014) also recommends reconsidering assessment scoring at the end of the foundation phase, similarly, Welsh Government (2015a) suggests that better training on how to utilise the foundation phase profile was needed, however, Donaldson (2015) suggests that progression steps should be used as a road map for every child focusing on what they can do rather than the foundation phase requiring very specific competencies to be met (Welsh Government, 2017). The forms can be time consuming to complete, putting pressure on staff where ratios in school settings is higher than within funded non maintained settings (professional association of childcare and early years, 2016, National Education Union, no date) and may not accurately reflect what a child is capable of. Assessments should be carried out under play conditions for a child to achieve their best outcomes as according to McInnes *et al.* (2011), a child that perceives an activity as play is likely to achieve higher levels of concentration and engagement in a task suggesting that a

practitioner must fully understand the role of play during observations and assessments to ensure the best outcomes for the child.

The new curriculum views every child's journey as being unique to them and the progressions steps covering every area of learning and experience ensures that, if a child excels in one area and is slower to develop skills in another this is accurately reflected, thereby allowing tailored support to be implemented to cater to their individual needs (Welsh Government, 2022e). The new assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings are very clear that practitioners should take a holistic approach to assessments, again focusing on what a child is achieving (Welsh Government, 2023e)

Training specific to the early years, including literacy and numeracy expectations and continuous professional development should be carried out at all levels to ensure that practitioners understand child development and how best to support this in the early years (Welsh Government, 2014, Welsh Government, 2015a). The structural quality of a setting can be affected by the level of qualifications held by its staff; highly qualified staff are key to quality provision, effective inductions and continuous professional development for new starters and experienced staff is also important to positive outcomes for children (Bonetti and Brown, 2018). Welsh Government (2014) found that some teaching assistants were not well supported or involved in the implementation of the foundation phase and that practitioners were leaving the funded non-maintained sector due to low wages.

The importance of the enabling adult in the new curriculum highlights the need for well-trained practitioners who understand child development to best support learners (Welsh Government, 2023b, Welsh Government 2023c), the curriculum has a training hwb that all practitioners may access to support consistent training for all practitioners (Welsh Government, 2023c). Stephen (2010) ascertains that developing practitioners who are confident in their role within the early years and understand how to put pedagogical theories into practice are best placed to support children in the early years.

The recommendations to make changes at all levels from government, Estyn, local authorities through to schools and funded non-maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2014) has been addressed in the new legislation which outlines the roles and responsibilities involved (Curriculum and assessment (Wales) Act 2021). The legislation covers guidance for schools on how to design their own curriculum based on values and priorities for their local environment (Welsh Government, 2022c), the journey to roll-out (Welsh Government, 2023d) and how to implement these changes (Welsh Government, no date a). The OECD (2020) argues that practitioners may interpret the same word differently leading to inconsistencies in the curriculum. Under the new curriculum Wales, schools are required to implement their own curriculum, utilising the twelve pedagogical principles, one of which is encouraging children to take increasing control over their own learning (2023f), this is a main focus within the early years' child led approach to learning (Welsh Government, 2022b), this places emphasis on strong leadership and highly trained

practitioners to develop a curriculum to meet the needs of their learners (Welsh Government, 2022c) and the new hwb ensures that a consistent language is available to all and provides examples of high achieving schools and settings as hubs for accessible learning and training.

The new early years curriculum in Wales is part a whole system approach to reforming an outdated education system. Designed to meet the ever-evolving needs of children, supporting them on their personal journeys as capable, lifelong learners. It is in its infancy in many schools and settings across Wales and time will be needed to fully appreciate and assess its success.

