

Section 1-

The new curriculum for Wales is set to be implemented, making play-based learning the foundations of education across the early years for children aged 3-7. Similarly, in 2008 the Foundation Phase was rolled out however it was not welcomed by enough people across Wales due to the lack of clarity that came with it. There is hope that reflecting on the foundation phase that the new curriculum for Wales will be rolled-out successfully and play-based and outdoor learning will be used across the early years sectors in Wales. Play-based, child-led, outdoor learning is something that is recognised and seen very important in the early years (Waters, 2016). The Welsh Assembly Government (2008 cited in Waters 2016) had set out to make play and experimental learning the top priority for children aged 3-7 in Wales through the roll-out of the Foundation Phase. There had been concern for children's progression in an overly formal learning environment and the use of play-based learning has been recognised as essential to children's development. While children play, they could face challenges, practise learning with their own ideas, take risks, make their own choices and solve problems, these problems could be solved individually, with one or two classmates or in small groups. Acar (2014) supports this by saying play in indoor and outdoor environments have a significant role in children's development and helps to facilitate the process of learning. These opportunities may not always arise through a formal learning approach and using play-based learning children will have understood the lesson better and gained an understanding of their identity and the world around them. This approach to learning can improve a child's self-image and boost their self-confidence which is fundamental at this stage of development (The Welsh Assembly Government, 2008 cited in Waters 2016). The foundation phase handbook for outdoor learning (2009) states that not only does this style of learning increase a child's development mentally, but it also improves their health and fitness. Howard and McInnes (2012) found that children who participated in activities in both a play and formal session the play type session had children scoring better overall regarding their emotional wellbeing. After analysing these scores, it is clear that there should be more emphasises on the importance of play-based, outdoor learning for children in the foundation phase and that implementing a play-based curriculum will benefit children and their early development. Akamca and Yildirim (2017) agreed by saying that if activities are led correctly for the children's interests, age, level of development and interests then the use of the outdoors can stimulate children mentally and physically. Children's emotional well-being appeared to be better after participating in the play activity supporting the evidence that play based learning can be paramount to a young child's development. The Welsh Assembly Government (2008a cited in Waters 2016) stated that the main role of the practitioner is to facilitate the learning. The foundation phase needs to have positive interaction between the practitioner and child during children's play.

It was stated in 2008 that the use of outdoor learning should be included in the child's daily experiences, and this is still needed now, evidence like this shows us that in 2008 there was inconsistency in the foundation phase and poses the question of how this can be implemented correctly and consistently in the new curriculum throughout all schools in Wales. Outdoor learning offers many opportunities to take risks, make noise and run

around freely while being creative. Being outdoors can stimulate a child enhancing their learning environment in ways that being indoors in a classroom cannot. The outdoors not only has a positive effect on children's mental wellbeing but also their health and wellbeing. Outdoors children can run, skip and jump around while using toys and apparatus which cannot be used in the classroom (The foundation phase outdoor learning handbook, 2009). Learning outdoors has become increasingly popular with the introductions of forest schools. Forest schools are types of outdoor education settings where young children spend their time receiving their education in woodland or forest settings. The sessions are play-based and child-initiated and child-led allowing children to express themselves freely (Leather, 2016). It has been noted that children in the foundation phase are often viewed as curious and active in search for meaning to life and their surroundings and as practitioners it is important that this is encouraged (Waters, 2016). The Welsh Assembly Government (2008 cited in Waters 2016) states that practitioners need to consider children's past experiences in order to develop as a substitute of categorising into age-based areas of learning. The opportunity was there for the foundation phase to allow us to gain understanding of children and their development. Waters (2016) states that it was clear that there was intention to make these changes to the foundation phase, yet no change appeared to happen. There was no clarity and a lack of consistency in the approach during the initial roll-out, there was not a clear strategy for practitioners to follow, resulting in many being unsure how to implement the changes, causing this to fail (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*, 2005).

