

The Foundation Phase

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Crynodeb

Yn yr erthygl hon eir ati i adfyfyrio'n feirniadol ar natur y Cyfnod Sylfaen yng Nghymru. Rhoddir ystyriaeth i arferion ac ymchwil sydd wedi dylanwadu ar ei ddatblygiad, megis Dull Reggio Emilia yn yr Eidal. Trafodir cysyniad 'Dysgu trwy chwarae'. Amlinellir yr heriau a wyneba ymarferwyr y mae'n rhaid iddynt sicrhau bod plant yn dysgu trwy gyfleoedd a arweinir gan ymholi, sy'n rhai gweithredol ac sy'n seiliedig ar chwarae. Ymchwilir i nifer o'r damcaniaethau, megis Arferion Meddwl (Costa a Kallick, 2008) gan adfyfyrio ar y modd y gall y rhain, yn ogystal â chyfoethogi'r modd y dysga ac y datblyga plant, hefyd gynorthwyo ymarferwyr yn y broses gynllunio.

Geiriau allweddol: Y Cyfnod Sylfaen, dysgu trwy chwarae, heriau, gweithredu, datblygu, asesu.

Abstract

This article critically reflects on the unique nature of the Foundation Phase in Wales. Consideration will be given to practices and research which have influenced its development, such as the Reggio Emilia Approach from Italy. Discussion of the concept of *Learning through play* will be made. Challenges facing practitioners who have to ensure learning takes place through enquiry led, active, play-based opportunities will be outlined. A number of theories are explored, such as Habits of Mind (Costa and Kallick, 2008) reflecting on how these can enrich not only the children's learning and development but also support practitioners in the planning process.

Key words: Foundation Phase, learning through play, challenges, implementation, development, assessment.

Introduction

This article will discuss the unique nature of the Foundation Phase (FP) in Wales and some of the theories and researchers that have influenced its development. Aspects relating to implementation and subsequent monitoring of the Foundation Phase will be explored. The relevance of, enquiry led, active, play-based opportunities will be discussed.

So, what is the Foundation Phase?

With educational reforms taking place in 2004, The Foundation Phase came in to existence through the document *The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3-7* (2003). The Welsh Assembly Governments priorities are based on the seven core aims of the United Nations Convention of the Child (UNCRC). The Foundation Phase was piloted in September 2004 with 3-5 year olds in forty one settings. Organised into *Seven Areas of Learning* rather than separate curriculum subjects, the rationale behind the FP is learning based on holistic, active experience.

“Through the Foundation Phase we are giving children the chance to learn by taking part in practical activities that are fun and enjoyable. They are also gaining first hand experiences through play and active involvement which enables them to be creative, imaginative and have fun whilst learning”.

Jones, 2010.

From personal experience the Foundation Phase does just this, when planned and implemented by skilled practitioners it enables all children to develop skills and understanding while still enjoying the freedom of creative and active play. This paper will share experience gained in the Foundation Phase environment, along with reviewing different types of thinking skills, such as De Bono (2000) *Six Thinking Hats* and *Sustained Shared Thinking*. These are important to incorporate the Skills Framework for 3 to 19 year olds into the curriculum. In the Skills Framework, developing thinking skills is seen as the key to learning. The importance of Welsh Language Development and Creativity will also be explored as the Welsh language can be exciting and enriching and it will be argued that it is vital that children are allowed to explore all areas of learning in a creative manner.

Implementation

The Foundation Phase has been built on a good foundation of early years practice here in Wales, which involved a broad and balanced curriculum. It combines what was called the Early Years Education (for 3 to 5 year olds) and Key Stage One (5 to 7 year olds) of the National Curriculum (WAG, 2011). The Welsh Assembly Government states that;

“The Foundation Phase is based on the principle that early years’ provision should offer a sound foundation for future learning through a developmentally appropriate curriculum. It will bring more consistency and continuity to children’s education at such an all-important period in their development”.

