

Early Years Curricular

Graham Donaldson's review into the Welsh curriculum and assessment strategies in 2014 has resulted in important changes to the teaching of the curriculum for learners aged 3 to 16 in schools across Wales (Taylor and Power, 2020; Donaldson, 2015). The aim of the Welsh Government is to improve the education system by raising teaching and learning standards taking into consideration the views of practitioners in order to bridge the attainment gap for all learners (Welsh Government, 2020). According to Power, Newton, and Taylor, (2020) to ensure the implementation of the curriculum to be successful teachers and practitioners must embrace the changes needed for the way in which they teach. Since 2011, The Welsh Government has made education reform a priority after the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed Wales were lower than average (OECD, 2014). This assignment aims to analyse the curriculum and how this is implemented through early years play based curricular, assessment arrangements, the importance of parents as partners in the early years and the benefits and the challenges practitioners face.

Part 1

The Welsh Government's approach to play based learning was implemented through roll out of the foundation phase curriculum framework in 2010. Based on the Scandinavian pedagogy through child centred approach and learning through play (Kanas, *et al.* 2022), which promised to encourage creativity and imagination allowing learners to fully immerse themselves through curiosity whilst having fun through a play-based curriculum, children will naturally develop a wider range of skills when they are developmentally ready (MacNamara, Collins and Giblin 2015; Welsh Government, 2015). Similarly, OECD (2018) suggests pedagogy through foundation phase allows practitioners to meet individual needs of learners, by directing activities and balancing tasks through organized learning and child-initiated play enabling children to view tasks as playful experiences with high standards of playful interactions involving adults (Howard, 2010; Howard and McInnes, 2013; Wainwright, *et al.* 2020).

Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2005) early review into the Foundation Phase pilot introduction found that the Welsh Government needed to raise standards by ensuring practitioners had high quality of training and qualifications to allow for effective provision to meet the needs of learners. Similarly, a later review by Taylor *et al.* (2013) found that the principles of a play-based curriculum and experiential pedagogy had been largely misunderstood by practitioners and to ensure effective practice and meaningful provision it is vital practitioners have a knowledge of the role of play, the importance of a stimulating environment inclusive of the outdoors and staff to child ratios are understood and adhered to (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2005).

Vygotsky's theory that play is a vital aspect of childhood, enabling children to master and gain a knowledge and understanding of the world around them (Pound, 2014), therefore allowing children to engage in playful learning experiences as early as possible allows them to develop a natural ability for investigation and discovery where meaning is made of the world around them and creates the skills within for future learning (Pistorova and Slutsky, 2018; Voce, 2015).

There is evidence to suggest that exposing young children to a formal education is unbefitting and provides little benefit moreover, a play-based approach to learning with skilled practitioners who are enthusiastic about providing stimulating learning environments through a playful approach enthruses children's desire for acquiring greater knowledge (Alexander, 2010; Wylie and Hogden, 2007; OECD, 2018). According to Howard, Miles, and Gealy (2009) the implementation of a play-based curriculum is a positive step away from inactive learning which benefits learners. Therefore, when delivering a play-based curriculum practitioners must have a clear understanding of the role of play in learning and development for children (Welsh Government, 2014).

The principles of the curriculum of the foundation phase are for children to encounter playful learning experiences through hands on activities and though practitioners identified a play-based curriculum as a strong aspect of the foundation phase there are challenges when implementing these changes to the curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2005). Considering the differences in opinion of what play is and that adults and children's definition of play may differ, it can be said children view activities with an adult as work rather than play and practitioners are in a unique position to use their expertise to ensure children are given the opportunity to view activities as play experiences through skilful approaches used (Howard

and McInnes, 2013). However, the Welsh Government (2008 b) play/active learning guidance suggests the frequent planning of play activities by adults rather than being child led. It is for this reason practitioners must understand the relevance of a playful approach within the foundation phase which enables children to make choices regarding their learning experiences structured by skilled practitioners (Wainwright, *et al.* 2020, Welsh Government 2021).

