

A critical analysis of two play-based approaches in Early Years Education: The Foundation Phase and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings.

Play based learning is now a cornerstone within the early year's education, alongside guidance from current curricula that increasingly value child-led approaches. Within Wales, there are two significant frameworks – The Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015) and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government, 2024). Both these frameworks aim to provide holistic learning experiences that are based on play. Both frameworks share similar pedagogical principles throughout, however they differ in application, expectations and within their structure. This essay critically contrasts and compares the two play-based approaches, while considering curriculum guidance, implementation and the divergence between practical realities and the expectations.

Play-based learning has been drawn from many developmental theories. Piaget (1952) emphasised how important exploration and active learning is within early years education in regards to cognitive development (Wadsworth, 2023), while Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of social interaction with peers alongside the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky (1952) states that children gain the most from learning in the presence of a more knowledgeable companion. Wadsworth (2023) notes that Piaget regarded children as “little scientists,” who build their understanding by engaging with their surroundings through processes of assimilation and accommodation. This concept of active, hands-on learning is reflected in contemporary educational discussions, which increasingly challenge traditional teaching methods. According to VanHorn et al. (2019), contemporary education systems have often relied excessively on rote memorisation (a method of learning that relies on memorisation and repetition rather than understanding (Sus, 2023), and theoretical concepts, overlooking children's innate curiosity and their ability to learn through practical experiences. This gap is being targeted by play-based methodologies such as the Foundation Phase and CFNMS. Both approaches foster settings where children can acquire knowledge through interactive play, complemented by adult guidance, which align with the developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. Both frameworks, The Foundation Phase and CFNMS

promote environments where children can gain knowledge through hands-on play, alongside guidance and adult interaction which support both theorists' methods.

The Foundation Phase is a statutory framework for children in Wales aged 3-7 and was introduced in 2008. Formally, it was Key Stage 1 curriculum, which brought a more experimental, child-led approach (StatsWales, n.d). The Foundation Phase encourages play-based learning and exploration, with a primary focus on the holistic development of the child. The framework consists of seven areas of learning which includes Personal and Social Development, Creative Development and Language and Literacy (Wainwright, et al. (2016). The pedagogical approach of this framework is underpinned by principles that shine a light on children's voice, interests and autonomy. The adult's role within this framework is seen as facilitators, their role is to provide enabling environments for the children, while avoiding domination of the child's learning experience (Whalley, 2021). The Foundation Phase provides a well-established pedagogical framework that holds a strong emphasis on a child's holistic development, while encouraging creativity and physical development (Wainwright, et al. 2019).

Launched in 2022, as a stepping stone within Curriculum for Wales (2022) reform, this framework was designed for early years providers that are not running alongside schools (e.g. childminders, or nurseries). The framework is designed to align with the Four Purposes of the Curriculum for Wales (2022), which maps out the kind of learning that Wales aims to develop over the coming years (Welsh Government, 2024). The Four Purposes are:

1. Ambitious, capable learners
2. Healthy, confident individuals
3. Enterprising, creative contributors
4. Ethical, informed citizens

CFNMS mirrors these key principles, while having the ability to offer more flexible, setting-appropriate guidance for children who are three to four years old. While this framework is tailored to children between the ages of 3-4, it still encourages early years practitioners to use the foundations of the four purposes through play-based learning (Welsh Government, 2024). Encouraging problem-solving within the setting helps encourage ambitious learning, allowing the child to have creative expression through open-ended play, which helps build their

confidence and creativity (Smith, 2021). However, as 3 – 4-year-olds are in the earlier stages of development, the CFNMS can provide a lot more flexibility, this flexibility can help practitioners to follow what the individual child is interested in and help create opportunities of spontaneous play, rather than having direction and instruction (Welsh Government, 2022). This guidance recognises the diversity within non-maintained settings, which often operate under different structures than school settings. While it consistently maintains the national education goals, it does not give structured timetables or lesson plans. Instead, it empowers early years practitioners to integrate the Four Purposes into engaging, adaptable settings, employing child-focused and developmentally suitable methods for each child (Welsh Government, 2022). The CFNMS's updated alignment with The Curriculum for Wales (2022) helps to ensure a smoother transition for children when they enter primary education, it offers clear progression steps and milestones while encouraging reflective practice as well as intentional pedagogy.

