

Early Years Curricula

Section 1

The Foundation phase curriculum was implemented in September 2010 for three- to seven-year-olds. The aim of the foundation phase was to encourage children to be imaginative, creative and make for more effective and enjoyable learning. (Welsh government ,2015) The foundation phase promotes continuous provision such as sand and water and enhanced provision for example different themes and role play areas. A vital part of the foundation phase was also play based planning and successful futures for the children providing them with the skills that they require. (Welsh government ,2018) The foundation phase was implemented as ESTYN (2011) stated research showed that children do not benefit from extensive formal teaching until the age of seven. UNICEF, (2018) agree with this by voicing that children thrive through play rather than in a formal setting. WISERD, (2014) states that the foundation phase was implemented well and in stages to ease practitioners, children, and families in.

The evaluation of the foundation phase shows that the foundation phase was fit for purpose as it had many benefits such as allowing the children to take risks and mistakes without fear of failure. The foundation phase also promotes play to ensure that children establish a sense of the world around them. (Welsh government ,2019) Furthermore, eighty nine percent of head teachers were happy with the foundation phase (Taylor, *et al.* 2015) however, it has been found that majority of head teachers have never taught an early year's class. (Fisher, 2021)

The foundation phase needed to change as the programme for international student assessment (PISA) Rankings placed Wales as the lowest scoring country in 2016 out of 72 countries. Wales came 39th in maths, 35th in science and 40th in reading. (Wightwick, 2016) In 2018 Wales was still below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average and the lowest in the United Kingdom. (Wightwick, 2019) (OECD ,2020) On one hand low PISA rankings can have negative effects on funding, grants and in some cases

country expansion. On the other hand, PISA rankings allow schools to measure, explore, act, and improve. (OECD, No Date) PISA rankings influence the government policy therefore effecting local authority down to school clusters, following class level and then to the individual practitioner. This effect relates to Bronfenbrenner theory of ecological systems regarding influence and control. (El Zaatari and Maalouf, 2022)

Practice issues around the foundation phase include, activities, observations, formal and informal teaching, learning through play, continuous, enhanced and focussed provision. There is confusion around these words as they have such a broad meaning. Professional learning can be put in place as a solution for this so that practitioners work simultaneously therefore the children receive the best outcome. (CPD ,2020) Professional learning for staff is often driven by policy directive rather than children's direct experienced and the individual setting. It is important that practitioners voice what training they require in order to gain more knowledge. Furthermore, training should also be given specifically to year two teachers to ensure learning through play as it was observed that year two classrooms were too formal and did not contain the enhanced provision of sand and water trays. (Taylor, *et al.* 2015)

The learning and teaching pedagogy shows what the foundation phase is meant to be the Welsh government (2008) have found that there should be positive links between home and providers of care and education as parents/ carers are children's first educators. Numerous class teachers have stated that their parent teacher relationships can be improved. (Twinkl ,2022) Furthermore, an activity should provide sufficient stimulus and challenge to engage children's interest and involvement. Independent stocktake shows what actually happens by evaluating the foundation phase it was found that majority of activities were carried out as part of an assessment the child was found to be not fully engaged and seem uninterested. (Siraj, 2014)

To compare both the independent stocktake and the learning and teaching pedagogy think that children's energy to learn is affected by their emotions, for example if a child is well nourished, content, comfortable and confident then the outcome of learning will be positive. This relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs as children's basic needs, require to be

met first. If the child's basic needs are met, then children have the energy to engage in the play-based curriculum. (Pichère and Cadiat, 2015)

Siraj, (2014) states that the 1:8 ratios should go to 1:10 however NSPCC, (2023) does not agree with this as the new curriculum requires more one to one work with the children in things that interest them.

Donaldson (2015) states one of the 'best things' (p17) of Welsh education was the foundation phase however he then goes on to say, 'the current school curriculum was out of date' (p15) Sir Ken Robison has the same value as this as he states that the foundation phase became systematic and therefore needed to change. (Robinson, 2010)

Rather than build people to be specific with specific job roles the curriculum should be creating people with transferable skills as no one can predict the jobs the future will hold.