WAG, 2011.



Seven Areas of Learning in the Foundation Phase (WAG, 2010, p. 14)

Young children in the Foundation Phase have the opportunity to gain first hand experiences through learning by doing and through play and active involvement in a play based curriculum. The development of speech and language skills are given a high priority as well as emphasis on reading and writing, and practical mathematics. These will be developed in a more holistic fashion with emphasis on children understanding how things work and on finding different ways to solve problems (WAG, 2011).

The focus of the Foundation Phase curriculum is on experiential learning, active involvement and developing each child's:

- Skills and understanding.
- Personal, social, emotional, physical and intellectual well being so as to develop the whole child.
- Positive attitudes to learning so that they enjoy it and want to continue.
- Self-esteem and self-confidence to experiment, investigate, learn new things and form new relationships.
- Creative, expressive and observational skills to encourage their development as individuals with different ways of responding to experiences.
- Activities in the outdoors where they have first-hand experience of solving real-life problems and learn about conservation and sustainability.

WAG, 2011.

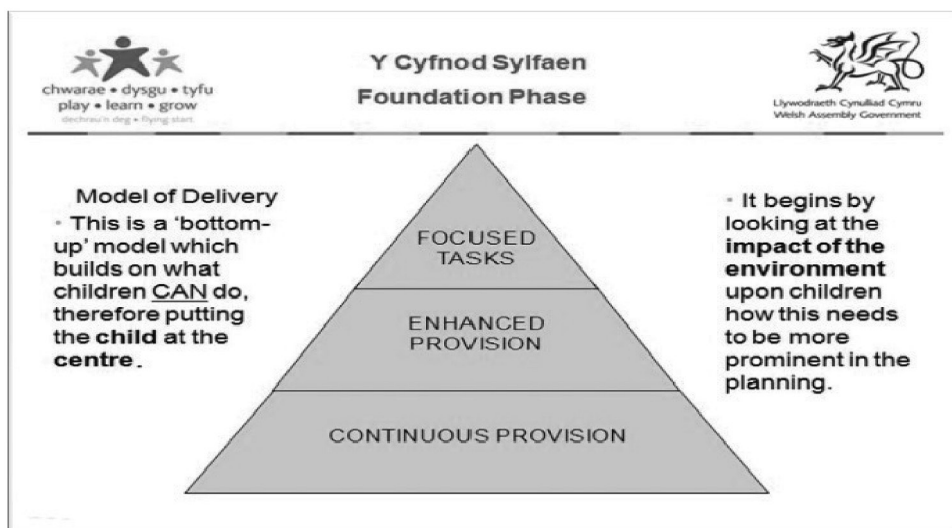
The Foundation Phase is now fully implemented, with the previous National Curriculum Key stage one suspended, although it took four years to do so, 1st September 2008 for all 3 to 4-year-olds 1st September 2009 for all 4 to 5-year-olds, 1st September 2010 for all 5 to 6-year-olds and finally 1st September 2011 for all 6 to 7-year-olds in the Foundation Phase (WAG, 2011).

The Monitoring and Evaluation of the Effective Implementation of the Foundation Phase (MEEIFP) Project across Wales report suggested that there are four concepts for effective learning through the Foundation Phase, the role of play; the need for a well planned environment, including outdoor space, for learning; the importance of the ratio of trained staff to children in a setting; and the development of Welsh, English and Bilingualism. (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 21). Recently the Education Minister Leighton Andrews said:

“The benefits of teaching and learning through the Foundation Phase are already being seen in schools and settings across Wales. But the pay-off of this radical new way of learning will be long-term and its impact will be felt for many years to come. Introducing the Foundation Phase was a big step forward for Wales but, as the past two years have shown us, it was a step in the right direction”.

Foundation Phase Roll out, 2011.

