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

Defining 'play' as "an engagement in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose" (Lexico, 2019), it is regularly seen as the 'work' that children undertake (Play Scotland, 2020). Play affords children the opportunities to experience true freedom by making choices and having control over their activities, which is what they need to constitute a break from their mostly adult-led world (Moyles, 2013). Boston College (2011) and Brown and Patte (2013) note that heavy restrictions on children's play time can see significant negative effects, such as detrimental impacts on the developments of their physical, mental, and social skills.

An emphasis was placed on the importance of play within early years and early childhood by the then Welsh Assembly Government (2002), who introduced the Play Policy for Wales. The policy details just how vital play is to the development of children's physical, psychological, emotional, social and creative skills, and how all adults should endeavour to provide children with an environment within which to perform play. This is a stance shared by Else (2014), who notes that play can aid in the development of cortical connections and can support neurological development. Play also exists to foster children's sense of creativity and choice. Mooney (2000) remarks that the notion of play being beneficial to a child's development is not a modern take, noting that renowned theorist Jean Piaget was of the belief that children are active learners and learned through concrete, first-hand experiences. Evidence gathered in a study by Howard and McInnes (2013) backs up this claim, discussing that the results of their study illustrated that children appeared more engaged and focused, as well as showed an increased state of emotional wellbeing, when partaking in an activity they had perceived as play compared to an activity that was not 'play like', despite the activities being virtually the same. In a study conducted by Fattore, Mason and Watson (2007) also found that play increases children's state of emotional wellbeing, remarking that children have themselves identified that the act of playing does indeed have a significantly positive effect on their happiness. Moyles (2013) and Howard and McInnes (2013) are of a similar viewpoint when considering the effects of play on children – suggesting that children, when perceiving an activity as play, are more inclined to attempt new things without the fear of the unknown, which can lead to increased development. Moyles (2013) also notes that play provides children with

deep level learning as well as offering a fun and enjoyable experience. A child's desire to play is instinctive and children often use play as a means to learn and understand the world that is all around them. This is often considered to be the best way in which children learn (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002; National Health Service, 2009). The United Nations (UN) saw play as such a vital part of early years and childhood that in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 31 is dedicated to ensuring that every child has the right to engage in play (Unicef, 2019).

According to Waters (2016), Welsh Government figures grew concerned over the former curriculum Key Stage 1, which was a formally structured education, and may have been inhibiting children from reaching their potential. This led to the eventual introduction of the Foundation Phase, which includes more of a focus on play and fun, enjoyable first-hand experiences (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Gonczy (2013) notes that many European countries, particularly those in the Scandinavian region, have long been aware of the benefits of a play based curriculum and thus do not begin to formally educate their children until they are aged seven – a full three years later than in the United Kingdom (UK).

The Foundation Phase was implemented in 2010 and encompassed a single phase of education for children between the ages of three and seven (Welsh Government, 2015a). The purpose of the curriculum was to foster children's creativity and fun, allowing them to play and to learn through their play. Having in place a curriculum that supports children's learning through the medium of a play based approach allows more opportunities for learning due to its open ended nature. This is in contrast to a curriculum that has its roots in worksheet based learning which Grossman (1996) suggests can be developmentally inappropriate and can even serve to stunt a child's learning.

As well as play based curricula in Scandinavia and the Foundation Phase in Wales, following the Second World War, the Reggio Emilia approach was introduced in Italy (Slipp, 2017). The Reggio Emilia approach envisions children as 'empty vessels' who are waiting to be filled with knowledge (Valentine, 1999). There are subtle differences in the delivery of the Reggio Emilia and Foundation Phase curricula. These differences include the number of pupils and teachers in any given class. In a Reggio Emilia setting, there are to be two teachers at all times and a maximum of twenty four children

that they are responsible for. In the Foundation Phase, specifically the early years, there are to be no more than twenty children and two staff (two teachers or a teacher and an assistant), though in older Foundation Phase classes there is an increased maximum pupil class size of twenty three (National Education Union, 2018). Despite these regulations being in place in Wales, class numbers continue to rise. This may be detrimental to children's learning and research has found that The Foundation Phase was more successfully delivered to classes that had a lower number of children per adult (Blatchford and Mortimore, 1994; Welsh Government, 2014a; Wightwick, 2018).