Despite both frameworks having advantages, there are discrepancies between curriculum expectations and the realities of practical implementation. Early years practitioners are expected to be well-trained, reflective and able to provide high-quality, responsive play-based learning within their environments (Maynard, Morgan & Waters, 2010). Unfortunately, the reality of this is that both frameworks reveal inconsistencies in professional growth and training. Some staff may struggle to confidently integrate child-led play with the curriculum goals, especially within non-maintained environments where each individual has different qualifications. This is supported by results from the 2020 STEPP Survey, which was initially tested in 2016. The survey reveals the differences in training for practitioners and that their working conditions continue to hinder the delivery of consistent quality in early years environments (UNSCO, 2020). There is a balance between free play and directed learning, play should be both natural and structured, which promotes growth across all areas of learning (Mentzer, 2022). However, in Foundation Phase environments, there can be a tendency to shift back to 'normal' teaching, especially when practitioners are faced with school demands or pressures from child assessments. This aligns with Ta (2021) who discovered that numerous educators have mixed views in regard to the importance of play. Additionally, systemic issues – like the demands of academic curricula and lack of development, constantly hinder the integration of play into educational practice.

Within the CFNMS settings, play is sometimes structured to align with school objectives. In regard to assessment practices, it is expected that formal and observational assessments become beneficial for a child's development (Neaum, 2019). However, many settings have limited time to do these observations and staff-to-child ratios can hinder the quality of observation. As time keeping strategies, some settings use checklist methods, which can then miss the subtleties of learning led by children (Perlman, et al. 2017). Wood (2024) states that educators make more than 1500 decisions and 252 judgements per day therefore checklists provide relief and structure. Both educational programmes promote the creation of enriching environments both indoors and outdoors. Be that as it may, the availability of resources differs significantly. Some early years settings may be able to offer engaging, nature-filled outdoor environments, while other settings may encounter financial or logistical challenges that then can restrict children's learning opportunities, and lack of materials may reduce the effectiveness of play-based education (Ntshangase & Venketsamy, 2022).

The Foundation Phase and CFNMS represent significant advancements within the early year's education, highlighting the role of play as a fundamental aspect of the child's learning experience. However, both frameworks show tensions between the theoretical principles and their implementation. The Foundation Phase's wider age range of 3-7 years presents both challenges and advantages. While it ensures continuity, it may present inconsistencies as children approach the age of 7, with the pressure of KS1 standards which then prompts a shift back to more formal approaches (Gray, 2024). Additionally, the extensive nature of the Seven Areas of Learning (Thomas, 2024), while holistic, can lack the clarity provided by newer frameworks such as CFNMS can offer. While CFNMS is designed to be more concise and aligned with curricula, it may become more prescriptive if educators fail to receive the correct training, leading to practitioners misunderstanding the balance between planning and child autonomy (DeVito, 2023). Maintaining a clear distinction between intentional teaching and adult-directed activities is challenging without the correct training, making it incredibly difficult to uphold this balance (Leggett, 2023). Alongside this, it is pivotal that practitioners educate parents on the significance of play within their child's learning process. Research indicates that when parents are able to grasp the significance of play, they become advocates for play-based activities, at home and within the school setting (Singh, 2023). Singh (2023) discovered that parents who acknowledge play being essential for their child's development, are more

likely to support play-based methods. Similarly, research by Wright, et al. (2023) in the US reveals that parents who are informed often prefer free or guided play instead of direct instruction. Findings from Chen, et al. (2023) states that active participation from the child's parents can strengthen the parent-child relationship and aids in language and motor skill development. Creating a strategy that aligns with home and the educational setting ensures that children receive consistent learning experiences throughout.

