

Early Years Play-based Curricula

Foundation phase for Wales 2022

“Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul”

(Fredrick Froebel, Pinterest, no date)

Section 1 – Implementation of play-based early years curricula in Wales

The Welsh Government made it imperative in supporting the development of children in the early years, between ages 0-7 years, by having a focus on creating high quality and exciting experiences since the introduction of the Foundation Phase in Wales 2004 (Siraj, 2014). The design and delivery of the curriculum holds a key importance on the high expectations of educational achievement for children and young people, all while supporting their personal well-being. Donaldson (2015) illuminates the significant challenges found in current educational expectations of children in the early years, and how they have often had a detrimental effect on children's achievements and welfare. Thus, it is essential for the curriculum to promote high expectations while capturing the engagement and interest of children, enabling them to achieve as appose to many educational underachievers (Donaldson, 2015). Another key element to the implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales is the range of extensive training and support that is provided by the Welsh Government, aimed at qualified teachers and practitioners to specify additional guidance materials on each area of learning including the use of the outdoors (Welsh Government, 2015). The new curriculum for Wales guidance (2021) emphasises the benefits to the interconnected approach to children's learning with the use of the safe outdoor environments, delivering first-hand experiences to children in the early years.

Play and Play-based Learning

Welsh Government (2017) set out a national strategy 'Prosperity for All', offering children from all backgrounds of life to have the best start in life, this is supporting article 29 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2021) that states that children's education must develop every unique child and encourage them to gain respect towards learning, family homelife, other cultures and the environment. Also, the UNCRC (2021) highlights the key principle of enabling children's participation will create an engaging curriculum that incorporates the interests of the children, furthermore supporting their needs and priorities. The Welsh government (2017) vision

is to produce highly skilled practitioners that will deliver quality care, education and play opportunities for young people as an ambitious workforce. With this, the development of the proposals began across three themes; Firstly, Attracting High Quality Recruits where pilot projects will take place within childcare settings. Secondly, Raising Standards and Skills which will support transferability with optional training modules for projects such as the Foundation Phase. Lastly, Investing in Building Capacity and Capability working in regional skills partnerships and further develop the 'progress for success programme' that provides funding to support practitioners to develop their skills (Welsh Government, 2017).

Hwb (2022) asserts that play and play-based learning is invaluable for children's holistic development and through playful experiences. Similarly, Sprouts (2019) states there are many benefits to children being given opportunities to explore their 'play' in depth, as learners are able to find ways that allow them to become self-aware around others in social circumstances, and inhabit positive behaviours towards their peers. Furthermore, play is fundamental to physical and creative development, proposing play is instrumental in young children's learning across the curriculum (Hwb, 2022). The Foundation Phase guidance (2015) emphasises the importance of child-led activities, in contradiction, according to Taylor *et al* (2015) there were more adult-led provisions observed more regularly despite of the direction of the curriculum. Moreover, Taylor *et al* (2015) states there is a clear correspondence between the head teacher and Foundation Phase lead practitioner of the foundation phase implementation. Despite these findings, there are observations that discovered variations in professional practice, this partly lies on the workforce's attitudes towards the foundation phase. Similarly, finding from Siraj (2014) also considers varied implementation of the foundation phase within schools across Wales, reporting conflicts between ages and abilities during the grouping of children when transitioning from early years to Key Stage 2. Additionally, it was reported that difficulties arose with newly qualified teachers, and that there was lack of knowledge around the foundation phase practices and pedagogies, additionally absence of understanding the importance of the children's transition into key stage 2 (Siraj, 2014).

Correspondingly, the work of Kingston and Siraj (2017) asserts that following the reviews within the work of Taylor et al. (2015) recommendations revised the need for improvements across Wales. Highlighting the importance of professional development of the practitioners working with early years children and young people, and fundamentally for the foundation phase to achieve high quality education for all provision, it is the responsibility of governments to invest educators to increase quality of delivery of the foundation phase from the professionals, in addition to encourage motivation (Kingston and Siraj, 2017). However, Waters (2016) underlines the work of Maynard *et al.* that discovered through analysis of Foundation Phase documentation there was a lack in the clarification for the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase and the precision of the approach for practitioners was absent. It is suggested that cognitive-constructivist developmental view of learning is not straight forward and evidence proposes the development of new pedagogies resonate with emphasis on social cultural perspectives, thus underpinning conflict between the pedagogies (Waters, 2016).

