

## **Section 1**

The two play based approaches that will be looked at is the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings. The Foundation Phase in Wales is a statutory curriculum for children aged 3 to 7 years old that focuses on developmental, experiential and active learning (Cardiff University, 2016). It encourages children to be imaginative, it makes learning more enjoyable and it is more effective. In the phase lies the holistic development of children and their skills that builds on previous learning of experience and knowledge. It leads on to promote equality of opportunity and celebrates diversity (Welsh Government, 2015a). According to a report by Donaldson (2015), the Foundation Phase is one of the 'best things' of Welsh Education and it has a 'very real strength' to build the new curriculum.

Similarly, the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings was developed to work with children to ensure they have the best start in life. It also looks to encourage both practitioners and children to discover a sense of belonging and pride and celebrate the diverse culture of modern Wales. The curriculum aims to shape children in to positive characters towards learning (Welsh Government, 2022). The curriculum connects with principles of the Curriculum for Wales by including the four core purposes that support positive life long experiences and learning. It looks at the 'how' and 'why' the curriculum is designed to support children's development of the purposes (Early Years Wales, 2020). Alongside the purposes, the curriculum as a whole has six areas of learning with twenty seven statements of what matters. These guide the principles that underpin the curriculum. Across the curriculum are three cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence. These are all areas of the curriculum that children must learn.

Estyn's reports frequently highlight the connections between the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings in Wales. The connection ensures a shared and developmentally appropriate educational experience for all children, regardless of the setting that they are in (Estyn, 2022). Four key findings from the report ensures that both Curriculums provide a developmental appropriate and child-centred education that promotes curiosity, independence and holistic development for each individual. Both curriculum's have shared pedagogical principles, meaning that many setting embracing the beliefs of both the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non Maintained Settings. The second finding of the report shows that there is integrated planning and assessment between the both. This meaning that settings following the Curriculum for Funded Non Maintained settings link closely with the four purposes, the statements of what matters and the areas of learning that children in the Foundation Phase follow through the curriculum. The third finding of the report outlines effective practice examples. This showing that Estyn's joint case studies with Care Inspectorate Wales provide examples of effective implementation of the curriculum in settings which includes planning and adapting environments to the children's interests and needs. This approach mirroring the Foundation Phase's emphasis on planning based on children's needs and interests. The final finding that links them both together is the development of observation and planning processes. This

showing that non-maintained settings are beginning to develop their observation and assessment process through strong leadership who have clear visions for their settings. This aligns with the Foundation Phase's focus on observation and assessment to inform planning to support children's learning.

Between the two curricula's, they both focus on child-centred and play-based learning, encourage exploration and discovery along with celebrating Wales's culture. Waters (2016) says that children in the Foundation Phase learn through first-hand experience with play being at the forefront of learning and through their playing, they develop ideas, experiment, take risks, problem solve and learn to make decisions. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings has a holistic approach that puts children at the centre. Two areas to the curriculum are 'engaging experiences' and 'effective environments'. They provide the children with creative environments to play, explore and gain authentic experiences along with being hands on, purposeful and meaningful to the child's development (Gamble, 2024). Furthermore, an area to the Foundation Phase which heavily encourages children to celebrate the culture of Wales is the 'Curriculum Cymreig'. The curriculum helps children develop and understanding of their cultural identity that is unique to Wales which is spread across all areas of learning. Through different languages, images, objects, sounds and tastes which are all key to Wales's heritage, children will learn a sense of belonging to Wales as well as understanding the literature, arts and language (Welsh Government, 2015b). The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings allows practitioners to celebrate the diverse culture of Wales with their children and encourage them to develop a sense of pride and belonging. Similar to the Foundation Phase, it recognises the values of Welsh language and provides play opportunities with a purpose for children to further their language skills and experience bilingualism (National Day Nurseries Association, n.d.).

However, the Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings have different areas of developmental pathways to a child's development. The seven areas to the Foundation Phase show a big focus on outdoor learning and children having full access to indoor and outdoor environments. There is also a focus on a child's individual needs as opposed to a 'one size fits all' approach (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained settings has five developmental pathways that are linked within the Curriculum for Wales. These pathways have some small links to the Foundation Phase with them being child-centred and holistic but there are differences. Unlike the Foundation Phase, the curriculum has a heavy focus on children having a sense of belonging to their community, Wales and the wider world. This curriculum also has a focus on communication with children developing listening, improving attention and understanding as well as focusing on vocabulary and speaking skills (National Day Nurseries Association, n.d.).

