

Early Years Curricula

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Section 1

This assignment seeks to explore and critically analyse the contrasting methods of two different curricula, New Zealand's Te Whariki (1996) versus Curriculum for Wales (2022). By exploring the differences between these two curricula, the strengths and weaknesses of each curriculum will be identified. Following this, the various potential barriers obstructing each curriculum's educators can be classified with possible mitigations suggested.

Education can be described as a means of teaching and learning, resulting in the discovery of novel knowledge and the development of skills (Halstead, 2005). Compulsory education in Wales is comprised of age ranges from the age of five up to sixteen years old. Before the age of five, optional forms of childcare and flying start settings exist. These are offered in funded non-maintained institutions. After the age of sixteen, school leavers may opt to continue in non-compulsory further and higher education. As explained by Cambridge University (2022) there are three distinct types of education: formal, informal, and non-formal. Formal education can be defined as a curriculum led, structured, and organised forms of academic learning held within public institutions, such as school, colleges, and universities. Formal-setting educators are expected to cater their teaching in line with structured guidance and framework, such as Curriculum for Wales (2022) and Te Whariki (2017). Informal education can be defined as learning that occurs outside of orthodox academic curriculum, such as from life experiences, peer-to-peer interactions, and familial agents (Eshach, 2007). These experiences can happen on a day-to-day basis, both inside and outside of academic institutions. As informal education is not typically structured using organised guidance, its educators may not be classically trained in education. Similarly to informal education, non-formal education falls outside traditional academic institutions, primarily involving learning through extra-curricular activities, such as swimming lessons, sports training, and community group activities. Non-formal educators may

possess specific education-based qualifications, knowledge, and applicable abilities (Cambridge University, 2022).

According to Young (2014), a curriculum can be described as a set of guidelines, framework, and statutory requirements within an academic environment. Curricula outline the necessary components of a specific or selected block of learning-material provided to students to enhance and develop various applicable techniques and skill proficiencies. Further explained by Santos and Cai (2016), curricula can be used to monitor and assess the progress and ability of taught students, in line with expected assessment requirements. Furthermore, it can be applied to various levels of academic institutions, ranging from funded non-maintained early years settings, primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.

Often, curricula can be paired alongside expanding legislation, which sets out mandatory elements that are required to be implemented in educational settings. For example, the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 sets out mandatory skills and subjects that schools in Wales must include during the construction of their own curricula. Conversely, New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum does not implement a set of specific lessons, instead, it aims to provide guidance to educators to build upon and further develop children's knowledge, abilities, and relationships, by nurturing holistic development.

As Wales' new iteration of national academic curriculum, Curriculum for Wales (2022) has only been recently introduced, therefore, many academic institutions throughout Wales, continue to follow the older Foundation Phase (2015) guidance. Now deemed obsolete, these settings are gradually converting their existing curricula to meet the updated requirements of the reformed Curriculum for Wales (2022). The Curriculum for Wales (2022) guidance assists Welsh schools in the creation, implementation, and reformation of their own institutional-wide framework, whilst specifically focussing on six compulsory areas of learning. Additionally, it aims to influence and inspire schools to develop a curriculum that supports and encourages their learners in achieving the four purposes mentioned within the guidance. This aims to aid all levels of education, from children aged three to sixteen years old. As supported by Addysg Cymru / Education Wales in 'Foundation Learning and Curriculum for Wales video explainer' (2023), methods from the previous curriculum, Foundation Phase (2010), have since

been reformed and renamed as 'Foundation Learning'. They further explain that key features and pedagogy of the framework, applied to three- to seven-year-old children, is now being used and implemented into the Curriculum for Wales (2022) to educate and facilitate continuous learning for children aged three to sixteen.

