

Section 1

This essay will explore a play-based curriculum, subsequently a detailed consideration and clarification of the Foundation Phase guidance and implementation of an appropriate training regime.

Following the devolution from the UK government in 2010, the Welsh Government introduced a new radical change to the statutory curriculum for 3- to 7-year-olds. Derived from research evidence from Scandinavia, New Zealand (Te-Whāriki), and the Reggio Emilia Approach (Biermeier, 2015), the Welsh Government established that, children under the age of six or seven, do not 'benefit from extensive formal teaching' (Estyn, 2011. and Welsh Government, 2015. p. 10). Proceeding to combine Early Years Education and Key Stage 1, the Welsh Government created the new Foundation Phase. This innovation provided children between 3 to 7 years of age access to an enjoyable and effective learning experience, through the method of a play-based curriculum (Saracho, 2021., Fesseha and Pyle, 2016., and Parker *et al*, 2022) . This play-based practice, focuses and encourages children to learn by exploring their creativity and imagination (Wainwright *et al*, 2016 and 2019., Waters, 2016).

Influenced by theorist such as Erikson, Vygotsky and Piaget, this new play-based curriculum provokes a child's interest and their natural urge to explore and learn from their play experiences (Alharbi, 2022., and Starting Blocks, 2022). Through continuous provisions aligned with the child's interests and growing developmental needs, this play-based approach provides the opportunities necessary for a child's natural curiosity, creativity, and imagination to be ignited. Furthermore, through a rich and supportive environment, a child can build upon previous knowledge to explore and make sense of the world around them. This enabling environment, provides the right set of circumstances for a child to participate in collaborative learning, developing their communication, language, problem-solving and social skills (Welsh Government, 2023b., Moore *et al*., 2014. p. 9-24., and McArdle, 2023).

Play-based learning, uses unstructured play as a tool to enable practitioners to fulfil a child's learning outcomes. Providing opportunities for the child to steer their own learning and creativity in a child-centred holistic approach (Raising Stars Early Learning Centre, 2022). Likewise, Van Oers & Duijkers, (2013. p. 511-534) explains

that play-based learning enables children to gain basic understanding, knowledge, and skills through their play, so it is essential that children are permitted to self-direct their play and learning. In addition, This new curriculum not only puts the child at the centre of their learning but encourages them to be a part of the planning process (Welsh Government, 2019). Leavres (2000. p. 20-29) suggests that play-based learning can provide children with opportunities to increase involvement in their own learning, enabling a deeper learning experience.

The implementation of the Foundation Phase was rolled out in three stages, the first stage roll out was a cross-country introduction during 2004/05 and consisted of 22 pilot schools and 22 funded non-maintained settings. The second 2006/7 stage consisted of the same quantity of settings; however, these Early Start schools and settings were selected due to their location within Flying Start areas. Finally, the implementation of the outstanding settings that were not involved in the original two stages, were rolled out during 2009/10 (Welsh Government, 2015).

Establishing the success of the implementation of this new play-based curriculum, two evaluation reports were commissioned. On fulfilment of both the Welsh Governments and the independent review by Professor Iram Siraj, it was determined that although the implementation of the Foundation Phase across Wales was successful, there were however, potential difficulties and confusion amongst staff (Welsh Government, 2015. and Siraj, 2014).

Although improvements in overall attendance, and a positive impact on children's learning and wellbeing was achieved, Head teachers and practitioners shared concerns that the Foundation Phase play-based curriculum, would lead to a 'decline in the educational achievement of seven-year olds' (Siraj, 2014). This belief was heightened with the introduction of the statutory Literacy and Numeracy Framework in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014).

Professor Siraj (2014) highlighted that staff confusion and concerns towards this new curriculum was due to the fact that practitioners had been provided with substandard training. Stating further, that due to the frameworks blanket and multiple meaning statements, individuals, schools and local authorities, interpretation of the curriculum, differed substantially. In addition, individuals perception of a 'play-based' curriculum or 'learning through play', could also be observed differently. Siraj (2014) articulates

that before a purposeful training plan can be accomplished, the Welsh government must clarify their 'Curriculum for Wales: Foundation Phase Framework' in relation to 'Learning through play' (Welsh Government, 2015).

