

## Section One – Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula.

Since its introduction in September 2010, the Foundation Phase has been the mandatory curriculum for all children in Wales aged three to seven. Welsh Government (2015) believes it increases the effectiveness and enjoyment of learning while fostering children's creativity and imagination. The Foundation Phase considers children's developmental needs. The holistic development of children's abilities, which builds on their prior knowledge and learning experiences, is at the core of the statutory curriculum framework. Aasen and Waters (2006) agree and say or children ages three to seven, the Foundation Phase framework defines seven areas of learning and puts the child "at the centre of any planned curriculum." These subjects are a component of a cross-curricular, integrated, holistic strategy that prioritises skill development. Children practise and solidify their learning through play; they also play with ideas, explore, take chances, solve issues, and make decisions both alone and in groups of two or more. (Welsh Government, 2015)

The capacity and assurance of practitioners to accept and handle the difficulties brought about by curricular change was to be crucial to the Foundation Phase's successful execution. Maynard, Morgan, Waters and Williams 2010 discuss how the importance of "shared beliefs and understanding" and "collective professionalism" is emphasised by the consequences of rising adult-to-child ratios as well as the requirements of implementing new pedagogical methodologies. The ratio for 3–4 year-olds was originally 1-8. Taylor *et al* (2015) believe In the Foundation Phase, there should be continued support for larger adult-to-child ratios as well as suggested year-group ratios that consider the developmental phases of young children. However, Siraj (2014) wrote in her report that staff members, consultants, and inspectors of primary schools concurred that it could be raised to 1:10 without compromising quality. According to Dalgaard *et al* (2022) smaller group sizes and greater adult to child ratios are thought to be positively correlated with better results for children. The amount and quality of adult-child interactions during the day are thought to increase with a larger adult-to-child ratio and a smaller group size.

Numerous studies indicate that more interactions occur between each child and an adult, and that the nature of these interactions become more stimulating and caring for the child when group sizes are reduced, and the adult to child ratio is increased. While there is currently little guidance in the research literature regarding the precise adult/child ratios and group sizes that are appropriate, there is evidence that reducing these ratios is thought to be advantageous (Munton *et al.*, 2002). The correlation between high staff-to-child ratios and high-quality early childhood care is widely accepted, based on the body of available evidence. On the other hand, systematic study on the effect of ratio-related regulations on the quality of provision has not been conducted. Staff salaries account for 70–80% of the expenditures associated with providing childcare. Enforcing legislation with larger ratios is likely to drive up the cost of childcare, driving away parents and forcing them into unregulated providers. As an alternative, it might encourage service providers in the non-profit and commercial sectors to lower expenses by hiring less skilled workers, paying less in salary, or eliminating funding for training. In early childhood settings, improved staff training has a significant impact not only on salaries and worker turnover but also on the quality of staff to child interactions.

According to PACEY (2017), professional development is any activity carried out to preserve and advance skills and expertise. In the field of early childhood education, it is now well acknowledged that children receive superior care from more highly qualified professionals. Training promotes quality, and specifically children's learning and well-being, according to several research (Burchinal *et al.*, 2002). According to Funkkink and Lont (2007), training can improve practitioners' engagement with the children as well as their ability to assist the social and personal growth of the children. Furthermore, it helps facilitate children's linguistic and motor development by offering more varied learning opportunities. They recommended that training that helped professionals comprehend developmentally appropriate practice was especially advantageous. Siraj (2014) says continuing professional development must offer chances for professional development that aid in the establishment of a standard method of instruction and learning throughout the Foundation Phase.

It is acknowledged in both the Siraj (2014) and Taylor et al. (2015) reports that having properly trained professionals is crucial and that professional learning is a necessary. Siraj (2014) maintains that to assist children's development throughout the foundation phase, including the critical role of the adult, we should provide training that guarantees all staff members have a solid understanding of how language, literacy, and numeracy develop. Ensure that Teaching Assistants have ongoing assistance and procedures for professional development in schools that are kept up to date, and that individuals who require it may access literacy and numeracy training. Taylor *et al.* (2015) says it is necessary to provide practitioners with useful guidance on how to integrate the Literacy and Numeracy Framework into the Foundation Phase. More focus must be placed on how various pedagogical techniques may be used to teach reading and numeracy in the classroom and how these approaches can work in tandem with one another. How to use the Foundation Phase pedagogies in Year 1 and especially Year 2 classes should receive specific attention via training and coaching for practitioners. In 2017 the Minister for Children and Social Care said to give children the best possible care, education, and play experiences, we want to draw the right individuals with the necessary skills and behaviours into the early years and childcare sector. It is imperative that we guarantee that our personnel can obtain training and qualifications that adhere to best practices and standards. In addition to helping the current workforce acquire the skills necessary to advance in their jobs and access new employment prospects, we need training that properly understands how children learn and develop (Welsh Government, 2017) Foundation phase training was rolled out across Wales to enable practitioners to use the new curriculum. Wales created several modules that were intended to be taught throughout the nation to assist LA and/or consortium staff in implementing the Foundation Phase (Siraj, 2014). In an Estyn interim report in 2010 found the way that children under five are taught in schools and other settings has improved. The quality of teaching in settings is improving, with a notable improvement in comparison to schools. Additionally, most practitioners demonstrate a readiness to test out new ideas and modify classroom techniques to meet Foundation Phase standards (Estyn, 2010). Developing the personnel is particularly crucial in enhancing the delivery of the Foundation Phase in Wales however evidence suggests that there were substantial variations in practice. A large amount