New Zealand's national early years curriculum, Te Whariki (1996) (Te Reo Māori for Woven Mat) is based upon four key curriculum principles, interwoven with five curriculum strands. These principles are woven together with the implementation of collaborative work between parents, families, and the local community to provide an inclusive, holistic, and relationship-driven learning environment for children (Ritchie, 2005). Unlike Curriculum for Wales (2022), Te Whariki only provides guidance for children aged between zero and six years old. Regardless of cultural background, Te Whariki integrates Māori cultural values and customs with Western concepts to create a bi-cultural approach to children's education, enabling children to become confident and self-aware of their culture and language (Ritchie, 2002). This is due, in part, to New Zealand's complicated recent history of colonisation, cultural oppression, and destruction of the native language. Te Whariki aims to unite both indigenous and Pākehā (meaning European-origin peoples of New Zealand) communities into a woven quality of upbringing.

In similar fashion, the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 highlights the Welsh language medium as a mandatory subject that all schools in Wales must include in their curriculum. This is because of a political drive to increase the number of Welsh-speaking children in Wales. The historic decline of Welsh speakers can be attributed to similar historic oppressions and colonisation. Vygotsky's theory (1962) discusses that cultural awareness and language acquisition is considered to play a key role in shaping young children's minds. Furthermore, children develop their morals, beliefs, and outlook on life through observing those who surround them (Fernandez, 2007). In order to facilitate children's language development, both curricula require staff who are confident, fluent language speakers and are able to teach at an academic level.

As supported by Senedd Cymru (2023), a key barrier to improving early years indigenous language acquisition is due to shortage of staff supporting in Welsh-medium schools and lack of Welsh teaching staff in English-medium schools. There is a potential that Wales may not achieve their goal of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050.

In fact, Welsh Government (2022) shows that the number of staff able to teach the Welsh medium in higher educational settings has decreased by 11% between the 2016/17 academic year and 2021/22. Some educators in Wales are not appropriately informed on the training that is available to them. For example, The Welsh Government offer free Welsh Medium lessons for those seeking to build upon their Welsh language skills (Welsh Government). Professional training aimed at existing English-speaking educators in Wales could be a potential solution for improving on general Welsh-speaking ability. This could create a domino effect, improving their taught children's Welsh-speaking abilities also. This is a similar solution for the lack of Te Reo Māori-speaking educators in New Zealand.

The Te Whariki Curriculum (1996) aims to provide a play-based learning environment for all children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 31 emphasises that all children obtain the right to play and participate in enriching activities. Play is considered to be a focal process by which children are able to develop an understanding of the world around them. Moser & Martinsen (2010) explains that Play-based learning is a form of education which utilises indoor and outdoor play to encourage children to develop and understand novel knowledge and abilities. Oppositely to education in Wales, where lesson plans are developed and organised by educators only, this form of learning allows children to choose to take part in activities that are interesting and meaningful to them, allowing a richer, more enhanced form of learning, as they do not feel forced into an unenjoyable activity (Guirguis, 2018).

To conclude, both Te Whariki and the Curriculum for Wales demonstrates a progressive approach to children's education. Te Whariki offers a free-flowing, non-subject-specific curriculum which has been implemented successfully, despite this, educators often find it difficult to identify areas of learning, causing them confusion on how to support and educate children through their play activities. Moreover, Te Whariki creates a successful emphasis on children's holistic development, and an importance on creating a sense of independence within educational settings. However, due to a lack of funding and staff, many schools in Wales do not have the facilities, space, or resources to implement these activities. Similarly, Curriculum for Wales suffers from an entrenched traditional mindset to learning methods. Although schools in Wales are gradually implementing play-based approaches to learning, educators in Wales

currently implement a more structured way of educating their learners compared to Te Whariki, and are, therefore, able to focus more on individual areas of learning. Despite initial differences in the measure of assessment and differing prioritisation on play-based learning, Te Whariki and the Curriculum for Wales suffer from many of the same barriers. These barriers primarily come from economic and cultural restrictions of their respective education sectors. These issues would be alleviated if proper funding was allocated to wider language and cultural learning with which both governments have committed to improving in their futures. Lower teacher to child ratios in Wales would also promote better implementation of Te Whariki's play-based initiatives.

