

Early Years Curricular Portfolio

Section 1:

Wales has gone through a new curriculum reform. As of September 2022, all schools have begun following the new curriculum and progression steps. *The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021* highlights the beginning of a new, unique and individual Welsh Curriculum, moving away from an overly formal approach which has been recognised as “no longer fit for purpose”. Donaldson (2015) supports the suggestion that the previous curriculum is not effective, identifying a need for change within his report ‘Successful Futures’, proposing that the curriculum was overly complicated and also outdated. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) reinforce this agreeing that a curriculum reform is required in order to achieve the best for Wales, suggesting previous curriculums have not been meeting the aims and objectives established. However, implementing a new curriculum frequently comes with challenges, as Huntington Research School (2019) identified, recognising that due to the dynamic and many variables of a setting it may be difficult to execute this effectively.

Welsh Government (2014a) highlights the significance of a play based curricula, whilst allowing children, aged three to seven years old to be creative and playful during their learning, all of which the new curriculum will aim to encourage, as NDNA (2021) acknowledges. Consequently, this emphasises the importance of the curriculum reform being necessary, as well as it being play based, since evidence and research such as, Brodie (2018) recognise the importance of play for children's holistic development, suggesting that the benefits of play are extensive to a child's learning. Power, Taylor and Newton (2020) support this ideology and suggest that the curriculum reform encourages play through a student – centred approach.

According to Pak *et al.* (2020) it is difficult to implement a new curriculum, stating that is challenging to ensure all educators have a deep understanding on the subject which they are being trained on. Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber (2010) propose a solution to this concern, stating in order to successfully implement a new curriculum there must be a large, deep change rather than small changes within an already proposed curriculum. Strengthening this viewpoint, OECD (no date) agrees declaring that changing one element of the curriculum is not useful, unless other related areas are also being developed in correspondence. Therefore, This assignment will explore and analyse the potential

barriers to the proposed curriculum reforms in Wales, whilst also considering what can be learnt and consequently developed from previous curriculum reform difficulties.

UNICEF (2018) recognise the importance of play and that it should therefore be implemented and encouraged within education settings, stating that play is an essential part of learning and teaching. In addition, Scharer (2017) supports this, acknowledging that Vygotsky's theory validates that play is essential in allowing children to grow and develop. This highlights the ideology that a play-based curricular should be used for children, particularly from the ages 3-7 years old, and Blandford and Knowles (2013) recognise that from birth to 7 is the most important period of human development, as children are required to build upon skills and competencies which they will require in the future. This evidence emphasises why the new curriculum is play-based in an aim to create ambitious, capable learners, as well as enterprising, creative contributors, as stated by Welsh Government (2021). This also highlights the importance of effectively implementing the new curriculum. Although, previous experience demonstrates that some challenges may occur when introducing and enforcing a new curriculum, as Welsh Government (2014c) refer to within the Independent Stocktake.

It has been established that play is at the centre of a child's learning and development, meaning all early year educators within settings in Wales should have a good understanding of the term play and how they can encourage this with the children in their care, as Charles and Bellinson (2019) recognise. Welsh Government (2022a) states that the new curriculum will encourage child-led learning, whilst educators work closely with the children, facilitating them to develop and build upon their skills, highlighting the importance of practitioners understanding key terminology. However, Eberle (2014) acknowledges that play is a complex term, and is difficult to define suggesting people may have different ideas on the definition. This suggests that there may be different ideas of the terminology used within the new curriculum, such as, play-based and unstructured play, as discussed by Welsh Government (2022b).

Following on from the concept that play is complex to define which will therefore oppose challenges during a play-based curricular reform, Waters (2016) argues that the Foundation Phase required change in practitioner behaviour in order to support learning through play, meaning educators were required to define key terminology. However, this proves difficult as research shows the concept of play can be interpreted in different ways, as Curtis and O'Hagan (2003) agree. Strengthening this theory,

Welsh Government (2014b) found that while practitioners had a good understanding on the foundation phase, they did not always fully understand the concept 'learning through play'. This implies that as there is no clear, set definition surrounding key terminology, practice varies and differs depending on the educators understanding and the training they receive, highlighting the importance of effective training.