Valentine (1999) remarks that, within the Reggio Emilia approach, children are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. Practitioners are present to support the children, but activities should be child led. Gonczy (2013) states that child-led activities are invaluable within education. Foundation Years (2012) suggest that opportunities to explore, initiate and plan activities themselves should be afforded to children wherever and whenever possible. This is a notion that the Welsh Government (2015a) have considered and have implemented, ensuring that children have sufficient opportunities to participate in activities that are child led and child initiated. It is important to note, however, that despite the good intentions implemented with the Foundation Phase, there still appears to be a higher percentage of adult led activities when compared to child led activities (Welsh Government, 2015b).

Despite reportedly being aware of the benefits of hands-on experiences and how positive they can be for a child's development thanks to the work of theorists such as Jean Piaget, it has been found that early years practitioners struggle to believe in the play based approach around which the Foundation Phase curriculum is based (Estyn, 2011). It is expected that early years practitioners play an significant role in children's learning within the Foundation Phase, and should always endeavour to foster a rich, stimulating learning environment in which children can flourish (Waters, 2016). According to the Welsh Government (2014b), early years practitioners are finding difficulty in letting go of traditional practices which translates to effective Foundation Phase practices decreasing in Welsh primary schools. The importance of practitioners understanding the curriculum that they deliver in order to offer effective education to early years children cannot be overstated (Foundation Years, 2012). Some practitioners are simply unaware and have not developed an understanding of the

purpose that play serves in early years education and the role it has in aiding children's development (McInnes et al., 2011). The report found that an effective education can be achieved by ensuring practitioners are aware of the role they play and that play and learning can be combined in early years education. This is a notion that Welsh Government (2014b) side with, finding that a 'watered down' delivery of the Foundation Phase curriculum is a common issue throughout Wales following an evaluation of the Foundation Phase by professor Iram Siraj. As suggested by Waters (2016), practice being delivered by practitioners who lacked the understanding of the theoretical underpinning of the Foundation Phase curriculum resulted in mixed qualities. Further development and improved delivery of the Foundation Phase curriculum can be achieved by practitioners committing to gaining a better understanding of the play based pedagogy around which it is based. Reggio Emilia pedagogues have specifically trained skills in which they utilise regularly to effectively support children's learning. Pedagogues provide children with loose objectives with no particular end target, which Valentine (1999), Soler and Miller (2003) and Kelemen (2019) suggest is the quintessential Reggio Emilia approach.

Questions must be raised of Foundation Phase practitioners who lack a significant understanding of the pedagogy around which the curriculum is based, such as their ability to effectively teach early years children. If practitioners struggle with understanding the pedagogy around which the Foundation Phase curriculum is based, it may benefit them to look at play how a child would and consider how a child sees the world (McInnes et al., 2011). The Welsh Government (2013) created an Early Years Childcare Plan which includes measures to review training modules in order to ensure the understanding of the Foundation Phase pedagogy among early years practitioners. Settings that effectively implement the Foundation Phase curriculum have children with increased and engagement, wellbeing and children achieving higher outcomes.

Despite the Foundation Phase curriculum being designed specifically for children between the ages of three and seven, the Welsh Government (2015a) found that Foundation Phase pedagogy was not consistently implemented through the classes Nursery through Year 2. It was found that the curriculum typically became far more formal and rigid after Reception class, in Years 1 and 2. Welsh Government (2014a and 2014b) found that this departure from core Foundation Phase principles may

concern practitioners who will be preparing their classes to undertake the National Literacy and Numeration standardisation tests. For Reggio Emilia, the core pedagogical principles that steer every setting are considered to be the child, the teacher and the environment, built on the philosophical foundation that children should be active participants of their own learning instead of simply receiving instructions. Reggio Emilia pedagogues are present simply to support and observe children instead of serving the purpose of instructing them, fostering the opportunities for children to take the initiative in their own learning. The environment fosters open ended learning and essentially functions to serve as a third teacher (Valentine 1999). Reggio Emilia, thanks to its roots being embedded in a societal philosophy, has been a statistically superior curriculum when compared to the Foundation Phase which, as previously noted, has in its employ select practitioners who are not in agreement with its core principles, resulting in significantly diminished delivery.