Section 2

As supported by the English Early years foundation stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework, the term 'unique child' refers to all children being individual beings with their own unique strengths and weaknesses, aptitudes and challenges, and interests and dislikes. The Foundation Phase (2015) explains that children gain and grow various skills at different rates, and that educators should allow children time to flourish at their own pace. It further suggests that educators are required to be knowledgeable about ways in which they can offer children to practice and explore these new skills, potentially through evaluation and reflection.

According to Broadfoot and Black (2004), assessment within an educational setting is considered to be a fundamental process where educators observe and gather evidence to better understand and evaluate the level of knowledge and capabilities of their learners. Without which, children's progress towards key milestones would be difficult to quantify. Therefore, as seen within the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, assessing children in educational settings is a mandatory requirement for every school's curriculum in Wales. As supported by Kizlik (2012), there are many different forms of assessment in education, such as development trackers, foundation phase profiles, short-form quizzes, marked coursework and homework, and invigilated examinations.

Alasuutari, et al., (2014) supports the idea that assessing children throughout their education enables educators to gauge the level an individual learner has achieved. This can reveal to educators if the children are making progress, if support is

necessary, and how best to provide that support, adapting it to each child's unique needs. Answering these questions through assessment allows educators to alter their way of teaching, along with providing parents and families with specific insight into their children's progression (Heritage & Wylie, 2018). By ensuring learners are challenged and supported accordingly, the Curriculum for Wales (2022) highlights the role that assessment plays in developing children's learning. Sattler (2006) suggests that assessing children can allow educators, parents and families to facilitate, adapt, and organise activities to further develop children's engagement in learning. According to Primary School in Wales (2020), the Welsh Government constructed the Curriculum for Wales (2022) with the concept of each unique child at the heart of the structure. This permits schools in Wales to create and design their own curriculum enabling educators to adapt their teaching plan to best suit each child's individual needs.

As supported by Dweck (2002), it is thought that children begin to construct the concept of not just their peers' abilities, but also their own. Additionally, children are thought to become aware of when they are placed into groups separated by knowledge and skill-based abilities, regardless of what names are given to the groups. She further adds, that due to this categorisation occurring at an early age, this can result in a fixed mindset that children often carry with them throughout their academic lives. This form of assessment can create a negative feedback loop, reinforcing children's negative self-confidence. As explained by Poole (2008), a suggested remedy to this problem may be to create mixed-ability groups, encouraging the transfer of peer-to-peer knowledge within groups. This could also negate the potential stigma associated with being assigned to "low level" or "bottom set" groups, potentially reducing future negative mental health impacts towards education. Considering the concept of the unique child, as supported by Kulik, et al., (1982), mixed groups can positively impact each child's self-development.

There are five progression steps utilised by the Curriculum for Wales (2022). The groups are categorised by age, however, children who require additional time in reaching achievement outcomes but are outside of the age boundaries are consented to remain within previous progression steps, permitting they are gradually progressing. If a child does not demonstrate any progression at all, this can be a potential indicator to educators of a child potentially requiring additional support, or referral. Progression Steps are used to discover and track the progression of learners from ages three to

sixteen. The intention of the progression steps is for them to be used as guidance and are based on stage not age. These steps are embedded into the six areas of learning and were created to allow children space to develop their abilities and knowledge at their own pace. It is emphasised that these steps take the form of achievement outcomes. Progression steps are considered particularly beneficial when considering the 'unique child'. The lack of pressure on academic knowledge requirements allows children to gain knowledge and progress through education at their own rate. Progression steps can prove difficult for educators to pinpoint an exact area of learning that a child is having difficulty with. Alongside this, reluctance from certain educators towards the implementation of reformed methods of assessing children can result in inefficient application and understanding of progression steps as an assessment tool. Linking to this, the transfer from previous assessment tools can prove to be time consuming, especially during periods of low educational funding and shortage of staff. Educators should be trained in the aspects required to assess via progression steps, deepening their understanding of abstract concepts, such as the holistic development intertwined with the unique child. A potential solution to persuading educators to apply new forms of assessment could be the implementation of informative professional training, enabling them to see the positive impacts that reformed assessments offer the concept of the unique child.

