

Early Years Curricula

Section 1

The foundation for future learning and development is laid by early years curricula, which is pivotal to a child's development (Department for Education, 2023). With an emphasis on the value of play in early childhood education, play-based curricula has grown in popularity in recent years (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid, 2019). The reason being that play based learning promotes the acquisition of knowledge and learning-to-learn abilities as well as overall development, and this occurs through activities that are enjoyable, valuable and social (Zosh, *et al.*, 2017; UNICEF, 2018). It acknowledges children's innate creativity and curiosity, promotes active play, problem-solving, and active discovery as vital aspects of the learning process (Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022; Allee-Herndon, *et al.*, 2022). Early years practitioners are essential in supporting play-based learning opportunities (Taylor and Boyer, 2020). It is the practitioner's responsibility to provide a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports children's innate desire to play. Additionally, early years practitioners are required to ensure that their approaches are in line with the concepts of play based learning. These include enabling children to lead activities, offering open ended resources and encouraging self-directed play (Welsh Government, 2021). According to Erikson's play theory, play is an essential way for children to form their own identities (Henricks, 2014). Carnes (2015) states that through play-based curricula, children can explore various roles and scenarios, fostering self-discovery and an understanding of their social environment, which links to Erikson's play theory. Children can navigate their psychosocial development on a foundation provided through play, according to Erikson (MacFarlane and Honeck, 2023). The Welsh Curriculum can support a child centred approach that promotes independent thinking and exploration by adopting Erikson's Play Theory (Cade, Wardle and Otter, 2022).

A crucial part of the Welsh education system, the Foundation Phase concentrated on early years education for children from three to seven years old. It placed a strong emphasis on play-based learning and hands-on experiences to support children's holistic development (Wainwright, *et al.*, 2016; Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). Therefore,

effective curriculum and school reform implementation is a complex process that requires a great deal of consideration (Dayagbil, *et al.*, 2021). Professor Graham Donaldson concluded a review on the Foundation Phase curriculum in Wales and found that reforming curriculum in Wales was necessary to provide children with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to thrive in the modern world (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). According to the review, educators, children and young children also desired a stronger emphasis on basic skills, work skills, career guidance, life skills, self-confidence, and health and wellbeing. Additionally, they desired that learning be enjoyable and engaging rather than primarily a means of passing tests or earning certifications (Donaldson, 2015). According to Wightwicke (2018), rewriting Wales' existing curriculum is necessary to satisfy the needs of future learners and succeed internationally (OECD, 2017; Donaldson, 2015). With the introduction of the New Curriculum for Wales during 2022, curriculum reform is currently at the forefront of education in Wales (Welsh Government 2020a). The Welsh Government (2022a), recommended that as schools are creating their new curricula, they should think about how assessment will complement this vision for their curriculum and the learning it will promote. Additionally, the new curriculum for Wales should give the justification upon which schools base their understanding of the experiences, information, and abilities that will best aid children's development and why (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). According to OECD (2018), Wales has good reason to alter their curriculum. The quality of learning experiences and the access to them for children appeared to be unassured by the Foundation Phase (OECD, 2014). Performance on national and international examinations, including the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and reports from Wales' education and training inspectorate, revealed a persistent decline in student performance up until 2015, confirming worries about the quality of students' education (OECD, 2018a; OECD, 2023).

Donaldson's approach to education is in line with global trends towards competency-led curricula. Systems such as Te Whariki, the education system in New Zealand, are designed to be self-sustaining lifelong learning systems that equip children and young people to seize opportunities in the rapidly changing twenty-first century (Marope, Griffin, and Gallagher, 2017). Te Whariki is an inclusive curriculum that caters to the needs of every child. Gender and ethnicity, a range of skills and

learning styles, family dynamics and morals, socioeconomic background, and religion are all included in the concept of inclusion (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017). Marope (2013) adds reference to curricula's enhanced potential for anticipatory knowledge and foresight, which Donaldson refers to as "future-proofing" the Welsh curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015). These competencies are known as the Four Purposes in the new Welsh curriculum (Welsh Government, 2020). All children and young people in Wales are to achieve the "four purposes of becoming ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world; and healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society". Wales' comprehensive reform project covers five policy areas: assessment and evaluation, leadership, curriculum, teaching, equity, excellence, and well-being (OECD, 2023). The four purposes of education and the statements of what matters which outline the major concepts of learning and what is crucial for children to understand, serve as the foundation for the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022a). It is organised around six major Areas of Learning and Experience with three cross-cutting competencies: literacy, numeracy, and digital competency, in order to support holistic learning (Dauncey, 2021).