Learning Styles



The Foundation Phase is delivered using, continuous and enhanced provision along with focus tasks (WAG, 2011)

Learning Style Theory (2011) suggest that this would allow learning to take place in the way the child feels comfortable, *Visual*, *Auditory* or *Kinaesthetic* (VAK) or even all three. However Claxton, Gardner and Greenfield (2009) are critical of the current focus on these learning styles. Claxton suggests that the acronym for learning VAK actually stands for vacuous. He indicates that different learning situations demand different learning approaches and that all human learning involves the merging of different sensory inputs. This approach is of great relevance to practitioners working with young children. In the Foundation Phase children need to develop a wide range of learning approaches as they are laying down the foundations in the brain for future learning. Effective learning at this stage must involve physical action as well as exploration of texture, shape, and form. Also children should develop ways of seeing and hearing that inform all of their learning. This is why the development

of effective practice in the Foundation Phase is so vital (Pound, 2009, p. 17). As Bruce (1997) has consistently argued, effective practice in early childhood education is rooted in child development understanding and based on the work of educators such as Froebel, Montessori and Steiner. They recognise the importance of the whole child, that children are self-motivating and that learning is most effective when it engages children in first hand experiences that builds on their existing understanding (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 8).

Observations and Assessment

Assessment particularly through the use of observation is a key element of practice in the Foundation Phase. Fisher (2002, p. 22) has argued effective early years teaching, learning and assessment needs to be underpinned by a number of key principles. These include the need for linked strands:

- To be rooted in developmentally appropriate practice.
- To take place within familiar contexts (Bowman *et al*, 2001).
- To be built on what the child can do rather than what they cannot (Bruce 1997).
- To be sensitive to how children build their knowledge, skills and understanding by drawing on a range of experiences, not categorised under subject headings.
- To recognise that when children are motivated by activities they learn best.
- To take place in an environment that promotes confidence and enhances self esteem (Dowling 2000).
- To be based on knowledge and information from a range of people who are involved with the child.

Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 8.

Observations are an essential component for practitioners in the Foundation Phase setting. The collection of evidence can take many forms, from personal experience a camera is an essential part of the foundation phase classroom, for the children to use as a self assessment tool and for the practitioner to record children's experiences and tasks, to assess and evaluate.

Observations must always take place in a non intrusive manner to ensure the child feels safe happy and comfortable. By recording objective observations, it is possible for the practitioner to learn in a practical way, this helps them become aware of these needs and how to meet them (Hobart, 2009, p. 17). Observations are a good form of keeping records and can help with future planning and also therefore developing the child's learning. One strategy way to begin observation in a Foundation Phase environment is through a "Look, Listen and Note" Approach.

- Looking – with clear purpose; taking into account the child's current development and the particular way the child is learning, for example, gathering through information from parents.
- Listening – to how the individual child interacts with different adults and between different children.
- Recording – noting the important features of the child's responses, behaviour, learning and development accurately and as soon as possible after observing them.

Grigg, 2010, p. 378.

Welsh Development

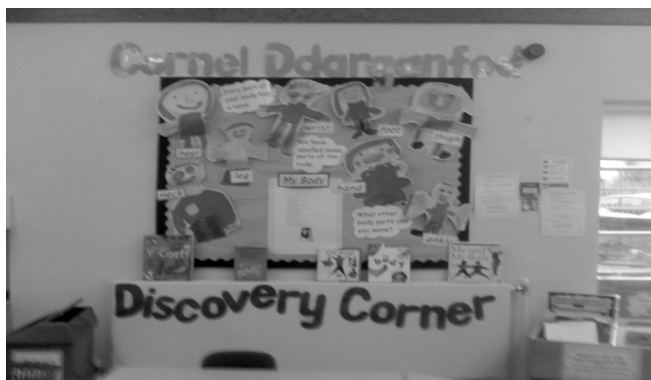
Here in Wales we are striving to give our future generation the best possible education and The Welsh Assembly Government has made a commitment to creating a bilingual nation where Welsh and English are used equally (Children and Family Information Service, 2011). This is why one of the seven areas of learning is now called Welsh Language Development.

