

Early Years Curriculum Portfolio

Section 1

Bottrill (2022) believes that an essential part to children's development is play. Bruce (2012) agrees, stating how play can elevate children's learning more so than literal everyday experiences can. However, there is ambiguity around defining the term 'play' (Waters 2016). Pyle and Danniels (2017) believe that play should be looked at as a continuum within curricula, ranging from adult directed play through to child directed play. Pelegrini (1991, quoted in Wainwright *et al.*, 2020, p. 44) supports this notion, that acts of play should be viewed along a continuum of non-play to pure play. However, Bottrill (2022) challenges this idea, claiming that real play emerges from the child with unrestricted opportunities for open ended, self-chosen challenges. Further insinuating that if adults are involved then real play is not taking place, inhibiting children's learning by enforced conformity that has potential to diminish their self-purpose and identity. Bruce (2012) agrees that play is self-chosen and states how children develop, becoming creators and innovators as they engage in playful activities.

In 2010, the Welsh Government introduced the Foundation Phase, which was the statutory curriculum for three- to seven-year-olds in Wales (Welsh Gov, 2015a). According to McLachlan, Fleer and Edwards (2018), a curriculum is a system that sets out the objectives, content, procedures and assessments to do with an education program for a particular group of learners. The Foundation Phase framework supports a play-based pedagogy, where children's learning is supported through play and practical experiences as opposed to being taught directly by a teacher, this is known as experiential learning (Wainwright *et al.*, 2016 and Aubrey and Riley 2016). This practice is supported by Kolb, who believed that individuals are at a heightened level of learning when they are involved in firsthand experiences (Aubrey and Riley, 2016). Froebel also saw play as a vital part in a child's learning and development. He believed that through play, the adult can observe the child's knowledge and understanding. However, he also believed that a child cannot be forced to play, and in suitable environments with adult support, play can thrive (Bruce, 2012).

The Foundation Phase drew on evidence that learning through formal teaching could result in attainment standards being lower, with experience from international early years curricula, such as Te Whariki and Scandinavian approaches paving the way for a child centered, play-based, experiential pedagogy being adopted in the Welsh curriculum (Welsh Gov. 2015b), where the practitioner's role was to facilitate learning (Waters, 2016).

There can be many determinants to effective implementation of a new play-based curriculum as can be seen by the recommendations made to the Welsh Government in the Stocktake final report and Successful futures (Welsh Gov. 2014 and Donaldson, G. 2015). A high percentage of the recommendations were associated with training (Waters 2016), whilst another factor was communication. According to Welsh Gov (2014), staff felt confused when the year 2 numeracy and literacy tests were introduced, as they appeared to contradict the values of the Foundation Phase. Funding was another potential barrier to implementation, with many being concerned about access to such a crucial factor in the implementation. Without funding, more support staff to fill the recommended staffing ratios would be difficult and access to appropriate training and resources would be limited if funding were not available (Welsh Gov, 2014). Howard (2010) also believes this to be a barrier to implementing a play-based curriculum. Pedagogy is also seen as a factor that would challenge curriculum reform; the Foundation Phase was making a radical change from formal teaching methods to a play-based, child-centered approach. According to Waters (2016), the use of the term play within curriculum documentation can cause problems in implementation due to the ambiguity of its meaning. Welsh Gov (2014) also notes this as being problematic as many practitioners lack theoretical knowledge and understanding, which leads to them not appreciating the value of play in children's learning. Many schools and nurseries lacked knowledge on how to provide an effective environment for a play-based pedagogy, leading to chaos within the classroom resulting in staff losing trust and sight of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Gov 2014). This gave way to the pendulum effect, where practitioners would swing from Foundation Phase methods back to their old pedagogies, meaning the radical transformation was hindered (Waters, 2016). Wainwright *et al.* (2020), state how important the environment is regarding engaging a

child in learning, claiming how a supportive, structured environment increases classroom engagement and learning. The Foundation Phase framework stated how the indoor and outdoor environments were to be designed in a fun and exciting way to stimulate children's development (Welsh Gov 2015a). However, Donaldson (2015) found that children want lessons to be more fun and engaging, with more time spent out of the classroom. This message is evidence that not all children found the Foundation Phase to be the way it was intended, which lead to further curriculum reform.