Within this framework the emphasis that children should be provided opportunities to learn through first-hand experience and play should be at the heart of the child's learning, is paramount. However, there are a number of teaching staff and practitioners who are unable to comprehend the importance of play in a child's educational experience (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Likewise, some belief that a child needs a more 'formal' teaching experience defined by schedules in accordance with Steiner's beliefs (Beckley, 2012). Nevertheless, the Foundation Phase is a sociocultural curriculum, and clarification of this and the meaning of 'play' is required.

Siraj and the Welsh Government reviews, both support this clarification process, however clarification of 'Play' is extremely difficult. Wood and Chesworth (2017) states, that although play is essential for learning, play encompasses many conductive learning activities and that different theorist have a different perspective to what 'play' is. However, MacDonald (2022) and Starting Blocks (2022) reinforces this by stating that due to its complexity, individuality and meaning, explaining that play provides children the opportunities to actively explore, imagine and make decisions in an enjoyable way. Santer *et al.*, (2007) discusses further, that practitioners should gain 'the best insight possible' into the definition of 'free play' and its importance to early development and learning. Recognising that when children are provided with opportunities to learn through their play, Estyn (2011, 2019., and Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018.) states that children have the ability to 'practise and consolidate their learning'. Looking further in-depth, Waters (2016) identifies the challenges facing practitioners and the identification of the meaning of key terminology. Terminology including, 'structured learning', 'active learning' and specifically terminology such as, 'child-initiated' and 'practitioner-directed' learning (Maynard *et al.* 2013. p.vi. and 2009). Siraj (2014) recommends that to overcome these issues, practitioners should receive training in both the theory and practice of Early Years education, to bolster their understanding of a child's developmental needs.

This is reinforced by the research performed by OECD (2020) stating that Early Childhood Education and Care staff, who participated in greater areas of training, have the ability to adapt their practice and support a child's needs and interests. In spite of this, Siraj (2014) and the Welsh Government (2015) established that there were limitations within the personal development and training process. Observing that instead of providing practitioners with continuous developmental opportunities, staff were subjected to a one-off training session. Proceeding further to comment that on occasions, this training session was carried out not by a professional developmental agency, but of that of a Senior Management team member. This provided opportunities for misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the information (Welsh Government, 2015. and Water, 2016).

Donaldson (2015) recognised Siraj (2014) scrutiny of the inconsistency in training, stating further that to fulfil a consistent professional development plan, individuals must be provided with ongoing training. Furthermore, Donaldson (2015) acknowledge the need to reform not only the training procedure but, also the expected role of the adult within 'initial teacher education and continuing professional development'. Expanding further that teachers and adults should not be led by outcomes, but by the needs of the children. Donaldson (2015) proposed that to overcome these challenges and issues on the introduction of the New Curriculum for Wales an 'extensive, well-coordinated and sustained professional development programme' should be established. The recommended program should be targeted to match the needs of individual practitioners, leaders, and teachers, and scheduled to coincide with the introduction of the new curriculum. Reinforcement of child-led learning and the adoption of sociocultural theories as suggested by Siraj (2014) should be made, providing evidential theory behind the practice.

Siraj- Blatchford & Hallet (2014. p. 121- 135) explain that professional development and reflective practice, enables practitioners to evaluate, change and challenge the existing ways, by applying theory into practice. However, time restraints can often challenge both reflective practice and professional development. Paige-Smith and Craft (2011. p. 13-24) and Siraj- Blatchford & Hallet (2014. p. 61) suggest that teamwork and good relationships are essential to overcoming these challenges. This is mirrored by the principles held by Miller *et al.* (2012. p. 287) whereby effective communication promotes continuity and consistency within the setting. Ensuring that

every member of staff is encouraged to participate in their own personal development and self-reflection.

Although the initial implementation of the Foundation Phase experienced some confusion and discontinuity, Donaldson (2015) recognizes the importance of a play-based curriculum. Utilising the recommendations and findings from both the Welsh Government (2015) Evaluation report and the Independent Stocktake report performed by Professor Siraj (2014), Donaldson (2015) has transformed the Curriculum for Wales from a Steiner influenced formal and scheduled curriculum, into a free-flowing, child-led and child influenced educational system.

Section 2

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

Siraj-Blatchford (2012) explains that to understand a child's development, practitioners must be aware that each child is an individual. Acknowledging that each child's uniqueness derives from the environment and socioeconomic culture of the child and their families. This belief of 'uniqueness' reinforces both Piaget and Vygotsky's theories, where a child's socioeconomic culture can influence a child's learning style, development, and temperament. Discussing further that babies and young children develop and mature in their own way, and at their own individual pace (Zhang, 2014). Each individual life experiences, skills, passion, and interests, makes them the person who they are. Each child's uniqueness is demonstrated in their engagement in their learning experience, activities, and the way in which they learn (Lopez, 2022., and Early Years Matters, 2016).

