Early Years Curricula

ECEY6007

Every child is unique and each child develops and matures in their own ways and at their own pace. They are learning to be confident, capable individuals. Through their early years stages children develop quickly, so early years staff need to provide the best support and care to ensure that there are continuous opportunities for the children to develop. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2019) states that "Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment." This right highlights what support early years staff needs to focus on in order to support each child's individual development.

Formative Assessment is a way of monitoring learners in a way that provides ongoing feedback to school staff. "The term formative assessment tends to be built on the pioneering work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam." Black, P. and William, D. (1998) stated that "all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or their students to modify teaching and learning activities in which the students are engaged." This type of assessment is also known as Assessment for Learning (AfL), which can be teacher led, peer assessed or self-assessed. It can help learners identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. Formative assessments are carried out by staff to observe children's physical, cognitive and socio-economic development. This form of assessment "needs to be based on observations of children in action in both self-chosen play and planned activities" (NurseryWord, 2003).

For formative assessment to be effective it should be carried out on a daily basis within the school day during teaching, learning and play. This form of assessment involves diagnostic testing with enables the teaching staff and child to establish where gaps could be in a pupil's learning. If a gap in a particular topic has been identified, the teacher may decide to revisit the previously taught topic.

Formative assessment within the classroom allows the teacher to monitor learning by providing regular feedback on what they have done well and what they need to improve on. Formative assessments usually follow the process of:

- Setting and assessing standards
- Then using these standards, collect data from observing the learners in the classroom carrying out self-chosen pay and planned activities

- The teacher will share this feedback with other staff and also the learners
- From this feedback, the learners can form their own assessment and can then understand what they should focus on when learning.

The ways in which formative assessment can be carried out in the classroom are very broad. It can range from simple observations, such as asking learners to put up their hand if they understand or a more detailed observation through a writing task. Some examples of types of formative assessment include strategic open questioning, quizzes, a class poll (raising hand) and discussion activities.

Summative assessment is a method of evaluation which is carried out at the end of a school term which gives staff a measurement of child's understanding against the standarised criteria. Staff can use this to grade a child and can also use it to see if their teaching methods are successful and effective or if it needs improvements made. Unlike formative assessments, these summative assessments are done at specific times and are not ongoing. The National Reading Tests are an example of summative assessments. Summative assessments allow the staff to form an academic record for each child and can keep track of the child's progression through the school. It also allows staff to identify areas of support needed which staff can then introduce interventions to support the child. On the other hand, summative assessments can be quite stressful for some children and this can affect their wellbeing, also some children may not respond well to tests therefore not giving a complete accurate representation of that child's understanding and knowledge. Formative assessments need to be casual for students to participate fully, but with summative assessments, they require clear expectations to be set as well as a timeline as to when they will happen to ensure students have the best chance possible to succeed. (Twinkl, 2021)

The main aim of observing children is to gain an understanding of what to plan, linking with the curriculum to offer the children enriched, authentic activities. When observing a child play, you are assessing their gestures, behaviour and interactions that they are having with others. Sometimes this observation is carried out by staff when playing with the child or it could be when staff ask questions and assess their response. Drake, J. (2006) believes that "observations that are rooted in child-initiated learning experiences will generate the most sound information for making accurate assessments of learning. A high-quality learning environment (indoor and outdoor) is, therefore, vital in order to observe children in naturally occurring

situations and self-initiated play." The way in which staff track a child's progress will depend on the individual's needs and style of learning and what a practitioner chooses to focus on could be down to the school's ethos. If tracking progress is carried out effectively it can support achievement of higher standards and can ensure that the children can make positive progress throughout the school. "Pupils' progress should be tracked regularly and systematically through a whole-school system which involves all staff. It is essentially a cyclical process of data gathering and analysis which informs target setting, the reviewing of teaching programmes and the use of intervention, booster and revision programmes." (Welsh Government, 2005) Using certain forms of progress trackers such as Building Blocks and spreadsheets can be a very time-consuming tool to use, due to this "some schools subscribe to online progress trackers which give them a wide range of frameworks to choose from and crunch the data for them. The downside of this method is that schools' data is not linked to all the other data that they hold about each pupil." (Kilminster, 2021) To ensure progress tracking is manageable, staff need to ensure that there is a strategic yet robust approach to the tracking and to ensure that it is integrated into everyday teaching. In 2015 it became a statutory requirement that in the first 6 weeks of Reception, the compact profile assessment should be used to provide outcomes for each child. These outcomes included, literacy skills, mathematical development, wellbeing and cultural diversity, social development and physical development. "The baseline assessment should be based on observations made over the six week period. Therefore, judgement should be used to determine the most appropriate outcome for a child." (Welsh Government)