The findings and evidence previously discussed demonstrate the challenges of implementing a new curriculum, as it shows that there were differing experiences depending on the setting due to a lack of understanding of key terminology, as Welsh Government (2017) agree stating it is fundamental that early years educators understand concepts within the curriculum, as well as policies. This shows a challenge which has occurred in the past during curriculum reform, and Education and Training Foundation (2018) state that during change and reform, educators are likely to need additional support and training and to ensure that curriculum reform is effective educators should be given clear instructions and additional materials.

In addition, Welsh Government (2014c) emphasise the importance of training, however they acknowledge that training is only effective when everyone is cooperating, meaning the head teachers should partake in the same training as the educators. This will ensure that all individuals have the same understanding of the curriculum they will be delivering. In order for training to be effective funding is required, and Audit Wales (2022), acknowledge that the Government has supported the new curriculum by providing funding for professional learning. This implies that practitioners and educators will have the opportunity to gain a deeper, clearer understanding on concepts which will run through the new curriculum. This will result in a more effective implementation, Welsh Government (2022c) strengthen this, agreeing that when implementing a curriculum it is fundamental that professional training is provided, to enable professional practise in the future.

Another issue which has previously arisen during a curriculum reform is that the goals and aims are not being achieved. Waters (2016) discusses the Foundation Phase, whilst considering challenges faced and lessons of which can be taken forward from these previous issues. She discusses the requirement of fun and stimulating environments both indoors and outdoors and how these should be used for children within the Foundation Phase. Supporting this concept, Welsh Government (2008) state that outcomes of the Foundation Phase should be met through continuous access to indoor and outdoor

areas for the most effective results, suggesting children should be able to explore these environments daily and freely. Furthermore, advocating for the outdoors, Welsh Government (2009) acknowledge that it is an stimulating environment which presents children with the opportunity to partake in experiential learning, due to the unique opportunities. This highlights the significance of an outdoor learning environment on children's holistic development, which emphasises the reason behind the Foundation Phase outlining that outcomes should be met through the outdoors, alongside indoor areas.

However, this is not always achievable and does not always happen within early years settings and schools. A study conducted by Welsh Government (2015) discovered that although it is outlined with the Foundation Phase that children have continuous access to a stimulating, outdoor environment, it was found that an outdoor learning environment was rarely used as a continuous extension of the classroom. It was revealed that only 34% of settings involved in the study reported using the outdoors every day, showing that the proposed targets outlined are not being met. Burt (2016) discusses the significance of the outdoor, natural environment on children's development, however he states that evidence shows that there has been a decline in the use of the outdoors within early years settings and schools. Supporting this with similar findings, NHS Wales (2017) discovered from a study that nearly a third of children under five are not receiving enough outdoor play, both within early years setting and also within their home environment. Therefore, these studies show that although it is proposed that children are able to access outdoor environments daily and without restrictions, this is not happening effectively.

Research has delved into potential reasons of why outdoor environments may not be used as often as expected, Sefton (2021) recognised that lack of outdoor play was often greater within areas of higher deprivation due to limited outdoor space, although research shows these children benefited greatly from outdoor learning when it was incorporated in their education daily. Early Years Alliance (2016) conducted a survey, and the findings revealed that nearly 400 early years educators stated they are struggling with inadequate or a complete lack of outdoor space, this suggests a potential justification for the low statistics of children who use an outdoor environment. Davy (2016) found that 46% of respondents stated that the outdoor area in their setting is not adequate or fit for purpose, one respondent said that their area is "too restrictive, doesn't allow children enough space to explore". Davidson (2019) agrees recognising the importance of outdoor learning, stating that there has been a lack of funding surrounding the outdoors within settings and this should be brought to a priority. The

evidence discussed, accentuates the viewpoint that early years settings should be given more support by the government, and currently due to a lack of funding settings are unable to use their outdoor areas, as they are not adequate or sufficient.

The evidence and research reviewed highlights the challenges and obstacles of implementing a new curriculum, which consequently has an impact on the way of which the curriculum is then delivered which has not always been effective in the past. However, from this evidence solutions have been drawn in an attempt to make curriculum reforms smoother and more effective.

