

The foundation phase is the statutory curriculum for all 3 – 7-year-olds. This is both within non-maintained and maintained settings. The curriculum within Key Stage 1 was designed to an experimental, developmental, play based approach to learning and teaching. This approach focuses mainly on the unique child and as well as the significance of the child's well-being and seriousness of a practitioner directed, and child-initiated balance within outdoor and indoor environments (Welsh Government, 2015).

There is a powerful focus on outdoor learning and allowing free-flow access between outdoor and indoor environments. A stability of child led, and adult-directed tasks should be delivered on a daily basis experimental, active learning with shared collaborative partnerships between the adults and the children (Welsh Government, 2012). It has been referred that the foundation phase is a play-based curriculum with more focus on individual needs rather than one 'size fits all' approach. Many individuals may argue that it is a move to far away from sedentary practice to a more active learning, which is more beneficial for young children. Howard, Miles, and Gealy, (2009) stated that, 'play is a central feature of the Foundation Phase framework.' According to Aasen and Waters, (2006) the Foundation Phase is needed because, 'the changes may be summarised as resulting from concerns about inappropriate nature of Early Years education provision in some settings and the formal nature of some children's experiences at the cost of their natural curiosity, creative expression, confidence, and love of learning.

When observing a developing child, it is important that practitioners learn to understand how a child develops and base an appropriate plan that includes the child's skills and developmental needs that they need in order for them to succeed into confident learners (The Welsh Government, 2015). Barriers within the curriculum also need to be taken into consideration when focusing on experimental play, to learning as by participating in this physically can cause barriers when it comes to sensory, communication or learning difficulties. However, practitioners should also recognise the well-being and emotional development. It is most important that each individual child has an entry way into a variety of resources which allows them to express themselves in order to apply their imagination and open up many opportunities in meaningful ways (The Foundation Phase, 2015). By providing these opportunities for children they are able to widen their skills at their own unique and

different rates as this will allow them to gain confidence and practise them in different situations and to reflect on their own work without realising. By allowing this it is opening each child's work to be respected, valued, and encourages it for originality in the way they have chosen to complete that specific scenario.

Evidence provided from reliable Early Years Programmes in New Zealand (Te Whāriki), Scandinavia and Reggio Emilia have indicated that formal teaching before the age of six and seven and the overly formal curriculum will result in low standards of attainment in the longer term (Waldron et al, 2014). This approach emphasises the significance of a child centred approach to learning and the importance of the well-being of children as a whole. There were three stages that were implemented in the Foundation Phase. These phases included the Pilot stage of 22 schools and 22 non-maintained settings in 2004/05, the Early Start stage of a further 22 schools and non-maintained settings in 2006/07 and all remaining schools and funded non-maintained settings during the Final Roll-out stage in 2009/10.

An annual report from Taylor et al (2014) gave an update on the evaluation of the design and methodology as it progressed to Stage 2 of the evaluation design.

The evaluation was designed to ensure multiple perspectives are obtained within the different aspects of the Foundation Phase. This can lead to similar questions being asked to different people and stakeholders, leading to us comparing what practitioners say with what they do or with other outcomes (Athey, 2007).

The findings of the Stocktake and recommendations have been reported under the main headings agreed in the terms of reference. The Foundation Phase was a major change and policy development implemented to 'get the best for Wales,' (NAfW, 2001) which included a policy for 3–7-year-olds within the Foundation Phase. One of the most recent policy developments is Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (OFES, 2013a) it shows the Welsh Governments commitment to the approach and targets the current position with its implementation to 'improve the life chances and outcomes of all children in Wales'.

The Independent Stocktakes previous findings found that the implementation of the Foundation Phase found the standard of teaching and learning within schools were a lot higher in non-maintained settings. It was found that practitioners were made more likely to nurture a child's intellectual development as well as their social-emotional wellbeing (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2006). There was a similar finding to Sylva et al,

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(2004) study found where qualifications of practitioners determine the quality of provision. It was also found that practitioners thought the curriculum was more supportive to children's learning when it was child centered and based on play learning, (Welsh Government, 2014). The Independent Stocktake Evaluation of the Foundation Phase in Wales by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods, have produced three reports which were available for us to consider. To date they have produced an annual report and outcomes report: Evaluating the Foundation Phase: Annual Report 2011/12 (Taylor et al, 2013) and Evaluating the Foundation Phase: the Outcomes of Foundation Phase Pupils (Report 1) (Davies et al, 2013).