Theorist Bandura's social learning theory suggests children learn by imitating and modelling behaviours of what and who is observed in their environment (Bates, 2019; Aubrey and Riley, 2019). This coincides with the views of the Welsh Assembly Government (2008a) and Welsh Government (2017a) through the foundation phase provision, positive relationships, observations and exchanges between practitioners and learners will encourage sustained shared thinking which enhances the learning experiences for all learners (Broadhead, Power, and Wood, 2010). Moreover, children have an innate ability to play, and knowledgeable adults enable rich learning experiences throughout the process through multi modal, multi-sensory and dynamic holistic approach (Samuelsson and Carlsson, 2008; Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse, 2019). It is for this reason the Welsh Government (2017b) aims to provide up to date training is made available to fully support practitioners to allow for the positive impact on the learning environment and experiences for learners in the foundation phase.

Affordances in the physical and outdoor learning environment is an essential aspect of the foundation phase, it is these environmental cues which allow children to view affordances as incentives in their surroundings to engage in various modes of discovery and exploration through play (Fiskum and Jacobsen, 2013). The foundation phase recommends that spaces should be utilised through careful planning to ensure maximum exposure for learners to experience various learning opportunities which enhances development (Welsh Government, 2015) However Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2005) found that many early years settings needed to improve the opportunities and experiences for children in the outdoor learning environment. It is therefore very important practitioners have a good understanding of their role in facilitating a stimulating, inviting outdoor learning environment through relevant training to ensure a high level of learner engagement (Wainwright *et al.* 2020; Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse, 2019).

Wales has been at the forefront in the development of utilising the outdoor environment through the foundation phase to fully embrace the concept of experiential learning and changeable learning experiences (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). Children's behaviour and interactions outdoors are often viewed as different to how they behave indoors so in order to gain an understanding of the unique child, play experiences should be observed in both indoor and outdoor environments (Welsh Government, 2017a). This supports the suggestion by the OECD, (2018) that the foundation phase outdoor environment is a fundamental resource in facilitating children's development through exploration and independence putting the child at the centre of their learning. Therefore, practitioners having the knowledge and understanding that the outdoor learning environment and the foundation phase is one and the same (Welsh Government, 2009) and in order to ensure successful implementation of the curriculum more diligent training must be available to practitioners throughout Wales (Welsh Government, 2014).

The Welsh Government is currently in the process of implementing much needed radical changes to the national curriculum (Power, Newton, and Taylor, 2020). PISA test results published in 2010 and later in 2018 showed achievements of Welsh students is significantly lower than learners in the rest of the UK and moreover results were significantly lower than tests undertaken in 2006 (Welsh Government, 2018; Welsh Government 2010; Welsh Government 2007). These results from PISA are important as they test skills of individuals central to the curriculums of any nation and given the poor results from 2006 it is vital the curriculum for Wales is brought into question (Andrews, 2011). A report from PISA suggested that the Welsh educational system is not providing a curriculum to meet the needs and desired outcomes that the young people of Wales deserve, Welsh schools fail to provide for the individual needs of all learners (OECD, 2014; Evans, 2022) and therefore, the education system in Wales needed to change (Andrews, 2011; OECD, 2014).

Though findings suggested stakeholder support for the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase changes were needed to create a curriculum which would enable educators to deliver an outstanding education programme to learners in the modern world (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2014; Siraj and Kingston, 2014). Fully committed to the UNCRC rights of the child (UNICEF, no date) the new curriculum takes into consideration the child's right to play and learn, are not disadvantaged through poverty, play opportunities remain a fundamental part of early years education through the new curriculum and enabling pathways environment

(Welsh Government, 2021). This illustrates the importance that practitioners have a good understanding and embrace the value of play in children's learning through the foundation phase (Howard, 2010; Howard and McInnes, 2013; Davies *et al.* 2013) and the Welsh Government (2017b) state they are committed to delivering multiple training programmes to enable successful delivery of the curriculum. To ensure practitioners have clear understanding of the new curriculum for Wales the government must put in place a national training policy to raise standards for practitioners and improve professional development opportunities (Evans, 2022; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2005).

Donaldson (2015) successful futures report proposed 68 changes around the Foundation Phase from age 3 to 16 teaching through cross curricular themes encompassing literacy, numeracy, and digital competency. Moreover, this would develop learner's abilities through a continuum of experiential learning and not separating lessons into subject areas and key stages (Evans, 2022). For the early years the enabling pathways guidance suggests inclusivity for all through playful learning experiences indoors and outdoors with enabling adults creating warm, safe stimulating environments supporting all learners regardless of developmental stage (Welsh Government 2021). This however would have serious ramifications for the teaching through the curriculum areas therefore vital practitioners have a clear understanding of cross curricular themes such as health and wellbeing or creative arts (Evans, 2022).

