The Early Years Curricula

Section 1

Putting a curriculum into practice and implementing it successfully is an evidently challenging task. An example of the these challenges can be seen when looking at Wales' Foundation Phase curriculum. Welsh education has come under heavy scrutiny for the past ten years. Gove (2013), who was England's secretary of state for education, issued a warning to England's voters in December 2013 he stated: "You need only look over the Severn to see a country going backwards." Wales was described by him as "an object lesson" in 2014 for what happens when reform is abandoned.

Furthermore Wales was performing the lowest among its neighbours, according to the latest PISA report at the time (OECD, 2014) and again 4 years on in 2018 according to the PISA results (Wightwick 2019), which supported Gove's claims. Among other things, it came to the conclusion that Welsh schools were unable to meet the needs of all pupils in terms of learning and that Wales had a large percentage of "low performers" as suggested by Power, Newton and Taylor (2020). OECD also discovered that another key problem was that disadvantage in its various forms had a detrimental influence on children's and young people's academic success and personal well-being. Therefore OECD believed it was critical that the curriculum be structured in such a way that it engages and empowers all children and young people (Donaldson, 2015a). The foundation phase was also criticized by Waters (2016) as there is no single obvious explanation for the Foundation Phase's strategy and teaching that practitioners could apply. This was resulting in confusion and differences in the curriculum throughout schools in Wales.

Wales recognised the need for lasting changes across the nation, as well as the need to consider implementation at all levels within the provision and across all stakeholders. As a result, in 2016, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to assess the policies and reforms implemented since the 2014 OECD review, which provided a number of policy recommendations for further improvements with a longer term perspective. OECD then introduced the Welsh education reform journey with a special focus on their implementation procedures, and gave tangible

recommendations for improvement (Schleicher, 2017). The resulting paper, Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015a), encouraged ideas for a new curriculum that relies on the existing strengths of Welsh education. The report identifies four main objectives that serve as a foundation for a new Curriculum for Wales: capable learners, creative contributors, informed citizens of Wales and the world and healthy confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. This reform has now been implemented and is known as the new curriculum for Wales which was introduced in January 2020.

Wales needed to ensure that the new curriculum was implemented successfully and delivered with confidence. OECD (2020) believed that it was crucial for Wales to address a number of issues in order to ensure that the new curriculum's intentions are carried out in practice, such as the difficulties in allowing schools to create their own curricula and the implications of the development of particular skills. Due to the difficulties that underprivileged schools may experience in implementing the curriculum, there was a possibility that inequalities would grow greater, which emphasises the necessity for defining the resources accessible to schools.

In 2020 the Welsh Government began implementing the new curriculum by firstly providing schools and other organisations a base in which to begin developing their own curricula with the four goals at the core. Secondly Curriculum for Wales: The Journey to 2022 was released by the Welsh government which outlined the procedures that should be followed in the lead-up to the rollout of the new curriculum for Wales and lays out clear expectations for schools and other settings as they develop their curricula and prepare to implement them starting from 2022 onwards. By establishing clear expectations it aimed to avoid the same mistakes made in the Foundation Phase and ensured that practitioners had obvious teaching and strategy to apply. The four aims of the curriculum are supported by this implementation plan, which also works to ensure that all aspects of the Welsh education system are moving in the same direction and bringing forth change for students, teachers, and all of Wales (Welsh Government no date)

Estyn have also supported the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales by engaging with schools and observing how well schools are coping with the new curriculum changes. Estyn (2018) stated that they received positive feedback by

most schools, whom had a positive attitude towards the change. The majority of teachers were aware that exceptional teaching and effective pedagogy both raise and maintain student progress and the curricula had been designed to support their teaching. On the other hand Estyn discovered barriers in some schools where the curriculum had insufficient planning and resulted in curriculum being disorganised, inconsistent and lacking cohesion.