The 'Unique Child' concept, coincides with UNCRC rights for the child, expanding further that every child has the right whatever their colour, disability, ethnicity, gender, language, race, or religion. To ensure that best interests of the child is paramount, the child's individualism must be considered (Save the Children, 2022). The concept of the 'unique child' does not only underpin the Curriculum for Wales, but also its predecessor, the Foundation Phase (Wales), Early Years Foundation Phase (England) and the New Zealand approach Te Whāriki. All stating within their Early Years framework, that 'every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured' (Welsh Government, 2015 and 2022., UK Government, 2024., Council of Europe, 2017., and Diglin, 2014). Donaldson (2015) 'Successful futures' report, explains that the Foundation Phase recognised the concept of the 'unique child' with the development of the Foundation Phase Profile and its 'summative assessment tool'. This is supported by Children in Wales (2024) statement, that when children are recognised as unique, practitioners are able to support each child's individual's needs, enabling the development in all aspects of a child's education, behaviour, interests, and overall life choices. When every child's individuality is recognised, it permits and supports a child's holistic

development by ensuring that the child's needs are at the forefront of the setting pedagogical practice (Welsh Government, 2022). Although gaining a holistic view of the child's abilities and development in key areas, the Foundation Phase did however utilise an age or stage assessment tracker, which prevented children achieving and developing at their own individual pace (UK Government, 2021., Welsh Government, 2017). Howley-Rouse (2023) and Donaldson (2015) explain that early childhood assessments need to consider the context of the child's interactions with their environment and people, to reflect the complexity of a child's development and learning (Dauncey, 2021). Further stating, that utilising less standardised forms of assessment and more qualitative and interpretive methods, enable practitioners to focus on a child's individuality, and personal achievements (Howley-Rouse, 2023., and Donaldson, 2015).

The Welsh Government (2017), believed that to assess and support the 'unique child', good observational and formative assessment practices should be deployed. Employing this technique, enables practitioners to support children by following and extending the child's interests, in addition to encouraging the child's future development in areas in which the child lack interest or understanding (McDowall, 2019., and Welsh Government, 2017). In addition, the Welsh Government (2017) states that when recording the child's achievements, summative assessments, should be utilised to provide practitioners with a range of opportunities to record the child's achievements and the confidence and range in which they perform a task. Incorporating these three assessment techniques, the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Wales enabled practitioners to assess the child in a holistic manner (Welsh Government, 2017).

The Welsh Government (2017 and 2023b) and GL Education (2020) both state that formative assessment enables practitioners to establish the current position of the child's development, providing the necessary focus on a child's curriculum skills. However, formative assessments can devalue an individual's uniqueness and does not consider an individual's rate of development. Formative assessments are driven by concentrating and measuring a child's achievement to attain the 'norm', rather than moving forward with the outcomes stated within the Foundation Phase framework. GL Education (2020) and Welsh Government (2023b) agree that formal assessments such as Standardised Testing, provide measurable, reliable and

comparable results. Identify areas of strength or weakness of children and enabling practitioners to provide children access to additional support or interventions needed.

However, Armstrong (2013) argues that to support the 'unique child' approach standardised tests cannot measure or value a child's creativity, diversity or life experiences. In addition, Armstrong (2013) states that standardised tests do not provide a 'level playing field' for children, as each individual reacts differently under test conditions. Dweck (2017) and Armstrong (2013) maintain that standardised testing is a catalyst for a fixed mindset, whereby children are labelled as 'reluctant learners' or 'lower ability', causing the child to suffer low self-expectations and low-self-esteem. Children classed as the 'high achievers', can exhibit signs of stress, as they are constantly under pressure to attain higher level grades. However, the Curriculum for Wales aims for a growth mindset, through which children are encouraged to tackled and overcome difficult challenges or tasks, in a setting where personal reflection enables the child to thrive (Welsh Government, 2022., and Dweck, 2017).

However, the Welsh Government (2017) believe that summative assessments, assess children by following a baseline process. Although this form of assessment is not designed for day-to-day use, it does however, attain evidence of a child's achievements over time, enabling and accounting for children of different rates of development. Thereby increasing the practitioner's ability to understand and achieve the 'unique child' concept (Welsh Government, 2017).

