

Section One: Critically Analyse the Implementation of Play Based Early Years Curricula Referring to Evaluative Research Evidence and Reports

Play based curriculums have become core in western countries early years education provision (World Health Organisation, 2020; Parker, *et al.*, 2022) with the benefits evident from theory, research and practise (Pyle, *et al.*, 2017; Parker, *et al.* 2022). In Wales, The Foundation Phase curriculum was implemented throughout early years settings in 2010 (Welsh Government, 2015) and was followed by the implementation of The New Curriculum in 2022, including all school-age children (Welsh Government, 2022).

Welsh Government (2019) state that the new curriculum has been designed to provide the foundations which will enable children to succeed in a 'changing world', promoting adaptability and motivation to keep learning new skills which will prepare them for a successful career. However, the Foundation Phase was implemented to make learning more effective by encouraging children to be creative, focussing on age three to seven (Welsh Government, 2015; Thomas and Lewis, 2016).

As stated by The Welsh Government (2014, p.4) 'children have a fundamental right to be able to play'. This view is also supported by the United Nations Rights of the Child, Article 31, which states 'Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities...' Wales became the first country to legislate play in 2010 with the publication of the document, 'Wales – a play friendly country'. This document includes seven core aims which are now fundamental to all strategies and policies written for Wales, and this legislation ensures that each local authority provides opportunities for all children to be able to play (Welsh Government, 2015). The creation of these policies, with play at the centre, demonstrates the importance and significance that play holds.

Additionally, established pedagogical theorists underpin their ideas with the involvement of play. Piaget identified that three types of play reflected upon children's ability to think (Howard, 2014 in Maynard and Powell, 2014; Aubrey and Riley, 2019). Correspondingly, Piaget considered all children to be scientists discovering how the world works (Ford, 2014 in Maynard and Powell, 2014; Aubrey and Riley, 2019).

With all this evidence, it becomes clear that play is an important tool for early years education and it can be understood why the Welsh Government (2008) based the formation of the Foundation Phase upon such theories and pedagogies (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). If this is the case, then why does Wales need a new early years curriculum?

Between 2013 and 2014 an independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase was undertaken (Welsh Government, 2014). Professor Siraj looked in depth at the way it was working 'on the ground' during that time and concluded with twenty-three recommendations that would improve the implementation of the Foundation Phase in the future (Welsh Government, 2014). In addition, Taylor, *et al.* (2015) evaluated the Foundation Phase and summarised their considerations in twenty-nine recommendations for the Welsh Government to instigate in order to 'encourage the development of the Foundation Phase' (p.110). In principle, these documents were published to discuss whether the Foundation Phase was 'fit for purpose' (Waters, 2016; Thomas and Lewis, 2016).

Following this, Donaldson (2015) composed his 'Successful Futures' document. In this he complements the Foundation Phase, calling it 'one of the best things in Welsh education' (2015, p. 17). However, linking to Waters (2016), Donaldson (2015) explained that insufficient training results in the curriculum being implemented differently causing anxiety to practitioners who may regress to more formal methods of teaching. Perhaps lessons can be learnt regarding training to implement the Foundation Phase correctly (Donaldson, 2015; Waters 2016).

Substantiating this statement, several of the recommendations in the document, 'Evaluating the Foundation Phase' link to the theme of training and implementation of the curriculum (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). Recommendation 4 explains that practitioners require more practical advice about implementing different pedagogical approaches to teach literacy and numeracy (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, in the document 'An Independent Stocktake into the Foundation Phase in Wales', recommendation 4.3 states that effective frameworks provide guidance to help practitioners clarify pedagogical aims (Welsh Government, 2014).

Another factor influencing practitioners, is the esteem to which numeracy and literacy are held regarding assessment, inspection and ranking tables. Wightwick (2019)

reported about the PISA ranking results in the national Welsh newspaper, WalesOnline, strongly asserting where Wales had been 'ranked' in comparison internationally and to the other UK nations (Schleicher, 2016). This article is easily accessible to the general public which includes pupils, parents and carers and could provide negative connotations regarding education. Then leading to apprehension amongst practitioners concerning the implementation of a play-based curriculum (Worthington and Van Oers, 2016; Waters, 2016; Pascal, *et al.*, 2021; oldprimarytimer, 2022).

Recommendation 4.3 from the Stocktake document illustrates that throughout settings there is a variability in implementation of the Foundation Phase based on how individuals understand the pedagogy of it (Welsh Government, 2014). Linking to recommendation 4.7 where it is stated that implementation of the Foundation Phase is variable depending on who received the training in the setting. This argues that training should be delivered throughout the staff cohort of settings, from management to practitioner level, in order to best apply the principals in a linear understanding (Welsh Government, 2014). Waters (2016) agrees, explaining that the Foundation Phase would be implemented at a greater quality if teacher training is changed and improved, and staff are allowed to adjust as curricula changes.