The Welsh Government (2023) states how Wales is implementing a high-quality, integrated, rights-based approach to Early Childhood Play, Learning, and Care (ECPLC). The Welsh Government is committing to place children's well-being and development at the centre of early childhood play, learning, and care in Wales to ensure that all children aged 0-5 years have the greatest possible start in life. The Welsh Government believe that all children have the fundamental right to play. Allowing infants and children plenty of time and space to play can help them explore their physical, cognitive, and social abilities as well as process the new learning they encounter when playing. Babies and young children can safely explore a variety of emotions and circumstances through play.

Most maintained schools in Wales and funded non-maintained nursery settings adopted their curriculum to follow the curriculum framework that was introduced for non-maintained nursery settings. This curricula supports holistic development and play based learning (Welsh Government 2022). There are strong connections between this curriculum and the six areas of learning as well as, the four curriculum purposes, and the concepts of child development.

The new curriculum focuses on the 5 developmental pathways to help early years children to flourish and develop into the four purposes that Wales aims for young learners to become. Munson (2022) explains that these paths include belonging, since it is critical that children realise their own distinct needs, likes, dislikes, and values, as well as those of others, and how everyone plays a role in the larger community. The second pathway is communication, children's communication skills grow as they learn to express their own wants, desires, and opinions. Another pathway is exploration, in which children pursue their own interests and fascinations with the help and encouragement of practitioners. Physical development is the process by which children improve their motor skills, coordination, and balance

through a variety of physical activities and obstacles. Finally, well-being is achieved when children recognise and value emotions, interests, traits, and choices in themselves and others.

We can compare the play based approach to learning to the successful Te-Whariki curriculum. This curriculum offers a wide range of experiences, most of which are play-based. Through exploration, communication, and representation, children learn to make sense of both their immediate and wider worlds by participating in these activities. Young children are becoming more interested in reading, maths, and other subject areas. These children are also capable of thinking in extremely creative ways as explained by the ministry of education New Zealand (2017). If Wales is able to implement their play based approach as successful as Te-Whariki it would allow a great possibility for the children in Wales to aspire to the four purposes that Wales hopes each child will become.

The majority of early years settings and classrooms in Wales have adopted the play based learning curricula. It can be difficult to define the concept of play which could potentially be a barrier and cause confusion for practitioners. UNICEF (2018) explains how an obstacle for practitioners may be that many teachers lack the necessary training to integrate play-based learning in their classrooms. They may consider 'learning resources' to be merely workbooks, rather than objects that children can investigate and utilise in their learning. Even when teachers recognise the need for such hands-on tools, there are frequently insufficient resources and little training to assist teachers in locating or creating play materials from low-cost locally accessible materials. Additionally many teachers have not witnessed learning via play in action and, as a result, are hesitant to use it in their classrooms.

Another potential barrier to play based learning is limit space and an environment that lacks opportunities for play. Play based learning relies on enabling environments and open spaces that offers plenty of room for all types of play opportunities including indoor and outdoor areas. Hodgman (2011) states that an enabling environment plays an important role considering it enables children to develop in all six areas of learning and gives them the chance to exercise existing skills and acquire new ones. It additionally provides children with challenges and stimulation. Therefore if the settings are unable to provide an enabling environment it is likely

that the child will suffer as they will be unable to reach their full potential as the lack of space or resources will not allow the child to fully immerse themselves into the play in the way that is needed for them to develop. Although this barrier could be resolved by offering plenty of opportunities for children to explore spaces outside of the setting such as the local park or a woodland area as these environments offer plenty of learning opportunities.

Section 2

Assuring that children are challenged and supported appropriately while allowing them to advance at a rate that is appropriate for them is made possible through assessment. In order to guide future learning and teaching , assessment should help create a holistic understanding of the child, including their areas of strength, learning preferences, and areas for improvement. Assessments provide important information that should be used to recognise and support children's learning as well as include any additional challenges or support needed for each child to reach their full potential. A wide variety of formats, such as learning stories, short narratives, one-page profiles, learning diaries, simple annotations, and digital apps or platforms, are available for practitioners to choose from in order for documenting and assessing a child's learning and development as discussed by the Welsh Government (2023).