Another challenge the foundation phase faced and similarly the new curriculum coming in may face is levels of staffing. The adult child ratio for children between the ages of 3 and 7 needs to be increased. Due to this, additional practitioners have been required in settings and classrooms. Although additional staffing has been welcomed the separation of teachers and practitioners in these settings has been noticed as teachers have focused more on actual 'teaching' and it has been the responsibility of the practitioners who initiate constant, play-based learning whether that be in the classroom or outdoors (Taylor, Rhys & Waldron, 2016). The definition of play needs to be specified for all practitioners to have the same shared understanding for Wales to achieve play-based learning, correctly, in the early years. The word 'play' has been viewed as ambiguous and it has been noted by Wood and Attfield (2005) that it can be perceived differently by practitioners and children Leggett and Newman (no date) have supported the statement that the word 'play' can be viewed as ambiguous by saying that children who are left completely unsupervised to play may miss important learning opportunities whereas children who have had correct support have excelled in outdoor and play-based learning. If there was a clearer definition of what 'play' meant for children in the early years all children across Wales would excel in these activities. The foundation phase needed practitioners to be supportive, have a positive attitude and change their approach to play-based learning. It was highlighted that practitioners needed to understand the balance of teacher led or teacher supported. However, there it was not clear how much balance of teacher and free play was needed for this to work correctly stated Maynard *et al* (2013 cited in Waters 2016). Waters (2016) states that Practitioners were unsure how to implement the foundation phase due to the lack of guidance and

support they had received and fell back to formal learning structures Estyn (2011) agreed with this statement by saying that there was a lack of specialised training for practitioners in Wales which has meant that there has been ineffective and unsuccessful outdoor learning. It has been made clear that for the new curriculum to work teachers and staff need the appropriate training and support for play-based child-led learning. The findings of the stocktake emphasise that practitioners needed a better understanding and better practise to be able to support all children in the foundation phase. Practitioners needed to understand what is being asked of them and how to execute their role correctly. There is still need for this now with the rollout of the new curriculum, practitioners and staff need clarity to implement this correctly. The role of the adult needs to be clearly defined to get a balance of playful learning while supporting young children in their literacy and numeracy skills. A positive which Siraj (2014) highlighted is that when executed correctly there are good outcomes. Waters (2016) states that both the foundation phase evaluation and the stocktake report make recommendations for training for all staff across the early year's curricula for the development of the foundation phase however this is something that needs to be compulsory going forward for the Curriculum for Wales not recommended otherwise again, it will fail. Leading up to the implementation of the new curriculum for Wales it is important that the correct things have been put in place in preparation for maintained and non-maintained settings to implement play-based learning correctly. Waters and Player (2015) emphasises the importance of professional development for all those in the early years sector for children to receive the best learning experiences. With the introduction of the new curriculum for Wales it is vital that the implementation is better than it was when the Foundation Phase was originally introduced. Correct distribution of staff, support of staff and most importantly supporting children with the transitions is crucial to benefit from play-based learning.

Section 2-

There is no argument that young children mature and develop at different paces therefore it can be difficult to assess two children of the same age who may be at different levels of development. When assessing children, it is important to remember that every child is unique and placing children into categories does not allow children to show a true reflection of their abilities. Currently when assessing children, the assessment criteria is based on their age, and they are put into categories. These categories are standardised progressions of where children are expected to be at, more often than not, these categories do not consider that every child is different. Children should be allowed to develop at their own individual and unique pace. The purpose of assessing children is to ensure the young learner is supported and challenged. The purpose is also to assist in developing a holistic picture of the learner. The generalising of children allows practitioners to sort and rank children. The Foundation Phase Framework (2015) groups children from nursery up to year 2 and generalises children. This does not cater for the unique child and instantly if a child does not hit those targets set for their age group they are seen to have 'failed' when this is not the case. Placing children into categories allows children to understand the idea of ability from a young age. Dweck (1991) stated that once children begin to understand what