Concluding their reports, both Siraj (Welsh Government, 2014) and Taylor, *et al.*, (2015) discuss the quality of training and offering suggestions for improvements. 'Evaluating the Foundation Phase' asserts training documents need to include more examples of pedagogical implementation in recommendation six (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). Comparatively, recommendation 4 in the 'Independent Stocktake' document suggests that training becomes compulsory for all early years staff but that this training requires underpinning with theory and research to enhance the rationale of importance, detailed in Recommendation 5 (Welsh Government, 2014).

Training was a key theme in the Donaldson Report (Donaldson, 2015). Donaldson (2015) expressed that training is an integral part of the structure of education. In addition, he stated that practitioners will require bespoke training to gain the skills and confidence to deliver the New Curriculum to pupils. In order to undertake this substantial training, practitioners will need sufficient preparation and time (Donaldson, 2015; Wavehill, 2015). In essence, if lessons needed to be learnt from

the training provided for the Foundation Phase, are there significant improvements of these measures to ensure that the New Curriculum training is appropriate and effective (Wavehill, 2015).

In conclusion, Morshed, et al. (2010:71) and OECD (no date) agree that to implement reform and change to curricula, changing just one element, i.e., the New Curriculum, will not be successful unless all related elements and pedagogy are also changed to become effective and intertwined with the new working systems. Will the New Curriculum impact positively upon the early years if the concerns highlighted in previous reports about the previous curriculum (Welsh Government, 2014; Taylor, et al., 2015; Donaldson, 2015) regarding training are not recognised and challenged (Wavehill, 2015; Waters, 2016; Pyle et al., 2019). Alternatively, is Donaldson's New Curriculum what is needed in early years education to provide a systematic change because, as Donaldson (2015:21) stated, 'the Foundation Phase is a very real strength on which to build the New Curriculum'.

Section Two: Considering the Concept of the Unique Child, Critically Evaluate Methods of Assessment, Progress Tracking and Age/Stage Related Developmental Models Within Play-Based Curricula.

Every child is unique, developing at their own pace within the confines of their limitations (Gouldsboro, 2017; Dalton, 2018). Children's development is continuous and complex, involving the whole child in a holistic capacity rather than specific areas of development. A theory studied by Jean Jacques Rousseau suggests that education should follow a child's natural growth using each child's specific needs (Aubrey and Riley, 2019). Furthermore, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains that learning occurs during social interactions, but that children's cognitive levels differ due to many reasons, in particular cultural markers (Bodrova and Leong, 2013; Aubrey and Riley, 2019).

Following on from the previous section, as stated by the OECD (no date), 'changing one element, e.g., curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, may only be useful if other related elements are changed as well.' The early years curriculum in Wales is transforming at a fast pace (OECD, 2017) therefore it is imperative that assessment adjusts in line with this change (Morshed, et al. 2010:71)

In New Zealand, the government understood the concept of this when they designed their new early years curriculum, Te Whariki (Sellers, 2013; New Zealand Government, 2017). This curriculum is designed to support the whole child with individualised learning and teaching, encouraging children to 'learn how to learn' (Ongley, 2017; New Zealand Government, 2017).

Te Whariki emphasised the importance of the cultural differences in New Zealand and designed their early years curriculum to embrace this, utilising culture to enrich children's learning (New Zealand Government, 2017; Chan, 2019). Drawing from Vygotsky's social cultural theory, Te Whariki is described as a bicultural curriculum linking an increasingly multicultural society in New Zealand in line with 'The Treaty'. This ensures that the curriculum fosters and supports children to achieve equitable outcomes whilst being inclusive to rich Maori culture, people and practises (New Zealand Government, 2017; Chan 2019).

Reinforcing the concept of the Unique Child, Maori tradition states children are valued from conception and need to be nurtured to understand their own importance (Reedy, 2013; Neha, et al., 2020). Te Whariki supports the ideas of the Maori tradition when it describes learning as a journey which begins at birth (New Zealand Government, 2017; Chan, 2019). In order to support this pedagogy, an alternative form of assessment has been developed called Learning Stories (New Zealand Government, 2017). Instead of following a checklist of predetermined markers which are based on age and stage, Te Whariki focusses on responsive and reciprocal practices which allow assessment to be formative and follow each individual child's needs (New Zealand Government, 2017; MacLachlan, 2018). The curriculum recognises that occasionally children will require additional support as their capabilities change or additional learning needs are identified (New Zealand Government, 2017). From gathering evidence over time in a Learning Story, these needs can be tracked and plans can be put in place for support (New Zealand Government, 2017).

Several early years curriculums draw on principals from the Te Whaiki pedagogy, including the Foundation Phase in Wales (Welsh Government, 2008; Wainwright, *et al.*, 2020) which asserts that its pedagogy is cross-curricula and holistic supporting the needs of the whole child. This is consistent with the concept of the Unique Child.