Training

The foundation Phase framework (2015) requires practitioners to take a play-based approach towards children's learning, although Waters (2015) discusses a problematic nature in the use of the word 'play' within the early year's curriculum frameworks. The reason for this is children will have a different view of the meaning of the word play in comparison to adults. The foundation Phase inherited these claims and created documentations for 'well planned play' and 'free play' giving more specific intention to the play for practitioners (Waters, 2015). Between 2013 and 2014, Professor Iram Siraj undertook a 'stocktake' in Wales with a focus on many points, for example, and understanding on the quality of delivery of the foundation phase, identify variables focussing on leadership and thus resulting in recommendations for improvement. Of 23 recommendations made to the Welsh Government, 9 of which related to training (Siraj, 2014). Siraj states that during the stocktake process it was brought to their attention by staff, that "*the foundation phase was not valued and that the weaker*

teachers were placed in the younger children's classes as the foundation phased was perceived to be the 'easy option'." (Siraj, 2014).

Siraj (2014) reports significant implications to professional learning in need of being addressed to develop the future of the foundation phase. The training proposed has a focus on theory and practice of appropriate pedagogies that will support practitioners in their role as the adult, when delivering the foundation phase and support progression for children in their learning and development (Siraj, 2014).

According to Taylor *et al* (2015) between 2004-2014 the Welsh Government invested into the provision of a training and support program for practitioners in the Foundation Phase. The training is an extensive program that consists of eight modules specific to pedagogy, curriculum and assessment guidance materials. These programmes were funded by the Welsh Government and implemented into 'pilot schools', and with six-year evaluation of said 'piloted schools' there were underpinning concerns regarding areas of learning associated with pedagogy in relation to the foundation phase, and a lack of support within planning and funding of the training Taylor *et al* (2015).

During January 2022 the Welsh Government launched its supporting learner progression assessment, which provides practitioners with Foundation phase professional learning resources, within the Welsh curriculum (Hwb, 2022). The modules are designed to assist practitioners to practice the provisions under these areas; Outdoor learning, Child development, Transitions, Observation, Play and play-based learning, Authentic and purposeful learning. In relation to these online resources provided by the Welsh government, Donaldson (2015) implemented the review's proposals on the core aims and configuration of the curriculum and formed a clear pedagogy. In keeping with the development of a child as holistic during their learning, Donaldson assert;

"The pedagogy that makes full use of wider skills within and across each area of learning and experience, particularly problem solving, creative and critical thinking, is likely to activate such powerful learning for children and young people."

(Donaldson, 2015)

Outdoors

The outdoors provides children with many learning opportunities and experiences that supports their development in a holistic manner, granting young people independent and real-world interactions with nature. Dolan (2015) asserts the outdoor learning activities can support social communications with peers which can lead to collaborative explorations with one another, promoting links between primary geography and outdoor learning. Natural resources wales (2020) provide activities and games that support children's learning in Health and Well-being learning area. Evidentially, the document shows connections of the health and well-being benefits of being outdoors including opportunities to increase physical activity, promoting academic attainment and helping to prevent the loss of environmental knowledge and understanding (Hwb, 2020).

In 1993 'forest schools' were developed in Britain and currently today there are over one hundred certified Forest School practitioners in the UK. The Forest Schools adopted the Scandinavian approach to learning in the natural outdoor environments, along with the use of natural and open-ended resources to enhance children's learning (forestschoollassociate, no date). Harris (2017) claims the forest schools may be taught within the framework of mainstream schools; however, the national curriculum is yet to approve it as compulsory so forest schools practice is seen as alternative form of education. The new curriculum for Wales (2022) supports child-led investigations as part of children's learning and development, the curriculum encourages practitioners to provide children in the early years open-ended opportunities to explore the outdoors as they see fit, and the role of the adult is to encourage and support the children's ideas with sustained-shared thinking (Welsh government, 2022). Siraj-Blatchford and Asani (2015) identifies sustained-shared thinking as an effective tool in the development of children's social interactions and creativity (Maguire, 2021).

According to Taylor *et al* (2015) there was a considerable escalation in the use of the outdoors as learning platforms, and assert that since the implementation of the

foundation phase in the early years there has been an overall escalation in the use of the outdoor space allowing a more 'free-flowing' exploration of activities between spaces as appose to 'learning zones' within the classroom. Although the use of the outdoors was being used better now than before, there are still some issues that prevent children from reaping the full benefits of the outdoors. During Taylor *et al* (2015) evaluation process, practitioners noted how the rich opportunities are often disrupted depending on the weather conditions of the day. Despite this the early years settings in primary schools provide small, sheltered outdoor areas that offer children self-directed opportunities to explore, in refrain from interrupting natural play.