of data also demonstrates that raising the calibre of the staff in the early years is crucial to enhancing the outcomes for children, especially those from underprivileged homes. Welsh Government (2016) found that all children's attainment is rising in environments where the Foundation Phase is being executed effectively. It does not, however, operate everywhere effectively. The studies offer several recommendations to advance Foundation Phase practice and provision, building on the accomplishments of settings and schools. Professional learning and development being one of these. Since the universal modules created at the start of the Foundation Phase's deployment were often of poor quality, individual LAs and consortia have modified and added to them over time. Training has improved, specifically for teachers and leaders more than support staff. Professional development is commonly acknowledged as being important for practitioners. Egan *et al*, (2019) says based on existing data, it appears that support staff are looking for ways to enhance their performance in their current roles and are interested in a career path that would allow them to advance in their roles and possibly increase their pay. The New curriculum for Wales has been introduced with these recommendations in mind, building on the good practice of the Foundation Phase. Adult involvement in a child's cognitive development is crucial, according to Vygotsky (Gowri, NSW, no date) To structure and expedite a child's learning, parents, teachers, carers, and tutors can utilise his notion of the zone of proximal development. Fernandaz *et al* (2015) says according to Bruner (1978), "scaffolding" is the cognitive assistance that teachers provide to students to aid them in completing tasks. that they wouldn't be able to manage working independently. The New curriculum emphasises the need of this and calls practitioners enabling adults. Welsh Government (2021) says the adult's role is crucial to the development of all children. By fostering emotionally secure surroundings that enable students to start expressing and controlling their emotions and behaviours in healthy ways, enabling adults to set the standard for learning.

Section 2 – Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child', critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula.

Cambridge dictionary (2024) defines unique as “being the only existing one of its type or, more generally, unusual, or special in some way”. Worcestershire County Council (no date) says every child is a unique child who is constantly learning and who can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured. Every child is different. Each child will grow and develop in their own unique way and at their own speed. They will progress through the various developmental phases at various rates. Depending on their temperament or personality, they will also respond to items in their environment differently (Welsh Government, no date) Each child is an individual with distinct traits and a distinct temperament. Children develop at different rates and in unique ways. Each stage of development, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social, emotional, and physical have equal significance (Early Years Matters, 2023)

Planning, assessment, and observation all aid in a child's growth and education. Observation is one of the most important aspects of routine professional practice while working with children of all ages. It is the method by which we determine each child's needs by closely monitoring, focusing on, and noting a child's or group of children's activities. By observation, we may identify a child as an individual. (West Sussex County Council, 2021) In order to enable each child to advance at a suitable rate and to make sure they are challenged and encouraged along the way, assessment is essential (Early Years Wales, 2020)

The new statutory assessment for the Foundation Phase was called the FPP (Foundation Phase Profile) and became statutory in the school years 2015/16. The assessment structure was in line with the updated learning outcomes and revised areas of learning. It consisted of four learning domains: mathematical development (MD), physical development (PD), language, literacy, and communication (LLC), and personal and social development (PSD) (Wales Online, 2015). Welsh Government (2015) said the primary goal of Foundation Phase Profiles was to offer a baseline evaluation that is consistent across the country and in line with Phase Outcomes.