Despite the fact that Donaldson called the Foundation Phase "one of the best things of Welsh Education," Taylor, *et al.*, (2015) concluded a final report on the evaluation of the Foundation Phase, and discovered that teacher training needed to be improved, in one of their many recommendations. The Welsh Government had to provide clear guidelines outlining the significance of developmentally appropriate practise in addition to a mandated curriculum as well as academic standards. The recommendation continued by stating that it was important to provide practitioners with specific training and guidance on how to apply the Foundation Phase pedagogies in year one and two classes in particular. Moreover, the specific areas of ambiguity or confusion included practitioners understanding on learning through play, which leads to professional learning (Donaldson, 2015; Welsh Government, 2020). Similarly, the conclusions and suggestions from the independent stocktake led by Professor Iram Siraj, who examined the implementation of the Foundation phase in

Wales and potential areas for improvement going forward, included professional learning as a proposal (Siraj and Kingston, 2014).

Professional learning encourages the achievement of high standards and passion for all learners, the growth of schools and the right of practitioners to obtain high quality professional development (Welsh Government, no date,a; Harris and Jones, 2017). Siraj suggested that Foundation Phase teachers should consider pursuing postgraduate training at Masters' level to improve the comprehension of the Foundation Phase (Siraj and Kingston, 2014). The stocktake went on to say that professional learning opportunities for professional learning through continuing professional development (CPD) must be provided in order to facilitate the progression of teaching and learning pedagogy for the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015, Welsh Government, 2022). However, there are practitioners who have fixed mindsets (Chuckry, 2019). A fixed mindset is the idea that one's skills are unchangeable, and due to this way of thinking, early years practitioners may turn to biases in thinking, which will affect their learning (Katz and Dack, 2013; Danielson, 2016). Despite the fact that educators will likely encounter periods when they have both a fixed and growth mindset, being aware of these mental states helps teachers modify their behaviour and attitudes in order to move towards the realisation that mistakes are key learning (Dweck, 2015). Furthermore, OECD (2014) state that Wales poses an issue in putting the New Curriculum into practice, maintaining the vision while changing the strategy's focus from being policy driven, to being school focused and child led. The difficulty schools in Wales may face in creating their own curricula is a lack of thorough understanding of what successful curriculum realisation might entail in practice (Welsh Government, 2019; Williams, 2017).

Section 2

According to Early Years Matters (2023), every child is unique, capable, resilient, self-assured, and in a state of continuous learning. Birth to 5 Matters (2017) states from early childhood and beyond, a child's learning, growth, and development are intricately linked. Early experiences have a significant impact on a child's future development since learning and growth build upon prior knowledge (Allen and Kelly, 2015). Children acquire and develop abilities at varying rates, and they must be allowed to grow at their own particular, distinctive speed, according to the foundation

phase in Wales (2015). Children should be provided with opportunity to practise newly acquired abilities in various contexts, as well as to reflect on and assess their own work. Children's original and honest work should be respected, cherished, and supported in all facets of their development (Welsh Government, 2015).

Building inclusive learning settings starts with valuing each child's individuality (Schuelka, 2018). In addition to supporting the unique child, inclusive education promotes a culture of understanding, deference, and celebration of difference for every child (Every Child Matters, no date). Daneshfar and Moharami (2018) state Vygotsky's theories and concepts have had a significant impact on gaining an understanding of the crucial role that culture plays in the method of assessment. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises the idea that understanding an individual's development requires understanding the cultural context in which it takes place (Shabani, 2018). According to Vygotsky's theory, assessors, parents, and educators should work together on assessments. This collaborative approach recognises the important cultural knowledge that parents and teachers have about the child that is being assessed. Incorporating them into the assessment process facilitates communication and reduces the disparity between cultural effects and accurate assessments (Daneshfar and Moharami, 2018; Clara, 2017). Bias in assessment processes and tools is an important issue brought on by cultural considerations. Children from diverse cultural origins may not be accurately measured by assessments that are created and standardised within a single cultural environment. As a result, there may be unfair outcomes and false assessments of children's ability (Polly, *et al.*, 2017). It is crucial to use culturally sensitive evaluation techniques in multicultural education in order to accurately evaluate each individual child (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Bournmal, *et al.*, (2010) believe that practitioners need to use assessment methods that take into consideration the experiences, languages, and cultural backgrounds of their children. Assessments of performance, portfolios, self-evaluations, and observations are a few examples of these techniques that let children show their knowledge and abilities in ways that are appropriate for their culture (Peterson and Elam, 2020).

Furthermore, according to Banks' theory (1997), multicultural education is a concept, a movement for educational reform, and an approach to teaching. The concept of

multicultural education aims to provide equitable educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status (University of Washington, 2023; Race, 2015). The purpose of multicultural education is to give every child equal access to an education by transforming the entire school setting to better represent the various cultures and social groups that exist in our country and in classrooms across the country (Childs, 2017). Considering the objectives of multicultural education are principles that practitioners should continuously work towards achieving, it is a process (Rata, 2015). The ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner offers an invaluable foundation for comprehending the complex nature of multicultural education (Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022). It highlights how different interrelated systems, all impacted by cultural circumstances, have an impact on a child's development. Given that multicultural education recognises the significance of cultural elements in a child's learning environment, it is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's theory (Salle, 2013).

