

Section 1:

According to Deng (2013) and Waks (2003), the early 21st century saw many countries including China, Norway and Singapore responding to the new challenge of globalisation – economic and social changes would not only bring incremental changes to education, but fundamental changes too. Furlong (2015) is the Initial Teacher Training Advisor of the Welsh Government, and he agrees, suggesting professionals need to grow with these changes. China adopted approaches inspired by Reggio Emilia and Montessori (Yang and Li, 2019); Norway has long standing traditions built on Froebel's theory (Alvestad and Sammuelsen, 1999); and Singapore foster many approaches including, Steiner, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia (Education in Singapore, 2022).

Welsh Gov (2020) suggests that Wales has curriculum reform leading the educational journey; and although it is a curriculum built in Wales, it was also inspired by many ideas from around the world (Welsh Gov, 2021); curriculum reform here in Wales is currently demonstrated through the role-out of the new Donaldson curriculum, ensuring that no child must be at a disadvantage in education because of social and economic differences; the curriculum must be inclusive to all children (*Education Act 2002; Children Act 1989*), promoting development and spirituality; culture; positive values and health and well-being; preparing children for good opportunities and experiences in adult life (Successful Futures, 2015; Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

Each setting across Wales and England has the same curriculum, however, it can be fashioned and altered to meet the individual settings unique needs. Welsh Gov (2022) offers this, by suggesting the new changes will encourage and support young people as they develop knowledge and skills to reach their full potential, and Donaldson (2015) believes these changes will support the unique needs of future learners, including changes in research/science/technology, and new skills to benefit future businesses and engineering. Therefore, this assignment considers the challenges faced within proposed curriculum reform in Wales; furthermore, examines the potential lessons learned from past obstacles when implementing changes to curricula (Welsh Gov, no date).

The Foundation Phase (FP) curriculum was piloted in 2004, and rolled out in stages but fully implemented by 2011 (Welsh Gov, 2016); it was a fundamental switch from the formal, competency-based approach associated with the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum, and it allowed for 3 – 7-year-olds in Wales to be taught and learn through enjoyable, active, hands on experiences, appropriate for the age and stage of development; it included 7 areas of learning: personal, social, wellbeing and culture; language, literacy and communication; maths; Welsh language; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical; and creative development (Welsh Gov, 2015), and as the curriculum unfolded, additional changes were implemented for example revised outcome statements including, bronze, silver and gold, and outcomes 1-6, to support end of phase assessments (Welsh Gov, 2015). A strategic action plan was created in 2016 by a group of experts to ensure consistent, effective practise across the FP, including the government's commitment to the curriculum even after the implementation/role-out of the new Donaldson curriculum from 2022 (Welsh Gov, 2016).

When planning for the new Donaldson curriculum, stocktake recommendations were considered by Welsh Gov (2015), to continue developing the positive and effective practice achieved through the FP curriculum; ensuring that the networking pioneers for the new curriculum regarded the principles underpinnings including culture and the Welsh language (Successful Futures, 2015); this suggests stakeholders value the FP, carrying some key principles into the new area of curriculum, now known as, Foundation Learning (PACEY, no date); two of these principles will form my evaluation: the importance of play in early years curricular and the value of parental involvement, including initial teacher training (ITT) and continuous professional development (CPD).

Lessons can be learned from evaluating the implementation of the FP to ensure the new Donaldson curriculum is executed successfully within the early years. Firstly, a play-based curriculum is important to child development, and it encourages young children to be creative, imaginative, and joyful, therefore learning becomes more effective, because they can explore and investigate a range of resources independently (Welsh Gov, 2015; Welsh Gov, 2019). However, Welsh Gov (2015) reports a study where researchers observed year 1 and 2 classrooms, and results did highlight that children like learning independently in rich environments that allow

for greater experiences. However, the researchers suggested that these year 1 and 2 children lacked in play-based learning, yet they were FP classrooms that should have been rich with such experiences; but the pedagogy for these children continued to be more formal. If the future for the curriculum for Wales considers listening to the voices of these children (unicef, no date), then more independent play-based learning is essential within early years for them to grow. Successful Futures (2015) agrees, recording a study of 300 children surveyed, and when asked about what they believed should change about the most recent curriculum, they said lessons should be fun and interesting. Furthermore, lifting the pressure off teachers, that has resulted in the focus being teaching to simply pass assessments and gain qualifications (Unicef, no date; Welsh Gov, 2015).