As mentioned by Carr and Lee (2019), New Zealand's Learning Stories are considered to be a form of assessment through observation and documentation written by the educator, composed as a story narrative. In building a foundation for a story to be written, the educator will usually observe, document, and occasionally photograph children who are exploring and engaging through play. When constructing the learning story, it is the educators' responsibility to convey the observed child's actions, phrases, and emotions through a story-based chronicle. When involving the child in this process, educators are encouraged to read the creative story aloud. This can allow children to reflect on their own thoughts, actions, and learning. As suggested by Southcott (2015), learning stories can create strong connections between teachers and families. By providing a short but in-depth look at their children's progression and overall day-to-day activities, it assures parents that their children are offered enriching learning opportunities within an early childhood setting. It is also considered to be beneficial when identifying aspects of worry in a child's development, that are not often

seen on the surface, such as dyslexia or autism. Though New Zealand's Learning Stories are considered to be an inclusive form of in-depth assessment, Erfanian, et al., (2020) suggests it could be difficult to implement into Welsh classrooms due to their time-consuming nature. Advisory document on infant class size (Welsh Government) 2015 states that the maximum classroom size for children aged five to seven is thirty. NASUWT (2022) reports that at least 6% of infant pupils in Wales were in classes of thirty-one pupils or more. Taking this into account, implementing Learning stories in Wales could become a difficult process due to time restraints and ratio limitations. Educators would be required to find the time to observe, document, and construct stories for each individual child, as well as ensure that they are covering the six areas of learning.

As seen within the recent Welsh Government School Census Results: January 2024, pupil to teacher ratios increased in primary schools in Wales, demonstrating a ratio of twenty-one pupils to three teachers. However, further explained, this could be due to the Welsh Government funding provided to schools in alignment with the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards Plan (2020) to provide extra staff within educational settings to assist in mitigating the potential effects that the Coronavirus pandemic may have on children. These results show that with appropriate funding, schools are able to seek out and employ an adequate number of staff, allowing improvements to pupil to teacher ratios, creating extra time and support for those implementing more in-depth forms of assessment, such as learning stories.

Overall, both forms of assessment offer positive detectable attributes that contribute to the facilitation of the unique child. However, both suggested assessment forms could face difficulty in implementation against entrenched attitudes to the current traditional assessment methods. Lack of funding and lower teacher-to-child ratios could stand as the biggest barrier to both assessment types, as each requires a larger degree of one-to-one documentation and interaction. However, the implementation of these methods in smaller settings, for example, in funded non-maintained early years settings, may see a greater positive effect.

Blog - Introduction to Digital Learning

Over the last twenty years, access to technology and digital devices has increased rapidly (Miah & Omar, 2012). Now more than ever, the traditional methods of learning and education are being integrated with digital interfaces. Young minds are being exposed to the wonders of the internet at younger ages than ever before. The Ofcom Online Report (2019) demonstrates that children are exposed to digital media and the internet from a young age. This brings into question the potential benefits and drawbacks of the implementation of digital devices, such as tablets, laptops, and interactive whiteboards in early years education.

The Pros and Cons of Digital Devices in Education

Digital devices and technology in early years education can be a controversial and difficult topic for both educators and parents to agree on. However, a key component of Curriculum for Wales, The Digital Competence Framework (2018), aims to set out attainable digital skills for children aged three to sixteen. On one hand, many like to highlight the vast capabilities of technology, and how it can be impactful in the classroom. Children's literacy and numeracy can benefit greatly from the use of technology. Educational applications and software may be used to better engage and enhance children's learning experiences compared to traditional educational media. Many educators use digital tools to create enriching learning experiences for young children. For example, some children may prefer to play with their peers rather than sit, reading a story. However, (Sawyer, et al., 2011) discusses that when storytelling is implemented through the digital medium, this may prove to be more of a memorable experience for young children, particularly when it is interactive and digitally animated.