Section 2

The new curriculum in Wales describes every child as unique and highlights the need for highly skilled practitioners capable of nurturing and supporting each child on their learning journey through understanding how children develop and how best to support their needs and encourage their interests (Welsh Government, 2022a). Froebel highlighted the need for practitioners who can provide an adaptive environment that can respond to each child's uniqueness to ensure practice is inclusive for the developing child (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). Bronfenbrenner's theory of bioecological systems demonstrates that there are many influences on every child that must be considered to enable practitioners to effectively support them, for example, their family makeup, including traditions and religious beliefs, what a child is expected to learn and who determines what they learn? The effects of government policy making and how these factors shape the child at the centre (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022). Vygotsky similarly argued that children learn through language and through place and that culture influences what a child learns, the aim is to look at how settings assess the unique child whilst considering the child holistically within a setting, within their family and within their community (Kozulin, 2003).

The Foundation phase framework which is currently being phased out in Wales argues that children must be allowed to develop at their own unique rate (Welsh Government, 2015b) In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) also argues that every child is unique and should be viewed as capable and resilient and should be supported by responsive adults able to provide engaging environments and experiences allowing them to develop knowledge and skills at their own rate (Department for Education, 2023). The new curriculum in Wales mirrors many elements of the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, Te Whariki, which also has a bilingual approach to education. Te Whariki celebrates the child as competent and capable within a bicultural education system whereby the uniqueness of local priorities is interwoven into each child's learning and development pathways thereby fully embedding the community's diversity (Ministry of Education, 2017). The new curriculum in Wales similarly expects every school and setting to design a curriculum that fits with the needs and interests of their children to reflect their local environment and the wider world (Welsh Government, 2022c).

As part of the current assessment arrangements in Wales, the foundation phase profile is used as a tool to give a nationally consistent baseline indication of where a child sits developmentally at the end of each school year and in aiding transitions between settings or schools (Welsh Government, 2017). Waters (2016) similarly suggests that the foundation phase framework is designed to allow adults to support children, in age-related stages, to learn and develop and to measure their progress against accepted norms. This notion of an accepted norm, however, does not align with the concept of the unique child. Donaldson (2015) argues that the current approach to assessment within the education system has become centred on making general, best fit judgements at set points which do not adequately reflect a child's depth of understanding. As part of the recommendations made within the successful futures review, Donaldson (2015), suggests that progression steps would be more beneficial to gaining a better, holistic understanding of where a child sits developmentally and that they should be revisited as a child develops new skills and knowledge. Welsh Government (2015a) recommends the need for training and guidance materials placing greater emphasis on the role of the practitioner and how to carry out observations and assessments.

McInnes *et al.* (2013) suggest that children that are engaged in activities of their own choosing, rather than an adult led activity, attain higher levels of engagement, thereby achieving higher levels of attainment. Carrying out observations under play conditions could be beneficial to accurately assessing children's progression, however, practitioners suggested that it was sometimes difficult to set out activities under play conditions to help assess certain skills under the foundation phase profile (Welsh Government, 2022f). McInnes *et al.* (2011) also suggests that when children are viewed as co constructors of their education, they are more engaged with learning activities, for example, if they have had an input into what activities are chosen and how they develop an activity, they are more likely to engage more deeply and learn through play. Similarly, Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) suggest that play and learning should co-exist within the early years and go hand in hand for effective progression to be made.

The foundation phase profile states that it aims to involve parents and carers in the children's learning through the reporting of a child's stage of learning and development including the national literacy and numeracy framework (Welsh Government, 2017), however, practitioners in most schools have adapted the foundation phase profile to suits their needs or do not use it all (Welsh Government, 2022f). Others felt that the profile was helpful in identifying children with additional learning needs and useful if a yes/no answer was needed but not so helpful when a subjective view was required to assess, for example, a pupils emotional and social well-being. Some schools scheduled narrow timeframes for assessments to be carried out due to time constraints and school schedules (Welsh Government, 2022f).