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

Current approaches to assessing Foundation Phase pupils have no issues according to the Welsh Government (2014b).

An additive was created for the Foundation Phase, which was titled The Foundation Phase Profile, which was introduced with the intention of supporting practitioners in their assessment of children in the early years. This was done by conducting a baseline assessment which would coincide with end of phase outcomes. Early years practitioners are able to provide children with a curriculum that is developmentally appropriate by utilising various forms of observation and assessment (Welsh Government, 2017a; 2017b). The importance of assessing children in the early years serves to aid practitioners in planning effectively for the children's learning and development (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2017). Though the importance of assessment throughout education is widely recognised, The British Association for Early Childhood Education (2018) remark that baseline assessments expected to be undertaken within the Foundation Phase, specifically at entry level/reception, could prove to be significantly damaging to children's learning as practitioners may be preoccupied with assessments instead of supporting children during their crucial settling periods. Additionally, reports have found that, due to the age of the children, these tests can be considered unfair as the children are very young and have not yet been exposed to a full time scholastic experience (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012). However, according to the National Foundation for Educational Research (2019), baseline assessments required by the Foundation Phase are informal and considered to be child friendly. These assessments involve practical observation through play, which is considered to be within the Foundation Phase curriculum's guidelines of learning through play.

Similar to the UK, children in New Zealand begin full time education at the age of either four or five – depending on their birthday (New Zealand Government, 2014). Much like Wales' Foundation Phase, assessments are carried out in New Zealand's early years settings, though there are some notable differences. Instead of children's psychological mindsets being observed, New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum assessments put into consideration any given child's personal life and interests as

well as their capabilities to play a part in their very own educational experiences. In the Te Whariki curriculum, the teachers are called Kaiako. The Kaiako utilise assessments in order to gather information about a child's interests and progress and note whether or not any additional support is required. Assessments can be both formal and informal. Informal assessments occur in any given moment between a child and Kaiako, allowing the Kaiako to immediately alter the way they deliver their teaching in order to support the individual child. Formal assessments include observations that are documented by the Kaiako, such as a collection of work or photographs, which are compiled into a portfolio based on each individual child (New Zealand Government, 2017; Te Whariki Online, 2018). These portfolios constitute a collection of 'learning stories' which serve to highlight the many positive aspects of a child's education as opposed to the focus being on targets they are not yet reaching. These learning stories have received plaudits for the ease of which Kaiako are able to share with parents, as well as children being able to view their own learning (Alexander, 2014; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2015). However, arguing that learning stories are outdated, Hamilton (2014, quoted in Zhang, 2017) suggests that learning stories do not promote the longevity of a child's learning. Though advocating for the positives of learning stories, Alexander (2014) does suggest that, alone, learning stories are an insufficient method of assessment due to the subjectivity of the adult, and should be utilised together with other forms of assessment.

Issues with assessments in the Foundation Phase were found in the Foundation Phase stocktake, an independent evaluation carried out by Iram Siraj (Welsh Government, 2014b), wherein practitioners had reported that the methods of assessment were contrary to the core values of the pedagogy around which the Foundation Phase was built. There is little consistency regarding assessments within the Foundation Phase and both children and practitioners would benefit from the introduction of a new framework (Waters, 2016). Murray (2017) describes the contradictory nature of assessments in the Foundation Phase as paradoxical, which practitioners are unfairly expected to please. Parents of early years children feel that schools are too concerned with box ticking and trying to please inspectorates, such as Estyn, instead of focusing on children's learning. This can lead to assessments

becoming overshadowed by accountability, which in turn will be detrimental to children's learning. (Donaldson, 2015; 2018).

Each child in early years is seen as unique and truly individual and that, throughout their learning in the Foundation Phase, they will be encouraged to develop at their own pace (Welsh Government, 2009b). However, within the Foundation Phase assessments, almost all children are expected to achieve the same learning goals, regardless of individuality (Murray, 2017). Traditional assessments tend to focus on checklists in order to determine what a child should be able to accomplish by a specific age or developmental stage (Arndt and Tesar, 2015). Educational inspectorates view these traditional assessments as integral in the development of a child's education as well as raising standards (Estyn, 2018). The Welsh Assembly Government (2009a) state that these traditional methods of assessments were seen to efficiently track a child's progress by comparing their age with which developmental stage they should be reaching, and that these methods is what the previous Key Stage 1 was constructed around. However, Welsh Government (2015b) details how assessments such as these have become an issue as the Foundation Phase has its core values rooted in children being allowed to develop at their own pace. Additionally, frameworks within the curriculum note that it is beneficial to teach children to their developmental stage rather than to their age. Despite this, the curriculum still expects practitioners to carry out statutory assessments that result in scores that are age-related – which, as discussed by Murray (2017), creates a paradox for practitioners. In contrast, New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum promotes the practice of the Kaiako understanding what children are trying to achieve and how they can support them over of traditional assessments Veazey (2018).