Another study by Howard and McInnes (2012), considered the impact of the perspective a child has regarding an activity as being play and not play; the researchers observed how these factors impact a child's emotional wellbeing. 129 children between 3 and 5 years old participated, and emotional wellbeing was measured using the Leuven's Involvement Scale. The results concluded a significant difference concerning the level of emotional wellbeing displayed by the children; evidence that demonstrates the powerful value of what the child perceives as play/fun. The children demonstrated lower emotional well-being with a more formal approach to learning, for example when they were directed to do a task or sat doing table-based activities.

Furthermore, the independent stocktake of the FP in Wales (2014) suggests that for a play-based curriculum to progress successfully, the principles must be understood and valued by all practitioners through the embedding of knowledge in ITT and through CPD; additionally, staff should be reflecting on professional practise to understand how well curricular is being implemented in their settings (Welsh Gov, 2014). According to Kingston (2017), practitioner's professional development and motivation is key when working with children, and effects the success of the curriculum; therefore, the Government must invest in educators, ensuring policy makers are improving teacher training, including salaries, incentives and career paths that are appealing.

The quality of ITT between 2006 to 2013 was slow and concluded then as merely adequate with assessments from Estyn, officials and leading stakeholders, including Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, suggesting in her Annual Report, that ITT needs to be better including the recruiting of teachers with the best qualifications (Furlong, 2015; Tabberer, 2013). However, Furlong (2015) wrote a report after a yearlong review stating that teacher training still needed to change in 2015 (BERA, 2015). Estyn (2021) recommends how to best qualify teachers through ITT in the post-compulsory educations and training sectors, by improving mentoring provisions, increasing training/teaching opportunities and, high quality experiences for students. On the other hand, Schleicher (2017) who is Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy, suggests the commitment to improving teaching and learning in Wales is evident across the entire education system. Welsh Gov (2020) agrees, promising six INSET days for teachers for CPD, and curriculum implementation, and furthermore, there has been financial investment into school budgets for professional learning, and this was £31 million, from 2018/19 to 2020/21.

Finally, Welsh Gov (2015) published a closing report, evaluating the FP; it was a 3-year evaluation carried out by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, and this concluded with 29 recommendations; one which highlighted that parents/carers and families should be more involved, including understanding the principles of the FP. It was suggested that the Welsh Government, local authorities, and maintained/non-maintained settings should be responsible for this, by providing further information and support to caregivers, for example, communications regarding their child's ongoing development and how they as primary caregivers can support their educational journey at home. They emphasized the value of parental involvement within the implementation of the curriculum; however, the report suggests this has always been difficult. On the other hand, Welsh Gov (2022) in the Curriculum for Wales: Annual Report 2022, suggests that school engagements with caregivers is something that has been acknowledged with positive progress and achievements to date; it has been emphasised, that parents and carers play a crucial role in the curriculum. This was also stated in the Audit Wales report on the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Gov, 2022 a); and this report outlined the agreement of evaluating the

effectiveness of parents/school engagements ensuring that progress continues as the new Curriculum unfolds.

To conclude, this section has discussed the importance of curriculum reform and moving with the economic and social changes of the world, including some of the benefits on child development and, inclusivity; it has focused on the implementation of a play-based curriculum while evaluating the execution of the FP over the years. Some evidence of the principles and values underpinnings of the FP has been discussed including the importance of play within curricula and the value of parental involvement. Some challenges faced by practitioners and stakeholders have been discussed, including a lack in professional understanding of play, what children perceive as play, and difficulties engaging parents. Furthermore, lessons have been learned when considering the role-out of the new curriculum for Wales, for example, play being an essential element of ITT and CPD; Moreover, the Welsh Government, local authorities, and individual settings are now making children, parents/carers and staff training a priority as the new Donaldson curriculum continues to unfold.

Section 2:

It was in 1988 that the Welsh national curriculum was first introduced; since then there has been a consistent change globally for example, the development of the internet and mobile phones; in amidst the rabid growth in technology, Pacey (no date) continues, by discussing Donaldson's intervention: commissioned to complete a review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, he concluded with 68 recommendations to improve the education system in the 21st century; 19 of these recommendations are related to assessment, and it was proposed that simplifying the procedures and also strengthening the implementation of teacher assessment is important to supporting the unique child's learning (Donaldson, 2015; Dauncey, M. 2021). According to Welsh Gov (2022 e), assessment will now strengthen student progression through a customised curriculum, assisting in identifying next steps in development, and the teaching and learning required to influence that progression.