Learning stories are narrative-based assessments that provides a holistic perspective of a child's educational progress. They come from the Te Whariki curricula based in New Zealand (Pack, 2016). Learning stories track the child's development, recording their successes passions, and distinctive qualities all the way through their education (Escamilla, 2021). Most learning stories originate from observations. These narratives provide practitioners with knowledge of a child's growth, styles of learning, and areas for development that could guide future teaching methods (Sisk-Hilton and Meier, 2017, Carr and Lee, 2019). When it comes to identifying the unique child, learning stories offer several advantages. Learning stories emphasise the journey of learning, rather than the end purpose, moving the emphasis from only assessing results to recording a child's learning process and development (Sands and McChesney, 2023). Furthermore, Formosinho and Peeters (2019) state that by capturing the environment in which learning takes place, it enables a thorough grasp of a child's interests, talents, and challenges. Although there are advantages to using learning stories as a method of assessment, Zhang (2017) states that using learning stories to assess children could cause subjectivity, where the interpretation of the practitioner would influence the outcome of the observation. this would therefore result in prejudice and provide an inaccurate reflection on the child's skills and genuine development (Murata, 2014). Learning

stories also necessitate a substantial amount of time and effort commitment from practitioners for observation, and documentation. These are tasks that can be difficult to complete whilst in a busy setting, where practitioners would then feel the need to complete it outside of their working hours (Bliklock, 2018). It could be beneficial to combine learning stories with other methods of assessment (Hargraves, 2018), to maximize their potential as an assessment method. As a result of this practitioners can gain a more thorough understanding of the children's educational progress, and it would also allow practitioners an opportunity to engage in reflective practice on the use of learning stories (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), 2016).

Previously in the Foundation Phase curriculum, teachers would assess their pupils using the Foundation Phase Framework. Assessments in the Foundation Phase Framework are intended to track children's development and progress. With the use of discussion, portfolio evaluations, and observation, these methods concentrate on obtaining data of children's progress (Welsh Government, 2015a). Children were expected to achieve targets as set out by The Welsh Government. For example, children in reception classes were expected to be "able to produce pieces of emergent writing". Campbell (2013) states that it seems unfair that some children may not reach this stage before moving up a class later on in the year, given that the oldest and youngest children are eleven months apart. Similarly, Kuntsi (2021) states regarding behaviour, maturity, and cognitive abilities, there is a noticeable difference in the early years of childhood, between these children. The possible undervaluation of academic disciplines in the formative years is an issue according to Murray (2018). Although the framework places a strong emphasis on play-based learning and creativity, (Waldron, Rhys, and Taylor, 2014) suggests that in order to effectively prepare children for further education, a more structured academic focus may be required. Concerns were additionally expressed about the consistency and dependability of the assessment techniques used in the framework. Boyko (2019) object to observational assessments claiming that the subjectivity may lead to biases that result in inconsistent evaluations. Furthermore, The Foundation Phase Framework was frequently criticised for being too time-consuming, too much of a tick-box exercise, and not being sufficiently tailored for each individual learner, according to research done by The Welsh Government (2022b). However, the

research also identified that practitioners in most schools described the need to set up specialised tasks, sometimes at a desk to assess skills that were harder to notice on through the observation of play. Together with the complexity and nature of skills being assessed, these were the main factors pushing practitioners towards using focused activities, which became increasingly problematic as the Foundation Phase progressed (Moyle, 2014). Although the Foundation Phase has some challenges, there were also favourable elements through this method of assessment in play based curricula. The framework was useful in identifying children who required additional support, or had an additional learning need, even though it was not designed to facilitate the identification of developmental delays in some children. Along with this, the Foundation Phase Framework was praised by practitioners (Welsh Government 2022b) as a good foundation to start assessing children and a practical tool for tracking issues.

Considering these factors raised from The Foundation Phase Framework, Professor Donaldson suggested that using Progression Steps would be a more appropriate method of assessing children in play based curricula (Dauncey, 2015). Every child and young person should have their own unique roadmap, according to the Review. In contrast, the Foundation Phase levelling system relied on a best-fit assessment of total achievement. Therefore, rather than being viewed as universal expectations, progression steps would be considered as reference points (Donaldson, 2015, Welsh Government, 2018a). To assess a student's development, the achievement outcomes for each of the six Areas of Learning and Experience will be used. Moreover, using terms including "I have" for experiences and "I can" for accomplishments, the child will provide a personal perspective while describing these achievement outcomes (Donaldson, 2015). The Review acknowledges that the learning continuum must be adaptable to children's varying speeds of progression. Some children will advance to higher levels more quickly than others (Welsh Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2019). Although the Progression Steps are no longer age or stage related and are broader, there are a few teachers who have reported it being harder to assess children on this scale (Welsh Government, 2022). This is a result of the assessments use of "I can" statements. During the feedback analysis (2022) one teacher stated that "This is unmanageable and goes against the notion of formative assessment and holistic learning".