Huw Lewis, (2015) the minister of education for Wales in 2015 states that the foundation phase was shaped by international thinking and the aim was to inspire learners to achieve. Schools in Wales can ensure successful implementations of its reforms by developing a collaborative culture, strong leadership for school improvement activities by headteachers, and the use of high-quality professional learning to improve teacher practices. (Waldron and McLeskey, 2010)

The whole curriculum has to be changed not just some aspects linked to the foundation phase as it is a holistic approach, and everything interlinks together in order to receive the best outcome. (OECD, No Date a)

The new curriculum is made up of four main purposes which are all based around the learner these purposes conclude ambitious capable learners, enterprising, creative contributors, ethical, informed citizens, and healthy, confident individuals. (Welsh government, 2015a)

The new curriculum is very child lead and child centred. Furthermore, its aim is to create individuals ready to learn through their everyday lives. (Welsh government, 2021)

When implementing the new curriculum practitioners can learn how to place the learning back into, the hands of the children in their care and let the children lead. Practitioners should observe and base activities on the child's individual interest and needs. Practitioners should be invested in the new curriculum and acquire knowledge through training to provide children with space and materials to learn and explore independently. (OECD ,2023)

Williams (2021) states that the new curriculum is providing the children with the best opportunities and support in life to ensure that they are able to thrive both as a team and independently. Teachers, parents, and national organisations need to work co-constructively to raise standards and tackle the attainment gap to create an education system for all children to reach their goals. Welsh Government (No date) agrees with this statement as it states there will be opportunities for parents and local communities to get involved in progressing the school's curriculum further. Everyone contributing together will have a positive impact on the level of education and as a result prepare the children for the future. However, to critique this there is no information whether this is actually happening in schools across Wales. Parents have personally come up to me asking for more information on the new curriculum so that they can support their child at home.

Donaldson (2018) states in a learning inspectorate that inspections need to change in order to reflect what we are doing in the curriculum. Schools now self-reflect and identify their own areas that require improvement when ESTYN visit, they then focus in on these.

The new curriculum maybe hard for practitioners to adapt to if they have been used to the foundation phase for a number of years, staffing can also be an issue if each child wants to do something in a different way it can be time consuming and taking staff out of the staff to children ratio. This new framework allows the practitioner to adapt to activities to the child's interest. (Newton, No Date)

When implementing the new curriculum there may be a variation in delivery quality. Meaning the children are receiving high or low levels of education resulting in different outcomes and opportunities. Recommendation 23 in an independent stocktake of the foundation phase in Wales states that reviews should be carried out regularly to ensure high

levels are maintained. If the quality of delivery is of a low-level recommendation 17 states that continued professional development should be carried out in order to gain knowledge and skills. (Siraj, 2014) Recommendation 7 in the evaluating the foundation phase states that training ensures that practitioners build the same understanding. (Taylor, *et al.* 2015)

For the future practitioners should be confident in both themselves and the new curriculum in order to create knowledgeable learners and experienced, fully qualified practitioners.

Section 2

The unique child means that all children grow and develop at their individual pace. Furthermore, children also have a variety of interest and a range of abilities. Each child learns in their own individual way and practitioners should adapt and tailor activities that work for the child. (University of Warwick, 2023) The unique child is important as it is one of the four guiding principles which should shape all early year's practice. Practitioners should take the unique child into account when providing them with opportunities, forming positive relationships and providing enabling environments that encourage their engagements and highlights their strengths. (Department for Education ,2023) The curriculum for Wales agrees with this and taking this into account provides permission to design a bespoke curriculum for the needs of each child as all children have different aspirations. (Welsh government ,2022) Children are constantly learning how to become, resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured learners.

The purpose of assessment is to provide critical information to educators, parents and families regarding the child's growth and development this information also provides data to refine and plan. Overall, the practitioner gains a better understanding of the child through assessments. (Hargraves, 2020) Assessments ensure each individual learner is supported and challenged accordingly, assessments develop a holistic picture of the child. According to Welsh government (2020) there should be a wide range of assessment approaches based around the child as the learner is at the heart of assessment and should link to the four purposes of the new curriculum. The assessment should engage the child and intrigue them.

The early years foundation stage England state that child centred practice and learning through play is important (Department for Education ,2023) it is vital that assessments do not take this away, practitioners and local government have to adapt and overcome by finding new ways to assess the children in their care. During the time of the foundation phase curriculum WISERD (2015) states that there was tension between the curriculum prioritising the importance of play vs the assessments that rely on age and very specific statements. Some practitioners enjoyed the detailed steps and specific statements as there

was no room for error however every child is unique and tackles challenges in different ways.

The foundation phase used to group children by ages into classes to assess what milestones they should be meeting; however, this is unfair as there could potentially be an eleven-month age gap between the children which is massive at that age. The younger children will always be behind if they are being compared and assessed against children older than them. This means that the age-related norms will not be the same for every child in the class as they are different ages. (Connell, 2020)

Children are also categorised into groups based off of ability teachers believe that the lower ability children have fixed state ability and are given less demanding curriculum.