Education in Wales is transforming with a view for equity and equality for all learners regardless of socio-economic background or homelife allowing every child to achieve success and develop a strong sense of wellbeing and self-belief (Welsh Government, 2017). The Welsh Government aims to develop an education system of the highest quality with inspirational educators through inclusive learning environments whose ethos for excellence, inclusion, equity, and equality is paramount (Welsh Government, 2017; Evans, 2022;).

Part 2

To ensure the best start to life every child must be viewed as unique individuals who have a varied range of characteristics, needs, abilities and backgrounds and each child develops at individual rates (UNICEF, 2018). Assessments carried out which consider progression is

unique and differs in every child ensure improvement for wellbeing, skills, and further knowledge (Welsh Government, 2022) these needs should be met with a curriculum through quality pedagogy that is developmentally appropriate with assessment and planning that is effectively suited to the ages and development of each unique child (UNICEF, 2018; Department for Education, 2021).

Assessment in the early years means not only to assess children's progress but to assess how practitioners teach and how learners respond (Smidt, 2015). Through Observation and assessment in the foundation phase practitioners can ascertain where learners are on the learning continuum and allows for identification of any difficulties or more able and talented abilities (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). There are many ways in which to use a play centred approached to create and utilise an authentic assessment both practitioner and child led which encompasses the national curriculum requirements and takes into consideration the unique child giving a true reflection of development on an individual basis (Van Hoorn *et al.* 2015).

The foundation phase profile is a fundamental part of the Welsh Government's assessment framework to support practitioners through the assessment process of pupil development during the foundation phase (Thomas and Lewis, 2016; Welsh Government, 2017a). The statutory baseline assessment carried out during the first six weeks on entry to reception to assess learners through the compact profile. Practitioners assess children across 4 areas of learning through observation to ascertain the level of developmental stages, learning styles and personal interests. Though practitioners viewed the baseline assessments positively due to largely being pursued through assessment there were many concerns across Wales regarding the lengthy process to complete the profile, certain aspects of the profile having to be assessed via adult led activities at a desk, and inadequate Welsh Government training on how to complete the profile (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2007; Taylor *et al.* 2013; Welsh Government, 2014). This led to the withdrawal of the baseline assessment in 2012 and was not replaced until 2015 where the new Foundation Phase Profile was piloted to include a new baseline and end of phase assessment (Thomas and Lewis, 2016; Welsh Government 2017a).

The full profile consists of all the skills ladders for the areas of learning, this is used to assess learner outcomes at the end of each phase and year 2, the end of the foundation phase (Welsh Government, 2017a). The Foundation Phase outcomes describe skills learners should reach when working on an outcome based on observation and evidence where practitioners decide

which outcome the child has achieved, at the end of year two end of phase assessments are statutory to ascertain learners' attainment across the seven areas of learning whereby results are sent to the Welsh Government where it is expected learners would have achieved all foundation phase outcomes by the end of year 2 (Thomas and Lewis, 2016; Welsh Government, 2017a).

According to Fawcett and Watson (2016) observation is one of the fundamental aspects of authentic assessment and the foundation phase links observation and assessment very closely. Continuous formative assessment in the foundation phase enables practitioners to plan activities which cater for individual learners needs and prioritizes the unique child's development, progression, and success empowering learners in the process (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). Specifically created to cover all aspects of child development The Foundation Phase Profile assessment tool allows practitioners to assess learners at the beginning and the end of the foundation phase via formative assessment based on observation of learners during the process of play-based activities (Welsh Government, 2019; Welsh Government 2017a). This enables practitioners to understand learners' development and devise a plan for the next steps within the skills ladder, which allows learners to master skills through a broad curriculum that is fair and takes into consideration the unique child. Robert-Holmes (2017) suggests baseline assessments aim to control and categorise the poorest of learners through prewritten criteria and ignores the possibilities of the unique child's ability to thrive.