ability means they will have a conception on it and decide what factors will motivate them and decide what things to enjoy and what things will challenge them. When encouraged, children often believe in themselves as they recognise that their own efforts make them stronger. Children will often put extra time into things that they believe they will succeed in, resulting in higher levels of achievement (Dweck 1991). This categorisation of children by their ages is something that the new curriculum is trying to shift away from. Going forward, the new curriculum has decided to part ways with the generalising and grouping of children when assessing them and have decided to use progression steps. The new curriculum allows for schools to design a curriculum for the needs of each individual child. Using progression steps to assess a child's development supports the idea that learning for children is not a straightforward process where we can tick boxes but it's a process which is different for each individual child. Some children slow down in certain areas of learning while they excel through others. The progression steps allow for children to progress at their own pace enjoying the curriculum and have variety allowing for children to revisit areas if they are not quite ready to progress to the next step (Jones and Waters, 2018). The progression steps enforce the idea that learning is an individual process for each child, and we should not categorise them. Using words like 'I can' is a much more personal approach to assessing a child. When looking at the foundation phase and new curriculum we gain a very clear understanding that the new curriculum is a lot more particular, and it has a lot more flexibility in comparison to the foundation phase which is widespread and complete by one sentence. It is important to remember that when we assess children it should not be a 'one off' judgement but it should reflect upon the unique child and the progress they have made over an extended period. Siraj (2014) stated that training would be required by all staff to correctly assess and measure a child's progression. There was great emphasis that all staff should feel confident when using the early years assessment framework and that children are monitored regularly to keep an accurate record of their progression. As Wales transitions into the new curriculum the development of the pedagogy is the key focus. Some practitioners felt that assessing children outdoors was not a 'formal' approach to assessment. The new curriculum is focused on taking the 'formality' away from assessments and learning in order to view how children truly excel in their environments. Assessing children outdoors allows us to gain a true understanding of their level of development. It is important that schools consider outdoor learning as apart of the curriculum and not as an 'extra' part to it. Schools must prioritise this while considering the benefits outdoor learning has. While the new curriculum is being implemented the use of outdoor learning is becoming a regular occurrence as after much research it has been seen to benefit children's cognitive, social and emotional development in the early years greatly (Waite and Davis, 2007). While it has several benefits, Outdoor learning is something that has been the cause for concerns regarding assessing children in the outdoors. There have been some barriers to observations and recording children's progression in regard to the progression steps that the new curriculum is using to assess children in the early years. Questions such as how often the progression steps need to be revisited, are there enough members of staff to observe correctly outdoors has also been stated. Many practitioners have their own

personal opinions on outdoor learning which can make assessing difficult (Waite *et al* ,2017). The tools currently used to assess children in the outdoors are not practical for everyday as they require a great deal of time using in depth methods only fitted for small groups (Booth et al. 2013).

Multiculturalism is increasing in the classroom and often, children who come from cultural backgrounds are automatically assumed to be lower in ability. Often teachers are challenged by this and are unsure of how to help children from a different cultural background reach their full potential (Alsubie, 2015). Children from different cultures are also at a disadvantage when it comes to the current form of being assessed. Assessments currently are not tailored to children from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. An issue that may arise when assessing a child from a different cultural or linguistic background using our current frameworks is that children may interpret the wording of the assessment differently after translating it. Bornman et al (2010) also expressed his concerns for this matter by stating that translations should be made by someone who comes from the same background. This is so that children are not disadvantaged and there are no misinterpretations in translations. Not allowing correct translation for correct interpretation of assessments could limit children in achieving their full potential as they may not truly understand what is being asked of them, threatening the validity of assessment. Some children entering the classroom from different backgrounds are often worried about getting judged or fear they will not achieve as the dynamic in the classroom is different to what they are used to (Thomas 1995, cited in Alsubaie, 2015). Another fear children often face is failure as often they come to the county learning in their second language (Cooper, Helmes & Ho, 2004, cited in Alsubaie, 2015). It is important that practitioners are inclusive of all their students. Any child from a different cultural background should be welcomed the same as any other child. It is also important to build trust with this person and assist them in feeling well respected and safe in their new learning environment (Multicultural education & curriculum, 2012, cited in Alsubaie, 2015). Banks (1999) believed that a goal of multicultural education is to change how practitioners are teaching and to change the approaches to learning for students of all genders, cultural and ethical backgrounds, language will have the same opportunities as everybody else in educational sectors. Banks (1999) then went onto introduce four approaches to achieving a multicultural curriculum. The first approach is called the contributions approach. This approach involves including books and activities to celebrate holidays, events and heroic people from different cultures around the world. As these are only small gestures to other cultures it is not specified in the curriculum. Secondly, there is the additive approach. This approach includes content, ideas, and perceptions added into the curriculum without changing its original structure. Thirdly, there is the transformation approach which will impact the structure of the curriculum. This approach encourages children to critically think about concepts, issues and problems that people from different ethnic backgrounds face encouraging children to consider diversity in their surroundings. Finally, there is the social action approach. This approach combines the transformative approach with activities aiming for social change. Children are not only asked to understand and question the issues in the world socially, but they are also asked to act

upon it. Allowing these approaches to be used going forward in the new curriculum will enforce the idea that all schools are different, and every child has their own unique needs. It will allow for assessments to be catered to the unique child and not limit them in terms of assessing their progression.

Section 3-

Have practitioners been correctly prepared for outdoor learning and the benefits that it entails?