Welsh Gov (2015b) claim that most practitioners welcomed the introduction of the Foundation Phase, with many being excited and relieved at its implementation. However, Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) claim that half of teachers and 70% of additional practitioners had not accessed all the training modules that had been provided. UK Gov (2023) claim that the professional development of teachers results in the learning outcomes of children being greater, as the knowledge base of practitioners is up to date ensuring their practice is coherent, which is an essential part to providing a curriculum that is of high quality. With this in mind, if practitioners were not completing training, then the Foundation Phase implementation was not going to be as successful as it could have potentially been. Regarding continual professional development and staff training, Welsh Gov (2023) have set out to ensure that high quality training materials for the New Curriculum for Wales will be available for practitioners through their implementation of the National Endorsement Panel. However, unless practitioners are held accountable for completing training by an outside body, there is potential for training to be incomplete, as was seen in the implementation of the Foundation Phase. It can also be noted that practitioners felt that the training materials provided during the role out of the foundation phase lacked clarity, and regardless of this being mentioned in the pilot stage, practitioners still raised the same concerns about the final guidance materials and training (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Despite this, Wainwright (2016) claims that some schools were clear about the intentions of the Foundation Phase as they were supported by senior management and completed the Welsh Government's training programs. Two key factors to successful curriculum implementation were found to be the senior management team's attitude, including the head teacher, along with the training, qualifications and skillset of teachers and learning

support staff (Welsh Gov, 2014). For this reason, recommendations were put in place for compulsory bespoke training to be issued to head teachers informing them of the positive impact the Foundation Phase could have on many aspects of children's learning (Welsh Gov 2014). Donaldson, G. (2015) agrees, stating that for reform to succeed, the skills, commitment and understanding of leadership teams needs to be developed. Waters and Payler (2015) recognise the importance of professional learning and development and how it positively impacts children's learning. Within Welsh schools, support staff are not required to have a qualification in education or childcare to work within the classroom (Welsh Gov 2015c). Welsh Gov (2015c) proposed a multi-level performance plan for support staff to follow, including knowledge and understanding of the foundation phase, however no report is available to review whether these materials had a positive impact.

From the experience the Foundation Phase afforded, the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales should be more informed. As Donaldson (2015) proposes, clarity of the aims and purposes of the curriculum is required, this will give rise to consistency in teacher's continual professional development. Training that is bespoke to the individual school and community's needs will ensure that teaching and support staff can confidently deliver the new curriculum. It is also recognised that this will require adequate time for the considerable training programs to be provided (Donaldson, 2015).

Welsh Gov (no date) vow to offer professional learning that will inform practitioners of the aims of the curriculum, ensuring that they fully understand the framework and can develop an effective pedagogy and culture of change, creating a shared vision of the curriculum within the setting. The development of the National Network aims to help develop and support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales through a co-constructive approach, welcoming the opinions of practitioners (Welsh Gov, no date), This aims to improve the overall quality of education, enabling the children of Wales to become lifelong learners who fulfil the four purposes.

Section 2

The Welsh Gov (2022a) recognise that every child has a voice that should be heard, that each child has individual needs, backgrounds and experiences and the skills and knowledge they possess are special to them. These exclusive traits are what constitutes a unique child (Welsh Gov, 2022a). Birth to five (no date) suggests that the uniqueness of each child means that they develop at different rates, in different ways. Welsh Gov (no date) agrees, further stating that each child will have a different reaction to stimulus based on their own unique temperament and personality.

Donaldson (2015) claims that an essential part of learning and teaching is assessment. Current assessment guidance for the curriculum for Wales focuses on the progression of the learner along a continuum of learning, claiming that its strength is looking at the unique progress of the child and planning future progression accordingly (Welsh Gov 2022b). Methods of assessment are designed by the individual school, however funded non-maintained nursery settings will have assessment arrangements provided should they choose to adopt the new curriculum (Welsh Gov 2022b and Welsh Gov 2022a). Some of the strengths noted by Welsh Gov (2022a) around assessments are that through observation, the practitioner can gain an understanding of the child's individual development to enable them to progress appropriately with adequate support and challenge. Dowling (2013) agrees, stating that observation is an important aspect of child development, as it allows the practitioner to provide additional provisions to challenge the individual child further, through knowing their enjoyments and understanding. Assessments allows the practitioner to gain awareness of the way each child learns and the ways to best motivate them. Importantly, it can be a way to identify those individuals who may require additional support to enable them to reach their full potential (Rodger, 2016). Welsh Gov (2023a) also claims that assessment is a tool for reflective practice, enabling the practitioner to provide effective environments and engaging experiences to support learner development.

Welsh Gov (2023a) claim that the quality of the environments and experiences provided by practitioners along with the quality of their interactions plays a part in the reliability of assessments.

