

Section 1:

Curricula in Wales is undergoing reform, and this period offers time for government, settings and practitioners to evaluate and reflect upon the shortcomings of the Foundation Phase in Wales and find ways to ensure the current reform is embedded smoothly. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) states that the curriculum reform will enable learners to develop the skills required to become successful citizens of the changing world of work. Continuing to state that while mathematics and literacy are important basic skills for all children, the development of creative thinking and problem solving, and citizenship and cultural identity are some of the focuses of the highest performing education systems. These are elements embedded in the new Curriculum for Wales' four purposes which aim to provide children and young people with the tools and skills to achieve their highest potential in life (Welsh Government, 2023b and Welsh Government, 2022a).

Creative exploration is a theory discussed by Froebel, who also noted the importance of observing children. Additionally, Froebel believed that children learn through doing and that practitioners should offer opportunities for independent play and exploration while also offering support, scaffolding, guidance and sustained shared thinking (Bowlby, 2016). Moreover, Froebel valued the learning achieved during play and the importance of secure relationships, culture, and the sense of belonging (Tovey, 2020). This is also evident in Ministry of Education (2017) where practitioners are directed to the benefits of play on children's ability to reason, problem solve, developing confidence and knowledge of the world around them including the environment. Moreover, Waters (2015) discusses the changes made during a time of devolution of the Welsh Government, to create the Foundation Phase as a single stage of education for 3- to 7-year-olds which embeds play and experiential learning and the many developmental benefits to children's learning. Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2015) state that using the senses to absorb information and experimenting with their ideas is the process known as experiential learning. Additionally, MacDonald, Waters and Palaiologou (2016) states the importance placed on the indoors and the outdoors within the Foundation Phase and the role of the practitioner as facilitators of learning. Therefore, this required practitioners to understand the important developmental potential within play and practitioners who can provide sparks of play in an exciting enabling environment. However, Waters (2015) discusses the difficulties faced by practitioners during the rollout of the Foundation Phase, as this required a change in pedagogy without support from government. Siraj (2014) suggests that some practitioners have a poor understanding of theories behind play-based experiential learning and child development. Some

settings offered a nod to play and continued to teach in their known pedagogical style while other settings, who are embracing play with little understanding of the way children learn, found the classroom environment to be disorderly chaos. Furthermore, Siraj (2014) suggests that government could improve practice with the availability of sufficient professional development and training opportunities, to inform practitioners around the theories of play based learning and practitioner roles in a play-based curriculum. Additionally, Siraj (2014) suggested that reflective practice needed to be embedded within settings so that improvements can be made. Moreover, there were suggestions that the government should provide models of good practice and that exemplar settings be available to ensure that settings provide the same high standard of practice and environments. This is additionally supported by Taylor *et al.* (2015) who stated training of pedagogical approaches, appropriate to the Foundation Phase, was important to improve practice and the outcomes seen within the Foundation Phase. Additionally, Waters (2015) stated the importance of practitioners being an enabling adult, and the importance of them not only understanding what play-based learning looks like but also why this impacts development. Key phrases such as 'meaningful play' were left to interpretation and therefore allowed for inconsistencies or reverting to known pedagogical practices (Waters, 2015). Therefore, training around child development, theorists, research, and playful pedagogical principles enables educators to form an understanding around why these changes are necessary. As such, the adult's role is to ensure professional development is accessed wherever possible. Audit Wales (2022) suggests that, with the introduction of the new Curriculum for Wales, that the Welsh Government collaborated with schools and professionals to identify training needs of practitioners, which includes teachers and teaching assistants. Moreover, Welsh Government (2022a) places responsibilities for professional collaboration, sharing best practice and knowledge with other professionals. These steps allow for settings to acquire a wealth of knowledge and expertise and form the best possible practice to provide the highest standards. Should these principles become embedded as suggested, play-based experiential learning may be implemented in the way it was intended. Duggan *et al.* (2022) found that schools already feel that there is improved collaboration between settings with the implementation of regional networks, meaning they can engage in professional dialogue to share understanding and practice. However, some respondents noted that there has been a lack of professional learning available to support them in embedding these new pedagogical approaches.

