

Early year's curricula

Section 1

Currently, reform of the curriculum for Wales is under way. Surveys carried out internationally by the Organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) highlighted a significant need for these changes to occur. Consequently, these disappointing PISA survey results carried out remain the driver behind the need for change (Donaldson, 2015). However, PISA results in 2018 did show some improvement, but still identified further improvements in the curriculum were needed to reach the desired target (Welsh parliament, 2021). This section will analyse previous curriculum reforms and any barriers of implementation that previously happened, whilst comparing to the new curriculum for Wales. Next, focusing on play-based learning and practitioner's professional development. Also, if there could be any possible implications and challenges with this.

Play based learning suggests the approach to teaching children to actively take part in play that develop their skills and knowledge. Thus, stimulating high levels of thinking allowing children to make good progress in their own development across all areas (Cambridge Assessment International Education, no date). Similarly, McInnes, Howard, Miles & Crowley (2011) emphasise that Play is fundamental to children's learning and believe this to be critically important to underpin the UK's curriculum guidance. Therefore, play is embedded firmly within school curricula as it is seen to be a focal part of the education in young children (McInnes , Howard, Crowley & Miles, 2013). Likewise, Hirsh-Pasek et al, (2009) agrees how the essential principle in early years education for children's development and their learning is to be play based (cited in McInnes, Howard , Crowley & Miles, 2013). For instance, to ensure play-based curriculum is implemented successfully throughout the early years, Howard, (2010) states all practitioners should have a clear understanding of play and how their role affects children's learning through play. In response to the importance of play enhancing learning, it is therefore just as important that adequately trained knowledgeable staff will deliver pedagogical practice effectively and be aware of the role they play as supporting adults (Whitebread, 2012, p. 33-34). The foundation phase was developed for a more play-based curriculum pedagogy, advocating children's learning through placing their social and personal well-being development at the heart of the curriculum, which practitioners implementing the foundation phase delivered with enthusiasm. However, an early evaluation of the foundation phase in 2006 showed that in contrast to this, there were findings that discovered that full understanding of the key concepts would vary from different practitioners (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2007, p. 44).

Similarly, the evaluation for the foundation phase report (Taylor *et al*, 2015) found there was a need for further foundation phase training for staff to fully understand and improve practice in delivering the curriculum. As a foundation phase guidance provided by Welsh government (2008) stated that practitioners approach should be as the facilitator and they should have thorough knowledge and understanding of child development. This would ensure the children's needs within each area of learning is carefully considered during teaching approaches. However, another recommendation highlighted in the evaluation for the foundation phase report, which advised all practitioners to be provided with specific training in how some subjects can be embedded within the areas of learning (Taylor *et al*, 2015). This evidenced that previous guidance of the role of the practitioner within the foundation phase was still in need of improving. According to Waters, (2016) the requirements for practitioners to change their behaviour to support play-based learning appeared to be problematic. Waters, (2016) argued why this was, explaining that during such a significant change in pedagogical approach time and adequate support for practitioners was lacking. This indicates how previous experiences of reform attempts and implementation have influenced what lessons have needed to be learnt going forward. Furthermore, Kingston, D. and Siraj, I, (2017) explains that during a review carried out of the early years workforce in Scotland during 2015. Some concerns were raised that educators qualifications were often marginalised and that they were unable to answer questions when asked, relating to their practice of why they carried out what they did, which illustrated lack of theoretical understanding of children's development and how they learn. There are numerous studies how the role of the adult can motivate young children's development when they take on a facilitating role without hindering a child's learning experience. Following an independent stocktake of the Foundation phase in Wales (2014) which was to gauge how well it was being implemented, including establishing if the principles of the foundation phase were being embedded within continued professional development. However, a number of key issues and recommendations were that experts would benefit from further knowledge of play-based pedagogy and how children learn and develop (Welsh government, 2014). Consequently, the new Curriculum for Wales (2020) pays great attention to the need for ensuring there is a shared understanding for practitioners to implement curriculum reform, along with opportunities for training and continued professional development (Welsh government, 2020). Currently, the new curriculum for wales has set out professional learning opportunities for all practitioners that will consistently extend their knowledge to benefit all young learners. The aim to promote practitioners own practice that entitles continuous access to training resources to develop pedagogical skills (Welsh government, 2023a).

Although, that is to say for the new curriculum to work, these issues need to be addressed and tackled by ensuring good understanding of what is expected of practitioners in practice through support and clarification (OECD, 2024). This vision is yet to be seen at these early stages of the new curriculum, however previous attempts of reform have taught how there is a high need for ongoing professional learning and clear-shared understanding of what this vision will look like in practice. For instance, the independent stocktake of the Foundation phase in Wales (2014) highlighted this fact with the recommendation of strengthening training and support to all educators would enhance quality and understanding of teaching (Welsh government, 2014). With this in mind looking at how the new curriculum plans to include professional development, they are realising the impact of these changes and how they will benefit children's learning experience, when delivered by highly motivated and skilled practitioners which ultimately impacts the success of the curriculum (Donaldson, 2015).