Communication plays a substantial role in children's education; therefore, each educator should consider different approaches to ensure all children are able to express their opinions, needs, and emotions. Digital devices can allow children with additional learning needs to clearly express themselves, utilising button-to-speech digital software on accessible touch screen devices (Hasselbring & Glaser, 2000). Apart from pupil-teacher communication, educators are encouraged to build strong relationships with both parents and families. This is to ensure that children have a coherent, deep support system, strengthening their well-being, academic achievements, and personal development. However, due to potential issues, such as,

ethnolinguistic barriers, communication between educators and families may prove extraordinarily difficult. Employing the use of digital tools such as translation applications can assist in minimising language-confusion for both parties.

Many international childcare settings, such as New Zealand's Te Whariki (1996), do not employ the use of digital devices in their settings. Instead, they emphasise children's holistic development and methods in which they can facilitate this. For example, providing children access to outdoor environments allows them to develop and explore critical abstract understanding of the world around them (Mann, et al., 2022). Furthermore, (Harvey, et al., 2020) theorised that children acquire knowledge at an increased rate if they are physically participating in a hands-on task such as gardening or cooking (Wistoft, 2013). Moreover, outdoor activities provide a host of health benefits on top of this (Chawla, 2015). In contrast, digital device usage infamously pales in comparison, even to the point of increasing health risks (Domoff, et al., 2019).

Because of the associated health risks, many early years educators, practitioners, and parents believe that digital devices do not belong in a classroom environment (Sergi, et al., 2017). Instead, they believe that early years education should emphasise play-based approaches to learning and focus on building upon children's social skills, alongside the development of their academic knowledge. Essentially, they see technology as not a complementary tool to but rather as a hinderance to children's development (Kefalaki, et al., 2022). Limone and Toto (2021), discusses the high rate of children's digital usage at home, especially since the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential impacts it can have on children's brain function, compromising their cognitive abilities.

Digital use in educational settings can increase children's reliance on digital stimulation, exacerbating potential negative aspects in both the school and home environment. National University (no date) highlights increased obesity rates in children and adolescents due to digital media addiction. Moreover, children often simulate their guardian's behaviour through modelling (Hartup, 1962), therefore, many parents may find it particularly difficult to control their children's digital device usage at home, as they themselves are seen using their own devices (Hiniker, et al., 2015).

This presents a particular challenge in the modern digital world, due to the prevalence of smartphones, computers, and games consoles.

Another key factor contributing to the hesitation of implementing digital devices within education, is the potential dangers to doing so. Children's unintentional misuse of the internet can lead to dangerous exposure to online child predators and those who seek children harm (Wolak, et al., 2010). This can lead to situations of monetary, emotional, and sexual abuse (Ali, et al., 2023) Although certain platforms offer parental controls, these circumstances may prove particularly dangerous due to the enigmatic nature of less known message applications, allowing potential message abuse to fly under the supervisor's radar (Livingstone, et al., 2014). Without realising, vulnerable children may be coerced or cyber bullied into leaking images of themselves, their identity, and address (Finkelhor, et al., 2022). This can serve as a gateway to wider potentially harmful content. Due to the internet being a vast software, innocent searches can produce easily accessible links to inappropriate content such as, violent or frightening photographs and videos, digital viruses, and other explicit content (Reid, et al., 2016). Although some individuals believe that older children are the only ones subjected to these harmful issues digital devices have been adapted for easy accessibility. Colourful symbols for everything, from video calls to photographs on a touch screen can entice young children to mistakenly interact.

Conclusion

Although digital competency is a mandatory requirement within the Curriculum for Wales (2022), there is still room for discussion on the age range deemed appropriate for children's initial introduction into digital device usage in education. This way, appropriately aged children may be taught how to use said devices safely, navigating the usefulness provided by digital tools, whilst minimising potential risk. Considering the benefits of device usage, it is evident that technology can be of great use in the learning environment, especially for children with additional learning needs, provided adequate safeguarding and supervision is ensured. However, we must not forget the potential drawbacks of digital exposure at too young an age, such as potentially opening the door to digital media addiction, a host of online dangers, and numerous health/cognitive disadvantages. Whilst early exposure to technology can prove beneficial in the digital world of tomorrow, we must prioritise young children's holistic

development outside of the digital landscape, relying instead on exploration of the natural world, physical interactions, and social connections, that, in turn, allow them to become unique and confident individuals.

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