Research carried out by Morgan *et al.* (2022) suggests practitioners viewed observation as first and foremost the best method of assessment which allows teachers to give a true reflection of learner's abilities and development. The research further suggests practitioners believe using assessment as daily practice is vital through verbal interactions, using workbooks and planning activities to ascertain independent skills level. However, some practitioners felt that teacher's assessment and knowledge of learners is more accurate than the foundation phase profile and should to be taken into consideration due to the level of daily interaction and observation of learners (Grigg, 2016). Similarly, Bradbury (2014) suggests teacher knowledge is superior when it comes to reporting data to Governments and using complicated assessments which cover all areas of learning greatly reduces time spent teaching (Bradbury, 2012). It was further noted that children develop skills rapidly and varying rates during the foundation phase emphasising the importance of assessments continuously in the learning environment (Welsh Government 2017c; Morgan *et al.* 2022).

Furthermore, not all learning could be assessed through play-based activities and had to be undertaken at a desk through a focus task with an adult to ascertain level of skills. Some practitioners felt this had an adverse effect on the true reflection on the ability of the learner as they feel under pressure to get it right. (Morgan, *et al.* 2022). This view coincides with Howard and McInnes (2013) suggestion that children view an activity with an adult as work rather than a play opportunity resulting in a flawed assessment conclusion.

In comparison the Reggio Emilia approach Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Emilia approach believed children are masters of their learning and have a desire to peruse their interests to gain an understanding, adults are not the prime teacher of knowledge and through curiosity children will make discoveries through investigation of their own (Bates, 2019; Hall, 2010). Through Reggio Emilia the unwritten curriculum begins with the individual child's interests and ability (Glazzard, 2010) the Reggio Emilia approach uses pedagogical documentation for observation and assessment, identifies children's interests and evidence children's play, interactions, ideas, and creations by taking photographs, video, voice recording, note taking and saving artwork (Robert-Holmes, 2017). This method of assessment aims to encompass all aspects of movement, interaction, play, and language led by the child (Glazzard, 2010) Using Pedagogical documentation allows practitioners to encapsulate the voice of the learners by prioritising child led chosen play opportunities giving the observer a realistic view of the development of the learner (Robert-Holmes, 2017; Fleet Patterson and Robertson, 2017).

Reggio Emilio uses the unique documentation process to record the learning experiences of children, an alternative method of assessment and evaluation not relying on rating scales or categories (Kalliala, and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2014) but allows for the recording throughout the project process and not just focussing on an end product. This is important as it allows practitioners to demonstrate to parents and children the learning experiences, allows for recall and reflection and the opportunity for collective discussion making the process of learning visible and open (Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006).

However, despite these advantages there are challenges to managing the pedagogical documentation. As the recording and creating of a visual document requires a certain amount of time and practitioners to create it is important to consider what time may be taken away

from elsewhere in the learning environment, similarly practitioners viewed the process as time consuming and adding more to an already heavy workload, furthermore teachers already must adhere to predeveloped curriculum standardized assessments and guidelines. For documentation to be successful it is important for practitioners to be passionate and have a belief in the benefits in the system of pedagogical documentation (Yilmaz *et al.* 2021).

Professor Donaldson highlighted a need for change and improvement to the teacher's assessments in Wales and in order to make improvements assessments needed to support teaching and be purposeful (Donaldson, 2015). Assessments need to engage learners through a variety of techniques and purposeful learning goals, practitioners need to be aware of the curriculum and assess within the four purposes linking together curriculum and assessment and the assessment process need not take up so much time to enable more time for feedback and marking which is just as important (Dauncey, 2021).

The curriculum for Wales puts the learner and the four purposes at the centre of the assessment process to ensure learner progression of individual learners and overall achievements on their learning journey. However, whether the Welsh Government can achieve its purpose of successfully implementing a new curriculum and assessment arrangements is yet to be seen as Gately (2020) suggests this depends on how assessment activities are planned in line with the four purposes but also to cover the curriculum strands in the areas of learning. It has been suggested the areas of learning are too expansive and therefore do not meet the four purposes and assessment arrangements (Gately, 2020). The biggest change to the assessment for Wales is schools will now develop assessments of their own to best support their learners and curriculum design. The Welsh Government recognises that schools are more knowledgeable about their learners and catchment so are best placed in designing a curriculum and assessment criteria that best suits the needs of their learners (Welsh Government, 2022).