Furthermore, teachers believe that the higher ability children have potential/ malleable intellect. The level ability groups children are put in whilst in infants tend to stay the same throughout education, the children are not given the opportunity to do the harder work and therefore do not progress further. (Parekh, 2017) Children are also very aware that they have the easy/hard work and then start to compare themselves to others resulting in a fixed mind-set. Children can have both a fixed and growth mind-set. If a child has a fixed mind-set, then they hide flaws, avoid challenges, is reluctant to negative feedback and do not ask questions due to fear of failure. If a child has a growth mind-set, then they view others success as inspirational, believe failure is temporary and that mistakes are part of learning. (Dweck, 2017) There are however some positives to grouping children by ability, the groups are tailored to their potential resulting in high self-esteem because the child will be able to complete the work. By grouping the children off of ability, it is easier for practitioners to manage as they are all completing the same work. (Ireson and Hallam, 2001)

Whilst implementing the new curriculum lots of things have to change I not just the curriculum. Assessments should also be adapted to fit in with the child lead / child centred approach. Practitioners could use learning stories for example. Learning stories are split into four sections the pictures captured of the child in the moment completing the activity, followed by the analysis written by the observer explaining what the child is doing and what they have met by completing this. The next step is opportunities and possibilities for next

time and the last step is the parents' voice. (Drummond, No Date) Learning stories are a dynamic process where teachers are able to adapt them and make it their own, it was a vital part to make learning stories both accessible to children, staff members and parents. The analysis part of the learning stories brings it into the field of assessment according to Teacher's TV (2015).

Learning stories are a Te Whariki approach Te Whariki Online (No Date) states that learning stories are a narrative form of assessment and make use of formative assessment sequence, noticing, recognising, and responding. The practitioner should notice what the child is curious about, how they communicate with others and how the child approaches the resources and space. Whilst observing practitioners may recognise increasing knowledge, skill development, concept development, preferred schemas or schematic learning and progress or any difficulties the child may be experiencing. Practitioners should respond by adapting current and future planning linked to the environment and gauge whether and/or how to interact. Practitioners can also question themselves on how to enrich experiences further.

When following the foundation phase curriculum learning stories as a form of assessment would not have been compatible at practitioners were looking for specific statements to check off a tick list. However, now with the curriculum for Wales learning stories are an amazing tool as they provide children with opportunity to become confident and capable learners alongside an enabling environment and adults around them.

There are however a number of barriers that have to be recognised when putting learning stories into practice such as time, ratios, meeting inspection criteria, funds, and class sizes. The workload however, for teachers is already a massive issue according to Walker, Worth and Brande (2019) as in 2019 most class teachers reported that they could not complete their workload within their contracted hours and did not have a good work-life balance. Taken this into account there may not be enough time for practitioners to write a learning story for each child in the class.

On the other hand, there are many strengths to using stories in early years settings such as that they are very detailed, child centred, a keepsake for parents, positive and identify what the child can do. Learning stories also provide family engagement, interpretation, and contribution. Through the format of the learning stories teachers can articulate the educational approach and how that reflects in the individuals learning. The practitioner's passion for the child can shine through learning stories and engage the parents/ carers in the way that a standard assessment cannot. This is important as parental engagement has high correlation with achievement and forms strong relationships. (Rogers, 2022)

Learning stories will also support children with additional learning needs (ALN), different, backgrounds and lifestyles as they go hand in hand with the values of the transformation programme. Putting children at the centre of their own learning and supporting learner to achieve their full potential. Through learning stories, the practitioner is able to assess and document any milestones big or small by observing and knowing the child. (Welsh government ,2018a)

When assessing practitioners observe children's progression. Principles of progression include increasing breadth and depth of knowledge, making connections and transferring learning into new contexts. Progression steps are broad statements, not linked to ages and stages as the previous curriculum was and uses 'I can....'. Which highlights that it is more child centred and focuses on what the child can do and not what they cannot (more positive). Circumstances such as additional learning needs (ALN) are considered as long as the child is making progress big or small it is encouraged and supported if needed. Every child is unique and progresses at their own rate. Due to the progression steps changing local governments have to manage the end result such as national qualifications. (Welsh government ,2021a) (Dauncey, 2015)

Culture is important to the unique child it is vital that practitioners value the culture of children and families but also support, recognise, and celebrate cultures. As experiences and communities shape each child's values and beliefs. Devarakonda (2013) states culture is complicated with many layers. This tells practitioners that knowledge on cultures is normally superficial and is often perceived to relate to different foods, clothing, and festivals. This is

not done on purpose; people are required to dig deeper and research or communicate with children and families from that culture. It is important that children are given the opportunities to ask questions as they want to learn and understand.