Working in the early years as a practitioner I have been able to witness the benefits that come along with child-led, play-based and outdoor learning. I have been able to witness first hand children use their problem-solving skills when it comes to moving logs to create a pattern, use numeracy skills when counting how many sticks are on the floor and literacy skills when asked how to spell words such as 'rain' and 'splash'. Having had many conversations with other professionals in the early years sector I have noticed that not everyone has the same view on outdoor learning. Many practitioners are unaware of how the outdoors can be utilised to teach children valuable lessons and how the outdoors can enhance children's learning experiences. I often wonder if practitioners refrain from using the outdoors as there is lack of information and lack of support for practitioners when it comes to outdoor learning. Using the outdoors is great for children as children are essentially able to 'run free' as they can kick leaves, run around taking in fresh air, splash in puddles and make noise which would not be considered 'acceptable' inside of a classroom. MacQuarrie (2018) states that many practitioners were not passionate about the use of outdoor learning, and many took the opportunity to use it as a reward of good behaviour. This again could be the result of lack of support for practitioners throughout the transition to implementing outdoor learning in the curriculum. From past experiences I feel that telling children 'If you do this well, we can do the next session outdoors' creates a divide between indoor and outdoor learning when they are supposed to be valued as an equal part of the curriculum and are supposed to be integrated together. Outdoor learning should not be viewed as a reward for children's behaviour in the classroom. Over the years I have been able to work with several children who each excel in different areas of learning, many children benefit from being in the classroom whereas there are many children who are much better suited to using the outdoors to their advantage for learning. Finding the correct balance of outdoor and indoor learning is something many practitioners have struggled with and many still do struggle with. I think prior to the new curriculum being implemented correct training for all staff and practitioners should be given and should be mandatory. This way all staff have received the same information and there will not be a sense of ambiguity regarding how to implement play-based learning outdoors. Not only will correct understanding of outdoor learning benefit staff but it will also give many children an opportunity to excel in their schooling. The correct balance of indoor and outdoor learning will be provided to all children across Wales.

Outdoor learning allows children to experience nature first-hand. Not only does outdoor learning benefit children mentally but it also increases their physical health too. The foundation phase outdoor learning handbook (2009) states that there are many positive

effects for children when they receive learning outdoors. The handbook also states that the outdoors can be the ideal learning environment for children to experiment with their learning. Children can experience different weathers, sounds, smells and textures which can enrich their learning experiences. These experiences could be missed if children were stuck in a classroom learning in a formal structure. Allowing a child to experience these things first hand is a great way to merge the classroom and the outdoors. A great literacy activity could be asking the children to write down how cold or how hot the weather has been during the week and what activities they have done outside while the weather has been this type of way.

From previous experiences with other practitioners, they have expressed that they often feel overwhelmed by the idea of risk taking when outdoor learning and are unsure how to feel about children being exposed to risks. The foundation phase outdoor learning handbook (2009) states that children can be exposed to risks within reason. Risk taking while outdoor learning can help to prevent children from taking unnecessary risks in dangerous, unsupervised situations. The Welsh Council for outdoor learning (2018) supports this by saying that risk taking can be viewed as a life skill for children which can be carried with them into their adult life. It is important that for every activity a risk assessment has been carried out prior to manage the level of risk and benefits of each activity. As we progress into the new curriculum, I feel it is essential for children to be involved in the processes of planning their activities, especially as we are moving into child-initiated play-based learning. An example of this could be taking children outdoors and asking them to choose something from the garden which could be used as theme of the week or ask them to use a range of outdoor materials such as hoops, logs or steppingstones to make an assault course for the following week's PE sessions. It is important to note that over the last few decades researchers have emphasised the importance of hearing children's voices (Smith 2011). The United Nations convention on the rights of the child (United Nations, 1989) supports this by recognising children as citizens and believe that children should be active in matters in which they are affected.

I believe that early year's practitioners do not feel equipped enough with information to confidently enforce outdoor, child-initiated, play-based learning. Many practitioners are often afraid of 'getting it wrong' and there are many that are not fully aware of the benefits that the outdoors can have for children and their education. I believe that this is due to the lack of guidance practitioners received which highlights the benefits of the use of outdoor learning and many are unaware of how to take the indoor learning and use the nature around to educate children at the same level they could receive in a classroom. Going forward, I hope that the new curriculum provides all staff and practitioners with the information required to allow outdoor learning to be the focus within the early years.

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