Assessment is essential for learner progression, ensuring support and challenge is accommodating that growth. It considers on going, daily support, but also progression over time, demonstrated by identifying, capturing, and reflecting on each

child's development. It also requires understanding group advancement to reflect on practise (Welsh Gov, no date). Therefore, this section seeks to evaluate the foundation phase assessment, considering the positives and negatives of age and stage developmental models for progress tracking, including barriers. However, before evaluating assessment, one might first consider what is meant by the concept of the 'Unique Child' in terms of assessment.

According to Ettekal and Mahoney (2017), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System suggests that learning and development is dependent upon each unique child with their individual circumstances, including environments, identities, languages, backgrounds, abilities and pace; these factors should place the unique child at the heart of assessment, and teacher's must be sure to adopt principles in guidance when implementing, reviewing, or revising them, so to then support individuals' progression in learning (Welsh Gov, no date; Welsh Gov, no date a). This must be an effective process which includes sustain shared thinking/understanding regarding progression, including the head teacher, class teacher, governing body, and the local authority. It considers the transition journey throughout school and parental/carer involvement/engagements (*Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021*; *Education Act 1996*; Welsh Gov, no date; Ministry of Education, 2017).

Now to consider the foundation phase profile (FPP), a national assessment and a tool which was created to determine a baseline for children over the first 6 weeks in reception, by assessing abilities and development through skills and outcomes, within personal, social, well-being and culture diversity; language, literacy, and communication; mathematics, and physical development (Welsh Gov, 2017). The child's ongoing progression is recorded throughout PF until end of year 2, with observation being a key method (Welsh Gov, 2022). However, according to Government Social Research (2022), a study concluded that following the statutory period of use (first 6 weeks), the FPP's were used only by 1 quarter of schools, 5 created their own internal assessments and 10 used packages that provided accessible platforms, achievable easily and quickly through digital devices instead. Although the internally developed systems were based on FPP's, they were changed to suit individual needs for example, making outcome levels smaller incremental steps, and focusing more on disposition to learning rather than skills only (Government Social Research, 2022; Welsh Gov, 2022 d).

FPP's are split into 2 parts: 1/ a Compact Profile, which observes a set of specific skills in the form of a ladder and offers information regarding a child's early learning. This is based on set stage outcomes (bronze, silver, gold, and outcomes 1-6), and is demonstrated through age-appropriate skills related to the 4 areas of development (Welsh Gov, 2017). This links to Piaget's theory on cognitive development, where he proposes universal stages and he believed all children go through these stages in the same order but not necessarily at the same rate; his behaviour patterns and milestones of ability are organised into stages appropriate to age, which is like FPP's (Rodriguez, 2018).

2/ The Full Profile, which includes a wider skillset that supports progression through the FP generally, providing a fuller idea of each child's development, including more detailed information on children that might be of concern. The observations and other formative assessments are collected through holistic activities within the 7 areas of the curriculum and including continuous, enhanced, and focussed tasks (Welsh Gov, 2017). The FP recommends recording progression through, notebooks, diaries, digital cameras, and sticky labels (Welsh Gov, 2009). This links to Vygotsky's idea of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' because observations can identify the different skills comparing between what an individual child can achieve independently, and their achievements with guidance. To ensure the child achieves, and moves through the ZPD, Vygotsky suggested the presence of a more knowledgeable other; social interactions with teachers; and scaffolding to be crucial, of which the FP supports. (Bodrova, 1997; Welsh Gov, 2015).

On the other hand, Sellegren (2017) discusses a report based on 1,400 union members; it is suggested that because of the pressure of assessment, teachers feel it is helpful to group children early based on expected outcomes. However, it is recorded that this could have a detrimental impact on the children's self-confidence and performance because grouping means limiting their learning. If Dweck (2007) is considered, her theory demonstrates the power of mindset, suggesting success can be significantly shaped by what one believes about their abilities. Therefore, children with a *fixed mindset*, for example children who are grouped according to ability, could believe their ability is fixed, and they will be less likely to succeed than those with a *growth mindset*, for example children who are in mixed ability groups, who believe their abilities can be developed.

Practitioners indicated a positive response on the alignment between the FPP and the educational principles of the FP, and this was because the baseline and end-of-phase assessments were mostly able to be carried out through observation within independent play; however, many schools found numerous skills were not easy to assess like this, for example, many table based adult lead activities needed to be set up for some skills to be observed (Government Social Research, 2022). However, the FP pedagogy encourages that the observations are supposed to support staff in finding out how children like to learn and what their unique interests are; with children's original work respected and valued without dictating their learning (Welsh Gov, 2017; Welsh Gov, 2015). Kolb (2012) agrees, his concept is supported by older theorist such as Dewy and Piaget, suggesting the learning process is influenced by experiential learning; knowledge is then created through an experience being transformed (concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation is transformed into reflective observation and active experimentation). This is because they are given permission to take control and to explore their own ideas in real world situations; as children interact with information, it becomes real to them. They grasp concepts; they become more creative, they reflect on their learning and failures become positive experiences, and it could lead to children appreciating their learning more (EBLS, 2019).