Successful frameworks supply guidelines which help staff to clarify their aims, provide a strategy for the day, focus on the assignment, progression and planning and support concentration on the significant aspects of child development (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). Having a good framework for children is important when having the need to support settings and schools to provide children with the skills and knowledge needed for the next phase of education and for further transitions and learning between educational levels (UNESCO, 2004). The Stocktake noted that in the main principles of the Foundation Phase were put into practice beneficially. The practitioners working there had an explicit view of what represented an effective Foundation Phase, they kept focus on quality, strategized well and modify their pedagogy to suit the families and children. Where the performance was practical, improvements for children's results were reported across the Foundation Phase and often beyond. There were reports from settings that improvements in areas of wellbeing, literacy, and numeracy. It was confirmed by the Stocktake that there is a significant variability throughout Wales, and the belief that the condition of the implementation Foundation Phase appears to be of a higher standard in maintained schools and nurse schools as compared to funded non-maintained settings remains. A recent review considering school and system reform typically militates against the achievement of children from the poorest backgrounds (Hopkins, 2013). However, the standard differs across the maintained and funded non-maintained sectors were difficult to defend in Wales as the inspection that was taken was different. The Hanney report published in 2000, recognised some benefits of the Early Years provision by countries, but many of the benefits were only present in one

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or two countries. There were four key areas for improvement that were highlighted, and these included, uneven standards of provision for Early Years; lack of focus and training courses for child development; No continuity in provision from zero to six as in other countries and insufficient practitioners trained to work within the Early Years and a lack of them. The Hanney report concluded a review of research from other countries that focus on child-initiated learning, children as social actors and agents of change, and found that at the age of fifteen those children who had addressed a very professional curriculum show a more anti-social behaviour and were less involved with education. Hanney argues in the report that 'where children start compulsory school age six or seven there is a firm belief that if formal activities are introduced too soon, some children who are not ready for this will begin to experience failure'. The Start Right report (Ball, 1994) stated that the UK is not in line with developments in other parts of the world and this is a concern. It reflects on four countries which include, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and Sweden, that have dealt with a change in curricula provision. Hanney (2000) reported that it was only Wales that had a specific focus on literacy and numeracy so early on in the educational provision. The other countries had far greater focus on self-expression and individuality and utilized different teaching strategies. Hanney observed that many Local Authorities were trialling new initiatives and strengthening interdisciplinary working relationships. It could be argued that the aims are overambitious, and the Foundation Phase alone might not achieve them. On the other hand, one could argue that the aims are realistic and achievable. One of the key findings from the recent three-year evaluation of the Foundation Phase that relates to raising standards of achievement reports.

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Children are born ready to learn. Children, without realising, extend out to interconnect with others within the world around them. Development is not an immediate process; however, it relies on the unique child being given the opportunity to interrelate within enabling environments and effective relationships.

The Early Years Foundation Stage, (EYFS, 2012) underpin four themes that give guidance for the best outcomes of learning. The four themes include positive relationships, the unique child, learning and development and enabling environments. Each child is unique, and they are always learning and can be efficient, positive, self-assured and adaptable. (Early Years Foundation Stage, 2012).

Within this first theme practitioners need to acknowledge and distinguish each child's growth and education, assess progress and plan for next steps. As part of their job, it is vital they help children develop an effective sense of their own culture and identity. It is also important to identify if any additional support is needed. When building positive relationship children are able to learn to be independent and strong through positive relationships. By doing this it allows practitioners to be encouraging of the child's own attempts and self-determination. It is sensitive and receptive to the child's interests, needs, and their feelings (EYFS, 2012). When enabling environments children are able to learn in which their encounters respond to their individual needs and there is a positive partnership between the practitioners and parents and carers. The Foundation Phase (2015: 4) views the unique child as, "children acquire and develop skills at different rates and must be allowed to develop at their own unique, individual pace. As children learn new skills, they should be given opportunities to practise them in different situations, to reflect on and evaluate their work. In all aspects of their development, children's own work should be respected, valued, and encouraged for its ordinality and honesty."

The curriculum for Wales doesn't only focus on the unique child but defines how a new framework in each school would be beneficial for the unique child. 'A new framework for learning in Wales which gives each school express permission to design a bespoke curriculum of the needs of each child' (Curriculum for Wales, 2022). The aim of The Curriculum for Wales is to guide each school to develop their own curriculum. This will encourage the learners to develop towards the four purposes of the curriculum. The need for a child's education to be considered as

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‘investment in human capital’ focuses attention on the perceived economic value of education. Tony Blair (2005) emphasised this by stating, ‘We have to secure Britain’s future in a world... driven by globalisation. We have to change and modernise, to equip everyone for this changing world’. With the increase of children aged 4 in schools and the increase in women working, the vision around young children within early years are starting to switch around us. An early year’s provision was recognised as an important factor in assembling children to be triumphant in school, providing a workforce for the future which could in turn reinforce the economic position of the country.