To fully realise the key benefits of play-based education, certain essential conditions need to be fulfilled. The importance of ongoing, high-quality training in child development and play theory while having opportunities for educators to have environments for reflection is key. Having supportive leadership within the settings, someone who appreciates the role of play and resists the push back for early formal education as well as policy alignment, where inspections, assessment and funding support play-based learning, rather than undermine them.

Critically Evaluating Assessment and Development Models in Play-Based Curricula: A 'Unique Child' Perspective

In early years education, the concept of a 'Unique Child' serves as a core principle within several important frameworks, such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England and the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (CFNMS) in Wales. This concept acknowledges that every child grows at their own rate, and they are influenced by their experiences, interests, family background, culture, and preferred learning methods (Welsh Government, 2022). No two children are the same, and effective educational practices must be sensitive to their individual needs and developmental journeys (Porter, 2021).

Acknowledging that every child is unique is essential as it affects their interaction with learning experiences as well as their relationships with peers. When educators understand and cater to a child's unique characteristics, they are more likely to foster inclusive and nurturing settings that enhance wellbeing, resilience and positive outcomes (United Nations, 1989; Article 29). Within the context of play-based learning, this philosophy supports practices like catering to children's interests, open-ended resources and modifying the curriculum which will then accommodate a variety of learners. Within this framework, assessment becomes more than just a way to measure achievement, it serves as a means to comprehend and enhance a child's individual learning experience. Early childhood assessment should be formative, continuous, and comprehensive. This then can emphasise not just what children have learnt, but also how they learn, their emotional states and what has inspired their curiosity (Becker, Rigaud & Epstein, 2022).

The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 and CFNMS (Welsh Government, 2022) highlight the importance of integrating assessment into children's daily activities, mainly via observations during play, discussions and reflective documentation. This approach should guide planning, reveal emerging interests and pinpoint areas where children may require additional support. Importantly, it should steer clear of comparisons or ranking methods that treat children as data points. When evaluation aligns with the concept of a 'unique child', it enables educators to recognise each child as an individual with their own rights, agency and potential (NAEYC, 2022). Nevertheless, if assessment is carried out in a rigid or an excessively formal manner, such as overly detailed checklists, it may clash with play-based pedagogy and risk undermining child led learning (Pyle & DeLuca, 2016). As an Institute of Education Studies

review highlights, that practises that are focused on accountability, such as worksheet-style assessments frequently take the place of more meaningful observations, leading educators to overlook the subtle and spontaneous learning experiences that can happen during play (Caven, 2022).

Unlike standardised assessments, observational methods are more flexible, therefore can capture the development of the child within all areas which include social and emotional growth (Kurt, 2020). Open-ended and spontaneous play provides opportunities for the practitioners to see which children approach problem solving and creative tasks, a chance to see what they are truly interested in. This alone makes observations valuable within frameworks such as the Foundation Phase and CFNMS, where it is centred around holistic environments and child-led learning (Welsh Government, 2022). However, while observations have the advantage of gaining a deeper insight, there are a few limitations. Children, within the educational setting are often observed in natural, familiar environments without pressure put upon them, which then produces an authentic response. This then allows the practitioner to see what interests and abilities that they might not witness in more formal contexts. As noted by the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2023), authentic assessment can thrive within environments where children feel comfortable. Observational assessments then support planning, practitioners can use what they have observed and learned about the child and adapt their learning opportunities to best suit their individual needs, which is a crucial when honouring the 'Unique Child'. According to the Child Development Institute (2020), purposeful observation within natural play environments allows educators to recognise the developing skills and interests of children, which enable them to adapt. Be that as it may, there are significant barriers to implementation. Two major barriers are time constraints and staff numbers. High staff-to-child ratios alongside busy, daily class routines can hinder practitioners carrying out detailed, regular observations. Perlman, et al. (2017) states that insufficient staff numbers and time can potentially reduce the quality of these observations, which then leads to settings default to checklists, as they are quicker. While checklists are fast and convenient, Peterson & Elam (2020) explain that they often lack context and depth, which is a necessity when trying to understand a child's unique learning journey. Another barrier is practitioner training. Anyone can observe a child and quickly note down what has been witnessed, however practitioners should have specific training that