When considering the FPP; children could have skills and outcomes which they have yet to achieve based on age, but what if the timeframe does not support the individual's unique needs (stage) (Welsh Gov, 2017), for example, children who are delayed, those with additional learning needs, or those that are simply not interested yet, because they are not the ones initiating it through their own experiential learning. Furthermore, Government Social Research (2022) recorded an interview which included 76 practitioners and parent governors, and an additional 18 stakeholders, and they suggested it was not being tailored enough to the unique child. If experiential learning is reaching its full potential within FP, then all children can be praised because the focus is on their unique successes rather than the expected outcomes (Government Social Research, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2017). Again, this links to Dweck's theory which encourages a growth mindset as appose to, fixed (Dweck, 2007).

The assessment approach that is demonstrated through New Zealand's, Te Whariki principles, use tools such as learning journeys and this places children at the centre of their education, encouraging empowerment as each unique child guides the practitioner's work. Adults can discover what children know and can achieve and their interests, through observation. The focus is on self-directed learning and achievements as appose to FPP's generic, tick box process which is proven to make such observations challenging; on the other hand, learning journeys are time consuming (Government Social Research, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2017). However, practitioners were generally positive about the quality of the FPP, because it is a helpful tool to set targets and identify next steps through observation and assessment while offering a good description of a child's overall development (Welsh Gov, 2022 d).

In conclusion, the social and economic changes of the 21st century has impacted the education system, including the approach taken toward achieving assessments; simplifying procedures to ensure learner progression is important and placing the unique child at the centre is key. The FPA has been discussed suggesting the benefits of the FPP's, including the positive benefits of observation, that can achieve an overall understanding of each child's development, including next steps to learning. However, it has been critiqued that age/stage assessments are not tailored enough to the unique child meaning children can be at a disadvantage when progress tracking, with teachers moulding a fixed mindset from early on concerning their own level of ability and success. It has been identified that children need time and benefit from experiential learning and through approaches such as learning journeys and a growth mindset, they can be observed progressing through child-initiated experiences which empower them to direct their own learning success.

Section 3:

Schools must engage more with fathers because they can have a positive influence on their child's progression and overall developmental success.

Estyn (2018) suggests that parental support can influence academic success significantly, and the UK Parliament (2001) believe parents are their child's first and most important educators in life. Learning begins at home and parent's must understand the value of their engagements with their children's educational journey;

furthermore, schools must understand the importance of strengthening and developing their engagements with home learning (Welsh Gov, 2016). Welsh Gov (2022 f) describes the new curriculum for Wales by acknowledging that parents have valuable contributions in relation to the unfolding of its individual vision, and the progression of its unique design. Schools need to be engaging effectively in 2-way conversations as a priority to ensuring parents are aware of their child's progression, and how they can further support their learning.

So, who are the parents? According to *Education Act 1996*, "parent" includes natural parents, married or lone parents, and anyone who has legal parental responsibility. Therefore, despite this blog focussing on fathers, other primary caregivers are not excluded from the crucial responsibility of engaging with their child's learning. However, if schools do not understand a father's significance and effort by failing to include them, this could present negative implications for their child's education, mental, and emotional well-being (Fatherhood Institute, 2010). *So, what are parents saying about their current level of engagement within the life of their child's school?* Parentkind (2022) surveyed 3,750 parents across the UK, including population by gender, age, region, and socio-economic status. Findings suggest that parents feel distanced, wanting to be more involved in the decisions surrounding their child's education; however, the barriers parents face included lack of time, finances, or being unsure of what to offer as parents.

According to The Department of Health and Human Services U.S. (2000) dads hesitate to be involved in school life because they fear inadequacies in a female dominating environment; they worry about showing their strengths within the school. Welsh Gov (2016) suggests targeting those less engaged audiences with parent: child learning interventions, for example fun sessions aimed at fathers and their children. Scottish Gov (no date) suggests a gender differentiated approach focussing on fathers (but without excluding mothers), and a 'Father's Transition Project', in England influenced dads to engage because it was appealing to them, as the fathers would be attending together; and alternative forms of provision for example 'hands on' experiences and interventions with their children in the evenings worked for fathers. This provided positive opportunities for fathers to be involved in their child's learning. However, it is recognised that schools must identify their target groups early, and by demonstrating empathy should create effective solutions, ensuring

tailored approaches are in place to establish inclusivity from the start, so that fathers feel welcomed from the get-go!