> "The EYFS Profile summarises and describes children's attainment at the end of the EYFS. It is based on on-going observation and assessment in the three prime and four specific areas of learning, and the three learning characteristics, set out below:
>
> The prime areas of learning: communication and language, physical development, personal, social and emotional development
>
> The specific areas of learning:
> • literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, expressive arts and design
>
> The learning characteristics:
> • playing and exploring, active learning, creating and thinking critically" (Early Years Matters, 2022)

The Foundation Phase Profile was trialed between January 2015 to March 2015 in around 200 settings and found that, “feedback was largely positive with practitioners recognising the usefulness of the majority of the skill ladders and how they worked together. Comments on specific areas for change recommended by trial participants have been used to produce the final version of the Profile.” (Welsh Government)

Cherry, K. (2020) says that “Child development theories focus on explaining how children change and grow over the course of childhood. Such theories center on various aspects of development including social, emotional, and cognitive growth.” There are a number of child development theories one of which being Erik Erikson’s theory of Psychosocial Development. Erikson believed that someone's personality developed in a set of stages and looked at ho social experiences impact a person. Eriksons interest of his theory was how someone's social interactions affected the development and growth of a human being. John Bowlby’s theory focuses on children’s social development and believes that a child's development is influenced by social relationships and that relationships with caregivers plays a big role in this. “Both children and caregivers engage in behaviors designed to ensure proximity. Children strive to stay close and connected to their caregivers who in turn provide a safe haven and a secure base for exploration.” (Cherry, K. 2020) Early Years staff should display positive play within the classroom to support children with their understanding of what they should also do. Children learn from observing others so staff should ensure that they are interacting positively. “Bandura believes observation, imitation, and modelling are central components of the learning process, and that behaviourism alone can’t account for every kind of learning. Thus his theory is a blend of, Behavioural theory and Cognitive theory.” (First Discoverers, 2021) Bandura believes that children will imitate behaviour in 3 types of ways. Active imitating which involves a child imitating a real person’s behaviour, verbal imitating which is where a child will imitate a description of a behaviour and symbolic imitating which involves the child imitating a media character. This theory highlights the importance of Early Years staff to be good role models.

“The Reggio Emilia approach to early years education puts children in the driver’s seat and sees them as curious individuals with the power and potential to develop and learn from their environment and the relationships they build with others” (Day Nurseries, 2022) This approach has influenced the attention given to the physical environment in the Early Years settings in the

United Kingdom. Reggio Emilia defines the learning environment as the "third teacher" as the learning environment around the child enables them to be explorers to learn and collaborate with others. Reggio Emilia's approach is set around four main principles which include an emergent curriculum, in-depth projects, representational development and collaboration. An emergent curriculum should be set around the children's interests, staff should come together to form a curriculum that is authentic and engaging for the children. In-depth projects can be formed around the children's likes and interests. These can be teacher and child led where the teacher offers support in areas of how work should be presented, but the child can independently or interdependently carry out the project task in their own way. Representational development is having a range of ways to be able to present your work and ideas, including forms of expressive arts sch as music, art or drama. Collaboration can support the child's cognitive development by encouraging them to work with others, these children can be involved in problem solving and can develop their interpersonal skills. Using and implementing the principles of this approach in the classroom can support effective development of a child's mind.

During the ages from birth to 8 years old is an important period for child development. During this period of time children develop cognitive skills, physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing and social competence. These all build a strong foundation for the child to progress and develop for their future lives. Play based learning is a valuable teaching method which can encourage the learner to form own decisions, take lead and make mistakes in a safe learning environment. Play based learning consists of teacher planned tasks that would be linked to the Early Years Outcomes and also learner-led play including imaginative play and open-ended questioning. "Play opportunities enhance children's mastery of academic concepts and build motivation to learn. In fact, two of the most important things that play can develop are interest and motivation. Encouraging these in the early grades brings children on board in contributing to their own learning." (UNICEF, 2018)

Jean Piaget was a psychologist who carried out a systematic study of children's cognitive development. Jean Piaget's theory suggests that as a child grows their intelligence changes. The child not only is able to acquire knowledge, but the learner has to develop an understanding of

the world around them. Cognitive development is based on how someone gains an understanding of the world through different forms of interactions.