Originally this area was called Bilingualism and Multicultural Understanding. Wales is now becoming a multicultural society, so by using the phrase *Bilingualism*, it could be misunderstood to be about developing any of the other languages now spoken in Wales. By the Welsh Government stating Welsh Development as one of the areas of learning it is clear to see the importance placed on Welsh Language. To achieve this it is essential that young children have increased opportunities to learn Welsh and to use the language in their everyday activities. Two languages enable a child to think creatively and flexibly and also allow them to freely learn other languages. The addition of the Curriculum Cymreig and the five elements of this; “Cultural, Economic, Environmental, Historical and Linguistic” (ACCAC, 2003, p. 4-5), ensure children learn about Welsh culture. However with Wales becoming an increasingly multicultural community, it is essential that young children learn about the different cultures and to respect and celebrate the diversity of the different racial, cultural and religious traditions.

It should help children to understand the influence that multiculturalism has on their everyday lives (Children and Family Information Service, 2011).

During the Foundation Phase children should develop Welsh language skills through listening and responding to familiar situations and by being exposed to Welsh throughout their school day, building on knowledge they previously have. From experience in Foundation Phase settings in Welsh medium and English medium schools, Welsh has played a part in everyday tasks and commands, for example, the register would be taken in Welsh, and incidental Welsh would be used throughout the day. In Welsh schools notices would be predominantly in Welsh however in English medium schools the notices, display boards etc would be bilingual.

By being exposed to Welsh, it enables the child to grasp an understanding of the language from an early age. The term *window of opportunity* has been used to describe the optimum time for a child to experience and develop in particular areas such as language. Nash (1997) explains that there appears to be a series of windows for



Above, Areas of the classroom have Welsh & English signs (November, 2012)



Above - a class display that children made when they had visitors from a school in Losotho, visit the school (November, 2012)

developing language. The window for acquiring syntax may close as early as five or six years of age, while the window for adding new words may never close (Nash, 1997: p.7). This is why Welsh development in the Foundation Phase is vital to give children the best start with the Welsh and English language.

Play Based and Active Learning

The whole Foundation Phase has been devised through the concept of play based and active learning. Rinaldi explains,

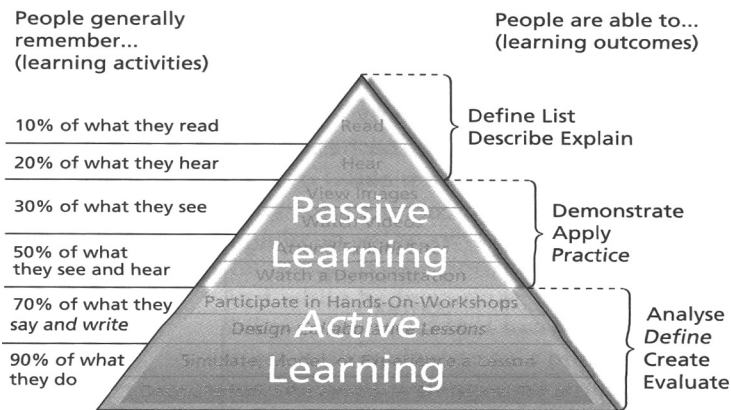
“Play is a universal phenomenon, present throughout history. It is shared knowledge a silent knowledge accessed by children of every epoch and culture with incredible sensitivity, originality and creativity, it is knowledge that is learned but not taught”.

Rinaldi, 2007.