The Foundation Phase is a development curriculum for three- to 7-year-olds within Wales, when announced in September of 2010. The focus of the Foundation Phase is to inspire children to be imaginative and creative and makes learning more amusing and more productive. The proceed towards education and lifelong learning is set out in the broader context of our vision for children and young people (The Welsh Government, 2013). The Early Years Stage framework, that was put into place in 2008, is reinforced by Every Child Matters agenda. This agenda, which was put into place in 2003, encourages an holistic approach to education through certain outcomes picked out for individuals aged from birth to 19, that is; stay safe, be healthy, accomplish and appreciate.

Legislation in 1989 from the UNCRC identified the importance to promote well-being of children and the significance to work together to achieve it. The Children’s Act in 2004 seek to expand multidisciplinary working to supply holistic care for children. Multidisciplinary working brings together professionals from differing disciplinary backgrounds to collaborate and co-operate to promote the well-being of the children they are responsible for, (Beckley, 2012).

The Early Years Foundation Stage framework, mandatory in 2008, developed the holistic approach to educating young children. These wide aims can be carried out by practitioners to identify the needs of the young children in the settings, providing an educational environment that it play-based for young children. Within this framework, practitioners can create the environment that empower young children in the setting to construct their understanding of the world around them (Bilton, 2010). Nearly all children that live in New Zealand now appear on early learning service for a sustained period of time. The Te Whāriki theory encourages children to learn how

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to learn. Teaching and learning is individualised for children, 'children are competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society.' (Te Whāriki, 2015). In Te Whāriki children are positioned as self-assertive and equal learners from birth. They learn by appealing in meaningful interconnection with other people and places and this process will continue throughout their lifetime. The new curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and encouragement of their wellbeing and health, to impartial access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, identity, and culture. The aim of the curriculum is to be an inclusive curriculum for all children. It holds a promise that all children will be entitled to learn with and engage in events that have meaning.

The Foundation Phase uses a formative assessment which was found to be a focal point when looking at children's accomplishments against skills within the curriculum. By using this they plan to focus on how they move forward rather than the outcomes of the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015). This means practitioners and children will be involved understanding specific skills. This allows practitioners to identify each child's current situation, plan and identify for steps within skills and acknowledge when they have been achieved. When planning it is important to underpin the needs of the child and meeting the particular skills across a broad and balanced curriculum. The foundation phase outcomes have been developed for summative assessment. This provides the type and range of attainment where children's outcomes should be demonstrated.

When looking at the Foundation Phase there is also a way in how the assessment is scored. There are many areas of the Foundation Phase that can be accomplished within the sector of learning. The outcomes Bronze to the Foundation Phase Outcome 6 is based on a numerical scoring system and this allows practitioners to measure the progress of the individual child. The aim of the scoring system is to make sure that the child is awarded for the outcome of their learning (Welsh Government, 2015). Each age group has its related outcome and scoring system. During this it allows children to obtain new skills but at individual rates and must be stimulated to develop at their own unique pace.

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The New Curriculum that is in progress has many steps that are helping to improve the Foundation Phase. There are 27 mandatory statements of what matters are the basis of learners' progression. The principles and key ideas contained within the statements which will improve their learning. It was described by the Curriculum for Wales that the principles of progression for the curriculum as a whole and for each individual Area. Based in the curriculum necessities set out in legislation, the New Curriculum should include: allowing learners to make progression towards the four purposes, be broad and balanced, include all six areas, cover every statement of what matters and embed the mandatory cross-curricular skills (Welsh Government, 2015). The progression must be obliged to the main part of the curriculum design sooner than starting with a theme and adapting the educational learning to it. The curriculum content, schools and practitioners must use the principles of development to inform their approach to progression.

Learning stories are an observation type that tell a story about what an educator sees, hears, knows, and interprets. They may include contributions from the child, the child's family, and other stakeholders. Learning stories is a fundamental aspect in the growth of a child's sense of identity. This is a beneficial way to assess a child and their development as we start to understand how they learn and what they are doing. Children can evolve their own interests as well as the significance of self-worth. This will empower children to be more interested in learning by their own volition. Story telling is an excellent tool and will work by allowing children to explain their expectations, strengthen character and teach desired behaviour within a workplace. When practitioners turn information into a relatable story with a lesson attached, it is easier for the audience to connect to and learn from it (Foundation Phase, 2014).