Despite the holistic view of the Foundation Phase curriculum as being positive and labelled a strength of the Welsh Education System, both at a policy level and a philosophical level (O'Prey et al., 2019), Wales will implement a new curriculum in 2022 which is titled 'Successful Futures', designed by professor Graham Donaldson. Donaldson (2015) states that the Successful Futures curriculum was designed to keep the core values of the Foundation Phase pedagogy, such as a play based approach and child led learning, but lays out a plan to change the way assessments will be carried out. Assessment is a vital component of a child's learning and will continue to exist within the Successful Futures curriculum, but will serve to improve children's

learning, something that current assessments do not do. Implemented within Successful Futures will be 'progression steps.' These will serve to provide children with a continuous learning process that will accompany them from the start of their education at age three to the end of their compulsory education at age sixteen. During this time, they will be allowed to progress at their own pace and will not be required to meet standard 'expectations.' This denotes a positive and progressive step forward as every child is different and will reach personal targets in their own time without supposedly 'falling behind' as they age and progress through their education. Practitioners should be aware of each and every child's individuality and uniqueness and should be equipped with the skills to respect the child's needs and the needs of their family. They should also be encouraged to support the children and their families to the best of their abilities (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2012). The Foundation Phase and Te Whariki share common values by encouraging children's learning and understanding of their own culture and the cultures of others (Soler and Miller, 2003; Welsh Government, 2015a). One of Te Whariki's core values exists to celebrate and encourage the forging of relationships with people of different cultures and heritages (Veazey, 2018).

Considerations must be made as to what type of assessment will support the impending Successful Futures curriculum. Practitioners in Wales who currently deliver the Foundation Phase curriculum currently utilise the "tick box" assessment method. This means that they teach what they have been instructed to teach from a checklist and nothing more (Glasse, 2017). This practice is the opposite of the core values of the Te Whariki curriculum, which encourages practitioners to develop relationships with children in their settings while creating the previously discussed learning stories. Learning stories serve to avoid assessing children's specific skills from a predetermined list. It must be considered whether this form of assessment is feasible for settings in the UK. According to Popham (1999) practitioners in the UK feel the stress of the children in their care undertaking national standardised tests as they feel it reflects directly on the quality of their teaching. This stress, along with the expectations of Estyn, limits a practitioner in Wales compared to their counterparts in New Zealand. There exists too much reliance on data that has been collected from assessments and testing, so much so that there is a decreased focus on children's actual learning (Sherrington, 2018). In addition to this, schools in the UK are too reliant

on supply staff as well as staff with little to no experience (Moorhead, 2016). It is crucial that early years practitioners receive specialist training in order to deliver the best possible practice (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2013). Donaldson (2015) advocates for substantial training for staff and early years practitioners, stating that it will be a necessity when implementing the impending Successful Futures curriculum. However, it is important to remember that the Foundation Phase curriculum was intended to have staff who had been delivered substantial training in order to deliver effective practice which, as previously discussed, has not been the case.

It is clear that there exist several issues regarding assessment within the early years in Wales. Even with all good intentions attached to the impending Successful Futures curriculum, it is important that practitioners stay vigilant with regards to their own training and hold to account those responsible for ensuring that early years practitioners are given every opportunity to better themselves and stay on top of training. If practitioners are vigilant about their own training, there will exist a positive ethos regarding the adherence to the core values of the Successful Futures curriculum.