> Piaget's (1936, 1950) theory of cognitive development explains how a child constructs a mental model of the world. He disagreed with the idea that intelligence was a fixed trait and regarded cognitive development as a process which occurs due to biological maturation and interaction with the environment. Children's ability to understand, think about and solve problems in the world develops in a stop-start, discontinuous manner. (McLeod, S. 2020)

Piaget's theory is proposed around four stages of development, being the Sensorimotor Stage (birth to 2 years), Preoperational Stage (2 to 7 years), Concrete Operational Stage (7 to 11 years) and the Formal Operational Stage (age 12 and up). Piaget suggested that each child will go through these stages in the same order but not necessarily at the same pace. However, even though Vygotsky believed that play based learning promoted social, emotional and cognitive development, he did not perceive a child's development through different stages but that a child's development was a continuous process. In comparison to Piaget's theory of that a child's cognitive development is acquired through independent investigation, Vygotsky believed that children acquire knowledge through learning from knowledgeable others such as teaching staff and also through social interactions. He also believed that a child's culture can have an affect on their cognitive development. Furthermore, both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theory suggests that children actively construct their own knowledge of the world around them and they both believe that cognitive development is not only about learning more things, but it involves a child's change in thinking.

The Foundation Phase was fully introduced and implemented in Wales by 2011 to replace the old Early Years' education style in Wales. "The Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum for all three to seven year old. It encourages children to be creative and imaginative, and makes learning more enjoyable and more effective." (Welsh Government, 2015 b) The Welsh Government formed a Foundation Phase action plan which was set out to support the implementation of the Foundation Phase and to support effective practice across Wales. The Welsh Government started a three-year independent stock take and evaluation and their findings suggested that "where the Foundation Phase is being implemented well, it is raising the

attainment of all children and there is positive evidence to show that the Foundation Phase is associated with improvements in overall school attendance, literacy, numeracy and learner well-being." (Taylor, C. et al, 2015)

Estyn felt that the implementation of the Foundation Phase had a positive impact on learner's wellbeing and that the learners were achieving well in a majority of schools. Their views on the majority of schools were that classrooms have been adapted to reflect the new Foundation Phase learning and teaching approaches and that practitioners have a full understanding of how to support and challenge the learners. Estyn (2011) stated that "In the best practice, practitioners demonstrate a sound knowledge of child development and use this knowledge well to consolidate and extend children's learning." In contrast, Estyn felt that there was a minority of schools that the Foundation Phase learners did not achieve well. They felt this was due to practitioners not having sufficient understanding of the principles of the Foundation Phase and unsure how to implement practice effectively. Also, that practitioners were not convinced of the educational value of the Foundation Phase. Estyn (2011) states that "curriculum planning has become very structured and detailed in most schools. Not all practitioners have the confidence to adapt these detailed plans or are convinced that they should amend their plans flexibly to meet children's interests."

In some of the schools that did not implement the Foundation Phase well, they may have had a higher child to staff ratio compared to the schools that had positively implemented the Foundation Phase. Classes with a low child to staff ratio can have a positive effect on a child's development, it can reduce classroom behaviour issues and can also reduce the teacher's stress. "Recent research notes, that where the evidence suggests that there are benefits in class size reduction and lower teacher: child ratios in respect of pupil attainment, these are most notable in Early Years education and in the early stages of Key Stage 1" (Siraj-Blatchford, I. 2005). In comparison, the classes with a higher child to staff ratio the availability of the teacher to support each of the learners is lower and can also reflect on the time the teacher has to learn and focus on implementing the Foundation Phase. Therefore, not effectively relaying the teaching and learning approaches well or even not at all. Many head teachers, teachers and Foundation Phase staff felt that there should be an improvement of child: staff ratio as this was deemed essential for the implementation of the Foundation Phase. Research found that "the introduction of the

Foundation Phase has led to the general reduction in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 from about 19 children per adult on average across all schools in 2004/05, to about 10 children per adult in 2011/12 – nearly a doubling in the number of adults working in these year groups" (Welsh Government, 2014).

