

The Foundation Phase and Early Years Curricula.

1. Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports.

The Foundation Phase is a play-based curriculum for children in Wales aged three to seven. This holistic play-based approach to learning is supported by early years pioneers, amongst those being Piaget, Froebel and Montessori, who advocate through research the effectiveness of play based learning, enhancing children's academic and developmental learning outcomes (Clough and Nutbrown, 2014).

According to research McInnes et al. (2009) notes that children demonstrate significant improvements in learning and behaviour, when an activity is seen in a more playful practice condition as opposed to a more formal practice, thus supporting learning. An increase in children's emotional wellbeing is also demonstrated when an activity is seen as play rather than not play (Aubrey and Riley, 2015; McInnes et al, 2009; Gray and MacBain, 2016).

Children's right to play is so important that it is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31). Children show high regard for the time, freedom and space to place, and there is considerable research that notes the holistic benefits of play, and the importance of play in promoting healthy child development (Hobbs et al, 2019).

There is however research that suggests that children who are deprived of play time or have very little play experiences, suffer negative effects and will be disadvantaged in their development, suffering lasting damage. Long term impacts resulting from play deprivation during early childhood include isolation, depression and in those affected, being both biologically and socially disabled (Play Wales, 2013).

Research from Donaldson (2015) identifies the Foundation Phase as a real strength with which to build on, with the roll out of the new curriculum for Wales. Therefore, going forward, building on and pulling the strengths out of the Foundation Phase, as Donaldson suggests, supporting the areas that require development and improvement, finding a new structure to scaffold practitioners who are uncertain/confused, in order to support effective delivery for teachers, practitioners and children's learning.

In an early evaluation of the Foundation Phase, Waters (2015) comments on the research which suggests that pedagogical practice of the practitioner in the Foundation Phase being problematic, highlighting the need for further support for practitioners. Suggesting, following the lead of other international models where similar play-based approaches are taken, therefore, adopting a pedagogy based on a theoretical understanding of the child which is informed by sociocultural theory. Waters (2015) also notes the vast range and variety of qualifications that practitioners hold in practice in the early years sector, with evidence indicating that better qualified staff working with children in early years settings the better the outcomes for children.

A report by Wightwick (2016) notes that Wales is the lowest scoring Country in 2016 out of 72 Countries, positioned 40th in Reading, 39th in Maths and 35th in Science. However, new Pisa results published for 2109 show how Wales is improving but remains behind other UK nations and the international average. Pisa results also note that the best education systems in the world are amongst others, Chinas mainland cities and Singapore. With Singapore rated as one of the top Countries for Maths and Science, Coughlan (2016) notes their use of the Maths mastery method approach to solving problems without the need for rote learning. Maths teachers however in the UK believe there was insufficient funding for training teachers in the mastery method approach, thus a lack of confidence in their own ability remains a barrier. Welsh Government have set new targets for the next time tests are taken in 2020 for publication in 2021, which aims to reach 500 points in all three Pisa measures (Wightwick, 2019).

Kingston and Siraj (2017) note that within the Foundation Phase action plan (Welsh Government, 2016) there is evidence in Professional Development in ECE. Developing practitioners' skills and knowledge supports them in educating and caring for the children and working in partnership with their families/carers. Also highlighted is the importance to promote a culture of ongoing professional growth for individual practitioners and the educational systems with which they work.

Professional development is a key element as it changes the very nature of delivery and pedagogy. Evans (2016) reports on the new teaching standards and the reshape of the existing continuing professional development that will help deliver the new Curriculum for Wales. Teachers in Wales will be supported to develop and improve

their practice, with the aim for practitioners to take charge of CPD moving forward to develop their own career paths, with training and support of the highest possible quality. A professional learning passport (PLP) has been launched by the Education Workforce Council to enable teachers to plan, record and reflect upon their professional learning. As Professor Donaldson believes teachers in Wales have no less potential than anywhere else in the world.