Additionally, it is suggested by Pitman (2020) that deprived areas with parents of poor socio-economic status, fathers can sadly bare a double and entangled definition as the 'poor parent', 1/ they cannot possibly be parenting well and, 2/ they are economically worse off than everyone else and continuing the cycle into the next generation. With such stereotypes linked to poverty, it is no wonder that parents whose children receive free school meals reported their lack of confidence to engage with their child's school (Parentkind, 2022); perhaps they do not feel it is a safe environment to be vulnerable and build crucial trustworthy relationships (Pitman, 2020; Welsh Gov, 2016). Furthermore, if fathers are positively engaged it can reduce chances of future crime and poverty in low socio-ecological status families (Sarkadi *et al.* 2008). Creating an environment that is inclusive of father's, regardless of socio-economic status is key to ensuring they feel valued and respected; their individuality should be welcomed, as this expresses the crucial message that all fathers are important (Department for Health and Human Services, 2018; Welsh Gov, 2016). Furthermore, multi-agency working for example, Team Around the Family (TAF) can be an effective approach to engage with and support families who have problems, for example fathers living in poverty, to assess and address those challenges together (Cheshire West and Chester, 2018; Cheshire West and Chester, 2018).

Prior to 1970, fathers were seen to be emotionally detached from their children with their role consisting mainly of being the financial provider; and it wasn't until more recently that they were more hands-on in the day-to-day childcare, including the development of positive relationships (Pitman, 2020). However, the most part of parenting still falls onto the mothers, with Welsh Gov (2016) suggesting most activities held during the day are attended mainly by women (Welsh Gov, 2016). Many fathers still feel the tension of both wanting to care for their child but having to be the financial provider for the family too (OECD Development Centre, 2014). Therefore, fathers must be supported to exercise their crucial role as male parent, because their interactions with their children, including healthy attachment relationships can significantly improve the health and well-being of their child, including good academic outcomes and furthermore, success in adult life (Fatherhood Institute, 2013; Scottish Gov, 2012).

This links to Bowlby's (secure) attachment theory and the powerful impact these early, healthy relationships have on a child's overall development and success (Sprouts 2018). On the other hand, if not encouraged, then poor father-child relationships will continue to result in studies that suggest children disliking school, poor relationships with teachers, high levels of victimisation from peers, and low life satisfaction, Bowlby would call this an insecure attachment (Sprouts, 2018; Fatherhood Institute, 2013). A study identified the effects of parent:child engagements later in the child's adult life; some parents were positively present when they were children, and others negatively. Those whose attachment relationships were poor, 91% of those children suffered mental health and physical problems as adults. Furthermore, the adults who had warm, involved parents in their lives as children, the poor overall health result was at 45% (Scottish Gov, 2017; Sprouts, 2018). This demonstrates the crucial role a father (but not excluding any other primary caregiver) has.

So, how can the school environment welcome fathers? The Welsh Governments (2016) FaCE the challenge together: Family and community engagement toolkit for schools in Wales, supports the ongoing development of building positive engagements with parents. The focus is on building healthy, 2-way relationships built on mutual respect and trust and the curriculum for Wales encourages this (Welsh Gov, 2022 f). Schools must first acknowledge that a child's engagements with their father is positively linked to academic achievements (enhancing cognitive development), social skills (reducing poor behaviour in boys), and emotional well-being (reduces psychological problems in girls) (Sarkadi *et al.* 2008); and attitudes and stereotypes must be addressed associated to male sex and masculinity, for example, society's perception of a father's disinterest/absence and lack of engagement towards childcare, compared to the mother; also, the idea surrounding health and safety that they are irresponsible and more dangerous than mothers – views which are internalised by men themselves, and so they become more reluctant to engage (Bateson *et al* 2017). Breaking through barriers is key to welcoming fathers; a 'father inclusion programme' could be implemented, exploring how the school can be more inclusive through interventions. This could be imbedded into the school's improvement plan and integrated into existing school policy; Collaborations within the school community and with father inclusion specialists could support this,

with staff training to educate practitioners, giving them an awareness of gender classifications; unconscious bias and gender equality (Father's Network Scotland, 2017).

To conclude, it has been identified that with the right approaches and early interventions, fathers feel included and do desire to be involved in their child's education (Father's Network Scotland, 2017; Bateson *et al* 2017).

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