How can the curriculum be meaningfully researched when you are working with children in the early years?

This was a highlighted question at a recent presentation on child – friendly research in early years. Focusing on the UK early years curricula it is primarily based around ‘play’. However, Pyle et al (2017) research showed that although play is valued and has a positive reaction with children the roles of play within children’s learning can be debated.

Within the curriculum when individuals are researching play it can be found to be problematic due to factors around it which include how we define ‘play’. This includes the curriculum if it is child-centred and ethically researched. Factors that need to be considered when evaluating the curriculum should be courteous and favourable to the children, and the international charter for ethical research involving children (Graham et al, 2013). By taking these factors into consideration these can be used to provide a beneficial and useful framework when evaluating different methods.

The early years of children’s lives are a critical part for the later development of their health and development. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) believes that one of the main reasons is due to how fast the brain grows and develops even before birth which then continues into their early childhood. Children are ready to learn from when they are born and learn a variety of skills over time, and it is how we demonstrate and show an understanding of the children’s developments. Within the research of play the Early Years Curricula is centred around observational or interview methodology.

Early Childhood Education and Care (2012) concluded that the curriculum and quality of learning do in fact have a helpful impact on a child’s growth and learning. However, the only way in which this can happen is if the standard of care is at a realistically high quality as it has been proven that the standard is low. This can then take a long-lasting effect on a child’s development, rather than bringing useful effects. According to the Welsh Government implementing a high-quality setting do have the largest impact on children and are the settings in which enable the children to extend to their full potential and support them in reaching good levels of development.

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Being observational in early years practice is a key skill for Early Years Practitioners. Although providing practitioners with these key skills it can come with challenges when observing play within the curriculum (Flewitt, 2014). One of the main questions for practitioners is, how does the observer know that what they are observing is in fact play? Even if the practitioner is sure that they are definitely observing play, it does come with possible downfalls. Such as, how often should the practitioner alter the play scenario while they observe? While observing children it needs to come with open and authentic questioning. However, language competence and cognitive overload is a factor that can make this very difficult. A power issue can also arise between the observing practitioner and the child which can also impact on the authenticity of any dialogue (Flewitt, 2014).

It has been found that visual methods have been used while researching play. A beneficial method has been allowing children to use cameras to take pictures of places that they enjoy playing in and further discussing and showing an understanding of the method that they have used. There has been once method in particular that has had a positive effect in projects such as the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011). When using this method approach, we are able to unravel the issued that have prevented play within early years setting that have gone unnoticed to the practitioners that are within the setting. As well as this there was also another photographic method that had taken place which was used to acknowledge each child's perspectives of play were looked at during this presentation. The method was used and adapted by the activity apperception story procedure (AASP) which has proven to have shown an encouraging effect (Howard, 2002: McInnes, 2010). These involved children sorting images into what they believed was play and what was not play.

Throughout the presentation many practitioners attempted this method, and it displayed the problems in defining what was play and what was not play. While doing that, it also displayed the similarities between the way adults and child's perspective of what they believed play was. The differences showed that there was no universal understanding. Though play young children learn, however this sorting activity only highlighted the problems when play-based activities are implemented for learning. This caused problems as activities constructed by adults that are seen as

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play may not be seen as play to the child, and this can cause learning to be minimised.

As demonstrated by the Mosaic approach, combining methods can be a powerful source (Clark and Moss, 2011). This approach inspired that using non-participant observation and audio recordings allowed an insight into practitioners understanding of play and how an adult's influence can easily change a child's perspective of play and what supports children's play (McInnes et al, 2013). Another example of combining methods is by allowing children to talk about their sorting choices when using AASP. By using different images, it is providing a focal point for a widened discussion which avoids many of the problematic issues concerned with using these methods with children in early years settings.

Overall, child-friendly research in early years is not easy. As seen traditional methods of observations and interview have their place but need to be carefully thought about to make sure that they are appropriate and respectful to the use for young children within the early years settings. While ethics is a beneficial starting point and ethic research such as – ethical practice in general – needs to be continuous and consistent (Graham et al, 2013)

While using visual methods can also be child-friendly they must be on the same level of scrutiny as other methods (Pyle et al, 2013). To conclude, the take-home message for using friendly research methods within the early years settings is to make sure it is fun and creative, but also be ethical.

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