Estyn (2011) reported the positive impact that the Foundation Phase had on children's wellbeing, when looking at five to six-year olds achievements. However, it also notes that in a minority of schools that was not the case, identifying that the practitioners and leaders struggled to understand the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase. It was also noted that boys demonstrated improved concentration and enjoyment in their learning, through active learning approaches and the use of the outdoor environment, although some settings had no outdoor provision or very limited use of a safe outdoor space.

Outdoor learning is important for children's overall health and development, providing them with the space to explore freely, learning about nature and the environment and how to care for it (Christie, Johnson, and Wardle, 2010). A key piece of legislation which also agrees that outdoor play is paramount to ensure children benefit from a healthy and happy childhood is The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015).

The Foundation Phase curriculum places great importance on children using the outdoors to experiment, explore and take risks as it provides unique opportunities for children to be more creative, active, and engaged in their learning. The curriculum outlines professional practitioners should provide fun and exciting environments with an emphasis on outdoor environments as a resource for children's learning, which promotes children's development and natural curiosity through first-hand experiences (Welsh Government, 2015). However, Bilton and Waters (2017) research reports that physical development was the most frequently cited aim for outdoor provision, given from early childhood educational provision in Wales and England. There is strong evidence that suggests that outdoor provision and high-quality early years education can make a real difference to young children's outcomes and even more so for the more vulnerable groups. Although findings from the report suggests that

improvements could be made, and more guidance given for a better understanding of aims and outcomes and the necessary link between the aim or purpose of education and the planned learning outcomes for children.

Froebel considered free flow play the highest form of learning, with children's earliest years in education being the most important and laying the foundations for future learning in later life. He strongly emphasized the significance of time spent every day in the outside world in a rich environment, and its potential for all areas of learning (Tovey, 2016). However, according to WIZERD (2015) evaluation of the Foundation Phase and its implementation, found tension and contradiction between the Foundation Phase, learning through play on one hand but measuring with standardised tests on the other, thus creating a philosophical and practical tension for many practitioners. Going forward, to make a change and have a new reform, we should look at changing tests, if not there is a likelihood practitioners will revert to old ways.

Practice identified by the evaluation WIZERD (2015) also comments about confusion for practitioner understanding, which impact on the delivery of the Foundation Phase. Particular areas highlighted, relate to the uncertainty of what is 'formal' and 'informal teaching', how observations take place, the types of activities that should be happening, if children don't view their experiences/activities as play based they don't engage as well. Recommendations made from the evaluation suggest that greater levels of training and support for practitioners to ensure that the delivery of the Foundation Phase and its implementation is successful going forward, promoting effective learning for all children in Wales. Therefore, with greater use of Foundation Phase pedagogies in their practice, children could arguably reach higher levels of achievement.

A play-based curriculum is important as through interactions and experiences the children learn about the world around them. When children are involved in experiences that are meaningful, based on their interests they are more motivated to learn, developing positive attitudes towards their learning (Elkind et al, 2016; Tovey, 2016). Professional practitioners who know and understand the child and who fully understand play, plan, and provide activities and experiences based around their individual needs and interests.

However, key findings from the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase led by Siraj (2015) examined the way the Foundation Phase was put into practice, giving recommendations to further strengthen implementation in the future. A lack of professional learning was reported, with recommendations for all leaders to be trained in Foundation Phase pedagogues, and shared understanding between team members also important. Going forward, all staff to partake in professional learning, if one person misunderstands something, that incorrect/misunderstanding of information gets passed on to everybody else. By enhancing the quality of teaching through target training and support, increases in all children's achievements are likely to result. Inspections were also highlighted, with difficulties comparing the Foundation Phase with like to like, due to procedure differences between funded and non-maintained settings, and maintained schools delivering the Foundation Phase. Therefore, Estyn and CIW now inspect together, as a result of the recommendations from the Independent Stocktake document (Siraj, 2015; Welsh Government, 2014).

The Foundation Phase pedagogy emphasises play based active learning for ages 3 to 7, which provides a balance between child initiated and adult led activities. Understanding and listening to the child, children are observed with skills and interest of each child identified and considered, to inform future planning for the next steps in learning. The Welsh Government (2015) seeks to raise standards for all and aims for a balanced school curriculum which is flexible and focuses on skill development as oppose to focussing on content. Every child has a right to education, to enable the child to develop their fullest potential, therefore the development of curriculum acts as an important vehicle for embedding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (NDNA, 2017; UNICEF, no date).

2. Critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula.

Welsh Government (2011) notes the national curriculum was introduced under the Education Act in 1988 to ensure every pupil is given the same standard of education, and that all children are taught the essential knowledge in the key subject disciplines.

The Foundation Phase is a play-based curriculum which caters for individual needs and was introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government to provide a developmentally

appropriate curriculum for all children in Wales aged 3- 7 years. Within the Foundation Phase Framework, Welsh Government (2015) note the 7 Areas of Learning and outcome statements which are expected standards of children's performance.

An evaluation of the Foundation Phase by WISERD (2015) outlines the approach which holds high importance on children learning by doing, with opportunities for play and first-hand experiences both indoors and outside. However, the study also highlights throughout all elements of the Foundation Phase, the use of the outdoors for learning varied the most, with few practitioners noting the importance and role of observation.

This is supported by Davies and Hamilton (2018) who note use of the outdoors being part of the ethos of the curriculum, with many benefits to the outdoor environment for children's learning and development. The use of outdoors assessments, however, was not used to its potential, proposing practitioner professional development on planning for learning and assessment in the outdoors.

Dijk-Wesselius et al (2020) agrees with barriers to outdoor learning, highlighting a lack of understanding between practitioners and early years workers. Practitioners lack of confidence in their own teaching practice impeded the opportunity for outdoor learning, with solutions to remove barriers being to support professional development to further extend and develop understanding of the use of outdoors as a learning environment.

Isaacs (no date) comments on assessing children within the early years and the progress check for children age 2, highlighting the challenges for practitioners as children's attendance to nurseries before the age of 3 may be limited to only one or two morning sessions per week. Therefore, less time is available for the practitioner to get to know the child and their individual needs and interests. Therefore, important information could be left out as practitioners have a limited timescale to produce an accurate assessment of the child. Additionally, if using the questions listed on the checklist, individual achievements which are not on an assessment form are not documented/celebrated.

A study by McInnes et al (2011) highlights children's enhanced sense of emotional wellbeing and significant improvements in their behaviours and their learning when an activity is seen as 'play' rather than 'not play'.

Similarly, Myburgh and Tamaro (2013) comment how Vygotsky believed that children operate at their highest-level during play, noting the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. Consequently, using tick list assessments, and asking children to complete a set of tasks may have negative results on the child and their learning developments, with them viewing the activity in a formal practice condition. This is supported by Kimberley (2016) who agrees with the child being given free choice and not adult led activities, whereby they have to complete a given task for assessment purposes. Rather, focusing on individual learning styles and interests.

Pound (2019) notes a similar view, highlighting Howard Gardner's theory of how children learn, and children's preferred ways of learning. Recognising that children approach learning in their own individual way and so to enable children to improve and progress, their styles need to be recognised and supported.

Education Wales (2020) notes the importance of assessment within the new curriculum, for each child to make progress at an appropriate pace while supported and challenged accordingly. However, it also highlights the purpose being to provide a holistic picture of the child, their own learning styles, and strengths to inform next steps. Checklists do not allow for this to happen as they are not inclusive of children with additional needs who cannot complete the tasks given. They do not consider the child's cultural background or home life, which may affect different aspects of development. Therefore, this type of assessment does not support the view of the unique child.

Power et al (2018) maintains a similar view, noting how children become detached from learning if living in poverty or have different cultural backgrounds, and these individual needs are not met or addressed.

Colwell et al (2015) echoes the importance of the child's family in education and sharing information and records of assessments with parents. However, parents reviewing these checklists as a form of assessment could create an unreliable view of the child and their own progress and developmental journey. This may also cause unnecessary distress if they feel their child is 'achieving below expected levels' or not reaching milestones within a certain age.