Rogers (2015), Tinney (2022) and Welsh Government (2017) all believe that observations are paramount for the 'unique child' assessment process, as it plays a key role in everyday Foundation Phase practice. Providing opportunities to determine the position of a child on the learning continuum, observations provide the right set of circumstances for practitioners to collect evidence and identify both difficulties and exceptional abilities of children within the setting (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). Observations enable practitioners to support and progress a child's curiosity further (Welsh Government, 2017., Rogers, 2015., and Tinney, 2022). However, although a single piece of work or observation may demonstrate a specific outcomes characteristic, a judgment cannot be formulated, as it does not contain or provide the full extent of information needed (Welsh Government, 2017).

Observations, provide opportunities for practitioners to learn information about the child's development in the day-to-day moments of the child's experience, these can be recorded by utilising the Te Whāriki approach of creating individual learning stories (Chicken and Whitehouse, 2022. p. 231., and Lee, 2013).

The new assessments for the Curriculum for Wales, understands that all children as unique individuals, recognising that the support required by individuals will differ according to the child's ability, background, identity, language, and prior education (Welsh Government, 2021, and 2023). In addition, the new curriculum for Wales encourages a best practice approach through shared understanding, encouraging practitioners to understand the progression of a child's learning, to ensure that the correct provisions are in place to best support the child. This shared understanding provides practitioners the tools required to provide the child with a smooth transition throughout their learning journey (Welsh Government, 2021, and 2023a).

The evidence and recording of assessments within the new Curriculum assessment process, should only be completed for the purpose of providing better support for the child's learning and development and not for accountability purposes (Welsh Government, 2021, and 2023a). Employing recording methods from aspects of the Te Whāriki learning process, settings have developed the use of learning stories. Howley-Rouse (2023) and Chicken and Whitehouse (2022. p. 231) describes learning stories as a holistic form of representing a child's learning as a documented story. Created from the collection of structured observations and displayed as a narrative cumulative series of images. Stating further that when multiple consecutive observations are pieced together, it provides a fuller picture of the child's achievements, by adding chapters to the learning story, it enables the practitioner the opportunity to include further evidence. Learning stories offer semi-structured observation method, that enables practitioners to recorded practitioner and child interactions, learning and play experience and curriculum requirements (Carr and Lee, 2019. p. 148-153). Providing opportunities to assess learning dispositions that align to curriculum goals in everyday settings, in addition to have the flexibility to acknowledge developmental unpredictability (Carr and Lee, 2019. p. 148-153). Learning stories enable practitioners to fulfil the family centred approach of the new curriculum. Education applications such as SeeSaw, can provide a platform for practitioners to share a child's learning experience with their families, providing

parents with opportunities to engage with their child's education (Welsh Government, 2023a., and Seesaw Learning Inc, *no date*). In spite of this, Howley-Rouse (2023) explains, that due to a learning story's focus on one practitioner's observations and analysis, learning stories have been deemed as lacking validity. Howley-Rouse (2023), Welsh Government (2023a) and Waters (2016) state that continuous updating of learning stories can become infrequent, resulting in a lack of continuity, as a result of a lack of time, staffing and ratio restrictions.

In conclusion, it is essential that practitioners embrace the concept of the 'unique child'. Understanding external influences that can affect a child's development, such as socioeconomic and cultural differences, enables practitioners to provide individuals with the support that they require. Resulting from the findings of the 'Successful futures' report (Donaldson, 2015), the Curriculum for Wales holds the belief of the 'unique child' at the forefront of its framework. Providing children, the ability to develop and learn at their own pace, whilst encouraging children to explore their individual interests. Enabling practitioners not only the opportunities to record individual's personal achievements in a holistic manner, but by providing the correct support for the individualism and uniqueness of every child within their setting.

Section 3

The battle between 'abilities grouping' and the 'unique child'

Described as the 'most significant curriculum reform that Wales has ever seen' (Donaldson, 2015), the Welsh curriculum has been designed to provide children with 'universal access' to knowledge, experiences, and skills, to create an aptitude for 'lifelong learning' (Welsh Government, 2020).