Knight et al., (2022) discuss the importance of teacher attitudes in inclusive education in Wales. They say that the basis of inclusive education is different to that of special education and therefore it is a fair system that benefits every individual. Teachers are seen as being 'critically' important in the set up of inclusive education. After research, they found that children who experience learning difficulties were found to benefit from more positive relationships with their teachers due to inclusivity in their education. In Wales's new

Curriculum for Wales, emphasis is placed on 'raising the aspirations for all learners'. This quote is supported by guidance that has been put in place to support schools in designing an inclusive school curricula (Welsh Government, 2020). In the same source, a quotation states "the legal framework established by [the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act] will play a crucial role in enabling the curriculum to deliver strong and inclusive schools". The meaning of this being that the Act is the core of the curriculum to ensure that all learners, including those with additional learning needs, are supported, that schools have a duty to identify and plan for those children with additional learning needs and that equality, fairness and inclusion are built in to every classroom.

Continuing professional development (CPD) in early years curricula is important for strengthening practice, improving child outcomes and making sure that practitioners remain informed about up to date methods. Lowe and Kilgour (2024) support CPD in early years education in Wales by closely linking principles and requirements of the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales together. Each chapter of their book includes activities to aid reflection, examples and case studies that practitioners can use and are encouraged to use to reflect upon their own practice within their setting. They also discuss collaborative and multi-agency working which is seen as a 'vital' within Welsh education. This allows practitioners to prepare for co-collaborative working.

Barriers to CPD however include time constraints, high costs to send staff on professional development training and it can cause limited access to training outside of working hours. Due to these barriers, settings can struggle to send staff on these development days due to staffing issues or shortages and setting funding barriers (UK Parliament, 2022). Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck (2020) also mention barriers to CPD and these are similar to the ones talked about above. These include low staff wages, lack of enthusiasm from staff to want to go on the training and challenging work conditions. With these barriers present, leaders can find it difficult to encourage staff to engage in CPD. Finally, Goddard (2018) examines the impact of funding on CPD whilst noting that many early years settings can no longer afford to provide training or send practitioners on training. This can be down to lack of funding from the Government and local authorities. There is also a mention of a lack of action plan in the CPD sector. This meaning that there is an absence of long term planning for how CPD is structured, delivered and supported in the early years, specifically in Wales.

## Section 2

Worcestershire County Council (2023) says that a unique child is an individual who is always learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured. A child can be unique in the way that they are included in situations, how their brain develops, the culture that they belong to, the level of resilience they have and how they transition from family members or settings. Leicestershire County Council (n.d.), expands on this by outlining how a child can be made to feel unique. This can be through having high expectations of the individual and putting them at the centre, knowing each child well to understand their interests, strengths and needs and allowing the child to express their feelings and talk about what matters to them.

Early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand have connections to the national ECE. To summarise what Fabian and Edwards (2023) write about Te Whariki, they both discuss that it has an emphasis on connected experiences and thought processes rather than isolated skills or knowledge. Through the model, children's relationships with peers, teachers, surroundings, families and communities are linked parts of their development. According to Schwartz and Unger (2020), Te Whariki is a bi-cultural curriculum. They quote that "biculturalism represents comfort and proficiency with both one's heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled. It is applicable not only to immigrants who have come from other countries, but also to children of immigrants who – although they are born and raised in the receiving society – are likely deeply embedded in the heritage culture at home with their families". This quote meaning being comfortable and skilled in the original culture and the culture that the individual lives in. For a child, this means growing up with support from their family's culture and the culture around them. This helps them to feel proud of who they are.

However, a critique to a bicultural curriculum like Te Whariki that Ongley (2013) talks about is that practitioners struggle to deliver the curriculum because of a lack of confidence and a reluctance to change. While general descriptions of outcomes and strategies allow practitioners to choose what and how they will teach it, there seem to be no strict rules related to bicultural curriculums and a lack of guidance.