educates them on what to observe, how it should be interpreted and how to document it correctly. Particularly across larger settings, Loizou and Recchia (2018) argue that without correct training, observations may become inconsistent, therefor compromising the reliability of the observation and undermining its usefulness when planning or communicating with their family members. It is important that observational assessments are used with care, to avoid bias. Practitioners bring their own values into the classrooms, along with assumptions. This can then potentially shape what they notice and sometimes miss. Louis and Betteridge (2020) argue that unconscious biases are inherent in our perceptions, without reflection our judgements can become skewed. This further highlights the need for reflection and awareness in all observation processes. When done correctly, observational assessment is a powerful method that complements play-based learning while supporting and gaining effective insights into the development of the unique child. However, barriers such as inconsistencies, time and training can hinder the outcome, especially when in under resourced settings. To overcome these challenges, a commitment to child-centred pedagogy must be made, alongside investment into the practitioner's development.

Age and Stage Development Models in Play-Base Curricula

Within the Early Years setting, structured assessment frameworks like Development Matters or Age-and-Stage Banding are frequently utilised to monitor children's development across various key learning domains. These resources offer developmental benchmarks, for example, 'birth to 11 months' or '30 – 50 months', which assist professionals in recognising typical milestones for specific age ranges, while identifying areas where children might require extra assistance (Department of Education, 2023). They are often brought with statements about 'expected' progress, making them beneficial for planning and early detection of special educational needs. These specific models offer a sense of continuity, comparability and accountability, particularly in larger environments. They give confidence to practitioners, parents and policymakers that children are achieving general developmental milestones. The Rand Corporation (2022) highlights that these structured frameworks are crucial for early identification and intervention. This way, they can assist in supporting the 'unique child' by ensuring that no child's needs are overlooked, especially if any delays are identified. However, an increasing amount of research questions the use of these tools in play-based settings.

Although they are good as a general guide, they can lead to an over-formalisation of assessment, which can then push practitioners to prioritise 'checking-off' skills instead of adapting to individual pathways (Brooker, 2011). This checklist approach may hinder the personalisation and adaptability that play-based curricula strive to uphold. Specifically, the timing and order of development can differ between children. The strict application of banding frameworks can lead to labelling some children as 'behind', when in reality they are just progressing at their own speed. Lauchlan and Boyle (2020) argue this and state that labelling a child can create unnecessary concern for parents and create a pressure for both practitioner and child when in an educational setting. Moreover, while Development Matters states that it is not intended to be a checklist, it functions as one in practice, more so when demonstrating progress. Stewart (2016), a co-author of Development Matters states that the 'tick list' approach can sometimes cause practitioners to make outcome-driven teaching a priority instead of child-led learning, which then can compromise the play-based philosophies of the Foundation Phase and CFNMS.

In summary, successful evaluation within play-based settings depends on finding the right balance between structured approaches and being responsive to each child's needs. Observations provide practitioners with genuine insights into the growth of the child, which aligns with the concept of the 'Unique Child'. Nonetheless, it demands time, consistency and reflection, which in reality can be incredibly challenging. Frameworks such as Development Matters offer valuable insights by recognising if any further requirements are needed, however they can become overly prescriptive. If applied rigidly, it may fail to reflect the diversity of a child's developmental journey. Both methods work well together. However, for it to support play-based learning, practitioners need to receive high-quality training alongside leadership, which prioritise flexibility and reflection. This will then ensure to enhance the child's development rather than hinder it.

Too Much Pressure, Too Little Credit: Rethinking the Role of Teaching Assistants

At 8.30am, a teaching assistant (TA) is drying a child's tears, assisting a student with special education needs, and preparing for a literacy lesson – all prior to the teacher's arrival. This scenario is a frequent glimpse into the daily reality of schools within the UK. However, despite their essential roles, teaching assistants frequently face underpayment, lack of recognition, and excessive workloads. Are we placing unrealistic demands on TA's without affording them the professional acknowledgment they rightfully deserve?