Part 3

The importance of working with parents/carers as partners in the early years curricular

Picture an early year's environment where the ethos of parents, children and practitioners working together is paramount, embracing working together to build and maintain positive

relationships and gain a clear understanding of the workings in the early years environment and how children learn and develop. Genuine partnerships where practitioners and parents realise the importance of working together collaboratively will give children the best start on the path of their learning journey. For schools to ensure diversity and equality is practiced within the setting practitioners must embark on professional development to fully understand the importance of inclusion of families regardless of social or ethnic background with fairness and impartiality to ensure families are fully embraced and welcomed as partners in the school environment (DCFS, 2008).

Parents have the greatest influence over their children from the earliest of days, they in effect are the first educators and what they do in the home environment has a critical impact of how children develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Roger, 2016; Welsh Government, 2015; Wheeler, Connor, and Goodwin, 2009). An important point for professionals to remember is parents are putting their trust in practitioners to take care of nurture and care for the one thing that is most precious, their child (Burnham, 2016). Therefore, for practitioners to liaise with parents effectively, understand learners' potential and improve standards it is essential to establish positive, trusting home school relationships with parents (Fuentes, *et al.* 2018; Truschel and Hoffman, 2021).

Communication is key in allowing positive home school links to develop (Roger, 2011) and as parents are seen as a vital part of the pedagogy in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015) through active communication, involvement of parents in school events and keeping parents informed on what their children are doing is key to opening and maintaining effective dialogue where school is seen as approachable and mutual support can be developed between home and school (Burnham, 2016; Johnson; 2010; Moyles 2007). However there are some challenges which prevent parents being involved in children's learning, this can range from work commitments, challenges being faced in their lives, personal historical negative experiences of school and difficult life experiences resulting in negative perception of figures in authority (Wheeler, Connor and Goodwin, 2009), schools are in a unique position to break these barriers and create the change needed for parents to be a part of the rewarding experiences of being involved in their child's learning (Burnham, 2016; Wheeler, Connor and Goodwin, 2009; Moyles 2007).

The Welsh Government (2022) assessment guidance suggests maintaining active dialogue with parents regarding their children's progression allows for a shared understanding of children's holistic development, it is further suggested these discussions with parents enable successful transitions and paves the way for progression as learners develop. Collecting information and through the foundation phase profile assessment sharing information around their child's progress with the new curriculum for Wales being implemented across the country the Welsh Government and schools are encouraging parents to become more engaged in their children's learning by providing information about progression through the four purposes (Welsh Government, 2015).

As curriculum guidance in Wales shows a strong emphasis on the value of parents as partners in early years education, the Reggio Emilia Approach embraces parental involvement and see their role as central to learners' development (Brunton and Thornton, 2007). Regular dialogue between parents and practitioners' results in a shared understanding of learner interests which is central to developing a meaningful and purposeful learning environment through planning with the child at the centre as competent, active constructors of their own learning (Smith, 2014). Reggio Emilia uses documentation to communicate daily, weekly, or monthly evidence record of learning, consisting of photographs, comments, explanations, and reflections of children learning, it is believed that this kind of documentation enhances parental involvement and communication between practitioners and children (Lim and Cho, 2019). As partnerships and positive relationships in education are central in the Reggio approach the involvement of parents as equal educators are paramount in operating shared thinking and understanding of child development, clear communication and dialogue which supports co-operation and partnerships between practitioners, parents, and children.

Whilst child centred learning in education is an important part of child learning and development, there are some challenges with the Reggio Emilia Approach. For example, Aljabreen (2020) suggests as there is no written curriculum and focuses on a constructivist child guided curriculum through experiential learning and therefore less structured, this approach may not suit the needs of all children as for some a more organised system is suited, however some believe as children are not working within the remits of a tight curriculum far deeper learning will occur and more is possible for learners than in state education classrooms. For it to work as intended practitioners must have a good understanding of the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach and strive to be intuitive to the needs of the

learners and parents, are imaginative, reflective, driven and be passionate about working with parents and children as partners for learning and development (Kelemen, 2013).

Embracing parents as partners in early years education is key to the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022). Building home school relationships and maintaining active dialogue with parents takes time, sensitivity, and effort, not all parents respond immediately to practitioners but want the best for their child (Campbell, Drury, and Miller, 2013). As the Welsh Government (2022) recognises parents are first and foremost the most crucial influence on their child the importance of effective relationships with school is an important aspect of the new curriculum, it is for this reason practitioners are knowledgeable and passionate about embracing parents into the setting, to set the foundations for the learning and development for individual children.

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