Colwell et al (2015) notes similar potential challenges with assessment checklists and this approach, which only provide practitioners with a snapshot of a child's

achievements. If completed by a practitioner that the child is not familiar with due to staff shortages and given time frames to get the task completed. This could potentially result in an inaccurate picture of the child's achievements, as they may be too shy or lack the confidence to complete the set of tasks given with an unfamiliar practitioner who is not their usual key worker within the setting.

Tierney (2012) similarly agrees, suggesting classroom assessments are influenced by classroom relationships and interactions, which further impacts the learning environment. Therefore, to enable the child to make progress fairly, assessments should be tailored to suit the individual needs of the child and their environment, which recognises the unique child and enables opportunities to learn.

In comparison, New Zealand Government (2017) notes the Te Whariki Early Childhood curriculum published in 1996 for children age 0-6 and sets out learning outcomes which prepares children in the 21st century to learn in a fast paced ever changing world. Te Whariki is an inclusive curriculum which is built around four main principles which are empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships.

Schwartz and Unger (2010) describes the bicultural Te Whariki curriculum which encourages and celebrates cultural differences, to help children to gain a positive understanding of their own culture and that of others.

Research by Ongley (2013) however reveals practitioners delivering a bicultural curriculum to toddlers struggled and found its application confusing. Therefore practitioners need to have the knowledge and skills to present the ethos to the children appropriately, looking at approaches to integrate it into the curriculum more naturally for toddlers. As practitioners understanding develops, confidence grows enabling teachers to go forward with new learnt knowledge of how to implement bicultural practices. This is supported by Jenkin (2016) who notes the UNCRC (1989) Article 29 which states that a child's education should help build respect for their parents, the identity, language, and values of countries including their own. Going forward practitioners can build on the relationships with the children and their families in the school and community to empower and transform classroom practices.

Waldron and McLeskey (2010) agree with high quality professional development being a focus for developing a more effective and inclusive school environment, which

improves outcomes for children. With the new curriculum for Wales, professional learning is an important aspect, it provides an opportunity to focus on relevant cultural aspects that reflect the children and their families in the school and the community. This is supported by Holland (2018) who notes the importance of new knowledge learnt through education where children can explore their rights and learn how to respect others. Holland (2018) emphasises the investment of skills and knowledge in practitioners to ensure their knowledge is up to date about different cultures/abilities, which enables them to share and pass on to children. This in turn is an approach to safeguard long term needs of children, which helps develop confident and healthy individuals who learn and thrive and have value and respect for themselves and others.

Research by Alsubaie (2015) supports the view of practitioners developing their knowledge and understanding of the children and their families and the community and having an open attitude. Thus, improved professional satisfaction improves practice and better outcomes for children, and can also enable practitioners to reduce issues that may arise in the multicultural classroom by improving their teaching approaches and learning.

WISERD (2015) notes the Foundation Phase draws on the evidence from the Te Whariki early years programme and describes the similarities with a focus on a less formal teaching practice, which has potential for lower standards of attainment in the longer term, adopting for a play based curriculum.

In comparison to the curriculum in Wales and Foundation Phase, the Te Whariki curriculum does not assess children's learning and development against pre set milestones. They focus on the child as a competent learner not from a deficit model. Instead they use learning stories as a form of assessment. Brodie (2014) reiterates the positive use of learning stories as it places the learner at the heart of the process and is their own personal journey which are positive reinforcements of child's abilities and interests which are shared with the children and their families. Agreeing with the tick list assessment forms and development milestones only giving a snapshot of children's learning. Learning stories provide many positive images and written notes to form a written story to the children and families and avoid assessing specific skills which are checked against a set of pre-set tasks given.

These could be considered as an alternative to the current assessment practices within the Foundation Phase with the curriculum reforms.

Pack (2016) similarly notes the learning stories assessment approach and child centred planning which provides a holistic view of the child's development. Also benefiting practitioners to learn more about the child and their family/background building stronger relationships, requiring them to have an in-depth knowledge of child development. While observing the play-based activity, practitioners can respond during interactions unlike the formal assessments of the tick lists.

This is supported by Carr and Lee (2013) who note the benefits of the learning stories and the approach of retelling the stories, enabling time for reflection empowering children as learners and thinkers, but also allowing the practitioner to plan for new learning experiences for the future.