To conclude, throughout this section it has analysed the need for professional development and what the benefits of this being embedded into a curriculum. Numerous evaluations have looked at previous challenges of curriculum reform and lessons that were learnt when implementing a new curriculum. Other main findings were that if practitioners fully understand play-based pedagogy they would consequently realise how children learn when offering rich learning experiences.

Section 2

Let us begin with the importance of considering the unique child by understanding that every child is an individual. How each child will discover and learn in their own way when given the opportunity by nurturing adults. When children are given the space and freedom to grow in their own time it influences their development and early experiences in these early years (Welsh government, 2024). Additionally, the Early years foundation stage (EYFS) four principles includes the importance of the unique child in early years practice, where they are seen as capable, resilient and confident to learn (Department for education). They say, "Every child is a unique child who is constantly learning." (Cited in Birth to 5 matters, no date). Furthermore, what it means to be a unique child can be described as allowing children to have their own voice and letting them be themselves to build their self-esteem (Teachers TV, 2015). It follows the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) universal agreement that all children should be seen as whole. Notably, identifying this within two articles that children have the right to relax and play (Article 31) and the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) (Unicef, no date).

This section will critically evaluate two different methods of assessment, and how well they support the unique child. Thus, for practitioners to identify children's strengths or any areas of improvement, assessments play a key purpose to support with progression and for the next steps (Welsh government, 2019). Assessments should be ongoing and not used as one-off observations. Nevertheless, it should develop a holistic picture of the child in order to inform teaching and planning on a day-to-day basis (Welsh government, 2022a). Taking a holistic approach lays a foundation for children's learning emphasising the unique child's physical, emotional, personal, social and spiritual well-being rather than focusing solely on academia aspects (Beckley, 2012, p.1). Similarly, a report by OECD, (2013) claims that practitioners should not look at learning as only cognitive activities they need to provide. But, by being aware of children's emotions, it will ultimately provide them with greater learning outcomes (Donaldson, 2015, p. 69). Notably, the curriculum for non-maintained settings supports holistic development and recognises that all children are unique in response to their individual needs, which coincides with how assessments are carried out. For instance, this is recognised by assessing children through a continuous process, it is seen as more purposeful to identifying children's progress, rather than one-off tick lists (Welsh government, 2022b). Previously, throughout children's time in the foundation phase children were assessed using the foundation phase profile where children would have a score towards their outcome based on an age and stage tracker (Welsh government, 2017). Brodie and Savage (2015) argue that children's achievement level is often defined by set goals that are expected of them by a practitioner carrying out progress checks. The practitioner is then required to measure if the child is developing as expected for their age against a 'typical child' of the same age. Previous research shows that this type of documentation is based on developmental psychology that encompasses certain objectives of a specific course of criteria, which is identified as 'normal' development (Alasuutari *et al*, 2014, p.81). According to Brodie and Savage, (2015) each person can perceive 'normal' differently causing problems with assessments and highlights that there is no clear definitions of what this means. Furthermore, for any practitioner following this will start to become mechanic in their approach to practice, as they will likely to become focused on what the child is not doing yet, instead of viewing the child as capable. This can then be at the expense of naturally seeing what the child is achieving, causing an adverse effect on learning. Hence, tracking the age and stage of children in all the same way does not show the unique child. Practitioners must be aware of child-centered pedagogy to fully be capable to meet the individual needs of children, combined with the knowledge and understanding of children's development and growth (Cade, 2023).

To examine both assessment methods further, refocusing the assessment approach alongside the new curriculum that best enables each individual learner, will help children reach their full potential (Welsh government, 2019). According to the Donaldson 'Successful futures' report (2015, p. 71) current assessment arrangements were in need of improvement, a part of this change was ensuring good quality pedagogy with an understanding of 'why', 'how' and 'what' practitioners teach. Practitioners that are providing assessments that are child-centered, will aid practitioners to find out what children can do, at the same time recording their observations in a more manageable way (Welsh government, 2023b). For instance, comparing the foundation phase profile to what the intention of the new curriculum assessment method will be. Notably, recording observations on the foundation phase profile are lengthy and time consuming for the practitioner. According to a report carried out by Welsh government, (2022c) researching the foundation phase assessment practice some common criticisms raised were that there were too many tick-box forms which ultimately became too time consuming and mainly not tailored to each individual child. Additionally practitioners are likely to be under pressure to plan for ensuring they have seen children accomplish certain things, consequently becoming less child-initiated and child-centered (Welsh government, 2017). Vygostky (1986) suggested that children's learning should be authentic and meaningful to the child (Hedges and Cullen, 2012). Moreover, Vygosky argued that the chronological age of a child could not be measured against a child's development level. Rather, practitioners should know their children well enough to help the individual child progress at their own pace (Nicholas *et al*, 2021). According to Piaget, he claimed how children progress through four interrelated stages at their own pace and can fluctuate between these stages. Some children could possibly take longer on stages than others; therefore, practitioners need to be aware of what children acquire at that point and how they can facilitate learning (Siegler, 1986 cited in Cade, 2023). Similarly, the curriculum of Te whariki recognises that the rate and timings of children's learning are different and tend to fluctuate daily. This can be influenced by how they are feeling and the environment on that particular day. Te Whariki acknowledge and have awareness in their curriculum so it can be flexible for the individual child (New Zealand government, 2017). Many childhood theoretical ideologies lay the foundation and are pioneers for early year's educators, which has served to inform many curriculum decisions and to guide practice (Hedges and Cullen, 2011). Across the non-maintained sector, new assessment arrangements were developed by early year's practitioners with a wealth of knowledge and experience on child development. These new arrangements recognised the uniqueness of the child that allowed practitioners to use these skills to respond to children's individual needs (Welsh government, 2023b). In addition, it will enable every young learner to progress at a pace appropriate to them, with adequate support from an early year's educator (Welsh government, 2022). However, this change in