The new curriculum for Wales aims to utilise the principles of progression thereby providing a consistent language for schools and settings on what progression looks like for each learner (Welsh Government, 2021b). The progressions steps allow for

the progress of each child to be tracked, supported and developed at each level, at their own individual pace. If a child develops more quickly in one area than another, this is reflected in their progression steps and allows practitioners to focus on how to support the next stage in a child's learning (Welsh Government, no date b). The assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained settings also aim to provide a more holistic approach to identifying where a child sits developmentally considering their individual needs, background, prior learning and ability (Welsh Government, 2023g), the assessment guidelines use descriptions such as 'The child may...' allowing a more holistic approach to evaluating and reporting on their development. The foundation phase expects a tick in the box without considering the child holistically and does not consider background information such as a child's home environment, changes in behaviour, if a child is unwell or chooses not to carry out set activities, for example, a child is more likely to engage with an activity that is set out on the floor without an adult present rather than at a table with an adult present (McInnes *et al.* 2013).

A learning story could be a method implemented to demonstrate a child's abilities and stages of progression clearly and accurately within the early years through making deep connections through careful observation and listening to children and what is important to them. The first five years are critical in a child's development (Brodie, 2018) and the new curriculum in Wales aims to develop enterprising, ethical, health and responsible lifelong learners who understand who they are, the community and world they inhabit and their place within it (Welsh Government, 2022c).

Learning stories allow a more personal connection to be made with families and carers which may support better parent partnerships. Welsh Government (2014) highlighted the need to help parents better understand their role in the delivery of the foundation phase and how they can contribute to the design of learning activities. The new curriculum in Wales similarly suggests that parents and local businesses should support and have a say in what and how children in their communities learn to better support their understanding of their background, their *cynefin* (Welsh Government, 2022b). Learning stories allow practitioners to gain a clearer understanding of a child's cultural background, for example, children building farm structures of their homes in Afghanistan (Educational leadership project, 2019), making those connections between home life and settings.

Practitioners have stated that assessments are given a narrow timeframe due to time constraints or school schedules, however, Lee (2019) argues that greater time should be given to writing learning stories to help children to understand who they are, sharing those stories with family members and consolidating their own learning through the retelling of their activities. Writing learning stories is also a process that can be adapted, for example, the use of love letters in a setting in South Wales, where every member of staff is able to input information to a child's profile which is then shared on a termly basis with families enabling a child to celebrate achievements and revisit special moments of their learning journey and what their next steps are (Rachael's Playhouse, no date).

The new curriculum in Wales is an opportunity to change how the education system views children and how best they are supported through their time in childcare and education and throughout their future. There are lessons to be learnt from the foundation phase, however, going forward the concept of the unique child should be uppermost when considering the four purposes and how to best to assess and evaluate a child's individual rate of development across all areas of learning and experience and what steps to take next. Learning stories could be an effective tool going forward as they allow for a more holistic approach to assessing a child's learning focusing on what they can do, however, practitioners need to be given the training to fully understand how best to carry out assessments through observation and be given the time to communicate their findings with the child and their families.

Section 3

Having been an agency teaching assistant for the last three years of my career, I have been lucky enough to visit a variety of schools and have worked alongside talented and dedicated practitioners that have the best interests of the children they work with at the very heart of everything they do. A problem that I come across regularly and one that is highlighted by many is the need for better outdoor provision, common concerns include limited space, too much concrete or it's too dangerous to use, however, I was lucky enough as a child to be allowed to get muddy from head to toe, climb trees, search rockpools for new unidentified species and believe that every child should have access to opportunities such as these on a daily basis whilst in settings, so how can settings adapt what they have to help create these engaging, authentic experiences to implement and fully embed outdoor learning?

Firstly, what is outdoor learning? According to the Welsh council for outdoor learning (2018), outdoor learning is open to all, includes physical activity and that being outdoors is central to the experience as it can be a vehicle for transforming activities into learning new skills, attitudes and behaviours, Harris (2017) argues that the use of outdoor education, such as found in forest schools, is unique and allows for more child initiated learning, freeing practitioners and children from the expected norms of indoor learning, all of which is reflected within the new curriculum for Wales.