The new curriculum for early years in schools will be based upon areas of learning and experience as appose to subject education, which is to enable to practitioner to focus on foundation philosophy as it is said to improve children's engagement and enhancing young people's creative development (Donaldson, 2015).

The implementation of a play-based curriculum in the early years has been analysed critically. The evidence shown provides an understanding of the significance of a play-based curriculum and how this can benefit children's learning and development. The core aims of the first application of the foundation phase and curriculum reform have been analysed. Results from previous curriculum reforms have been considered and focus points of what could be better when entering into a new curriculum reform in Wales. There is one key point throughout the research that evidentially implies that in order to instrument a successful play-based curriculum, the professional learning needs of the workforce must be supported.

Assessing Children in the Early Years – Play-based Curricula

University of Wales (2022) emphasises the fundamental role that assessment plays in practitioners supporting the development of children subject to their individual abilities and the ways in which they learn, in order to consider the appropriate progressive next steps for their learning in alignment with the purpose of education. Although the validity of assessments lies on the relationship of intended outcomes and learning process, Donaldson (2015) reports the challenges within the current assessment criteria of the curriculum as to establish a clear sight of overall purposes and learning intentions. Evidence gathered from the Review proposed a fundamental principle, “that the new curriculum structure and associated assessment arrangements should give expression to the four overall curriculum purposes” (Donaldson, 2015). The Welsh government are currently consulting on the proposal in order for practitioners to have a clear understanding of overall purpose and to encourage a focus primarily on progression. Gov Wales (2021) acknowledge that the requirement of well-coordinated and enabling reforms will determine the success of the new transformational curriculum, and have produces four key enabling objectives; to develop a high-quality education profession, passionate leaders working in collaboration to increase standards, inclusive schools working in partnerships and committed to excellence, equity and well-being, and lastly robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements.

The Foundation Phase (2015) framework provided practitioners with intentional learning outcomes for each of the seven areas of learning, based on a numerical scoring system each child’s learning ability would be established on the classification of ‘expected age of development – in relation to expected learning outcomes categorised from bronze (6-12 months) to outcome 6 (84-96 months). Research considers barriers within this framework that are said to obstruct the real analysis of each child’s actual ability. In relation to Erikson’s psychosocial stages summary chart produced in 1940, states children in the early years use exploration and play as their instrument of education. The main focus of developmental outcomes for children again from 0-7 years are purely based upon basic life skills and needs. Firstly, children acquire a sense of trust of those

around them, progressing to the discovery of their own independence and the ability to do things by themselves. Through exploration and play children begin asserting control of their own environment and then as they move towards 7 years, they are then able to cope with academic demands (studyLIB, no date).

However, EarlyYearsMatters (2022) states every child is a unique child and the maturity of their development cannot be determined without the considerations of their vulnerability in relations of emotional and social health and well-being. This is supported by the theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs that suggest children are only able to meet full self-actualisation when all their basic needs are met (EPM, 2020). Taking this into consideration, it begs the question is it fair to assess every child on the same proposed learning outcomes criteria when each unique child come from a different set homelife or background? For example, one child could have a high potential but he hasn't been getting breakfast in the mornings so here his basic needs are not being met, is it fair to assess his academic ability when he is not at his full potential?

To this date assessment methods such as observations, note-taking or check-lists have been used to assess children and their development. Hwb (2022) define observations as a key role in every day practice of practitioners. With the appropriate skills and effective observational techniques of the practitioner, they will be able to determine a fair and clear analysis of the learner's progression and identify ways in which each learner can be supported when planning future steps. According to Titley, Davies, and Atherton (2020) the development of the new curriculum for Wales has designed a new 'genericism' competency-focused approach (Donaldson, 2015). This is said to encompass a comprehensive range of outcomes as appose to just constricted measures of achievement. Donaldson asserts the assessments will be conducted by the practitioners with the use of a comprehensive repertoire of techniques, corresponding to the varied outcomes described from the learners' interpretation Titley, Davies, and Atherton (2020).