The Welsh Assembly Government stated “it is important that children are not introduced to formal methods of learning to soon as this can have a detrimental effect on their future learning and development” (WAG, 2008c, p.8). This is backed up by good practise in countries such as Denmark, Reggio Emilia in Italy and New Zealand. For example in Reggio Emilia in Italy, children are not taught by rote but are allowed to learn on their own or with each other. In the Reggio Approach the Philosophy, the child is viewed as rich and powerful with rights rather than needs (McDonald (2004) cited in Rinaldi, 2007). Louise Boyd Cadwell (1997, p. 27) states “they allow child to explore the educationally rich environment indoors and outdoors, the teacher is there to foster the child and their capabilities and to challenge the child in an appropriate way”. This is essentially what The Welsh Assembly Government wants from the Foundation Phase, allowing children to learn through practical activities that necessarily challenge and motivate (WAG, 2008d, p.11). This is backed up by the view of Bruner, he believes that the child naturally adapts to its environment and abstract thinking develops through action (Moyle, 2005, p. 63).

Play is all about developing flexibility of thought. It provides opportunities to try out possibilities, to put different elements of situation together in various

ways and to look at problems from different viewpoints. There has been a lot of controversy around the Foundation Phase, is it good that our children are just playing? Play can often be mistaken as the opposite of work, but within the Foundation Phase structured educational play can allow children to learn effectively by first hand experiences. It allows children to take ownership of their learning and become active learners throughout all areas of learning (WAG, 2008d, p.7).



“Active learning is concerned with the process by which children play an active role in the learning experience” (Grigg, 2010, p.101 and p.102)

If play and active learning is structure well the purpose should be to;

- Motivate.
- Stimulate.
- Support.
- Develop skill.
- Develop concepts.
- Develop language/communication skills.
- Develop positive attitudes.
- Demonstrate awareness/use of recent learning and skills.
- Consolidate learning.

WAG, 2008d, p. 7.

Child centered learning is one of the main focuses in the Foundation Phase, Piaget had a similar view to supported this; he thought that learning should focus on the child. Schools needed to provide necessary materials so each child could explore and build schemas. The child would adapt, reach a state of equilibration and then move into a state of disequilibrium as it learns yet more. His process requires the materials to explore the learning environment and requires an active enquiring child. He believed that “A teacher is not really required, as there is no place for training” (Pound, 2005, p. 37). This goes against the views of Bruner and Vygotsky both thought adult participation helped learning (Brain, 2000, p. 102). Blatchford and McCallum agrees and that;

“Cognitive development (the building up of knowledge and understanding) is the result of active learning – the child participating in problem solving, together with a *more knowledgeable other* who can provide leadership and guidance within the activity”.

Siraj-Blatchford and McCallum, 2005, p. 28.

Thinking Skills

There is more and more focus on thinking skills in education. This is why WAG in 2005 produced the “Developing thinking skills and assessment for learning” programme in 2005. This was produced to support schools in their development of Thinking and Assessment for Learning.

In 2005 DCELLS set up and funded a programme for developing thinking and assessment for learning working in partnership with school clusters and Local Authority (LA) advisers. The programme focused on the development, implementation and dissemination of good practice in the teaching of developing thinking and assessment for learning strategies. The main aims of the programme were to:

- Improve pupil performance.
- Increase engagement with learning.
- Change classroom practice, thereby improving pedagogy.
- Increase the frequency of creative lessons.

WAG, 2008a.

Within the Foundation Phase thinking skills are developed in the day to day provision. Children are encouraged to develop their thinking across the curriculum through the processes of planning, developing and reflecting, this helps them acquire deeper



From personal experience I have seen an example of this in the letter corner. In the said school, every day the activity is changed although the letter is the same for the week. The teacher changes the activity so children can be creative with their thinking

understanding and enables them to explore and make sense of their world. WAG suggests,

“The processes of developing thinking, namely plan, develop and reflect, should not be seen as a set style of learning and teaching. Each process does not have specific place in task. The three processes should be interchangeable”.

WAG, 2010, p. 10.

The three-way process allows the child to think creatively, during the Foundation Phase this is very important, as the child needs to adapt to different area easily and be creative in how the areas are used in the Foundation Phase setting. Tasks like this allow the child to be critical and to carry out the tasks and evaluate and reflect on their learning.