As part of early childhood education in New Zealand, Te Whariki develops learning stories that are narrative descriptions of a child's actions when they play. For practitioners, they provide rich, informative and engaging ways to document children's learning journeys (Learning Stories Help, n.d.). Learning stories are an observation and assessment tool that manages a child's progress. Tricia Kassotis (2016) discusses how the tool is used to observe children and write narrative stories of the learning that is occurring in different situations.

During the curriculum, children will have opportunities to develop skills to be able to ask for what they need, to work alongside other children, how to be responsible individuals and how to contribute their ideas to different scenarios. All of which is to help form the children in to confident learners (Ministry of Education, 2017).

The Te Whariki curriculum in New Zealand shows links with the Curriculum for Wales by aiming to help children be confident individuals. One of the four core purposes in the Welsh curriculum is also to create confident individuals. Similar to the aims of the Te Whariki, the curriculum in Wales aims for children to be able to have the confidence to participate in performances, have the skills and knowledge to manage life independently and form positive relationships with peers (Welsh Government, 2022).

The learning stories of children's progress can be documented through photos, artwork, written observations and videos. These can then be shared electronically between staff members or on paper or in a scrap book so practitioners and families can at the progress with the child (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Through sharing the learning stories, it can be beneficial as they support Whanau engagement, strengthens relationships, extends learning beyond the settings, considers the

principles of Te Whariki and celebrates children's identities. Lee and Al (2013) consider both supporting engagement and strengthening relationships by emphasising in their book the importance of strong connections to families. They discuss how responsive and mutual relationships with families improve children's learning experiences. The stories extend learning outside of the settings as they allow families to interpret and extend learning through shared narratives (Carr, 2001). Principles of Te Whariki are family and community and empowerment. A journal article talks about how the learning story assessment framework aligns with the principles. The framework emphasises the importance of the assessment process and how it is in the interest of both the children and their families (Carr et al., 2002). To conclude the positives to learning stories, when they are written with a relationship-building approach, they are able to help support a child by acknowledging their identity and valuing cultural backgrounds and experiences (Ritchie and Rau, 2006).

However, A further criticism is that some practitioner's interpretations of Te Whariki are too varied and that the way learning stories are created differ with each practitioner. It also says that for some practitioners, Te Whariki becomes an 'excuse' due to the type of curriculum not requiring any specific result. This is because the curriculum does tell practitioners about specific outcomes or practices and practitioners' abilities can be assumed to vary (Murata, 2014).

Other notable authors who discuss criticisms are Blaiklock (2008), Zhang (2016) and Wanoa and Johnston (2020). Blaiklock questions the validity and reliability of a learning story and highlights issues such as the individuality of the observations, the lack of clear guidance and the challenges with assessing learning and development. Zhang, critiques the learning story framework by suggesting that while the approach identifies their strengths, it also overlooks their challenges. Finally, Wanoa and Johnston explored the thoughts of practitioners, parents and authorities on learning stories and found that the value of them were recognized, they were not identified as the best method for assessing a child's learning.

As an overall summary, learning stories could work in Wales due to the shared values between Te whariki and Curriculum for Wales. Both curricula are child-centred and holistic approaches that look strongly towards well-being, identity and family engagement. Learning stories link well with the Curriculum for Wales's four core purposes. Blaiklock (2011) says that New Zealand's approaches that emphasise inclusivity and community involvement resonate with the educational principles in Wales's curriculum. A second reason as to why learning stories could work in Wales is because they supports bilingualism and cultural identity. Soler and Miller (2003) journal article compares Te Whariki to other early years curricula which highlights cultural diversity. This lines up with similar values surrounding bilingualism and culture that are seen in Wales's system. The learning stories could reflect Welsh and English bilingual practises in settings, like Te Whariki reflects Maori cultures. These could also be adapted to celebrate Welsh identity, heritage and home languages.

### Section 3

As a practitioner in an early years setting, being passionate about an area of Curriculum for Wales will form the basis of their childhood development. The blog will look at outdoor learning in Wales and the link it has to the curriculum.

Robb (2023) describes outdoor learning as the transformation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours through engaging with the outdoor environment. This being for the personal and social benefits of individuals, families, societies and the world.

