

Vikki Curtis 1650885

Developing Professional Curiosity:
A Critical Literature Review

Supporting young children to be capable through the lens of the curriculum for
funded non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2022)

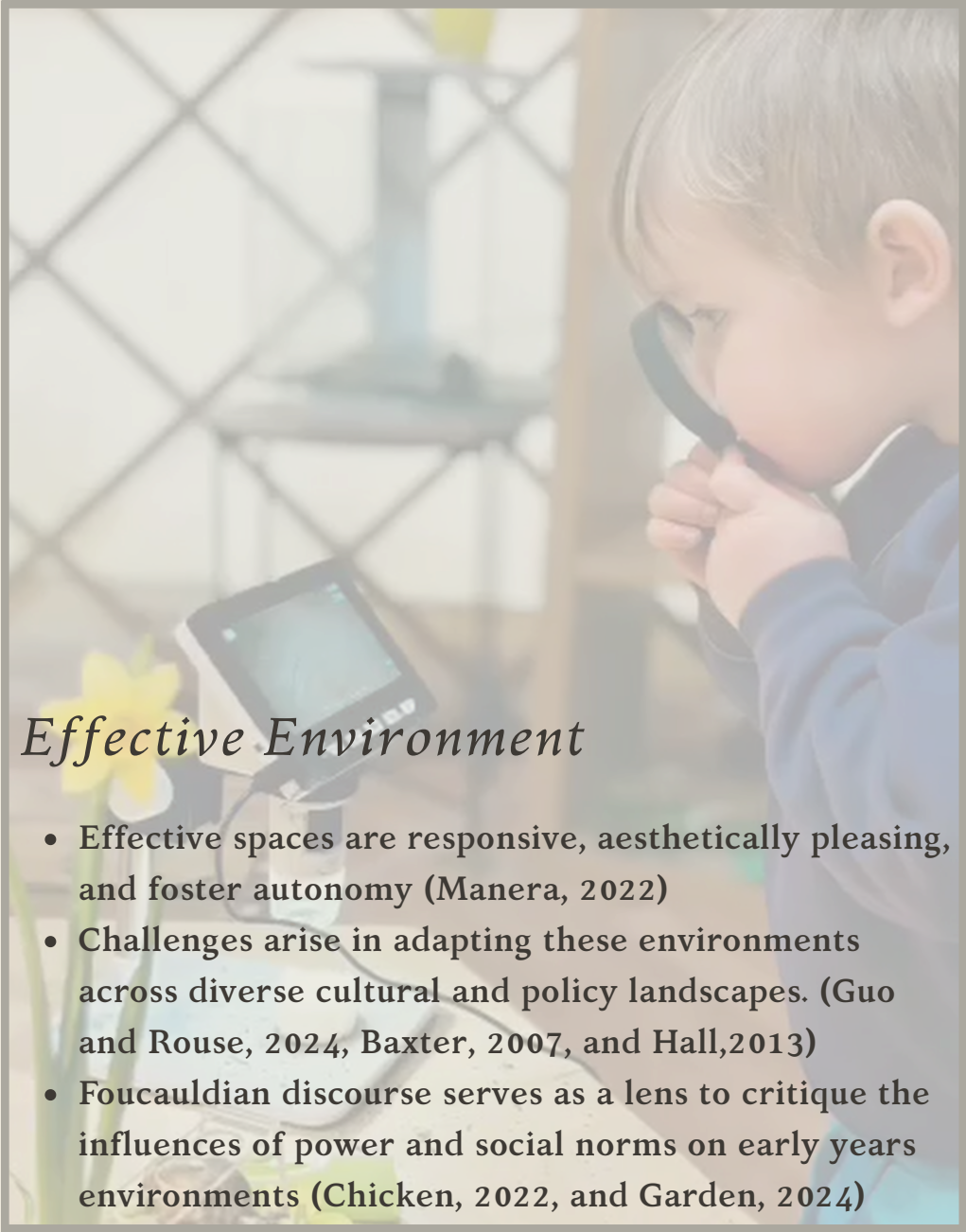
POSITIONALITY

- Lives in a socioeconomically deprived area and works as a Flying Start Advisory Teacher and Estyn nursery inspector.
- Co-authored the CFNMS and is a Froebelian practitioner.
- Work is grounded in child-centred pedagogy and attachment theory (Circle of Security).