The Foundation Phase environment gives children the opportunity to develop independent thinking through choosing activities, and exploring materials and toys from a very early age, without adults directing them all the time. The WAG suggests that;

“Behaviour that indicates children are thinking independently includes instances where they observe how to complete an activity or how something works and then attempt it without direction. Children might also indicate independent thinking in instances where they try different solutions to solve problems. Children’s imagination and creativity can be supported and extended through opportunities to sequence and extend events and stories”.

WAG, 2009, p. 19.

However Vygotsky suggest that a teacher is needed as scaffolding for the child’s learning this allows the child to do achieve whatever they want, or to solve a problem. Without the scaffolding the child will be unable to learn. The scaffolding can slowly be withdrawn as the child progresses and the problem is solves (Brain, 2000, p. 93). Bruner (1983) also believes that the best way a child help in learning is to watch the success of the child and leave it to continue and then watch when things go wrong and intervene (Brain, 2000, p. 95).

In the Foundation Phase setting allows Vygotsky and Bruner’s thought to develop, although it is said to be child centered learning through personal experience the adult tends to lead the learning. Learning and thinking is helped in the whole by *Sustained Shared Thinking*, this encouraged engaging in discussion with a child and by encouraging them to talk about their interest and by asking open ended questions the practitioner can extend and support a child’s thinking (WAG, 2008, p. 35). Sustained shared thinking is defined in the EPPE research as;

“Two or more individuals working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding”.

EPPE Report, 2005, p. 6.

This is in line with Vygotsky’s social interaction theory, he believed that language is one of the tools for thinking which we learn from others and use with others in thinking

and learning (Pound, 2005, p. 40), this is supported by WAG “The Foundation Phase opportunities for children to be listened to and their meaningful suggestions acted upon” (WAG, 2008b, p. 17).

There are many effective thinking skills programmes to use in the Foundation Phase such as *Habits of Mind* and De Bono’s, *Six Thinking Hats* (2000).

Table 4.2 Six Thinking Hats

Hat	Image association	Symbolises	Useful questions
White	Paper	Facts and figures	What are the facts? What do we need to know?
Red	Fire	Emotions	How do you feel about . . . ? What makes you angry/sad?
Yellow	Sunshine	Positives	What are the good points? What are the benefits of this?
Black	Judgement	Negatives, caution	What are the bad points? What are the potential problems? What do the rules say?
Green	Plants	Creativity	What are the alternatives? What ideas do you have?
Blue	Sky	Overview	Have we thought this through? Have we all had a say? What have we learnt?

Source: Adapted from De Bono (2000)

Grigg, 2010, p. 94.

The above can be used in the teachers planning, evaluating and comparison or during child led activities to aid problem solving. The technique uses six different coloured hats, teaching a different type of thinking for each. A metaphorical hat or for children maybe a real hat can be place to the head so a different type of thinking style can be used. These hats can be very powerful and flexible when used correctly, however the children must know how to use them (Fleetman, 2003, p. 28-29). For example when a child wears the white hat, they would be aware that they need to consider the facts, when wearing the green hat they need to think about alternatives to the situation and when wearing the blue hat, they would need to think about what they have learnt.

Creativity

From personal experience, Creativity is a valuable aspect of education, this implemented in the Foundation Phase, with out of the seven areas being Creative development. This is wonderful however in my opinion the children should be creative in all area of learning. Children should use their imagination and creativity across the curriculum. WAG states; “The child’s natural curiosity and disposition to learn should be stimulated by everyday sensory experiences, both indoors and outdoors” (WAG, 2010, p. 39).