The Profile helps practitioners to offer a developmentally appropriate, holistic curriculum for every child by utilising formative evaluations and observations. Since the FPP is intended to be an observational assessment, teachers should be able to form opinions based on a variety of well-known tasks and activities (Wales Online, 2015) Formative assessment was taken into consideration when designing the FPP; there are no "gaps" in the skill ladders that comprise the evaluation. This is crucial because, for the average child, each Outcome represents around a year's worth of development; therefore, any gaps would make supporting progress more challenging. Welsh Government (2015) said schools would be able to monitor students' development from the start of Foundation Phase until its conclusion thanks to the FPP's assessment system, which encouraged and supported Foundation Phase pedagogy. Welsh Government (2015) decided that the minimum regulatory requirements for using the FPP would be the Compact Profile at baseline, during the first six weeks of the child being in reception, and the Full Profile at the end of the phase. Additionally, for their own tracking needs, schools and settings had the option to adopt either Profile on an annual basis as well as introducing it into nursery classes. With the use of this technology, transition plans might be carried out more skilfully and schools and other settings could observe, track, and support children's learning and growth throughout the Foundation Phase. The growth of children could be tracked, and early interventions might be used for those who needed extra support or practise with particular skills. The data collected would support professionals when talking with parents about their child's development and how to support each child as an individual. Morgan *et al* (2022) found that regarding the congruence of the Foundation Phase Profile with the Pedagogical Principles of the Foundation Phase, practitioners had generally good reflections. This is mostly because observation was a viable method for conducting the baseline and end-of-phase assessments. Nonetheless, a significant concern brought up throughout the investigation was the degree to which professionals mentioned the necessity of establishing a limited quantity of concentrated assignments, occasionally entailing working while seated, to evaluate specific competencies. The Foundation Phase Profile was criticised for being excessively time-consuming, overly checklist-oriented, and inadequately customised for each individual learner.

Margaret Carr (2021) defines Learning Stories as "written vignettes of individual children" that follow a structured narrative format. An educational narrative is a description of an important moment in a child's life. This might be as simple as first mounting the steps or watching paint drip across the paper. Instead of passing judgement or checking developmental milestones, they are meant to be a celebration of your child's skills and interests (Brodie, 2014). Escamilla (2021) says Learning Stories depart from the more conventional approaches to education, learning, and evaluation, which frequently highlight the limitations of children and families and present them in a deficient light. In contrast, Learning Stories provide an opportunity to reframe teachers as critical thinkers, creative writers, and play advocates and children as inquisitive, informed, and playful learners. The term "documentation" refers to the practice of watching and documenting children's learning experiences using various media in the Reggio Emilia early childhood schools of Northern Italy (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011) According to Rinaldi (2005) their curriculum structure is "based on adults listening rather than speaking, where doubts and amazement are welcome factors along with scientific inquiry and the deductive method of the detective." Routine classroom procedures that inform the curriculum include systematic and insightful monitoring of the learning of pupils.

Hargraves (2020) says Learning Stories support in-depth student observations and analysis, pointing out linkages and confirming complexity as a necessary component of early childhood education. Learning stories effectively communicate the complexities and intensity of events through detailed descriptions. They also explain the surroundings and interactions between the teachers and students that enhance and encourage learning. Narratives have the potential to reveal just as much about education as they do about learning, making them a valuable tool for assessing instruction. The Te Whāriki (2017) curriculum document's early childhood assessment is based on the ideas of fostering each child's developing capacity to engage with and learn about the outside world. As they aid in the development of competences and reinforce children's sense of competence, learning stories align with this goal. The purpose of learning stories is to discover and support children's learning dispositions and to provide positive narratives that show children that they are competent and powerful in a variety of situations and roles. A portfolio comprised

of educational narratives that highlights the child's abilities and celebrates them as a capable individual. Alexander (2018) says although learning stories are commended for gathering engaging illustrations of children's activities, some argue that they are not always the most effective means of evaluating growth in a longer term and more comprehensive perspective. Learning stories are lengthy and need extensive writing, which might take a lot of time, according to Blaiklock (2010) and Zhang (2016). The adult author's subjective judgement and personal experience determine the learning story's quality. Early Years Careers (no date) said owing to the length of time required to compose a learning story, these are sometimes finished later. This greatly depends on practitioners having a clear memory of the specifics. Due of the difficulty of remembering so many specific facts for every child, learning stories may not be an accurate representation of the experience.

Practitioners considered the foundation phase profile to be a useful tool. The adoption of an electronic system known as "incerts" made data entry straightforward and allowed for the quick identification of any gaps in each child's achievement, which in turn allowed teachers to organise the necessary interventions for children with any specific needs. Donaldson (2015) suggested modifications to the curriculum and evaluation methods offer a fresh perspective on how children should be educated over the course of their education. However, in the Successful Futures Review Donaldson (2015) said comprehensive evaluations of student performance in respect to curricular goals, based on experiences outside of the formal classroom, should be included in summative reports to parents and carers. Portfolio evidence should be used to support summative reporting at significant transition points. Reports should also provide more comprehensive proof of how children are growing towards the goals, based on pertinent accomplishments that don't necessarily come from academic instruction. In recommendation 38, Donaldson (2015) says to represent the variety of curriculum objectives, a variety of evaluation methods should be employed, chosen based on "fit-for-purpose" standards thus leaning towards other types of assessment such as Learning Stories.