Section 3

Children's mental health and wellbeing in school.

Concern over the effect of education on children's general well-being and mental health has grown in recent years and is well recognized (DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, 2012). Education is essential for both personal and societal growth, but it is important to recognise the possible negative impacts it may have on children's development. This blog seeks to examine the various ways that education might affect children's wellbeing and mental health, considering both the positive and negative elements, by drawing on recent research and scholarly assessments. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2023) describe overall health: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.". This concept implies that mental health is more than the absence of mental illnesses or disabilities, which is a significant finding.

The WHO (2022) further explain that promoting the mental health of children and young people is a top priority. Looking at the United Nations Convention on the Right of The Child (UNCRC), Article 24 explains that "Every child has the right to the best possible health". For children to remain healthy, governments must offer high-quality healthcare as well as health and wellbeing education (UNICEF, 2019). This can be done by putting in place school-based programmes, supporting practitioners in their efforts to offer caring attention, and passing laws and regulations that support and safeguard mental health. Programmes for social and emotional learning in schools are among the best methods of promotion for nations of all financial levels (UNICEF, 2020).

Furthermore, the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2021) conducted a survey, asking children about the coronavirus and how they felt about online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report found that the majority of children aged between three and seven reported to feeling unhappy, or a mixture of sad and happy at the same time. Children missed their friends, and school – however around half of young people preferred learning at their own pace. Similarly, a research study commissioned by The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Aberystwyth University and Bangor University (2021) found that numerous stakeholders underlined the need of schools providing support, routine, play, opportunities for social interaction, and leadership in the classroom in order to improve children's mental health and

wellbeing. The research highlighted there is a need for a greater understanding of the necessity of this as a prerequisite for successful student growth and accomplishment.

With the New Curriculum for Wales – Successful Futures being a play based curricula, it is important to see how they will emphasize the importance of health and wellbeing in schools. One of the four main purposes of the new Welsh curriculum is that all children will grow up to be healthy, self-assured individuals who are prepared to live happy, fulfilled lives as contributing members of society (Gatley, 2020). Health and well-being are areas of learning and experience that feed into the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, according to the Welsh Government (2020). These areas of learning are just as important as reading and numeracy. The aim is that this area should offer a holistic approach for comprehending health and wellbeing, with practitioners attempting to incorporate all five statements into their lesson plans, which together contribute to supporting the four purposes of the curriculum.

Furthermore, now that Wales has a new method of assessing children in schools, the focus is on what the children can achieve, for example, Progression Step 5 in Developing physical health and well-being has lifelong benefits stating that children will be able to "describe the behaviours, conditions and situations that affect my physical health and well-being, and I know how to respond to and/or manage these in order to actively reduce the risk of harm to myself" (Welsh Government, 2020). Additionally, NSPCC Learning (2021) state that promoting the wellbeing of children and young people is essential to their safety, development, and the achievement of positives into adulthood. UNICEF (2022) state that creating an enabling environment for positive mental health and wellbeing is seen to be a support for children in schools, and governments must mainstream this within their education policies, plans, and budgets, which Wales are aiming to achieve.

Moreover, in order for practitioners to promote children's wellbeing, it is important they know how to do so. With consideration for each child's local context, nature-specific outdoor learning should be incorporated into every child's school experience as it offers measurable socio-emotional, academic, and wellbeing benefits. Early childhood is a crucial period for building a solid foundation of healthy behaviours that will influence children's physical and mental health for the rest of their lives. Children's health and wellbeing are greatly enhanced by frequent exposure to natural outdoor settings (Park and Riley,). Children who spend regular

time outside - in parks, forests, and playgrounds, have the chance to play hard, release stress, and directly experience nature, all of which have positive effects on their physical and mental health, whereas children who spend more time indoors are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses such as depression and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Yang, Yang and Wang, 2018). There should be a focus on how natural settings can be used for learning in teacher pre-service and in-service training, this will ensure to minimise any complications that may occur when implementing a play-based curriculum (Mann, *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, to summarise, in comparison to the Foundation Phase curriculum, where there was no system in place to monitor children's wellbeing, Successful Futures will be a very welcome opportunity for children to share their experiences with health and wellbeing and, hopefully, the beneficial effects that this innovative and exciting curriculum is encountering.

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