The Intended Role of a TA – and The Reality

Teaching assistants are intended to serve as a valuable support in the classroom, collaborating with teachers to facilitate learning activities, offer personalised assistance, and foster inclusive environments (Department of Education, 2024). According to DfE (2024), their responsibilities include preparing materials, aiding in behaviour management, assisting with evaluations and occasionally participating in planning services. In reality, numerous teaching assistants' function outside their intended roles. Webster, Russell and Blatchford (2016) discovered that TA's frequently carry out interventions or oversee entire classes without explicit guidance. In certain schools, they are tasked with substituting for absent teachers, working independently with have significant needs, and offering pastoral support. These duties are normally assigned to a qualified teacher. The line between teachers and TA's is becoming less clear, yet they lack the necessary training, pay or recognition. Teaching assistants play a crucial role within school settings, however important research by Webster, Russell and Blatchford (2016) reveals that schools are not fully utilising the TA's role. They state that when students receive more support for TA's, the pupil's academic progress seems to decline. This issue isn't due to the TA's support, but choices made by the school leaders. This evidence highlights that systemic choices are often the root of the issue and shines a light on the need for training and guidance.

Unrecognised Expertise and Emotional Labour

Teaching assistants play a crucial role for many children, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, English as an additional language, or social and emotional issues (Webster & Boer, 2019). Sylva, et al (2004) suggests that successful early year's environments feature skilled and reflective practitioners who work as a team. However, Sylva, et al (2004) explains that individuals who foster children's development, particularly in lower-paid positions, are frequently unappreciated, despite their valuable skills.

This emotional effort can be taxing on TA's. As explained by Kelly (2020) numerous teaching assistants manage challenging behavioural requirements, safeguarding issues, and their own workload demands. This is expected with minimal oversight. As Nutbrown (2012) highlights in her Foundations for Quality report, the quality of early years education significantly depends on the quality of the workforce. However, the system is structured around support staff who

are unfortunately underpaid and overworked, while receiving limited opportunities to gain development within their role.

Training, Pay and Progression

Although teaching assistants make up almost one-third of the workforce, they continue to be among the lowest paid. According to UNISON's (2021) survey of school support staff, a significant number earn less than the living wage and have restricted opportunities. While some have relevant qualifications, others do not, yet all expectations remain unchanged. Within the survey, it states that in order to make ends meet in their personal lives, a quarter (25%) of staff had to take on a second or third job. While more than two thirds (71%) of staff were worried about paying their utility bills. On top of this, due to cuts from the Covid years, staff members were asked to take on other roles within the school settings, which include cleaning, welfare checks and additional support from families, yet no increase to their pay was made. Nutbrown (2012) emphasised the need for a 'fully qualified early years workforce' and urged all practitioners have professional development pathways. Unfortunately, as previous research shows, these opportunities are still inconsistent, and majority of time require personal funding. The lack of clarity surrounding role definitions and investment for training has resulted in an invisible barrier, limiting their potential.

The Impact of Children and Settings

When teaching assistant gain the support and training necessary, the effects and benefits for children become clearer, meaning, individual attention can be given, and stronger relationships can be created. However, TA's that are expected to do more within their role and receive inconsistent training can then create an inconsistency within the child's education (Department of Education, 2023). Without clear structure within the setting, teaching assistants will find themselves stretched too far, whether it be lesson planning/delivery or behaviours, this then leaves little to no time for meaningful engagement with children who needs that extra bit of help. This then undermines the value of play-based learning that are strongly advocated within the Foundation Phase and CFNMS in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015).

What Needs to Change?

- Regular, high-quality training should be compulsory in every teaching assistant role, instead of being an option
- Clarity within the role: to avoid burnout of each practitioner, there should be clear responsibilities
- It is essential to recognise their expertise, by providing pathways and increases to pay if their workload increases
- Teaching assistants should be made aware of setting decisions and part of planning

Final Thought

If teaching assistants are described as the 'back bone' of school settings (Killoran, 2024), they should be treated as such. It is impossible to create a play-based, responsive, nurturing setting if the practitioners that are enforcing it are overwhelmed and undervalued. As Nutbrown (2012) argues, high quality staff brings high quality education.

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