Further research by Carr and Lee (2016) reveal the many ways learning stories can be documented through multimedia documentation, thus providing inclusive practice to families of recorded experiences of the child, who may be unable to attend settings or excursions. Contrary to the checklist assessment, which upon completion is filed away in an office and does not offer any open dialogues with other practitioners or the child and family. The effective use of documenting learning stories is a beneficial strategy in supporting parental engagement and has a positive impact on the learning of children and nurtures their future learning opportunities.

3. Blog.

What needs to change with current teaching?

Evidence suggests high quality provision in the early years has a lasting impact on the future outcomes for children. According to Sylva et al, (2010) key findings from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education study (EPPE) highlights the importance of well qualified staff, noting the higher the teacher quality providing the better education for children.

Nutbrown (2012) agrees with high quality staffing providing the best possible start in life for young children, commenting on high quality early years provision narrowing the gap between disadvantaged and non- disadvantaged children.

Is this all that is needed though?

Bonetti and An (2017) question the evidence, commenting on more recent studies reporting only a minor impact on children's outcomes, when graduates were among those staff in early years settings.

However, Hillman (2015) identifies a clear and strong relationship between the quality of early years education and provision, resulting from better qualifications and more qualified practitioners. With settings that incorporated graduate members of staff, Hillman (2015) reports these settings scoring higher on all quality measures, across private, voluntary, and independent settings. With a graduate leadership presence supporting to narrow the quality of early years provision in deprived and more advantaged areas.

This is supported by Drakeford (2019) who comments on the importance of early childhood experiences and the benefits for children in both short and long term with high quality early years provision. Drakeford (2019) also highlights the type of setting being irrelevant, rather the importance being the core aim which is for high quality stimulating learning and care experience, drawing on the value, experience and skills set of both teachers and childcare providers.

However, Bonetti (2020) reports failings to develop skills in the early years staff, suggesting the overload of continual policy changes over the last decade hindering the early years workforce. Research by Bonetti (2020) reveals increasing evidence on the importance of a highly qualified skilled workforce and high-quality provision in the early years sector, hindered with continued widespread recruitment and retention problems.

Underpaid and undervalued.

The overriding evidence points towards delivering high quality care and provision for children to enable them to reach their full potential in their future lives.

However, a study by Neale (2018) reports 30% of the teachers felt they were underpaid, with 84% noting that they did not believe their profession was valued by society.

This is supported by Faux (2020) who comments on the limited pay increase for those who do go on to gain higher qualifications, with increased workloads and the lack of social recognition can only encourage professional practitioners to leave the early years workforce they have worked so hard for.

Further research by Bury et al (2020) reveals barriers of developing a high-quality workforce to include, budget constraints, difficulties providing cover to release staff to attend courses and non-supportive management being reported as not paying staff when released on training days.

Additional evidence coincides with the stress felt by professional practitioners in the early years workforce, as a report by Early Years Alliance (2018) reveals key findings with 58% of staff feeling loss of motivation, 25% considering leaving the early years sector, noting stress as a result of their job and 54% commenting on low pay as a regular source of stress.

Good management can help empower employees and make them feel valued in the workplace.

Rawstone (2020) highlights the importance of staff wellbeing in the early years sector helping to improve practice and outcomes for children. With high levels of support for practitioner's wellbeing issues being a grade for outstanding settings given from Ofsted for outstanding leadership. Effective leadership results in the best outcomes for children being achieved, having a positive impact on the settings and the families that they work with.

Investing in all professional practitioners will raise standards through qualifications and continuous professional development, building on skills and value which in turn improves employee retention as they feel valued.

Investing in quality childhood education and care for the investment in the future of our nation.

UNICEF, (2013) notes the rights to a child's development and reaching their full potential in life. The importance of cognitive development during early childhood being a crucial time of a child's life for their well-being and overall development. Therefore, it is imperative that the workforce within early years is equipped with the knowledge and skills to support children, ensuring better quality early years education and improved outcomes for children and their future lives.

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