### Section 3 – Blog

#### Why is outdoor play important for children's development? Did the Covid 19 pandemic effect outdoor play?



(Source:Elstree School, no date)

Having spent many years working in a school's nursery, I have a broad understanding of the curriculum and how it has changed. I have witnessed its implementation and adjustments. The necessity and value of outdoor play, however, is the one constant observed in the early years. Hagser and Elliott (2021) agree and say early childhood education relies heavily on play, and outdoor play provides special chances for learning and growth.

Playing outside has always been a major part of early childhood education history. In order to support children's moral, intellectual, and physical growth, Friedrich Froebel emphasised the value of outdoor play for children. In accordance with his educational philosophies, engaging in outdoor learning through play, gardening, and nature studies would cultivate a sense of responsibility for all living things. (Habser and Elliott, 2021) Children were curious, creative, and engaged learners, according to Tovey (no date) speaking for Froebel. In his opinion, the most effective methods for children to learn are through play, interaction, problem-solving, extensive first-hand experience, and self-activity. They flourish in environments of emotional stability, joy, and intimate interpersonal relationships. Bruce (2012) said for Froebel, being outside offered not only chances for work and exercise but also for introspection and contemplation of what one had seen in the natural world.

Children's curiosity was piqued by outdoor activities, which also promoted perseverance, problem-solving skills, and respect for the natural world.

The great outdoors provides a unique opportunity for creativity, movement, noise, and risk-taking, making it the perfect setting for experiential learning. The weather, noises, smells, and textures found outside provide a wealth of unique stimuli that can improve and enrich a child's learning environment. Children's growth is enhanced in all spheres by being outside: social, physical, artistic, cultural, and individual.

Youngsters who possess these abilities are more likely to acquire new things and remember what they have learned (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009)

Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic closed down our nation on 26th March 2020.

Lockdown measures were implemented for both adults and children, reducing leisure time to just one hour each day. The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) said owing to the lockdown, children had very few options for leisure and play activities because all sports clubs, libraries, recreation centres, play parks, and youth services were closed. Children were not able to play in ways that involved contact as physical separation measures were put in place, which was harmful to their development.

The pandemic caused an increase in early learning and childcare hours to be halted. This restricted the amount of time, space, and assistance available for play activities, which had a detrimental effect on pre-schoolers' rights to play. Screen time increased as children and young people were using the internet more now for schooling as well as leisure time. Positive experiences, like spending more time engaging with friends did result from this however there were negative effects as lack of exercise and face to face socialisations (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, no date)

Chwarae Cymru say that encouraging children and adolescents to play outside and socialise with friends is essential for their overall physical, mental, and social health. It influences their happiness and fosters the social skills they acquire. Allowing children to play outside and socialise with peers in their community fosters their self-assurance and self-reliance. It also aids in their understanding of and familiarity with their surroundings. According to National Resources Wales (2022) in the past few years, outdoor learning has gained importance, particularly due to the Covid-19 pandemic which has increased awareness among all of us of the significance of spending time outdoors and fostering our connection with nature. In order to

implement the new Curriculum for Wales, the Welsh government supports outdoor learning as a crucial pedagogical strategy. However, earlier studies on the pandemic's effects on children, adolescents and teachers, outdoor learning played an increased role, both in and out of school, in supporting physical and mental wellbeing" (French *et al*, 2021). Children and youth who participate in outdoor learning are able to establish connections with the natural world, our built heritage, our culture, and our society (Scottish Government,2010) This is in keeping with the Welsh notion of 'cynefin' that is part of the new curriculum. Cynefin is a symbol of the idea of helping people find their place in the world, where they feel supported and encouraged to interact with their surroundings (Welsh Government, 2022). Cynefin is consequently associated with place-based identity legitimation as well as outdoor learning as a pedagogy. The COVID-19 pandemic made us all realise how crucial it is to spend time outside and connect with nature, which led to an increase in the importance of outdoor learning in education (National Resources Wales, 2022).

Welsh Government (2022) says the fundamental ideas that underpin all children's holistic and meaningful learning begin with competent, perceptive, and enthusiastic adults who provide engaging, real-world experiences in productive, stimulating settings. In addition to offering chances to evoke amazement and wonder, the outdoors gives children the freedom to be themselves in welcoming, unstructured environments. Children's senses can be richly and authentically stimulated by the sights, sounds, textures, and smells they encounter in the great outdoors.

There are numerous ways to include outdoor learning into your nursery's activities and overarching goals. It has become a significant component of early years education which practitioners must incorporate into their planning. Every child is different, with a variety of upbringings and environments. We are aware that many people learn in methods that aren't necessarily appropriate for a classroom. The outdoors can provide a location that feels less confined and restricted, as well as much more opportunity for inclusive activities. More importantly, outdoor learning activities have the potential to be enjoyable, imaginative, demanding, and daring. They can help children acquire the skills necessary to become self-assured and responsible adults

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