Section 2:

Doherty and Langston (2013) recognise that every child is unique from the moment they are born, their culture, experiences and individuality means all children develop at their own pace. Welsh Government (2015b) emphasise this concept as they recognise that all children will develop at different rates and this should be facilitated by the adult. This demonstrates the reason some methods of assessment may not be effective within early years settings and schools, since they are the same for every child and too generic.

Leicestershire County Council (2020) draw attention to the concept of the unique child, stating that educators must listen to children and ensure they are following a child-centred approach to facilitate the child and celebrate their individuality within settings. Although this is acknowledged children are often compared and assessed against their peers throughout education, the Department of Education (2013) state that children will be tracked by their educators and statutory national curriculum tests at key stages 1 and 2 will continue. However, this contradicted the concept of the 'unique child', as all children were undergoing the same assessments and test, with the knowledge that no two children are the same, which Levy (1996) confirms, thus proposing the hypothesis that assessment and age/stage related models are not effective where a play-based curricula is concerned.

Nevertheless, the Department for children, school and families (2009) acknowledge the importance of knowing and understanding each child as a unique individual to ensure they have the best possible experience. This suggests that everybody within the setting who is involved in supporting a child's development should endeavour to learn as much about the child as possible. To achieve this, it is proposed that practitioners and educators observe children, as this will allow them to assess effectively, Palaiologou (2008) promotes this perspective. She agrees that observing a child will allow the practitioner to achieve an understanding of the child's abilities and areas in which they require additional support. Further strengthening these views Spreeuwenberg (2022), agree that observation is an effective way to progress track children's abilities over a period of time, which also reinforces the idea that every child is unique, as it provides educators with the opportunity to gain an understanding of the individual.

The Welsh Government (2019) outline the statutory assessments used within the education system to track children's progress from key stage 2. The Welsh Government (2022d) refers to the national tests

and state that they were used within the education system which allow their educators to assess where they are ability wise amongst their peers. Although these tests provide educators with a clear visual representation of their students, there are debates on how effective they are as well as having a detrimental impact on the children.

Evidence, such as the National Education Union (2018) argue that national tests are not effective and have the opposite effect, arguing that they are detrimental on children's wellbeing. They argue that in circumstances where there is too much pressure, such as an end of year test the adverse unintended outcome will occur, and More than a score (2018) support this. They discovered from a small study that 63% of parents believe their primary age school child is under too much pressure from testing. However, contraindicatory to the viewpoints proposed, Jerrim (2020) used data from the Millennium Cohort Study, which considered children's wellbeing during the national testing period. The results found that there were no significant or worrying changes in the children's mental wellbeing, suggesting the national tests were not having a damaging effect on children's mental health and wellbeing.

Although there is conflicting evidence on how national tests effect the children participating, this form of assessment does not support the concept of the 'unique child'. Craggs (2020) proposes the idea that a balance is required between performance measurement and play, to ensure educators and practitioners are listening to the children's voice, which is outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child (UNCRC), as illustrated by UNICEF (2019). In addition, the National Union of Teachers (2015) propose the idea that tests and exams are too standardised and not inclusive for all pupils, which mean they do not cater for every child's individual need. This suggests that they are not effective and also do not work in correspondence with the concept that every child is unique, which is a fundamental concept, according to Pembrokeshire Country Council (2022).

Pacey (2021), recognise that the new curriculum's pedagogy is for settings to provide children with play-based learning, enforcing a holistic approach to learning. Leading on from this, when implementing a play-based pedagogy and curriculum, it is argued that previous forms of assessments, such as the national testing do not work and enable children to learn through play, as Palmer (2021) argues. She debates that if a setting is following a play-based curriculum, it is unfair and not valid to carry out the national tests once a year, as it could influence the teaching which occurs within the classroom. Lauer (2011) considers the concept of play dSeprivation, suggesting that due to pressures and unachievable

targets for educators, aspects such as 'free play' and 'play – based learning' are not happening as often as necessary. Supporting this, Welsh Government (2022f) found that practitioners described not being able to assess certain skills through play and they therefore have to set more formal tests and activities. Hence, the viewpoint that a national test at the end of the year will take away from play-based learning, as there will be less opportunities to simply play during the period before.