There are a number of job categories in early years such as a teacher, teaching assistant, non-teaching assistant, nursery nurse, play group leader and a variety of more. In 2012 it was recorded that there were around 15,923 practitioners working with children of early years ages. There are also a vast variety of training courses and qualification schemes on offer to become an early years practitioner. Due to the variety of courses and qualifications there is a lack of national regulation in what professional skills and knowledge that is learnt by the professional, this can have different impacts on the child's leaning. Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2002) found that "the most highly qualified staff also provided the most direct teaching, we found that they were the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking interactions. Further, we found that less qualified staff are significantly better pedagogues when they are supervised by qualified teachers." As part of the Foundation Phase Action Plan professional learning was an area of focus as having an effectve workforce would have a positive impact on the delivery of the Foundation Phase. Maynard, T. (2010, quoted in Welsh Government 2015) believes that "it is important for policy makers, managers and others to recognise the limits and challenges associated with exporting successful approaches from individual settings and developing them into larger, national initiatives." One of the areas of action in the Foundation Phase Action Plan (2016) was to "provide high-quality professional learning and leadership development." Training was planned and organised by local autorities to support practitioners with the implementation of the Foundation Phases. These training modules for practitoners were developed at the start of the implementation of the Foundation Phase. This could have impacted the training that was delivered to practitioners as the modules may not have been as effective as later traing due to them not being trialled and changed for improvement if needed. Estyn (2010) stated that the "local authority evidence indicates that most under-fives practitioners have been trained in at least one of the five core modules of the National Training Programme" however, the Welsh Government (2014) found that " the differences and inequalities in training and their accessibility to all appropriate staff concerning and the level and content of the initial training at least was lacking." Also, Siraj-Blatchford (2005) argues that

"that a number of training issues need to be dealt with in order to enable the current workforce and newly trained staff to be confident in delivering the proposed Foundation Phase together with the new expectations for developing the use of the Welsh language to a high and effective standard."

The action plan highlighted a focus would be to enhance focus activities using both the indoors and outdoors to engage the children. Funding the school's Foundation Phase could have improved the learning areas including developing the outdoor area to allow continuous use and access to both the indoor and outdoor and to use both as learning areas. In some schools their funding would have been needed to redesign areas to support the Foundation Phase approach to using the outdoors as a learning area. Depending on how effective the school was on using this funding would affect the improvement of the learning areas. Also, some schools may have needed more improvements and may not have had substantial funding to do so. The Welsh Government provided around £36 million grants to schools between the years of 2004-05 and 2011-12. This budget was to provide support in developing outdoor learning spaces. However, Taylor, C. research into evaluating the Foundation Phase found that,

> "the apparent short-fall in capital budgets noted and the uncertainty as to what changes to the environment were needed, not surprising that this area of implementation tended to draw the most criticism, as these three head teachers demonstrate, "Our school was not physically ready for the Foundation Phase – especially the outdoor area. There was a big cost implication to provide adequate outdoor space" (Taylor, C. et al, 2015)

The Welsh Government carried out a three-year evaluation of the Foundation Phase, which was led by Chris Taylor, a professor from Cardiff University. The evaluation outlined four main aims which were:

- "to evaluate how well the Foundation Phase is being implemented and highlight ways in which improvement can be made (the process evaluation)
- to evaluate what impact the Foundation Phase has had to date (the outcome evaluation) to assess the value for money of the Foundation Phase (the economic evaluation)
- and to put in place an evaluation framework for the future tracking of

- outputs and outcomes of the Foundation Phase (the evaluation framework)" (Welsh Government, 2015)

The evaluation found that the children that had attended Foundation were more likely to gain level 4 or higher in English at Key Stage 2 and practitioners believe that the Foundation Phase has had a positive impact on the children's literacy and numeracy skills. Also, children that attended Foundation Phase had supported in the improvement in overall attendance. Recommendations highlighted in the evaluation considers that training modules for Foundation Phase should be compulsory for head teachers, Foundation Phase staff and additional staff to attend and that there should be follow up training to support continuous effective implementation of the Foundation Phase. Data that was collected found that "approximately 90% of lead practitioners in schools and funded non-maintained settings thought that the Welsh Government documentation and Local Authority training was useful or very useful" (Taylor, C. et al, 2015). Continuous monitoring of the Foundation Phase's standard and quality should be carried out to ensure that children are continuously developing children's cognitive skills, physical and mental health, emotional wellbeing and social competence and are encouraged to be imaginative and creative in an effective learning environment.