Creativity has to be supported by teachers to get the best out of the child, Guy Claxton suggests there are 8 *I*s to creativity; Immersion, inquisitiveness, investigation, interaction, imagination, intuition, intellect and imitation (Pound, 2009, p.16). All these or just a few can help a child with his/her creative natural. In the Foundation Phase it is essential that children are left to play and discover on their own, most of the time. From personal experience when in schools, the majority of display boards look



Above is a classroom display -children were given paint & pattern sequences. All the children show creativity and individuality

beautiful with each picture, painting etc, almost identical. Why is this? If children are left to explore and use their imagination the display boards would look completely different, maybe at Christmas we would not have twenty five red Santa's, maybe we would have green, pink or purples ones.

Literacy Levels

Although the Foundation Phase has been celebrated in the whole and the impact on the wellbeing of the child has been positive, literacy has been a hot topic for criticism, but after three years of the scheme being rolled out to primary settings across the country, there are signs that in some schools the learning through play approach is causing problems (Evans, 2011).

From personal experience schools are now putting commercial reading scheme such as Read, Write Inc. in place. This is a phonics based scheme where children are put into ability groups, not year or age groups. If this will raise standards is yet to be seen, and is this the right way to go? A comment on the article *Literacy slumps sounds alarm*:

“The Foundation Phase was initially described as the best bits of practice from European and International schools. Where these schools get it right is by focusing on early childhood development and experiences and not on the outcomes at 7, 11, 16 etc. Many of the Scandinavian countries have lower reading and writing skills at 7 and 11 than in our country, but by the time they leave education they are streets ahead”.

Evans, 2010.



Steiner agrees with the above, he states that “whether at school or at home, the young child is to be occupied mainly with quite other matters than formal exercise in learning to read, until his eighth year or at least”. He goes on to say that skills should be acquired through oral, rather than written or printed work and should be gained through natural experiences (Pound 2008, p. 24).

It is possible that we are worrying too soon, with regards to literacy standards, my personal belief is that we should leave the first children of the Foundation Phase develop their literacy skills at Key Stage 2, the foundations that were laid in their previous years education will be built upon and we will be able to judge from there if the Foundation Phase is working as far as literacy is concerned. To help this, from September 2011, children entering the Foundation Phase will have their reading and writing assessed (to) form a profile to enable practitioners to address the learning needs of the individual child and focus on developing and monitoring their progress in language, literacy and communication. Answering questions in the Senedd recently, education minister Leighton Andrews said the Foundation Phase will not be allowed to lead to a reduction in literacy. “Overall, I am optimistic that the foundation phase will impact upon literacy and numeracy. We certainly cannot let go of those basics as young people go through the foundation phase” (Evans, 2010). Estyn states in the Literacy and the Foundation Phase, an evaluation of the implementation of the Foundation Phase for five to six-year-olds in primary schools, with special reference to literacy that its findings were that,

“In a significant minority of schools, children are not learning enough in the Foundation Phase. Children do not make enough progress in their learning because the activities being planned are not challenging enough and there isn’t an appropriate balance between child-initiated and practitioner-led activities. The lack of balance and good planning limits the development of children’s independent thinking and problem-solving skills”.

ESTYN, 2011, p. 1.

Conclusion

While researching and experiencing the Foundation Phase, it has been wonderful to see children come alive while experiencing different activities indoors and outdoors.

The vast amount of work Foundation Phase teachers and staff have to do to promote learning and setting up the different learning environments needs acknowledgement. As even though it is *Learning through play*, it has to be planned with detail, yet be able to be adapted at the last second if the need arises.

“An early years curriculum based on active learning and including elements of play and assessment for learning, is capable of increasing the engagement, enjoyment and achievement of our youngest children”.

WAG, 2008, p. 4.

Many different strategies are used in the Foundation Phase to develop a range of skills, from developing different thinking skills to reading schemes and different observational techniques. All these need to be undertaken in the appropriate manner and the right strategy chosen for the task in hand. The only hope is that the right training is given and funding spent on the right resources to make sure the Foundation Phase flourishes in the years to come, so that all our young children have a good foundation to build their future learning on.

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