Before the new curriculum for Wales, the Foundation Phase Profile was used to assess children. Although it was a play-based curriculum, practitioners claimed that they often needed to assess children's skills through pre-prepared focus tasks, which is a contradiction to the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Gov 2022d). MacBlain (2021) suggests that performing tasks as tests at a particular time of day can result in a failure to recognise the child's potential and barriers to their learning. Welsh Gov (2023a) however recognise the importance of observing children during play and their daily routines to record their holistic learning and developmental progress. The Foundation Phase Profile used a skills ladder to record development of the child, using statements requiring yes or no responses (Welsh Gov 2017), Donaldson (2015) concludes that the use of stage related outcomes to assess was dissatisfactory. However, the assessment guidance for the curriculum for funded non maintained settings gives examples of open questions to use when assessing individual skills and capabilities (Welsh Gov 2023a). The recommendation of the use of a wide range of assessment techniques in the new curriculum for Wales to suit the different learning outcomes, allows the practitioner flexibility of assessing the unique child, as a broader picture of their development can be seen (Donaldson, 2015). However, it is stated that practitioners need to be knowledgeable about the validity, reliability, and meaningfulness of their chosen assessment techniques (Donaldson, 2015 and Welsh Gov, 2022b).

Welsh Gov (2023a) gives practitioners an array of assessment methods to consider using, one of which is learning stories. Fabian and Edwards (2023) describe how learning stories are formative, structured, written observations focused on the individual child's learning dispositions, written to the child and their family. Learning stories are complex and require the practitioner to have a deep understanding of the child, as well as the capabilities to articulate themselves on paper to give a clear observation and the knowledge base to give an explanation of learning and development. Welsh Gov

(2023a) does not divulge further in to learning stories within the framework, so to expect practitioners in Wales to be able to meet the expectations of a learning story, without additional support is unrealistic when only 50% of teachers from a research project in New Zealand provided enough evidence to document children's disposition to learning. It was found that teachers who are unfamiliar with writing learning stories required substantial mentoring and time to become adept in completing them (Fabian and Edwards, 2023). Learning stories do fit theoretically within the new curriculum for Wales as well as funded non maintained nursery setting, as they evaluate the holistic development of the unique child (Knauf, 2019), which Welsh Gov (2022) claims should be recognised during assessment. MacLachlan, Fler and Edwards (2018) agree that linking curriculum with assessment gives a holistic evaluation of the child's progression. However, Fabian and Edwards (2023) found that practitioners in New Zealand struggled to find enough time to invest in writing the Learning Stories to a standard that they felt was acceptable, and frustration due to lack of time was evident. This could pose a potential barrier to practitioners in Wales as a lack of funding has meant higher adult to learner ratios which has seen a decrease in quality of practice already (Welsh Parliament 2023).

Another way of assessing the unique child's learning and progression is by video recording. This method aims to capture the child's interests and enables the practitioner to gain an understanding of learning within the setting (Welsh Gov 2023a). Video recording can be beneficial if the practitioner is constrained by time, as it is a media that can be accessed again later. However, it is noted that care should be taken to be inconspicuous whilst filming, so as not to distract the children from their play (Welsh Gov 2023a). This method of assessment could also be applied to the new curriculum for Wales as it's play based pedagogy along with the high ratios of adult to child learners allows the teacher to capture the children in moments of heightened learning through play as well as to revisit the observation to perform a complete assessment later (Smidt 2015).

The curriculum for Wales uses progression steps as a way of monitoring a child's development (Welsh Gov 2022c). The aim of the curriculum is to develop lifelong

learners (Welsh Gov 2023b) which is supported by Froebelian theory that states learning is a process that takes place throughout life (Bruce, 2012). The progression continuum allows the unique learner to develop at their own pace, which means that the practitioner needs to begin at where the child is rather than where they are expected to be (Bruce, 2012 and Welsh Gov 2022b). The progression code for the curriculum for Wales has a set of overarching principles of progression that span across all areas of learning. (Welsh Gov 2021). Each area of learning has statements of what matters, which are used to structure curriculum design. Descriptions of learning within each statement, gives learners and practitioners guidance on how the child should progress through their learning journey (Welsh Gov, 2022f). The progression steps are broadly age related; however, it is acknowledged that each learner is unique and develops at a different pace (Welsh Gov, 2022f).

Although the new curriculum states that education in Wales is steering away from the national requirements for teacher assessments, in favour of assessments that are individualised and appropriate to schools and settings, mandatory online assessments for numeracy and reading will take place for children in year 2 and beyond (Welsh Gov 2022e). However, it is claimed that these tests still have a level of respect for the unique learner as difficulty of the questions adjusts according to the response of the learner. Flexibility to time and breaks during the test is also down to the discretion of the individual school. A nod to wellbeing has been made, seemingly as it is recognised that formal tests will be unfamiliar to the younger learners and have the potential to cause anxiety (Welsh Gov 2023c). Donaldson (2015) claims that standardised tests are important when looking at the overall assessment of individuals but claims that they do not give an understanding of the holistic development of the unique child and should be used minimally in a play-based curriculum.