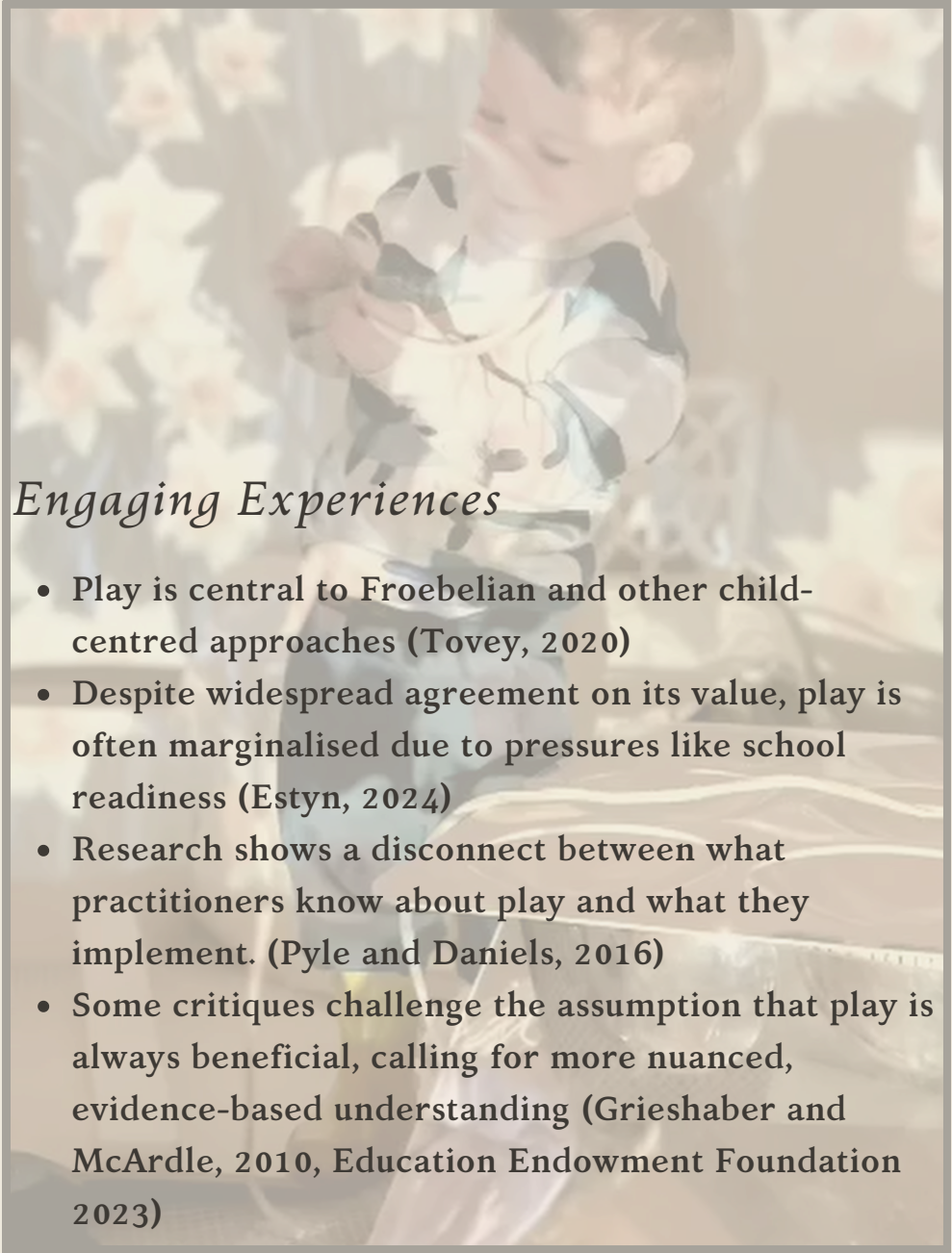
Introduction

'Several research papers have concluded that children growing up in poverty may have poorer health outcomes (WG,2024); be at risk of child abuse and neglect (Bywaters et al, 2022); have a speech and language need (Stats Wales, 2023); and be less successful academically than children from families with more resources (Mayo and Siraj, 2015). This frames children in Flying Start in need of ‘catching up’.



Effective Environment

- Effective spaces are responsive, aesthetically pleasing, and foster autonomy (Manera, 2022)
- Challenges arise in adapting these environments across diverse cultural and policy landscapes. (Guo and Rouse, 2024, Baxter, 2007, and Hall,2013)
- Foucauldian discourse serves as a lens to critique the influences of power and social norms on early years environments (Chicken, 2022, and Garden, 2024)



Engaging Experiences

- Play is central to Froebelian and other child-centred approaches (Tovey, 2020)
- Despite widespread agreement on its value, play is often marginalised due to pressures like school readiness (Estyn, 2024)
- Research shows a disconnect between what practitioners know about play and what they implement. (Pyle and Daniels, 2016)
- Some critiques challenge the assumption that play is always beneficial, calling for more nuanced, evidence-based understanding (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010, Education Endowment Foundation 2023)



The Enabling Adult

- Deficit views persist, especially in deprived areas, limiting children’s autonomy and curiosity (Waters-Davies and MacDonald, 2022)
- Research shows that practitioners’ beliefs can either enable or constrain children’s experiences (Salamon and Harrison, 2015)
- There is a need to amplify the voices of children often excluded from research due to perceived incompetence (Tyrie et al, 2023)



