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**Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports:**

The outdoors is a big part of learning for children in Wales (Health & physical literacy, 2015), with its current curriculum the Foundation Phase which is the current early years education system in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009: 2). Schools/settings are expected to provide 'indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe' but also to 'promote development and children's curiosity and to explore and learn through first-hand experiences. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2025: 3).

So, how does the Foundation Phase approach play based learning? According to the Foundation Phase Framework (2015) play is a very important part of a child's learning experience, meaning there needs to be a focus on play based learning. Play helps to develop traits that are useful in work such as perseverance, attention to detail and concentration. It helps to develop children intellectually; it also helps them to learn and practice social behaviour and finally, helps them to become more self-aware. It replaced a system where children were taught separate subjects, meaning that children under the age of seven would no longer learn about physical education in the same way. Instead children would be taught areas of learning (FPF,2015). According to Orca (2012) this curriculum is based on growing sociocultural theories such as Reggio Emilia, Te Whariki and even looked at Scandinavian approaches which are well known for their play-based approach (Maynard, 2014).

Is this system, based on developmental, experiential, play- based teaching being implemented in schools/settings in an effective way? Educational settings that have followed the Foundation Phase as closely as possible have shown good evidence of progress and well-being however, evidence also shows that this is not the case for everyone, some of the progress is uneven and that some children gain more from this approach than others. For example, children from poorer backgrounds and boys seem to gain less from this approach than others (Power, 2018). However, an article by the BBC (2011) says that 'the approach is helping improve children's motivation and attitude to learning, with boys benefiting. Stating that 'children are not learning enough in the foundation phase.' his is said to be because of a number of school's standards when it comes to literacy. Estyn (2011) believes this is because they don't have enough information regarding the policy, or just because they don't believe in it. Estyn (2011) also concludes to say that boys benefit the most from this new system and according to an article from Stevens (2004) this is because boys learn better when they are more active, boys when told to sit still tend to fidget a lot and find it hard to focus. The Foundation Phase focuses on play based learning, experiential

learning and the child as an individual which would benefit both boys and girls as play has many areas. Some of these include construction play, role play, creative play and many more (The Welsh Government, 2016). Estyn (2011) confirm this in their report saying that' the wellbeing of children benefits from the implementation of the Foundation Phase; children enjoy learning much more and are increasingly motivated for learning. They go on to say that 'Active learning approaches and the use of outdoor learning' are helping boys to stay focused in learning.

Is this system, based on developmental, experiential, play- based teaching being implemented into schools/settings in an effective way? The Welsh Government (2015:3) say that educational settings are expected to have '*Indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe'* they go on to say that '*The Foundation Phase environment should promote discovery and independence and a greater emphasis on using the outdoor environment as a resource for children's learning*.'

Estyn (2011) reported that although the implementation of the Foundation Phase was going well there was a small number of schools where the children were not learning enough, this was because the activities that were being planned for the children were not challenging enough, this stemmed from the activities being mainly adult led and not letting child-led play occur enough. This was causing children to develop slower and not learn efficiently from the Foundation Phase. Even though adult led play and teaching is useful, for example the teaching technique of scaffolding is still used in schools today (PrepScholar, 2020). Which was formed by Lev Vygotsky who stated, '*In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.*' (Vygitsky,1967:16). However, it was Maria Montessori and Piaget who believed in the importance of the role of play in children's cognitive development (Open University, no date).

This is how the Foundation Phase is beneficial. The curriculum is based on play, experiential learning and is child-centred, in the hopes that children are quick thinkers and independent (Davidson, 2010). In New Zealand with the Aotearoa approach guided by the minister of education Te Whāriki they implement a method that uses Singing, art and story-telling as a way to teach children about multiple cultures, it was said to be a method where the children didn't even realise they were learning. However, it was said that the art format did not give children enough interaction to keep their attention (Ongley, 2013). You could also compare this to one of the Seven Areas of Leaning in The Foundation Phase which is Welsh Language Development (Welsh Government, 2019).

A more recent report from Estyn (2016) will focus on four main points, one of these will be improving the quality of teaching, this will be through better support and training for Teachers. Including an 'improved recruitment system and initial training' (Welsh Government, 2014). The goal of the Welsh Government was not to attack the system but to find where changes are needed to be made, this could be a small or large change or to take something out completely (Welsh Government, 2019). According to Ofsted's findings there is a lack of understanding when it comes to understanding the key terms and what they mean. The language used to describe the curriculum can be difficult to understand and widely translated, they go on to say '*The term 'skills' is liberally applied in many contexts, but it is very rarely clear whether it means specific subject skills, such as reading, or personal skills, such as being able to work in a team*'. (Harford, 2017) and even though it is said the foundation phase has helped with children's well-being (Power, 2018) well-being also requires teachers to understand how the system has changed so they are equipped to implement it properly into the foundation phase (Wainwright et al, 2016).