The Welsh Government (2022) states how the Foundation Phase supported a technique for assessment that organises evaluations from the age of three and provided guidance for the assessment process. Within the first six weeks after entering Reception practitioners were permitted to assess the children to determine a baseline evaluation of all students across the country, which established a baseline of students' abilities and development in four areas of learning. Furthermore National Reading and Numeracy Tests were administered as a component of the Foundation Phase assessments. The National Reading and Numeracy Tests were formerly paper-based assessments given in schools once a year. They were required for all students in Wales in years 2-9. They included a 30-minute procedural numeracy test, a 30-minute reasoning numeracy test, and an hour-long reading test. Nevertheless, Estyn discovered in 2017 that "many schools'

processes for assessing literacy and numeracy are too complicated and time consuming." They put more of an emphasis on gathering data than they did on evaluating students' progression over time or pinpointing certain areas that require improvement.

When the new curriculum for Wales was introduced the assessment practiced changed. This resulted in schools now being responsible for developing and implementing their own assessment methods. Assessing children through the new curriculum has three mains roles these are helping each child on a daily, continuous basis; recognising, documenting, and considering individual growth; and comprehending collective growth over time to assist the environment in self-reflection as stated by the Welsh Government (2022a)

Pack (2016) explains how one way that children can be assessed through the new curriculum is by learning stories. The Learning Stories Assessment technique is a type of observation and documentation published in the form of a narrative story which could include photos of child doing the activities discussed in the story. Benefits of learning stories assessments are that children can tell practitioners appreciate their thoughts and ideas when practitioners listen, watch, and document their experiences. This can help boost children’s confidence through assessment. Another benefit to learning stories is that it strengthens the parent/teacher relationship and learning stories informs parents how children learn via play by providing knowledge about their abilities in a welcoming, authentic style.

The evidence shows how the new curriculum supports the unique child by assessing children as individuals rather than as data statistics on tests. The developmental needs of children are prioritised in the new curriculum for Wales, which adopts a holistic approach to education. It acknowledges that every child is unique, that children ought to be respected and have a voice, and that they have a need and a right to play (Pacey, no date). The New Curriculum for Wales kept their views similar to the foundation phase views on the unique child which emphasises that children must be given the freedom to grow at their own unique, individual pace since they learn and develop skills at varying rates. Children's creativity and openness should be accepted, acknowledged, and fostered in every aspect of their development (Welsh Government, 2015).

The view of the unique child is supported by the theorist Vygotsky. Learning happens through social interactions between individuals, according to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning. This theory is currently one of the most prevalent ones in education. Aubrey and Riley (2019, p.58) explains how Vygotsky claimed that an individual child's social context played a critical part in their construction of knowledge in a manner consistent with the culture in which they developed. According to Vygotsky, children acquire cultural tools—which stand for a means of communication and world interpretation—in a similar manner to how children acquire physical tools. Children do not inherit these cultural tools; rather, they are formed and nourished inside their cultural environment. According to Vygotsky's perspective, children should be introduced to these cultural resources at school, including language, storytelling, artwork, signs, and models. In order to facilitate new learning through problem-solving and social interactions, he thought that students should be exposed to a range of cultural tools.

Additionally Dr. Montessori was also among the first to develop educational approaches focused on the notion of the unique child. The belief that children possess the inner ability to grow and develop is a fundamental component of Montessori education. The knowledge that this self-construction occurs as a result of the child's interactions with their surroundings. It is the child's responsibility to actively engage with their ever changing environment as explained by Gueterbock (no date).

The unique child needs positive relationships to support their learning and development. Pacey (no date) discusses how children have a sense of belonging when they have positive relationships. These connections are made between a child and an enabling adult. The unique needs, emotions, and interests of the child are catered for and acknowledged by an enabling adult.