While the Foundation Phase in Wales aimed to set some of these theories in practice by advocating play-based pedagogy, with hands-on, experiential learning, Taylor, Mirain and

Waldron (2016) argue that the Foundation Phase also enforced more structured learning, alongside play and exploration, with emphasis on key skills attainment by a dictated age bracket. This strains practitioners to ensure children are all reaching targets based on their age and not considering that children's development is not linear (Welsh Government, 2023a) This means that children develop at different paces and so the target milestones set by the Foundation Phase goes against the unique child ethos of Froebel's approach. Therefore, the developmental milestones placed on each child within the Foundation Phase did not consider a child's uniqueness and the slower pace with which a play-based curriculum is embedded. This is also supported by Donaldson (2015) who suggests that the main goal of settings became imparting information to meet external targets. This removed the autonomy of teachers and teaching staff to follow the children's interests, a feature which should have been key to a play-based experiential curriculum. This is supported by Siraj (2014) who found that there were frictions between the play-based pedagogy and developmental approaches of the Foundation Phase and the rigidity of the Foundation Phase expectations and outcomes by the end of year 2. It could be said then that the Foundation Phase did not allow for a holistic approach to play-based, experiential learning. Taylor *et al.* (2015) stated in its recommendations that training and professional development was required, across many aspects of its recommendations. However, recommendation 7 specifically calls for training to guide practitioners around observations and assessment. This is of importance across all roles within settings as rapid implementation of the Foundation Phase required an increase in staff, which resulted in some under experienced staffing (Siraj, 2014). Despite these findings, it could be hoped that the recent reviews and therefore reflection would allow for improved outcomes with the implementation of the new curricula in Wales. However, Wilson *et al.* (2023) found that some practitioners were still unsure of the vocabulary being at an appropriate level. The new Curriculum for Wales implements progression steps, which are the continuum for learning and are not seen as age related (Donaldson, 2015). Welsh Government (2021) sets out principles for progression which enable settings to make provisions for all learners and states that progression steps are steps which allow for individual progression and not age based targets. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2021) explains that learner progression should be at the heart of settings' curriculum with the assessment of learners and the four purposes informing planning. Therefore, settings should utilise assessment tools to inform their planning, to ensure adequate challenge is offered. Moreover, settings are required to provide adequate progression in the depth of knowledge (Welsh Government, 2021). Additionally, Welsh Government (2022a) states the importance of allowing children to revisit, extend and consolidate their learning with

repetative access to learning opportunities and activities. This is supported by Bruner's spiral curriculum theory, whereby learners are encouraged to revisit learning with additional challenge to reinforce learning and deepen understanding (Conway, 2007). Additionally, this is supported by the Reggio Emilia approach which advocates revisiting to create a deeper understanding (Learning and teaching Scotland, 2006). It is therefore important that practitioners do not simply assess children as a tick box exercise, to fit with set criteria, with value placed on reaching milestones in learning and development by a certain age (Welsh Government 2023a). In support of this, Welsh Government (2022e) suggests that it is the role of the adult to evaluate how the child learns, as well as what knowledge and skills they have acquired. This is supported by Welsh Government (2022b). Additionally, the positive language and emphasis on what the child can do and recognising how they learn is fundamental to Welsh Government (2022a) and Welsh Government (2023a). This returns to Froebel's understanding of child development and his principles of recognising children's achievements rather than focusing on their educational gaps (Froebel Trust, no date). Therefore, the adult's role is to ensure they understand the ways to observe and assess learning. This is supported by the glossary and in-depth explanations around key concepts in the documents to learn from the shortcomings of the Foundation Phase. Duggan *et al.* (2022) discuss findings that settings are already feeling uneasy around the accountability and inspection arrangements going forward, with the lack of clear prescriptive assessment routines for evidence purposes. Also, the varied ways in which settings approach assessment causes concerns about primary to secondary school transitions Duggan *et al.* (2022). Therefore, it is important that, with the rollout of the new Curriculum for Wales, practitioners stick to the key principles of these new curricula in Wales and do not feel pressurised to meet certain progression steps within a set time, and potentially revert to more formal teaching methods in the hope that this supports learner progression.