The fact of whether national testing and generic assessments within the education system is fair has been questioned, and the National Education Union (2019) state that learning and assessments should be fair and equitable to all within the setting. Thus, suggesting that the way in which children are being assessed, particularly those involved in a play-based curriculum is unfair. Tierney (2013) agrees that fairness is ideal and should be achieved in education, recognising that this is not always possible due to the growing interest in performance-based assessments. In an attempt to overcome these barriers, Assessment Reform Group (2002) identify areas that would help in ensuring assessments done within the classroom are effective. Stating that assessment should also focus on how students learn, as different people have various learning styles as Kolb (2014) identifies, this suggests that a new, more accommodating assessment style is required.

Drawbacks of generic national testing lead the Welsh Government (2022e) to propose a new form of assessment, and it has been outlined that a new continuous way of assessing and tracking children, will enable learner progression. It states that assessments should focus on recognising each learners strengths achievements and areas for improvement, which will enable educators to facilitate their learning. Parker, Thomsen and Berry (2022) recognise that the role of the practitioner within a setting is to identify play cues and develop upon these, to encourage each individuals learning. Children will be naturally assessed on a daily basis whilst they are learning through their play. Salcuni, Mazzeschi and Capella (2017) propose that this is an effective method of tracking children, as it presents educators with the opportunity to gain a deep, fair and realistic view on the child's capabilities. Thus, therefore works in agreement with the concept of the 'unique child'.

Moreover, building upon assessment methods which support and embrace the fact that every child is unique, learning stories have been introduced within Wales. Pack (2016) outline learning stories as an integrated learning assessment tool, which originated in New Zealand, stating that they are a powerful tool where the educator will observe the children learn through play. Karlsdottir and Garoarsdottir

(2010), discovered that documenting children's continuous learning through learning stories allow their educators to have a visual representation of children's strengths and capabilities. This will vary depending on the child as all children develop at a different rate, as Hayes, *et al.* (2014) acknowledge, making it an effective, valid and realistic assessment tool, as every child is unique and will be assessed whilst enabling them follow their natural curiosity, which according to Gurholt and Sanderud (2016) is fundamental for children's growth and development.

Chazan (2002) recognises that play is of the utmost importance for children of all ages, and states it is beneficial to observe and assess children during play sessions as it is when they are following their own interests and at ease. O'Grady and Dusing (2015) strengthen this agreeing that play-based assessment are reliable and valid and will allow practitioners to gain a holistic understanding of the individual child. The evidence considered suggests that observing and assessing children through a continuous approach on a daily basis is effective and will also enable practitioners and educators to gain a true representation of the child. Supporting this, Public Health England (2014) acknowledge children and students who appear happy and comfortable in a task or activity are more likely to achieve better results and work to the best of their ability. This, therefore supports the concept and use of learning stories, as Karlsdottir and Garoarsdottir (2010) agree, stating that documenting children's learning stories allows practitioners to focus on children's strengths and capabilities. Therefore, discussions above emphasise that a new form of assessment was necessary, particularly during a curriculum reform, given that settings are encouraged to use more play-based learning.

Section 3:

The importance of including outdoor learning within a play-based curriculum, whilst uncovering what is being done to encourage the use of the outdoors and if it is enough?

*What is **outdoor learning**?*

Outdoor learning is an expression which can frequently be heard when referring to early years settings and curriculums, as children are born curious, making the outdoors the perfect place to encourage this, whilst allowing them to participate in experiential learning. Considering Piaget's statement that children are 'little scientists' Oakley (2004) states that due to this children should have continuous access to a stimulating, safe outdoor environment. However, previous evidence has suggested that the term 'outdoor learning' is not always fully understood or completed within the settings.

Play is fundamental for children within the early years, this includes both indoors and outdoors. Over the past few years there has been a huge focus outdoor leaning, due to the numerous benefits which have been researched, as Durant (2012) agrees. Waite (2009) agrees that there are many positive elements of outdoor learning for children, agreeing that it has an overall positive effect on a child's holistic learning, whilst making the process fun and enjoyable.

The English Outdoor Council (2018) recognise outdoor learning as a broad term, expressing that outdoor learning is when participants learn through activities outdoors and what they encounter and discover. This is further supported by the Institute for Outdoor Learning (2021), as they recognise that outdoor learning is an umbrella term for different approaches, which include activities and experiences within the outdoors. Some examples of outdoor learning can range from forest schools, to loose parts within an outdoor environment, as Learning through Landscapes (2021) outline. This demonstrates that outdoor learning is a complex term, and therefore may be misunderstood by educators within settings and is therefore not being performed as much as proposed.