Welsh Government (2023h) and Welsh Government (2022b) suggest that children should have equal play opportunities both indoors and outdoors and that the environment should provide opportunities for risky play that can be adapted with the help of enabling adults (Welsh Government, 2023b), for example, providing water for children who wish to create wet sand for building or puddles to jump in. Even within small, confined spaces, equipment can be rotated through, tidied away after one play has finished and swapped for another set of equipment as the children decide what they need. Enabling practitioners who are responsive and able to adapt to a child's needs, as suggested by Bowlby (REF), can create stronger attachments, giving children the reassurance needed to explore their environment and in doing so partake in outdoor learning.

Bird feeders can be placed in the smallest of spaces to help encourage nature into a child's environment, the learning potential when utilising this are great from weighing

out the bird food, discussing a birds feeding habits, creating nests from loose parts to identifying and drawing the birds that have been spotted, all of which, can be used to meet the six areas of learning and experiences as part of the new curriculum in Wales (Welsh Government, ???). Practitioners should strive to utilise natural materials as much as possible whilst outdoors to avoid duplicating the indoor provision outdoor (Welsh Government 2023h). Barrable (2019) argues that natural materials such as sticks, mud, sand and water can be manipulated and reshaped to create endless possibilities during play, however, man-made toys and tools have limitations on what they can become.

Introducing wooden planters, creating bug hotels and mud kitchens are all accessible for settings with small outdoor spaces and could also be an opportunity build on parent and communities ties through adopting the schools as learning organisations ethos (Welsh Government, 2022d). Setting could ask for donations of time and equipment from local businesses or tradespeople to help develop outdoor learning opportunities.

Going into the community and utilising local amenities such as play parks, nature reserves and taking walks in the local community to help children identify with their local area and give them the opportunity to suggest areas they may want to visit, walks they do with the family dog and items of interest they may have spotted such as an unusual species of tree or a good spot for lifting rocks and finding woodlice, having limited outdoor space is all a matter of perspective and even in urban areas or concrete jungles there are opportunities to create a living wall, take rubbings from different surfaces to create collages or using sticks and planters to hear the sounds reverberating from surrounding buildings (Robertson, 2014).

The outdoor environment allows for risky play and presents challenges and obstacles that are difficult or even impossible to create indoors (Leggett and Newman, 2017). Practitioners may consider outdoor areas such as forest schools as too dangerous for young children to use effectively, however, the new curriculum in Wales suggests that children should be viewed as competent and capable (Welsh Government, 2023h and Welsh Government, 2022b). Allowing children to explore the natural environment in a risk assessed area can be beneficial to a child's development (Acar, 2014 and Mann *et al.* 2022). Practitioners should be comfortable carrying our risk assessments before an area is visited but also confident to carry out continuous, in the moment risk assessments, for example, if a log appears too heavy for a child, the practitioner may offer assistance in manoeuvring it to the required locations or perhaps a branch is sticking out at an awkward angle and everyone may need to pause and be made aware of the present hazard and discuss how to mitigate risks involved. Safeguarding and preventing injury cannot be entirely avoided however, ensuring that children are aware that their behaviour and attitude whilst playing outdoors requires a different set of guidelines to that expected indoors (Waller *et al.* 2017) and that they should be viewed as capable and competent, responsible for their own safety and that of their friends. The correct clothing to match the weather conditions can also mitigate risk, for example, sunscreen and hats for the summer, waterproofs, wellies and warm gear for the

winter thereby reducing the risk of injury, such as sunburn. Risky play is highlighted within the new curriculum and practitioners should adapt outdoor spaces to afford appropriate risk and challenge opportunities for the children they support (Welsh Government, 2023h and Welsh Government, 2022b).

In conclusion, the new curriculum for the early years in Wales is play based and utilising the outdoor as an adaptive, changeable environment that can be enjoyed all year round should be an integral part of a child's everyday experience. The outdoor environment is open to all and provides free, easily adapted natural materials that will change with the seasons, practitioners should ensure that they are willing to embrace playing, exploring and following a child's lead to make the most of the exhilarating world that we all inhabit.

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