Te Whariki asserts a strong focus on children being capable and confident and the assessment method used fosters this. Learning Stories provide an opportunity for reflection and peer-to-peer learning. As children develop, they can engage in this process, becoming involved in planning their own learning (New Zealand Government, 2017). This gives children a sense of purpose supporting their unique selves, wellbeing and benefiting their self-confidence, sustaining their abilities as strong and capable individuals. The planning in the Foundation Phase is intended to be child centred however, unlike Te Whariki, the children do not become involved with this planning. Subsequently, the Foundation Phase planning has some way to improve to support the Unique Child as Te Whariki does.

The Welsh Government (2008) recognise that children are unique in that they hold a range of individual differences. In order to promote this, the Foundation Phase guidance expresses the importance of practitioners undertaking observations of the children to inform planning, ensuring each child's needs are met appropriately. Te Whariki also employs the use of observation as a planning tool, however, unlike the Foundation Phase, these observations lead to immediate changes supporting the current and long-term goals and needs of each unique child.

Long term and formative assessment are provided through the Learning Stories which becomes a more formal part of the assessment process when practitioners write detailed information linking their observations to each child's engagement with the curriculum (New Zealand Government, 2017). This assessment does not view children in isolation but captures the unique characteristics of each child taking account of the whole child (New Zealand Government, 2017). Te Whariki credit children with an increasing capacity to assess their own progress. As they learn they become more able to plan the next challenge in their learning.

In contrast, the Foundation Phase includes statutory assessments – one when the child begins attending the setting and one when they leave (Welsh Government, 2008). Foundation Phase Profile is the assessment method of the Foundation Phase. It supports the development of each child throughout their time in the Foundation Phase using four areas of learning. The Practitioner completes a profile for each child at specific points during this period linking to milestones that children are expected to have reached (Welsh Government, 2017). Although based on

developmental 'norms', these milestones are not based on age, however, this contrasts with Te Whariki where children are assessed in line with their own abilities and needs rather than their age or stage of development (New Zealand Government, 2017).

The idea of the Unique Child becomes lost when practitioners focus upon stage related development and checklists (Bradbury, 2019). Te Whariki fosters the Unique Child in its approach of following each child's individual progress through a learning story, however, it can be argued that this method can miss developmental delays and the identification of additional learning needs (Cameron, 2014; Zhang, 2017). To ensure this does not happen, Te Whariki is regularly evaluated both internally and externally to consider how the curriculum is effectively supporting children to meet their goals and progress their learning (New Zealand Government, 2017).

Furthermore, parents and care givers are involved in the assessment of their children through the strong relationship that evolves between them and the practitioners (DES, 1990; New Zealand Government, 2017). This instigates an ease of communication between all parties producing a dialogue when there is a concern or query regarding concerns about additional learning needs or developmental delays (Schärer, 2019). This partnership is also beneficial when children are experiencing negative impacts such as poverty and neglect, amid other issues, as communication and trust form part of the wider sociocultural learning theories (DES, 1990; Maynard, Taylor, *et al.*, 2015; Aubrey and Riley, 2019).

On the other hand, completing the Foundation Phase Profile provides an accurate overview of each child's individual development, which is aligned to the Skills Ladder (Quigley, *et al.*, 2012). This Skills Ladder pinpoints where the child is in each area of their development and compares them to a developmental normality (Welsh Government, 2008; Welsh Government, 2017). As such, the practitioner can identify developmental delays or additional learning needs which allows for suitable support to be implemented for each child (Early Years Wales, 2020).

In conclusion, there are positive and negative arguments for the assessment methods of each curriculum, Te Whaiki and the Foundation Phase. It is important to consider the context of where each curriculum works both environmentally and socially to enable a completely accurate analysis (Wainright, *et al.*, 2020). However,

the evidence provided suggests that Te Whariki promotes the Unique Child more positively through their progressive assessment (MacLachlan, 2018; Nehu, *et al.*, 2020). The Foundation Phase could be considered contradictory where it states that planning and assessment should be child centered but that statutory assessments must still be completed to align children to an age and stage related skills ladder (Evans, 2022).

Part Three: Blog - What Makes an Enabling Practitioner?

Early Years settings are full of exceptional practitioners who are highly qualified and experienced. Most have worked in the sector for years and raised their own children while others have completed rigorous assessments and qualifications. So, now the curriculum is changing, why is the government asking for more from these people? Haven't they achieved enough already?

The New Curriculum focusses on children who are aged three to sixteen attending maintained settings in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019). It calls for a more child – centered approach to planning and assessment with holistic opportunities available for all in an inclusive atmosphere (Donaldson, 2015). In the Early Years this is demonstrated by practitioners creating enabling environments Nursery Resources, 2018; Caldina, 2022; PACEY, 2022).