A new curriculum is being implemented and due to be published in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2020). According to the Curriculum for Wales feedback analysis (2019) the government are taking feedback and perspective from children and young people, giving the children a voice which links in directly with article 12 of the UNCRC. (Lansdown, 2011).' However, The Foundation Phase has already taken a holistic approach to learning which helps with how the child perceives themselves which also contributes to their self-worth/esteem. This is through a balance of activities that are child-led and activities that are practitioner led, this helps children to be more focused in their learning and therefore get more from the Foundation Phase (DCELLS, 2008). The Wales feedback analysis (2019) then goes on to say, '*there are some concerns that adults were the experts and that such a responsibility should be left to them'.*

According to the Donaldson report (2015) the Foundation Phase is a great learning system, especially compared to the curriculum it overtook. However, there are some key issues that need to be developed and looked at within the curriculum, one factor linked to pedagogy is setting tasks and building on previous knowledge, this could be linked to the Regio Emilia approach which is an early year's approach to the child being an individual, capable, and 'rich with wonder and knowledge' (The Scots College, 2017). This also links into one of the four main points in the Donaldson report (2015) that has the outcome that children are ambitious, capable learners.

In summary, the Foundation Phase has many strengths such as it is a play-based approach that encourages experiential learning, that is child-centred, holistic, and relevant. It is a curriculum that is well-planned that helps to develop children to be independent and creative (Davidson, 2010:13). With boys benefiting to this active way of learning more than girls. (Estyn, 2011). However, in some cases it has been proven that not all schools have implemented the Foundation Phase successfully, this could be because of lack of training for Practitioners or a lack of confidence (Wainwright et al, 2016). With the curriculum being so focused on the individual child, and the child being strong and independent, is having such a structured, well planned approach beneficial for their learning. According to the Donaldson report (2015) we need to be focusing on the children more and their right to a voice. The Foundation Phase is successful curriculum in implementing play based learning and works as a whole, with plans and actions such as the Fit for the Future Education in Wales (2019), Wales can keep upto date with ensuring an up to date system for the children to for fill the Foundation Phase into a successful future.

**Critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula:**

Assessment is a way that we can learn from mistakes and make critical changes that will help children have a brighter, meaningful future (Koralek, 2004). Assessment is gathering information on each individual child, accumulating this data, and using it to plan a more suitable curriculum. It's also a way to communicate with parents on how well their child is doing in school, which can then allow the child to be properly supported (Educational Foundation, 2014).

The Early Years Development and Assessment Frame (EYDAF) run by the welsh Government is an assessment framework that looks at implementing a fair assessment method for all schools, it is not compulsory to use this in schools but it is encouraged so it is possible to record progression in one place and properly make the required changes to the curriculum (Welsh Early Years Specialists, no date).

When it comes to assessment fairness is widely considered, there are many reasons why it's hard to achieve fairness because everyone views it in different ways, finding techniques that are fair and suitable for everyone take time and often practitioners struggle to meet the restrictions they are already under (Camilli, 2006) (Tierney, 2013). So how do we make assessment fair to all children? A common consideration when it comes to assessment is multicultural children, there are many issues that can arise when implementing assessment that Practitioners must take into consideration Welsh Government, 2008).

Some of these issues can be a loss of translation, children from different cultures could understand words in a different meaning, which could damage the integrity of the assessment. A child that needs a translator needs to be represented by this person so that the assessment is valid, and the child has an equal chance compared to the rest of the children (Bornman, 2010). Vygotsky's zone of proximal development furthers this point but saying you should take into consideration the potential level of development within the child too and not just look at the current development level. This also links into scaffolding where sometimes children can learn something off a more knowledgeable over faster than if they tried to learn it on their own with no guidance (James, 2014). A way in which we can help children that have a multicultural background is by ensuring they have a rich environment to develop and learn in. Meisels (1996) suggests that there is '*evidence that settings better enable young children to show hat they know, what they can do, and what they are experiencing'.* Bracken (1987) also suggests that there are cultural aspects of young children that can benefit from flexible environments. It is harder to test young children because they are not as experienced in the ways of life, therefore having a '*flexible and responsive environment that promotes the physical and emotional comfort of the child'* is far more likely to be a more precise assessment (National Research Council, 2001). The current Foundation Phase curriculum aims cover this well with its focus on play and the outdoors, focusing on physical literacy and chid-led play aiming to have confident children for the future (Estyn, 2011; Welsh Government, 2016). Baker (2006) states: '*the ability of an individual to have the competence to speak in different languages may not be the same. The ability to speak one language may be better than the other due to its dominant use in different contexts.*' (Baker, 2006) This is something that should be taken into consideration when forming assessment criteria for children with EAL. (First Discoveries, no date) It should be noted that it is difficult for teachers to properly determine their abilities whilst hear them speak English as a second language (Early Education, 2012; First Discoveries, no date). This could also be linked to the Cultural Iceberg Theory that demonstrates that there is always more to consider than what you can see with your eyes, when we look at children we have to think about their backgrounds, home life and other circumstance (Hall, 1976; Baker, 2006).