Focus

Does a well-intentioned professional position mean that some children are restricted from access to play and pedagogy that might serve to support curiosity and conceptual thinking? (Waters-Davies and MacDonald 2022)

Photographs with permission courtesy of: First Friends Tiggys Daycare Buds to Blossoms



The implementation gap

- Despite ‘knowing’ about developmentally appropriate pedagogy the practice often lags behind due to entrenched beliefs (Murphy, Greenway and Conn, 2024)
- The idea of the “threshold concept”—seeing the child as capable—is central to bridging this gap (Waters-Davies and MacDonald, 2022)
- Risk aversion, and lack of trust in children’s abilities contribute to the gap (Jerebine et al, 2022, Jerebine, 2022a)
- Whole-setting approaches and attachment-informed pedagogy are proposed as solutions (Pepper, forthcoming, CIW, 2025)



Conclusion

- There is a need for action research in settings where the threshold concept of the capable child has not yet been reached.
- The author proposes ‘insider’ inquiry to challenge deficit discourses and foster professional curiosity.
- Future research should focus on:
 - Children under three
 - Attachment-informed pedagogy
 - Practitioner beliefs and their transformation
 - Inclusive participation of all children in research

Reference List

Baxter, C. (2007) "Making connections": Early childhood teachers recreating meaning: Contextualizing Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Master's thesis, Macquarie University. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/1959.14/659>

Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., With Cooper, A., Kennedy, E. and Malik, A. (2022) The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence. Luffield Foundation.

Care Inspectorate Wales (2025) First Friends – Managing children's 'big feelings' based on well-being and mental health approach. First Friends Case Study English.

Education Endowment Foundation (2023) Play-based learning. EEF. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/play-based-learning>

Estyn (2024) Impact of poverty on educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education. Available at: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/impact-poverty-educational-attainment-support-provision-and-transition-early-education>

Grieshaber, S. and McArdle, F. (2010) The trouble with play. London: Open University Press.

Guo, K. and Rouse, E. (2024) 'Searching for evidence-based practice: A qualitative metasynthesis of the research on Reggio Emilia practices in Australian early years settings', Australian Journal of Education, 69(1), pp. 58–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00049441241302831> (Original work published 2025)

Hall, C. (2013) Implementing a Reggio Emilia inspired approach in a mainstream Western Australian context: The impact on early childhood teachers' professional role. Master's thesis, Edith Cowan University. Available at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1082/>

Jerebine, A. et al. (2022a) "All the fun stuff, the teachers say, 'that's dangerous!'" Hearing from children on safety and risk in active play in schools: a systematic review', International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-022-01305-0>

Jerebine, A., Fitton-Davies, K., Lander, N., Eyre, E.L.J., Duncan, M.J. and Barnett, L.M. (2022) "'Children are precious cargo; we don't let them take any risks!'" Hearing from adults on safety and risk in children's active play in schools: a systematic review', The International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 19(1), p. 111. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-022-01344-7>

Manera, L. (2022) 'The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. An Analysis to Its Inclusive Perspectives and Their Relationships to Aesthetic Spects', in Postiglione, E. (ed.) Fostering Inclusion in Education. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07492-9_7

Mayo, A. and Siraj, I. (2015) 'Parenting practices and children's academic success in low-SES families', Oxford Review of Education.

Murphy, A., Greenway, C. and Conn, C. (2024) 'Negotiating additional learning needs reform in Wales: The voice of the ALNCo', British Journal of Special Education, 00, pp. 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12568>

Pepper, R. (Forthcoming) Evaluating the Circle of Security Classroom approach with childcare practitioners.

Pyle, A. and Daniels, E. (2016) 'A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play', Early Education and Development, 28(3), pp. 274–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>

Stats Wales (2023) Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/pupil-level-annual-school-census-plasc>

Tovey, H. (2020, March) Froebel's principles and practice today. Available at: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Froebels-principles-and-practice-today.pdf>

Tyrie, J., Chicken, S., Knight, C., Mannay, D., Tur Porres, G., Waites, T., Waters-Davies, J. and Westall, A. (2023) COVID-19, education and learning: Amplifying young children's voices. [Project Report]. The Welsh Government. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/0b6492be-c863-41...>

Waters-Davies, J. and MacDonald, N. (2022) 'The capable child as a threshold concept for inclusive early childhood education and care', in Conn, C. and Murphy, A. (eds.) Inclusive Pedagogies for Early Childhood Education: Respecting and Responding to Differences in Learning. London: Taylor and Francis.

Welsh Government (2022, January 10) A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.

Welsh Government (2024) Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/child-poverty-strategy-wales-2024>