Section 2:

Welsh Government (2022a) describes the importance of recognising the uniqueness of each child, their family, their knowledge and development and the uniqueness of the experiences each of them will have had so far. Additionally, Welsh Government (2023a) discusses the importance of recognising each child's unique development progress and ensuring that practitioners are accommodating these within their assessment arrangements. Moreover, assessments should not be a one-off event, practitioners should endeavor to capture all areas of the child's development across the five developmental pathways in order to inform planning and provide challenge which is appropriate to each individual child. Therefore, it is important

that practitioners understand what is meant by the unique child. Tovey (2020) states that Froebel believed that children were unique and develop at their own pace and should be allowed to explore and follow their own interests with the guidance of enabling adults and effective environments. Early Education (2012) discusses each child's individual progress in the areas of learning and the varying speed at which progress is made in each area, individual to each child. Intercultural English (no date) states that many other factors contribute to each person's uniqueness including their values and beliefs, language, and cultural norms. Additionally, Sharman, Cross, and Vennis (2015) discuss the unique interests and motivators to learn that will need to be planned for by practitioners. This evidences the need for practitioners who truly value the differences of each child and the unique way in which they all develop, and as such the importance of supporting individual progression. This is supported by Ministry of Education (2017) which states that practitioners should be tuned in to the child's learning and fascinations and, through effective assessments, should be able to cater for their next steps. In support of this, Sharman, Cross, and Vennis (2013) also state that observing a child holistically is important in making a rounded assessment of their development and assessing their next steps which inform planning and practice. This is also supported by Welsh Government (2023c) who state that for children to develop, observations are integral to creating the correct level of challenge within planning. Birth to 5 matters (no date b) additionally states that observations are key to capturing a child's holistic development, by being aware of the learning that is taking place during playful moments, and the importance of capturing how each child learns. Therefore, it is important that enabling practitioners explore the interests of the child that may be used as a vehicle for further learning, areas where the child may require scaffolding, the ability to notice and respond to their play and curiosities. Additionally, Welsh Government (2023a) discuss the speed in which children learn and develop, and states that assessment should support children to progress at their own pace, ensuring that practitioners gather a holistic account of the child, their abilities, and next steps. This is supported by Welsh Government (2022d) which discusses "Principles of progression" to be used alongside the statements of what matters within the new Curriculum, in order that practitioners may understand how to support progression for all learners.

Welsh Government (2022c) discusses Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 which ensures that ongoing assessment procedures are in place and that these procedures are regularly reviewed and reflected within settings. Therefore, practitioners must be reflective and critically evaluate the procedures in place within their settings to fully support the assessment needs of all children. Moreover, Sharman, Cross, and Vennis (2013) suggest the importance of

utilising different methods of observation over a period to ensure that practitioners gather sufficient information to make a balanced review of the child's progress. Ministry of Education (2017) states that written observations are useful to document the progression made by each child and to use when information is needed for outside agencies or for families to understand their child's progression. Welsh Government (2022b) additionally states that assessment and progression are dependent and cannot develop independently, assessment should be fundamental to settings curriculum development.

Welsh Government (2017) offered practitioners an assessment tool to enable them to identify the abilities of children within the Foundation Phase. The document had benefits including the ability to marry with health care professionals' observation tools (Welsh Government 2017) in order to promptly identify need. Moreover, the Foundation Phase Profile Handbook offered formative and summative assessments, to establish progression. Morgan *et al.* (2022) found that practitioners were torn as to whether the Foundation Phase Profile offers an assessment based on observation and as such this allows for a playful pedagogical approach as some practitioners reported the need for staged activities or activities at tables. This goes against the ethos of play due to adults being nearby and intervening in play to direct it, as suggested by McInnes *et al.* (2011). Moreover, practitioners found this an arduous exercise of ticking boxes (Morgan *et al.*, 2022) meaning that there could be speculation over their accuracy.