*What is **currently** in place to support outdoor learning?*

Outdoor learning is a fundamental part of learning through play within the early years, as it presents children with valuable life experiences, as well as giving them the opportunity to develop their holistic skills. Welsh Government (2015b) outline outdoor learning as part of their current curriculum in Wales, highlighting how practitioners should implement this, proposing that it should be used on a daily basis,

they acknowledge that the outdoors presents children with the opportunity to partake in experimental learning, due to the unique opportunities. Moreover, Tebbs (2018) agree that children should have the opportunity to participate in outdoor learning, due to the valuable benefits of which being outdoors presents children with. Welsh Government (2009) constructed a handbook, to ensure practitioners understand the importance of outdoor provision which enables them to implement this effectively. This shows that the Government and also theorists are aiming to implement outdoor learning within early years settings by demonstrating to educators the importance and effect it has on the children within their care.

Estyn (2011) recognise that the Foundation Phase places a large amount of importance on children using the outdoors, allowing them to experience, explore and also take risks safely. However, although this is outlined within multiple reports, it has been discovered that this is not always occurring. Supporting the viewpoint that children should be experiencing outdoors on a daily basis, Cohen (2021) state that children should be giving outside every day to participate in both structured and unstructured play.

Whilst considering what has been proposed for outdoor learning, there has been different funding and grants introduced for settings, aiming to encourage the use of the outdoors. The Ernest Cook Trust (2022) outline grants which can be awarded to both primary and secondary schools, an example is the 'Outdoor Essentials Grant', stating this should be used to buy essentials such as wellies and waterproofs. This, not only ensures settings are being encouraged to participate in outdoor play but it also means all children will be able to partake in these activities, as they will have the appropriate clothing, for example. According to Casey (2007), it is essential that all children within a setting has equal opportunities to explore and experience nature, suggesting they will need the correct and suitable clothing, which grants can support. The fact grants are available highlights the importance of outdoor learning, as it demonstrates ways of which the Government and Local Authorities are aiming to encourage it.

Why should a play-based curriculum include outdoor learning?

Practitioners and educators should recall their childhood memories, many will say they spent the majority of time outdoors agreeing that they created their best memories whilst in this environment, to encourage this within the future generation it is important the abundant benefits are understood.

Learning and Teaching Scotland (2022) highlight that learning outdoors can help children learn through first-hand experiences, whilst enabling them to develop their skills. Tebbs (2022) acknowledge that research has discovered many benefits for outdoor learning, including improving confidence, social skills., communication, motor skills alongside knowledge and understand. Moreover, Mind (2022) state that spending time outdoors benefit an individual's mental well-being, helping boost their mood and reducing feelings of stress or sadness.

This demonstrates why multiple theorists and also the Government try to encourage outdoor learning within early years settings. However, this is not always achieved.

*Are children **experiencing outdoor learning** with their early years settings?*

Alarming research conducted by Moss (2012) discovered that less than 10% of children play and learn within the outdoor environment and nature, which can be compared to 50% from a generation ago. This demonstrates a large deterioration in children's relationships with the natural environment.

In terms of within early years settings. Boon (2018) states when implementing a curriculum challenges will occur, and often what is proposed in a curriculum is not always achieved and implemented. Research shows that only 34% of practitioners reported using the outdoors on a daily basis, as discovered by Welsh Government (2015a), stating that it is often dependant on weather. However, this could potentially be seen as a contradicting response since there are grants and funding in place to support settings in purchasing appropriate clothing, such as wetsuits, meaning the children could go outside in all weather conditions. However, it is clear that the outdoors is not be utilised, suggesting children are becoming less comfortable with outdoor learning.

Practitioners should feel responsibility for the decline in the use of the outdoors, as educators they should be encouraging children to go outdoors and experience experimental natural play, as they are aware of the benefits. Spring (2021) agrees, stating that practitioners should be supported to implementing outdoor learning strategies, suggesting following children's lead and interests may lead more adults into the natural environment.

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