Encompassed within the four purposes, the Welsh Government (2020) states that learners should be provided with age and ability appropriate opportunities and experiences, to fulfil all the requirements of the curriculum. This child-centred pedagogy has been designed to adopt the 'unique child' concept, to encourage each child's individualism. When a setting celebrates a child's 'diversity and uniqueness', it enables a child's confidence, self-respect, and personal growth to develop, this growth mindset provides a child with the necessary tools to overcome obstacles which may arise (Nutbrown, 2023., and Porter 2021). Birth To 5 Matters (2020) believes that for a setting to support the development and learning of all children, an inclusive approach must be encouraged. With this in mind, how can settings encourage individualism and diversity of children if they insist on grouping children on an ability basis?

What is the meaning of ability within the classroom?

Carroll (2023) describes ability grouping within education as 'the method of splitting a group of students into smaller groups based on ability' as a result of a child's outcomes from age related standardised testing and curriculum achievements within the classroom (Gripton, 2020). Enabling practitioners to rank or sort children into ability groups instead of recognising their individuality. However, Donaldson (2015) Vygotsky and Piaget (Alharbi, 2022) believes that each individual child develops at their own pace, which may not necessarily follow age related outcomes.

Ability and Mindset

Webb-Williams (2021) explains that although the setting follows the same curriculum, practitioners do however provide a different level of challenges and support for each individual group. Expressing further that unfortunately, some

practitioners presume cultural backgrounds or children grouped into lower ability have a fixed mindset that prevents them from overcoming challenges. In contrast, children of higher ability are defined as having a growth mindset and have a higher intellect potential. Alam and Mohanty (2023) explain that when a setting adopts the ability grouping principle, it removes the prospect of embracing inclusive, diverse and equality opportunities needed to foster a growth mindset, it does however, create a fixed mindset environment (Devarakonda, 2013). Rogers (2015) explains further, that when a child's opportunities for being unique are limited, it can lead to a lack of confidence to apply their skills to proceed independently. Renard (2023) explains, that when a child develops within a negative and fixed mindset environment, a child will believe that if they encounter a setback, it is easier to quit rather than trying to overcome the issue. However, when provided with a positive and growth mindset environment, children are provided with the tools to acknowledge and overcome any obstacle that arise. Growth mindsets, enable individuals to understand that situation outcomes are due to the individual own actions, other than nature being responsible for an individual achievement.

Why do settings still apply the ability grouping belief?

Explaining further Alam and Mohanty (2023) discusses that there are numerous children within settings who have mixed abilities across a wide range of topics, who find themselves placed in lower ability groups. Alam and Mohanty (2023) states that issues such as rigidity of grouping can cause children to view their abilities and intelligence as unchangeable and innate. This can have a detrimental effect on a child's self-confidence and their belief of failure when confronted with obstacles. In addition, Rissanen *et al.* (2021), states, that children who have a shy demeanour, can also be misunderstood as being lower ability, therefore situated within the wrong ability group.

How can setting overcome these issues?

Due to class sizes and staffing ratio numbers, settings have no other option other than to group children, to complete focus tasks, however, to achieve the 'unique child' concept, settings can utilise the mixed-grouping approach (Robertson and Downs, 2022). Webb-Williams (2021) explains that although low-ability groups 'protect' children from negative social and ability comparisons, mixed-ability groups

do however promote Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. By adapting Vygotsky's theory, settings can enable higher-ability pupils to become the 'knowledgeable other' for middle or lower-ability pupils (Bekiryazici, 2015). This technique, enables individuals to share their knowledge within a group of their peers, enabling a child's social and self-confidence to develop and grow. Grouping children with a shy demeanour within their friendship group, provides the individual the opportunity to share their thought and knowledge within a safe environment.

Renard (2023) believes that settings should adopt cooperative work within a mixed group situation, rather than encouraging a competitive individual approach. Stating further that when a child works as part of a group, they are more motivated and have a higher level of success due to the individuals feeling of responsible for the groups outcomes. Brodie (2024) and Sobel and Alston (2021) discusses this further by stating that, when children are provided with the opportunity to work within a mixed ability group, it enables them to understand their own strengths and weakness and that of others. This inclusive practice, enable children to explore and problem solve in an active learning setting, encouraging children to work together in a sustained shared thinking environment (Rodgers, 2015).

We can all acknowledge that the Curriculum of Wales has transformed the education system and that embracing a child's individualism and uniqueness has an impact on a child's growth mindset. Due to staffing ratios, we have gained an understanding that practitioners have no other options other than splitting class sizes into groups, however this does not condone ability grouping. Adopting a mixed ability group, encourages children to engage in sustained shared thinking and in turn a growth mindset to become lifelong learners.

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