With the role out of the new Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, so too is there a change in assessment methods with less prescriptive observation and on-entry assessment frameworks, practitioners can explore methods of gathering information about the child ensuring that they are following Welsh Government guidance of the holistic assessment (Welsh Government, (2023a), Welsh Government (2022b) and Welsh Government (2022e).

Welsh Government (2023a) states that professional dialogue around the progress of the children in their setting is essential to child progression. This means practitioners must share their assessment of children's progression and of the child's learning processes. Moreover, Sands (2017) explains that learning stories offer practitioners an opportunity to document the actions of a child in a scenario and further unpick the situation upon reflection to enable them to realise the child's full learning in the moment and plan for next steps. Additionally, Blaiklock (2008) states that learning stories can improve relations with parents and carers. Moreover, Sands (2017) continues to state that practitioners need to ensure that they are analysing the events in order for the learning story to be an effective tool and reflection. This means learning

stories can become time consuming and takes time away from teaching children, and some practitioners may prefer the effectiveness of a checklist (Zhang, 2015). Hargraves (2020) states that this analysis should include the child's behaviours and attitudes to learning in order to ascertain a clear understanding of the ability of the unique child. This is supported by Welsh Government (2023a) and Sands (2017) who state the importance of practitioners who are noticing what learning is happening, analysing the learning journey within the moment and responding to this with planning which supports further learning. Furthermore, this is supported by Knauf (2020) who states that learning stories are not a way of assessing ability with predetermined progression expectations, such as the Foundation Phase profile andbook, but more an opportunity to record the unique development of the unique child. This is additionally supported by Wang and Hou (2020) who state that learning stories concentrate on the abilities of the child and their aptitudes. Moreover, Welsh Government (2023a) offers practitioners indicators of what to look for when assessing the child's social and emotional, physical, numeracy and literacy development, which allows practitioners to have a basis to commence their observations. However, Wang and Hou (2020) Zhang (2015) and Blaiklock (2008) also state that learning stories may be susceptible to the unconscious bias of teachers. That is, as teachers write learning stories based on their own view of the event and understanding of child development, the evidence recorded may become skewed. Additionally, Blaiklock explains that learning stories do not provide settings with quantitative data of childrens' progression. Furthermore, Duggan (2022) found practitioners are concerned about the school inspections process without quantitative data. Additionally, it has been suggested that the end of Foundation Phase online personal assessments be extended to include more skills than literacy and numeracy alone (Owen *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, this would place more pressure on children and practitioners alike and goes against the principles of the curriculum reform. However, Owen *et al.* (2023) further states that this data can be moderated, which is not possible when we consider learning stories. This is further supported by Welsh Government (2019) which stated that the lack of formal assessment documentation could equal inconsistent assessments of learning. Additionally, while the Foundation Phase profile could align with the assessment arrangements of other agencies (Welsh Government, 2017), the qualitative data gathered in the learning stories does not support this.

Section 3:

The wellbeing of our children and the benefits to utilising the outdoors: What the outdoors can bring to children that four walls can sometimes struggle to achieve.

In recent years there has been a realisation of the importance of children's wellbeing and the positive effects of supporting mental health within education and child development. Notably, the new Curriculum for Wales and the curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2022a and Welsh Government, 2022f) ensure that wellbeing is developed throughout children and young people's school lives as this is encompassed within one of the four purposes for the new curriculum as well as the health and wellbeing area of learning and experience (AoLE). It is encouraging to see that within this AoLE, that children are encouraged to develop emotional awareness and therefore explore how we can manage our emotions as well as show empathy to others.