The Welsh Government (2021) explains how enabling adults support learners in the early years by paying close attention to, observe, and empathetically respond to them in order to gain a deeper knowledge of their developmental needs. They must decide when and how to intervene to assist learners in generating meaning. They should encourage and assist students as they begin to collaborate to solve challenges. It is critical for enabling adults to establish effective cross-curricular links

in order to present a broad and balanced curriculum that draws on learners' prior knowledge and experiences. They improve planning to uphold the standard of service, regularly adjusting it to accommodate the requirements of every learner.

Although a potential barrier to observation and regularly adjusting the curriculum to suit every child's interests. Is that observing a full class of children can be time consuming and it can be difficult to create a curriculum that supports each and every interest of every individual child in the class.

Another barrier that could affect positive relationships in the early years is the adult to child ratio. Children in Wales can start Nursery in School settings from the age of 3.The National Education Union (NEU) (2023) states that it is the schools responsibility to place the appropriate staffing in place for each unique classroom but the NEU recommends 26 children to one qualified teacher and one support staff whom is level 3 qualified or above. With reference to these recommendations it could be very challenging for the enabling adult to have a positive relationship with each individual child in a large class as there isn't enough staff to accommodate it.

Another important factor to supporting the unique child is the enabling environment. Conn and Murphy (2022) discusses how the definition of the learning environment is a complicated and multidimensional process that takes into account the physical space, material resources, planned learning experiences, and how children respond to these. Palaiologou (2012) believes that to be able to successfully observe, record and assess children in the early years children and practitioners need an enabling environment to support development and learning.

According to the Leggett and Newman (2017), "both indoor and outdoor environments support all aspects of children's learning and invite communication between children, early childhood educators, families, and the broader community." They encourage overall shared thinking and collaboration'.

Although there is plenty of evidence that states the benefits of the outdoor environment and has a crucial part to play in the new curriculum for Wales some practitioners may have their own particular perspectives on play, experiential learning, and outdoor play. A potential barrier is practitioners may limit learning for children because they are less likely to adopt a pedagogy that understands learning from a child's perspective and recognises the relevance of the outdoor environment

in assisting children to achieve higher levels of cognitive understanding as stated by Davies and Hamilton(2018) .

Culture can play a huge role in individual children’s lives. It’s important that their culture and values that they are taught at home are respected, understood and accepted in the school environment.

Alsubaie (2015) states that according to various studies, students' academic achievement may be low or poor if their education systems are different from the culture of their classroom. The research also illustrates how some cultures use and prefer indirect connections in contrast to directness, open expression, or frankness. For example, in a multicultural classroom in a Western educational system, a Chinese student requested for the teacher to please refrain from asking the student any questions in class. The student was terrified of being criticised or giving the incorrect answers in class because the direct questioning style in education was unfamiliar in the students culture.

Ongley (2007) explains how teachers must use a certain set of tactics and tools to successfully administer a bicultural curriculum. Music, according to the Te Whariki concept, can be used to integrate diverse cultures into the classroom. This could be because children are musical beings. They appear to have an intrinsic sense of rhythm and may express themselves through music. Singing, dancing, and musical instruments are proven to be helpful tools, with the addition of an action or item, the children's curiosity expands and their involvement in the experiences deepens.

Practitioners in Wales should make conscious efforts to research, understand support all the different cultures and backgrounds that the children bring into classroom. By doing so the practitioner is supporting the unique child and educating the other children by introducing new cultures and views to the classroom. It also helps support one of the 4 main purposes of the new curriculum to help children to become ethically informed citizens of Wales and the world.

Section 3

A parent-school partnership in the new curriculum for Wales.