Forest Schools – a holistic approach to learning

A forest school is an outdoor educational approach to learning which involves nature based, child centered learning. It is a learner lead approach which gives children opportunities to play, explore and take healthy risks.

Forest schools have become widely introduced across the UK. Forest schools developed in Britain at around 1993 after practitioners visited Denmark and looked into their pre-school system. Denmark's educational approach avoids formal tests and age rankings and instead focuses on challenges that teach the children ways on doing things with a big emphasis on problem solving. Most of the kindergartens in Denmark focus on teaching social skills and are encouraged to be problem solvers and critical thinkers.

The forest school approach to learning links to Reggio Emilia's approach. This approach focuses on the children being viewed as capable learners that are able to direct their own learning and which values the children as resilient curious learners that have the potential to learn from things that surround them. Rock, A. (2020) said that

"The Reggio Emilia philosophy is based upon the following set of principles:

- Children must have some say over what they learn; additionally, the senses play a big role in the learning process.
- Children engage with their senses to help them learn and fully process something.
- Children are encouraged to interact with other children and explore the world through material items and relationships.
- Children should be encouraged to always express themselves and be given infinite means and opportunities to do so."

The New Curriculum for Wales has been developed to ensure that education in Wales is focused on children acquiring knowledge, skills and experiences to allow them to face future lifelong challenges. The aim of the curriculum is to help develop the children to achieve the four purposes of the curriculum, which stated by Department of Education and Skills (2015) are that "All our children and young people will be ambitious capable learners, enterprising creative contributors, healthy confident individuals and ethical informed citizens."

"An increasing number of early years practitioners are adopting the forest school approach to support outdoor learning in their provisions. The forest school experience offers many benefits to young children and encourages development across all areas of the EYFS"(Croner-I, 2019). Forest schools enable the children to achieve similar skills, knowledge and experiences that are set out in the new curriculum and linked with the four purposes.

Forest Schools support the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum as, by stated in the Foundation Phase Framework (2015) "Through their play, children practice and consolidate their learning, play with ideas, experiment, take risks, solve problems, and make decisions individually, in small and in large groups. First-hand experiences allow children to develop an understanding of themselves and the world in which they live."

The UK Forest School community agreed on six guiding principles which ensure that this approach is delivered appropriately to its learners. Stated on (Forest School, 2020) the Forest schools should:

- "be a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review.
- take place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- use a range of learner-centered processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
- aim to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
- offer learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- be run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice."

Why are forest schools beneficial for children?

Developmental Benefits

Forest schools help children learn through a holistic approach to learning. Children that attend forest school become more resilient and motivated to learn. The children have the opportunities to develop their social skills, self-esteem, self-awareness, problem solving and their gross and fine motor skills. Children can develop these skills through a range of activities such as nature arts and crafts, yoga, shelter and den building, hiking and exploring nature.

In England ecoActive (2020), decided to run forest schools in four different primary schools that were affected by local deprivation. EcoActive (2020) worked with 64 children between the ages of 7-11 and as stated on ecoActive (2020) found that "84% of children showed improved social, verbal and non-verbal communication skills and 69% of children became more engaged and motivated learners."

Environmental Benefits

The child will develop a greater understanding of the outdoor world and will create a bond with nature.

What do forest schools promote?

"Spending time in green space or bringing nature into your everyday life can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing" (Mind, 2021). Being outdoors can encourage the children to be more active, this can help improve their mood by reducing feelings of anger and frustration.

Forest schools encourage parents and the wider community to get involved in the development and running of the forest school. Families become more likely to spend more time in woodland areas, playing and exploring nature once they have been involved with the development of the forest school.

Children learn to work independently and interdependently completing tasks that help the children develop essential life skills.

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