The significance of Outdoor Learning within Early Years educational settings

As children are the primary users of outdoor environments within early years educational settings, it is important to be aware of their thoughts and feelings regarding them (Merewether, 2015). Studies consistently find that children prefer the outdoor environment when compared to an indoor environment. It is important to understand why this is the case. According to Bilton (2010) and Wood (2014), the outdoors offers children the freedom that is vital for them to feel, away from adult interference, so that they may gain a sense of control in their own learning. Leggett and Newman (2017) note that many educators are in agreement about the value of the outdoors and the freedom it offers children with the absence of an adult. The outdoors affords children a near infinite number of possibilities for learning, though not every practitioner is aware of its benefits, which leads to the outdoors not being utilised to its full potential (Ernst, 2014; Davies and Hamilton, 2018).

A child's cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic development can see enhancement from experiencing an outdoor learning environment (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009a; Yildirim and Akamaca, 2017; Barrable, 2019). In addition to its developmental benefits, the outdoors affords children many health benefits such as improvement of physical fitness and enhanced cognitive functions (Bilton, 2010). The physical benefits that the outdoor learning environments offer children can have a positive effect academically and foster an improved scholastic performance (Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning, 2018). Estyn (2017) take a similar stance, noting that there is a correlation between schools that are high achieving and schools that offer their children outdoor learning experiences. The Welsh Assembly Government (2009a) remark that a child's learning is vastly improved when spending extended periods of time in an outdoor learning environment.

Tovey (2007) notes that children's opportunities to undertake outdoor play are declining. Children do not need a classroom in order to learn as they are learning all the time (Yildirim and Akamaca, 2017) and Barrable (2019). The Welsh Assembly Government (2009a) state that, of the four countries that comprise the UK, Wales is the leader in outdoor learning – a fact that is unsurprising as outdoor learning and the Foundation Phase curriculum go hand in hand. It has been suggested, however, that many practitioners miss opportunities provided by the outdoors in supporting children's

learning (Maynard and Waters, 2007). MacQuarrie, Nugent and Warden (2015) remark that it is reassuring and exciting that there exist practitioners in the early years who see the benefits of learning in outdoor environments and endeavour to afford children with experiences in these environments as often as possible. All practitioners in the early years should be aware of, and educated about, the benefits of outdoor learning so that they may deliver an effective learning experience to young children (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Yildirim and Akamaca, 2017). Acar (2013) suggests that it is vital that children experience learning in the outdoors as it will afford them opportunities that they simply will not find in indoor environments. The outdoors provides children with natural resources with which to conduct their own learning. These resources are open ended and their uses and perceptions are only limited by the imagination of the child using them – imagination that will get stronger with each moment spent in the outdoors (Giesecking, 2014). Tovey (2007, p.20) notes that “outdoor play offers challenges for children to try things out, to have a go and take risks in their learning.” Bilton (2010) expands on these risks, detailing that children often find success when engaging in risk related activities in outdoor environments. While risks should always be assessed to ensure that no serious harm can befall any child, risk is integral to a child’s learning process and outdoor learning serves to provide these risks in abundance (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009; Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning, 2018).

Experiencing learning in outdoor environments will provide children with an understanding, appreciation, respect, and a sense of compassion for nature and natural environments (Cooper, 2015). Simply through being in the outdoors when undertaking learning, children become aware of the impact that they, as humans, have on nature and the wider world. It is believed that if children are aware of issues of sustainability, they will develop an enhanced sustainable attitude. Mooney (2000) and Tovey (2007) remark that noted childhood theorists Jean Piaget and Friedrich Froebel both advocated for learning in the outdoors, stating that children will learn to empathise with their surroundings and develop an appreciation of nature. Additionally, children experiencing outdoor learning environments will lead to experience with various weather conditions which can provide multi-sensory experiences (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009a). These multi-sensory experiences are considered to be incredibly beneficial to learning in the early years (Conkbayir and

Pascal, 2014). From a sustainability perspective, this can also lead to an enhanced understanding of climate change and the part that the human race plays (Rooney, 2018). Allowing children to become aware of sustainability issues such as climate change will directly contribute to one of the impending Successful Futures curriculum's four core purposes – for children to become ethical, informed citizens (Donaldson, 2015).

Outdoor learning is a key component of learning in the early years. So much so that it is an integral part of the pedagogy around which both the current Foundation Phase and the incoming Successful Futures curriculums are based. It offers children physical, emotional, societal and academic benefits with minimal drawbacks and must be seen to be a key component in early years settings going forward.

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