The early years assessment tends to look at initial, formative and summative as three stages of assessment which goes in order from the start of learning, during learning and the end stage where a child's ability is finally decided, these factors take into consideration behaviour, environment and assessing children's ability out of context and tries to assess in a fair way for each individual child this is again leading back to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Showing that if the adult is sympathetic with teaching then the performance of the child can rise (ARCELS, 20018). When it comes to bicultural curriculum Te Whāriki in New Zealand have a bicultural curriculum for children. They believe to achieve a bicultural curriculum then it is important to help

trains and give confidence to the teachers (Ongley, 2013), would a bicultural system work in Wales? It links to The Foundation Phase curriculum in giving Welsh language provision and cultural understanding (Welsh Government, 2016).

It is important that we have assessments so the curriculum can evolve and adapt based on the children's needs. With continued assessments we can determine the future of the curriculum to best support the needs of the child (Early Years Matter, 2020).

**Are Children ready to have a voice in the direction of the curriculum or are they too young to know what is best for them?**

A question that lays heavy on my mind – are children ready for the responsibilities on their actions and what they say? As children we always look to adults on what to do, we are guided by our parents and the other role models in their lives (Devine, 2004). For example, even in court the child has a right to a voice and to be represented, however the decision is usually down to the guardian to make and even though they may ask the child, ultimately the decision falls on the adult (Compact Law, no date). However, this is because the best interest of the child is being considered. When it comes to the curriculum, we can also say that the best interest of the child is being considered which is why we constantly assess their progress and abilities to better shape them for the future (Welsh Government, 2019).

Giving the children a voice is part of their rights according to article 12 of the UNCRC (Lansdown, 2011) and is something that has been tested preparing for the implementation of the 2022 curriculum (Welsh Government, 2019). In the feedback analysis for these changes the government reached out to children asking them their views, the results have a clear theme in regards to what they wanted changing for their learning experiences, which makes me stop and think that clearly the children have a united voice and are capable of making these decisions. However, further down in the analysis they did note that there were some concerns that adults are the experts and that these choices are indeed a great responsibility to carry (Welsh Government, 2019). Is it truly fair that we give this responsibility to our children? Do they truly understand the future outcomes to their words?

The Foundation Phase curriculum is already well grounded in the individual child, holistic learning approaches and the aim is to nurture children into being independent (Welsh Government, 2019). The Early Years Foundation Stage states that all children should learn resilience, confidence, and self-assurance, will giving children a voice in their future curriculum help nurture the current

curriculum in making children that are confident and self-assured. It is proven that children thrive from independence and it is becoming my view that giving children a small voice regarding the curriculum could be hugely beneficial to them (Estyn, 2019). Using this same technique and taking time to listen to children could even help to determine good practice and an effective way of assessment. Even though I can see the possibility of some children not knowing the future their words may bring I believe that the positives far out way the negatives. Through giving children a voice, we can promote and implement many necessary things, ensuring that all children are given this opportunity. For example, learning or celebrating about children's culture or beliefs will make the child feel accepted and then feel more comfortable in sharing their thoughts and beliefs with other, therefore once again encouraging independence and confidence within children (Kimberly, 2015; Estyn, 2019).

The changes coming to the curriculum are a good change as the children's voice is beginning to rise in educational settings and will benefit all children (Estyn, 2018), for example think of the high number of children in Britain experiencing poverty (BBC, 2017). According to research undertaken by the University of Tübingen show that children's backgrounds for example their family life, play a big role in their school achievement, this is said to be because some family settings or circumstances could be detrimental to a child's well-being, if a child is coming to school with no motivation then it is going to be much more difficult for the school to bring back that feeling of well-being, especially if they are not aware of the home circumstance (University of Tübingen, 2017; Hafner, 2017). In a curriculum like the Foundation Phase that is encouraging all children to be confident learners and self-assured learners, I would say that the way the curriculum is implemented is beneficial for children with varying backgrounds.

In Glan Usk Primary School they have implemented a curriculum that is based on professional learning and reflective practice, the outcomes have produced confident students who are in control of their own learning, the method of this practice includes giving the children their own learning wall where their planning, skills and lesson ideas are highlighted. This has proven to be an effective way to give each child a voice in moulding their curriculum and feel like their voice and opinions are valued (Estyn, 2018).

So, going back to the question at hand – are children ready to have a voice? I think the answer is yes as long as that voice is guided and nurtured by adults and practitioners which is what the Foundation Phase and even the impending changes to the curriculum will abide by, it seems vital that children are given their voice when it comes to their own development, creating a future of children that are independent, self-assured and not afraid to have a voice. Maybe we could even further this with the impending changes, planning less and organising everything based on the individual child (Welsh Government, 2019; Estyn, 2019; Donaldson, 2015). I believe what is important is that we are

teaching children to understand the curriculum and therefore giving them the chance to learn more from it. Children's voices matter!

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