curriculum causes a change in practice that can cause uncertainty amongst some early year's practitioners who have worked in a certain way for a long time. Of course practitioners can support one another and gain better understandings of the new assessment methods and have discussions about learners progression. This can be supported by referring back to written and practical recordings, videos or observations that have been built up gradually over a period of time (Welsh government, 2023). Some early year's practitioners may implement Learning stories to capture learners progress as it happens whereby this highlights their strengths. This is a method taken from the Te Whariki framework that effectively tells a story of children's work over time. Therefore, learning stories intention creates a picture that goes beyond one day, and that it is personal and meaningful to both children and families (Felstiner, no date). This aligns with the new curriculum for Wales's assessments where a shared understanding between practitioners is encouraged that allows time to reflect on observations and experiences, collectively discussing how well children are developing. Bringing parents and carers into such discussions help gain a deeper understanding of the holistic development of each child that aid in building a good working relationship. For instance when a child is not making progress these conversations with colleagues and parents are invaluable to assist in supporting children further. Discussions and sharing information are recognised as a powerful tool (Welsh government, 2023b).

To conclude this section, it has been identified that every child is on their own unique learning journey and progress at their own pace. When there are knowledgeable educators that understand this and can support children, they are likely to thrive in a positive way. The new curriculum for Wales has made appropriate changes within its assessment arrangements that captures the unique child and how individual children all develop at different rates where there can be fluctuation. Assessments are no longer one off observations to tick off but a continuous process.

Section 3

The benefits of pre-school education and for 0-3 year olds

Early year's education can have a positive impact on young children's development. These early years are a period of rapid growth and learning. It is vitally important to understand how the time between 0-3 years lays down the foundations of health and development throughout life. These early experiences children have will shape their brain development (Unicef, no date). A research study on the benefits of children under three years old attending pre-school was carried out on a range of children from differing backgrounds. This was called the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE), which discovered key

findings in pre-school aged children. These showed enhanced levels of development in all areas, earlier identification of development delay, which resulted in early intervention. In addition, pre-school attendance particularly, showed significant benefits to children from disadvantaged areas (Sylva, et al, 2004). Notably, these fascinating findings from this project discovered new evidence that early childhood education influenced children's development and the importance it provided for future educational outcomes. As a result, through the research it is well noted that children who attend early year's setting are well prepared for entry to school by compulsory age, engage better in activities and are more independent confident individuals. According to Montessori children's learning was at their most powerful in the first year of life and it was from this age that children needed a stimulating environment, and if a child was deprived of these actions their natural development would be impacted (Issacs, 2018). Montessori explained that these early years held enormous potential for the individual young child's development and through active learning. Montessori maintained that with supportive adults and given a stimulating environment that would offer learning opportunities that would provide activities to extend the developmental needs (Isaacs, 2007).

There are many types of pre-school provisions available for children. Playgroups offer a space where parents can learn how they can make a difference to their child's development. For example, learning nursery rhymes, singing songs, reading with their child and making friends. All of which provide an important effect on the young child. Groups provide parents with the knowledge to learn how to play with their child and give ideas they can use in the home environment, resulting in a positive effect for the parent and child. Early year's practitioners who facilitate these groups are on hand to offer advice or give information as required (Action for children, 2023).

In Wales, targeted families in certain areas are entitled to free quality part time childcare when their child reaches aged 2years. As all flying start settings operate longer than 2 hourly sessions they must meet the required national minimum standards governed by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) to ensure adequate care is being provided for children in their care. It cannot be denied that the quality of childcare must be at a high standard at these settings as all staff are required to achieve certain qualifications and are required to undertake continuous professional development.

The Welsh government are currently ensuring that children aged 0-3 years are having the best start in life as possible focusing on the best way to support their learning (Welsh government, 2023). As a result the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) in Wales which was previously Early childhood education and care (ECEC) are documents

ensuring that practitioners working in early years settings are well-informed and supported to help babies and children grow and develop (Welsh government, 2023).

Finally, pre school education for children aged 0-3 years is an important time of development, which needs to be nurtured, and how there positive effects on babies and young children's development attending pre school provisions. In particular, providing better school readiness and early intervention.

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