Section 3

Both the curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings and the new Curriculum for Wales stipulate that the outdoor environment should be used across the curriculum to provide authentic, meaningful, enjoyable experiences for young learners, that encourage awe and wonder (Welsh Gov, 2022a and Welsh Gov, 2023d). However, Learning through Landscapes (no date) documents how numerous teachers are reluctant to use the outdoor environment as they do not believe it to be an appropriate area to learn in, despite the myths being completely untrue. The outdoor environment engages all the child's senses at once (White, 2014), which is said to be a key factor in their health and wellbeing (Beames, Higgins and Nicol, 2012). Grigg and Lewis (2016) state that many benefits to children's learning and development can be seen through regular outdoor experiences, including physical, personal and social, moral, spiritual, cultural and cognitive development.

Wales Council for outdoor learning (2018) state that everyone involved in the education and care of children needs to realise the value learning outdoors carries. Having it threaded through the curriculum does not seem to be enough for practitioners to register its importance, with reports that outdoor learning experiences in the early years continue to decline, mainly due to the attitudes of teachers (Kelly, Sharpe and Fotou, 2022). Davies and Hamilton (2016) argue that the significant learning and developmental benefits to being outside mean signify that indoor learning alone is not enough to educate children.

Some settings in Wales are lucky enough to have provision to give learners forest school sessions. However, it is documented that practitioners feel that the perceived risk associated with allowing a child to be free to climb trees, use authentic tools and be

unrestricted in their exploration poses too much of a risk, and thus the child's enjoyment of outdoor play is annihilated due to the anxieties teachers claim to have around outdoor play (Button and Wade, 2018 and Kelly, Sharpe and Fotou, 2022). Froebel was an advocate for adventurous outdoor play, believing that firsthand experiences enhanced children's learning (Bruce 2012). Welsh Gov (2022a) builds their curricula on such theory, insisting that children need a vast array of physical experiences outdoors as well as opportunities to manipulate tools and equipment. These simple experiences provide an important opportunity for children to develop gross and fine motor skills as well as balance, core strength and co-ordination. All of which are essential skills to development. Instead of not allowing the children to explore and experience risk, the practitioners should support the child in being aware of their movements and actions and to explore their physical potential (Welsh Gov 2022a). This is supported by Vygotsky who believed that adults played an important role in scaffolding a child's learning (Aubrey and Riley, 2016).

Glackin (2016) claims how learning outdoors offers unique experiences related to science that can help develop and progress the learner's cognitive skills. Take for example the cold weather experienced this winter. Ice would have been present in many playgrounds, giving the perfect opportunity for teachers to plan in the moment and take their children outside to play with the potentially unseen before phenomena. Through their curiosity and exploration of their environment, matter and how things work, children are building a foundation for learning across the statements of what matters in science and technology (Welsh Gov 2020). Although this event may have occurred in some settings, indeed with practitioners' input of asking open questions to enhance the child's learning, as supported by Piaget and his zone of proximal development theory (Stanley, 2011, p. 20), it would also have been a missed opportunity in other settings. Bilton (2019) found that the attitudes of staff members, including head teachers, often prevented the outdoor environment being utilised in effective ways, with the weather being a major factor. Practitioners noted how many would not venture outdoors if it was too cold or too wet. These barriers, that are a common occurrence in Wales, are easy to overcome, with the wearing of a coat, mac or wellington boots. Frequent opportunities with the correct resources might lead to going

out in the rain becoming normal (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Conkbayir and Pascal (2018) note how the McMillan sisters regarded outdoor play of great importance to children, stressing the benefits of being out in the open air to their health and wellbeing. They stressed the important fact that being out in the cold air does not give rise to becoming ill with a cold, it was even written into policy at their nursery settings. This is something that parents and practitioners still believe is possible, preventing the use of outdoor space on cold days, which there are plenty of in Wales. The motivation teachers lack to take their class outdoors is something of an issue, with excuses such as it taking too much time to get the children prepared to be out in nature being common. Changing these perspectives is difficult when convenience seems to favour (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2023).

Another inhibiting factor practitioners possess when it comes to the outdoors, is that they are only there as supervisors, standing back, chatting and not engaging in meaningful interactions with the children. This stems from a belief that the outdoors is a free play environment where they do not need to be an educator. Leggett and Newman (2017) The new Curriculum for Wales, along with the previous, Foundation Phase are both play-based curricula, that promote

To combat the negative attitudes many practitioners have towards learning in the outdoors, Davies and Hamilton (2016) propose training materials are provided, to give teachers a solid knowledge base and understanding of how to educate and assess children in the outdoors and why it is so important to their holistic development.

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