Additionally, the benefits to children's wellbeing and development, as a result of time spent outdoors, has gained popularity. This is supported by Unicef (2020)'s report which stated that wellbeing is improved with time outside. The report has some stark statistics which emphasises the importance of supporting mental health, including suicide being a leading cause of death for teenagers and obesity in 5- 19-year-olds increasing by almost 100million children by 2030. However, feeling the breeze in your face, running through trees, or climbing them has benefits not only to physical development such as gross motor skills, but also improves how you feel. World Health Organization (2016)'s review explains how evidence shows that stress levels reduce, wellbeing improves, and physical health improves (due to being more physically active) with time spent outdoors. This is supported by the findings of Rhayader Church in Wales Primary School, whereby they found that children were more able to manage their emotions, as well as improved attendance and concentration, with regular time spent outdoors (Estyn, 2023). Additionally, Estyn (2019) found that practitioners who regularly provide outdoor learning sessions have an improved sense of wellbeing and job satisfaction. Practitioners who explore the outdoors within their settings not only allow children to utilise the outdoor environment to develop the more academic concepts, for example mathematical learning or exploration (Woods, 2013) they may also be able to support wellbeing and health. Education Scotland (2023) discusses the Norwegian approaches to settings accessing the outdoors and the many benefits to the children, including risk taking to improve self-confidence. It comes as no surprise then that government guidance is now supporting the integration of outdoor environments in best practice (Estyn, 2023. Welsh Government, 2022a. And Welsh Government, 2023d). This is not only the view of the government in Wales, but many other nations are also now placing

importance on the use of outdoor environments in the early years. Learning and Teaching Scotland (2010) and Education Scotland (2022) discuss the importance of implementing outdoor learning as part of a rounded curriculum in Scotland. Moreover, New Zealand's Te Whariki expresses an importance on belonging and interactions with nature and the outdoors and its benefits to a sense of belonging and wellbeing (Ministry of education, 2017).

That said, practitioners and settings face many barriers to providing outdoor learning sessions. It is difficult to provide authentic and meaningful opportunities with settings feeling the restrictions of budgets and therefore dwindling resources. Schools week (2024) states that in 2018, the government in England pledged £10million to schools to improve outdoor learning experiences. However, there are concerns that despite the large sum of money, this does not meet the needs for all settings. You can read more here: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/10-million-pledge-for-outdoor-learning-not-enough-to-make-a-difference-warn-critics/> Whilst outdoor learning can and should include natural resources, there is a place for loose parts and other resources to enhance these areas (Birth to 5 matters, no date a). Additionally, for children to feel safe, secure, and warm, it may be necessary for settings to provide all weather clothing and suitable outdoor footwear. Feeling safe and being warm and comfortable in your learning environment is important to enable children to play, explore, learn and reach their full potential as discussed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Pacey, 2016). Therefore, an enabling outdoor environment must include suitable clothing and footwear, which some parents cannot afford to provide. Additionally, the school budget may not allow for such an expense. These resources may be at the bottom of the budget, below the indoor environments, as not all settings and practitioners value the benefits to outdoor environments. Estyn (2016) best practice school was lucky enough to receive a grant to fund the outdoor learning environment which it used to provide forest school sessions with its own forest school leader. Without such finance opportunities readily available it is difficult to see how settings can provide such opportunities to all learners. More can be read about this school's approach here: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/school-environment-benefits-pupil-wellbeing> The school budget often affects the staff ratio too, which means that the number of adults does not allow for safe and meaningful exploration of outdoor environments, with short outdoor play times being timetabled into the day as a nod to outdoor time instead. Staff will also require professional development and professional dialogue in order to improve their understanding of best practice and pedagogical approaches in the outdoors, as well as improving their own confidence in the area of outdoor learning (Estyn, 2019). Van Dijk-Wesselius *et al.* (2020) also discusses the negative implications on outdoor learning sessions when practitioners

professional learning is not supported. During the research practitioners stated they felt better equipped to offer engaging outdoor learning opportunities when they had been able to engage in outdoor learning environments themselves and were presented with opportunities for professional dialogue with experienced practitioners. This too will have budget implications, not only to fund the training but also to provide classroom cover for the practitioner to be released from class.

There are many more challenges that come with trying to make more use of the outdoor environment, especially when working with children. These include settings and practitioners being risk averse and parents who do not appreciate the learning opportunities. However, the benefits to childhood mental health and wellbeing, the importance of developing healthy and confident children who grow to become resilient and able to process the many challenges they will inevitably face as an adult, with reduced stress (World Health Organisation, 2016) because of connections to the outdoors, potentially as a coping mechanism, surely outweighs these challenges.

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