When a child starts schools for the first time some parents feel isolated from the their child, as for the first time their child has a completely separate life without them and it can be quite difficult for parents to fully know what is going on between the four walls of the classroom. A parent-teacher relationship with consistent communications can benefit the parents, teacher and most importantly the child when executed correctly. As Pacey (no date) states informal conversations on a regular basis with parents are a really valuable resource to build good relationships. A brief conversation can reassure parents, who tend to feel as though they are missing out on their child's day. Therefore bridging the gap between parent and school partnership could be essential to all parties involved in ensuring the success of the new curriculum for Wales.

(Welsh Government, 2023) The national minimum standards for regulated childcare (NMS) states how, standard 6 is working in partnership with parents. According to the NMS it is important for schools in Wales to keep parents updated on their child's activities, accomplishments, and development. This could include keeping parents completely informed about routines and childcare practises, or providing regular information about activities to parents, such as through wall displays, photographs, or examples of children's work. Additionally with the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales headteachers of maintained schools are required to make arrangements to provide information about a learner's progress to parents. The new information-sharing standards recognise the critical role that parents may play in bridging the gap between school and home and assisting students in making progress. Headteachers have the freedom to choose the best format for communicating with parents, and they will be encouraged to utilise a variety of communication channels to effectively engage and maximise parental involvement as discussed by Welsh Government (2023).

The Educational policy institution (2021) found that parents' personal school experiences may influence their involvement in their child’s school. It may have affected how much parents trust and encourage their own children and their teachers if they did not "succeed" in school, love learning, or have positive experiences within

the system. According to Axford et al. (2019) parent expectations are a reflection of parents views and opinions about education in general. Therefore having high parental expectations appears to be essential for children's academic progress because children are likely to hold similar attitudes and views as their parents. Therefore with this in mind it is essential for schools to build parents trust and this can be done through strong parent-teacher communication. Teachers can achieve this through many different methods of communication such as having an open door policy so parents can discuss any worries and concerns with the teacher whenever possible, frequent parents evenings, over the phone or through email, Weekly newsletters to keep parents updated on what’s being going on throughout the school that week, electronic updates such as a school app and lastly through assessments as suggested by Povey et al. (2016).

Unfortunately a barrier to teachers working in partnership with parents can uninvolved parents. This could be due to many factors, as discussed by Povey et al. (2023a) although a key barrier seems to be due to a lack of time, such as; work commitments, family commitments or the timing of school events not suiting their lifestyle. Although Povey did find that a minority of parents simply just had no interest in their childrens education.

The Welsh Government (2016) discusses the many benefits that supportive parents who work in partnership with schools have to support their child academically. The first benefit being that children learn more easily and feel protected during transitions when they receive encouragement from their parents. This may be because children feel safe to make mistakes when they know they are loved, supported and encouraged therefore there is not any fear or pressure when they are in the learning environment which leads to children learning at their own unique pace. Another benefit discussed by the Welsh Government is when children believe their parents or other carers support their academic growth, they are more likely to continue learning after the age of 16. This could be due to children feeling valued and confident in their ability when they have the support of their parents.

Schools and Parents should also work together to ensure that children in the early years are given ample opportunity to benefit from the play-based learning that the new curriculum for Wales has to offer. The new curriculum for Wales believes in a

play-based approach to learning which is broad and can be difficult to implement in the early years classrooms, which may require the partnership of both teachers and parents to ensure the success of this approach. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) explain how play-based learning is still relatively new to the field of teaching, and additionally has a lack of data to support the development of "best" practises. Due to this parents and even teachers may be reluctant to support this approach to teaching. However ensuring that parents and teacher have good communication and are able to openly discuss their concerns, opinions and beliefs, will help in assuring that children are provided with the best possible outcome. Additionally, the new curriculum focuses on the unique child and how children all learning at different times and stages therefore in the early years classrooms there may be some children who simple are not yet ready for learning and the best approach for them is the play-based learning approach to feed their curiosity and prepare them for learning, therefore teachers can work in partnership with parents to teach parents how to encourage their curiosity at home without forcing or pressuring children into learning before they are ready to do so.