Urie Bronfenbrenner notes the importance of environments to the development of children in his Ecological Systems Theory (Aubrey and Riley, 2019; Tudge and Rosa, 2019). Likewise, Lev Vygotsky explains that the cultural and social environments in which children grow-up influence their learning and development (Aubrey and Riley, 2019). Consequently, the environment in the setting in which children attend is important so that it supports their learning and development effectively (Welsh Government, 2008).

Enabling environments provide children with stimulating and challenging experiences; foster the unique child and link resources to specific interests; be flexible by providing opportunities for all types of play; deliver a quiet space for reflection and rest; encourage children to be creative and take risks; promote equity and inclusivity; nurture children's independence and aid them to develop a positive attitude to learning and finally, provide safety and emotional support. When developed successfully, the enabling environment supports children to learn across

all areas of the curriculum (Nursery Resources, 2018; Early Years Alliance, 2019; Caldina, 2022; PACEY, 2022).

Changing the existing set-up in schools and settings is a difficult responsibility and this falls upon those hard-working practitioners who have been mentioned before. Not only will they implement these changes, but they will also be responsible for involving the children and parents in planning the new environment whilst consulting the curriculum to ensure that the environment will meet the learning needs of each child (Hodgman, 2012; Ryder Richardson, 2013). However, creating an enabling environment is not necessarily what creates an enabling practitioner. For the enabling environment to facilitate deep learning, it needs enabling practitioners!

There are several elements which come together creating an enabling practitioners. In some people, this will come naturally while others will have to apply themselves during New Curriculum training, and in practice, to achieve this. Some practitioners may believe that there is no place for change because their current system is working well. However, part of becoming enabling involves reflecting upon your practice to understand what is impacting upon your ability to change to a new pedagogical thinking. This includes collaborating with colleagues, immersing yourself in training opportunities and asking questions (Canning, 2013; PACEY, 2022).

It is imperative that practitioners understand the importance of building warm and supportive relationships with children to increase a positive attachment and create a model for healthy relationships which are based upon inclusion (Harvard, 2020). This nurtures children and gives them the security within the setting to feel comfortable and facilitate their agency, gaining the utmost from the enabling environment the practitioner has created for them (Nursery Resources, 2018; Harvard, 2020; Early Years Matters, 2022).

The enabling practitioner must have confidence in their practice, allowing children to explore the environment autonomously, choosing who they play with, what they play with and where they play. Children need to be able to move freely within the setting to make these choices. Part of this involves supporting collaboration and cooperation between children helping them to develop essential social skills (Nursery Resources, 2018; Caldina, 2022).

Additionally, enabling practitioners are required to always hold an optimistic approach therefore contributing positively to the emotional environment of the setting. In turn, this fosters a supportive atmosphere for children to be able to express their emotions and feelings in a healthy manner whilst learning to manage them efficiently (Nursery Resources, 2018; Early Years Matters, 2022, PACEY, 2022).

All humans are born with an innate ability to take risks. Adults are experienced at taking risks and therefore, can successfully decide whether the benefit outweighs the risk and whether precautions should be prepared. On the other hand, children need to develop this skill (Lavrysen, Bertrands, *et al.* 2015). Risky play is exciting and exhilarating. It provides children with the opportunities to encounter or create uncertainty, hazards and unpredictability through their play. The skills gained through risky play promote children's holistic development. The enabling practitioner can support this risk taking safely allowing children to explore and play using all their senses (Hodgman, 2012; Ryder Richardson, 2013; Nursery Resources, 2018; Early Years Matters, 2022).

Conversely, practitioner's perceptions of risk are influenced by broader social and cultural impacts resulting in different perceptions of risk. Additionally, as modern society increasingly chooses to mitigate risks to children, it may be argued that several practitioners choose to eradicate the chance of risk completely in order to keep children safe. (Little, 2015).

Sustained shared thinking is a pedagogical method which requires practitioners to use high order skills and work together with the children to extend the narrative of conversations evaluating and creating solutions to solve problems (Purdon, 2014, PACEY, 2022). Enabling practitioners facilitate rich learning opportunities as they demonstrate sustained shared thinking to extend conversations and consolidate learning, supporting children to engage in the enabling environment in a curious manner, in turn, deepening the learning and development created (Purdon, 2014, PACEY, 2022).

In conclusion, an enabling practitioner builds on the valued early years practitioner to contribute towards the facilitation of an enabling environment benefitting the learning and development of early years children. They are progressive practitioners who

understand the need for change in the fast-paced and ever-changing world that children are being born into. They reflect on their practice, understanding that how they worked in the past may not be relevant to current and incoming cohorts. Nevertheless, the hard-working practitioners that our children love, but with an added edge of modern cool!

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