With this, The Welsh Government has introduced a progression steps framework that will be measured at three yearly intervals. Titley, Davies, and Atherton (2020) indicates

the planning for Donaldson's curriculum for Wales. At each progression the practitioner will incorporate a sequence of achievements and decide which statement is most appropriately fitted to each individual, the timeframe of three yearly intervals is to offer teachers scope when making pedagogical decisions on how to support children.

Conversely to these reports, the work of Champan (2020) insists it was proposed by teachers that there were concerns around the impact of the reform of pedagogy within the new curriculum. It is said that challenges around schooling staffs' commitment to current practice and newly altered approaches to professional learning during the process of the reform was proved difficult (Champan, 2020). However, teachers found that working as a collective in 'shared sense-making', bridged the potential divide to create solutions, and that to have effective implementation of the curriculum reform it was necessary for the cultural change in the educational system. Furthermore, Donaldson (2015) *Successful Futures* includes emphasis on multidisciplinary working on connections that recognise an improved independence on schools and practitioners.

A study was carried out by Davies and Hamilton (2016) with the intention of examining challenges in practice when assessing learning in the early years, considering the outdoor classroom. The study proposal consisted of qualitative and quantitative data, and used a variety of methods of inquiry such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews that were distributed between selective staffing in the schools. Additional questions for practitioners in the foundation phase were added to the questionnaires, for example; *"where are assessments carried out? Are there difficulties in current changes or demands to the curriculum that have had an impact on the use of the outdoor classroom for children's learning and assessment?"* Moreover, Davies and Hamilton's study found that practitioners considered the outdoor environment as valuable when assessing all children, this giving fair opportunities for the unique child. In contrast, during the discussion practitioners addressed the lack of ICT equipment due to expenses was a challenge to assess the areas of learning. Additionally, it was found that practitioners use a wide repertoire of techniques depending on what activity is being assessed, however, figures show that observational assessments were the most

used method when assessing in the outdoors as 36 out of 37 interviewed settings claim to use observation as their chosen method or assessment (Davies and Hamilton, 2016).

Donaldson's report (2015) asserts the requirement of well thought out planning when assessing, that a range of techniques need to match the hoping outcome, reassuring that observation is to be used to determine whether the desired learning has taken place. According to Howard and McInnes (2012) self-directed play is an important part of children's learning in the foundation phase and practitioners allowing young children the freedom to choose what they do and how they do it offers them a sense of control, thus increasing their levels of confidence within themselves resulting in positive emotional well-being. In relation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a play-based curricula will offer all children opportunities that enhance their basic needs and promotes a positive mindset that will enhance and showcase their natural abilities.

The review of Donaldson (2015) encourages practitioners to take a more imaginative approach to assessment, these approaches consist of role playing, varied practical activities, presentations and portfolios. The aim of these creative methods is to support all children's development in a holistic manner as every child is considered as a 'unique child'. Moreover, Barrable (2019) discusses the great emphasis on the environment for early years education and reviews the many benefits that using the outdoors has on children's holistic development, this has led to a rapid growth for outdoor learning in curricula around the world. This movement on natural environments, and theorists such as Montessori, Frobel and Reggio, have focused on how the outdoors can be manipulated and developed to encourage all children's curiosity and explorations of the natural world (Barrable, 2019). Similarly, the 'Early Years Foundation Stage Principle' document provisions the four core principles set out to support all children specifically the children's development as a skilful communicator and competent learner considering 'the unique child'. The four purposes support children in a holistic manner by offering rich play and active experiences while allowing the practitioner to plan for observational assessment in wider learning environments (Every Child Matters, 2022).

Through essential research provided it is revealed that young children learn and perform at their best when giving open-ended opportunities to explore exciting, natural environments in whichever way they see fit. As stated in Every Child Matters (2022) every child is considered as a unique child, all coming from different backgrounds and living under individual circumstances with talents and abilities distinctively to them. Thus, the recommendation within the Donaldson report (2015) that asserts the importance of practitioners exploring more inventive approaches towards assessment techniques such as role playing and practical activities. This giving the intentions of offering all children equal opportunities to showcase their true abilities within exclusive circumstance. Following relevant research and the study case carried out in 2015 by Davies and Hamilton, it was clear that the assessment method of observations was the most popular method used by the practitioners. Donaldson supports this method within the new curricula, as the only method that must be used throughout all assessments in order to ensure the true desired outcome was achieved.