Minister for Education, Lynne Neagle, shows commitment to improving educational experiences which includes outdoor learning. Neagle has engaged with The Wales Council for Outdoor Learning to back outdoor learning and they highlight the importance of outdoor education. They have both expressed their aspirations to build positive relationships (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2025). Further to Neagle's work, she has also supported outdoor education in schools over Wales through funding initiatives that encourage experiential learning. In 2025, she and members of the Welsh Parliament and Senedd discussed a Local Authority Education Grant that would be combined to £400million which was spread out over Wales to help fund educational activities which includes outdoor education (Welsh Parliament, 2025). In December 2024, Neagle also oversaw a £225.5million Funding Boost that was announced to support Welsh education including the outdoors.

Outdoor learning is able to help fulfil the four core purposes of the new Curriculum for Wales with endless benefits for both children, staff and families. Learning through the outdoors provides effective and child-centred pedagogy by developing high levels of well-being and confidence, encourages social and physical development, provides unique opportunities for children to incorporate cross-curricular skills, develop their imagination and curiosity and have the ability to assess and experience risks which help to strengthen resilience and confidence (Edwards, 2022).

A quotation by the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2008) states 'Wales leads the UK in its development of learning outdoors and the Foundation Phase will further ensure that we are in the vanguard of experiential learning, of which outdoor learning is such a vital element'. This meaning that outdoor learning in the early years in Wales is leading the way with experiential learning in the UK.

In a Community School Thematic Report in 2020, Estyn discussed the importance of working with families and communities and identified schools and settings that have effective engagement. This was through providing help and encouragement to families so that they could support their child's learning at home and working with parents and families as equal partners (Welsh Government, 2023).

An outdoor learning initiative that schools and early years settings have opportunities to participate in that would encourage parental and family engagement in is Wales Outdoor Learning Week. This event features activities like nest box making, bug hotel building, wildlife walks and environmental investigations (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, n.d.).

Bilton and Waters (2016) critically analyse how professionals in Wales and England are driven to use the outdoor provisions within their settings. Findings of the research they carried out suggests that practitioners in Wales aim and plan to use outdoor spaces specifically for curriculum-related learning more than practitioners in England. The research shows how the divide of education pedagogy has impacted the way in which practitioners demonstrate their aims for outdoor education in Wales and England.

In my setting as a primary school teaching assistant, we have weekly Forest School sessions with a company named 'Bearfoot and Beyond'. During these sessions, children are exploring the school's outdoor area whilst learning about various aspects of bushcraft. Over the months, children have used areas of the Curriculum for Wales to complete numeracy, literacy, health and well-being and science activities linked with the outdoors. Bushcraft activities that children have been getting involved with include whittling, learning to light fires safely, planting trees and plants and creating wood cookies.

We have also built strong connections with families of the children who have been getting involved with mathematics specific outdoor sessions in the afternoons during school hours. Families have found these sessions beneficial as they have been able to learn ways to support their children with aspects of the curriculum in the outdoors outside of the education setting.

Furthermore, parents and families in Wales strongly support outdoor learning and recognise the large benefits it has for children's development, well-being and academic engagement. A survey carried out by Public Health Wales (2024) revealed that the majority of parents and families support schools' involvement in promoting health and well-being. Statistics from the survey show that 80% of parents support schools in developing positive coping mechanisms, 78% of them support schools that foster positive relationships and 74% of parents support practitioners helping to prevent substance misuse.

However, barriers to outdoor learning that parents and families show concerns about are issues such as risk factors that could lead to injuries, language barriers of children whom Welsh and English is their second language, children with disabilities having difficulty with accessing outdoor provisions, staffing levels to provide children with the outdoor educational opportunities and the admin and paperwork that comes with it in settings (NHS Confederation, 2024).

Relating back to what I discussed happens at my setting above, as much as parents love these sessions, they do feed back to us about some negatives. One of the negatives they fed back to us about what the sessions being in the afternoon during school time. The sessions run between the hours of 1pm and 3pm and they said that parents and families were struggling to attend these sessions due to work commitments and that they feel more parents would be able to benefit from them and attend if they were after school hours. Some parents, not all, also fed back about their children missing afternoon learning in the classroom due to the children being out of class for the outdoor learning. Parents concerns were that children would sometimes do numeracy or literacy would in the afternoons that they did not want their child missing out on.

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