Furthermore, reviews and research from year 2015 to current year suggests that the natural outdoors learning environments are most valuable to the early years, and as children explore these environments through their own self-directed play, they are able to develop positive and creative attitudes towards their learning and others around them, encouraging the holistic development of their well-being and social well-being (Howard and McInnes, 2012). This movement on the natural environments is adopted within the new play-based curricula for Wales 2022 as practitioners are encouraged to provide children in the early years scope to use play as a learning tool for the young unique children (Hwb, 2022).

Section 3

Blog; The importance of outdoor learning environments for children in the Foundation Phase in Wales

“The holistic development of children and their skills is the centre of the statutory curriculum framework” Welsh government (2015).

Through research and analysis of early years provisions and teaching guidance reviews there is a valued connection between children’s enhanced learning and development, and the use of natural outdoor environments. A theorist named Fredrich Frobel who was a German scientist that created ‘kindergarten’ for children to come and cultivate their learning through gardening. Frobel’s theory suggested that natural environments linked closely with children’s learning as it has endless academic concepts relating to maths, science. Furthermore, Frobel believed these environments brought key developmental advantages to all children in a unique way (Tovey, no date).

It is important to mention that Wales have supported this notion and integrated the use of the outdoors in the early years as reviewed in the Donaldson report’s recommendations provision (2015). However, as an experienced practitioner I have to say that even though the guidance of the curricula is play-based and encourages the early years settings within Wales to make better use of the outdoors, it is seen that this is not always the case. In fact, there is a substantial failure in children having access to the outdoors on a daily basis due to a variety of barriers that have stood in the way. The evaluation of (Taylor et al (2015) asserts that the weather conditions will have primarily affect whether the children are granted the outdoor space in certain settings as they are not equipped with sheltered spaces, however, this has been revised as part of the new curriculum (2019) to ensure children have these rich opportunities regardless of weather conditions.

As part of the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2022) article 29 refers to every child having the right to goals of education. Defining that the education of

each individual child must be developed to their unique personality, talents, abilities and ways of learning. The development of these attributes must be nurtured by practitioners in a way that encourages the child's respect for themselves, their families, different cultures and specifically to this piece the environment.

A key factor that Sprouts (2019) suggests is the benefits that children attain when given the opportunity to explore 'play' in depth. Sprout's work asserts children's awareness of themselves and the world around them during their self-led investigations and how this enhances their creative development and confidence in social situations. This is important to have an understanding of as a practitioner as it can sometimes be difficult not to direct children's languages and explorations in a certain direction despite all good intentions of a certain outcomes, as appose to allowing the children to lead their own play to open themselves up to new discoveries which in turn will grant them more rich and memorable experiences.

The new curriculum for Wales (2022) provides 4 enabling purposes for children in the early years use of the outdoors, consisting of supporting children to become capable learners, creative contributors, informed citizens of Wales and lastly confident individuals. So, how is Wales proposing to incorporate these provisions into the foundation phase framework? For example, you can depict the Scandinavian approach (Frobel) toward children's learning and how the natural environment has many advantageous variables that enhance young children's development; having to look after other living things and learning about sustainability can be related to becoming ethical citizens. Moreover, learning about our planet and place in the world, how things are made, developed, grow and are sustained (University of Wales, 2022).

Although the new curriculum for Wales (2022) has addressed many of the difficulties perceived in the foundation phase in regards to not utilising the use of the outdoor spaces that settings have in relation to natural environments. While it is clear that Wales are taking suitable steps in an enlightening direction for young children in Wales and offering the early years appropriate provisions in order to increase learning opportunities

for all children, it is to my knowledge that there is still a long way to go before these environments are fully applied to c standardisation appose to guidance's.

If you were to look further into the Frobllien approach to early years children's learning in Scandinavian countries, their entire curriculum is based upon the outdoors with the consideration that the environment is regarded as the third teacher. In fact, the program is that successful we now in Britain have multiple 'Forest schools' across the country and over one hundred certified Forest school practitioners (forestschoollassociate, no date).

Meanwhile, it is our duty as practitioners to inherit the recommendations of Donaldson (2015) and other reviews and guidance based on the new curriculum for Wales 2022 that define the various ways in which outdoor learning spaces can be adapted and utilised in order to provide children with rich and encompassing experiences and developing them in a holistic manner following the four purposes for children in the early year's framework. Thus, the Welsh curriculum providing children from all walks of life with consistent opportunities to explore in ways they see fit, which in turn enhances many areas of development as young people.

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