Culture and assessments. Assessments must be translated into home languages if the child requires this, so that they are able to understand what is being asked. The translation must be word for word the same if not as a result the child will be answering a different question. Translation inaccuracies may result in the child getting the answer incorrect to resolve this issue the person translating should be from the same culture. During assessments the same question must be asked to all children, providing them with the same opportunity to answer to make it fair as children's performance in assessments is measured. (Bornman, *et al.* 2010)

Vygotsky the developmental psychologist, researched the influence of culture on child development it was found that Learning is a social process and between two people during social interactions. Children's cognitive levels differ and cultural 'markers' have an impact on child development. Overall, language is a cultural tool. (Donato McCormick, 1994) (McLeod, 2023) Morton and Guerin (2017) states that all students need to be recognised and valued. Multiple perspectives should be valued as teachers and learners can learn from each other. This goes hand in hand with Vygotsky's more knowledgeable other theory. Practitioners can nurture all children's cultures and think critically to remove barriers to improve understanding. The new curriculum is play based and this concept is universal meaning all children can take part.

Section 3

The benefits of the outdoor environment on children's holistic development.

Through personal experience I have found that the outdoors is extremely beneficial to children's holistic development, however some practitioners are reluctant to take children outdoors for a number of reasons. Throughout this blog I want to persuade those practitioners to stop depriving the children in their care of the awe and wonder that the outdoors has to offer.

Welsh Government (2022a) states that the outdoors is a vital aspect to children's learning as it supports social, emotional, spiritual, and physical development as well as well-being. Being outdoors has also been found to support and boost children's confidence and self-esteem. The outdoor environment provides children with the tools to promote curiosity and exploration. Furthermore, all five senses are engaged when outside and children tend to be more open and themselves. The outdoor environment makes children aware of the world around them and builds empathy for living things creating ethically informed citizens of Wales and the world which is one of the four purposes for the new curriculum. According to a study 87 percent of people who played outside on a daily basis as a child valued nature later in life and continued to become ethical citizens. (Nace, 2017) The scale of the outdoors provides children with awareness improving co-ordination and gross motor skills. The outdoor environment allows children to gauge their own limitations through play.

There was also a strong emphasis on outdoor learning throughout the foundation phase this shows practitioners that the importance of outdoor learning has not changed over the last thirteen years, and it should be imbedded in their practice. Welsh government (2008) states that the outdoor learning environment should be an extension of the classroom and children should be able to move freely between the two.

Bruner believed that children learn through discovery, curiosity, self-exploration and through hands on meaningful, personal experiences including the world around them. (Olson, 2007) Piaget agrees with this as he values children's learning through self-exploration however, he

does highlight that practitioners may need training to adapt and learn how to sometimes take a step back so that children can find things out for themselves. (Egan, 2012)

The outdoor environment has been found to make children feel like the best versions of themselves as it promotes creativity and critical thinking. Playing outdoors also takes the pressure off the child as the classroom environment may sometimes feel overwhelming. The freedom of the open space brings it with a sense of happiness and wellbeing that you cannot find indoors. UNICEF (No Date) states that giving children the space outside allows them to overcome and come to terms with feelings such as pain, loss and fear while being able to still act like a child through play. Spending time outside in the fresh air also has many health benefits it has been found that fresh air can improve physical health and a lower risk of depression, high blood pressure as well as significantly lead to a longer life, as practitioners do you want to shorten, the life of children in your care? (NHS ,2023) Being outdoors for a short period of time can increase focus and attention of the children when they are in the classroom. (Avitt, 2021) Research shows that outdoor learning has a positive impact on children's holistic development alongside the role of an enabling adult. (Wales council for outdoor learning ,2020)

The outdoor environment enables children to foster independence (Outdoor education ,2010) this adapts to the child centred, and child led approach of the new curriculum for Wales. The enabling environment of the outdoors allows all children to do what they want when they want using the resources provided by the experienced adult in something that interests them. The outdoor environment should be prioritised as much as the classroom and equal time should be given for both. The environment should follow the interests of the children, being communication rich as well as visual. Practical activities for maths and English can be completed outdoors. Effective environments spark awe and wonder and ignite curiosity about the living and non-living world, motivating the child to explore, solve problems as well as develop creativity and critical thinking skills boosting confidence and independence. Article 31 states that children have the right to play this includes playing in an outdoor environment (UNICEF, no date a) McCarthy (2020) agrees with this and states the outdoor space is vital for children's holistic development.

Engaging experience are made up of deep level involvement, uninterrupted learning which is also rooted in real life authentic meaningful situations. It is the learners choice what they are interested in, different languages and cultures should be promoted through engaging experiences outdoors. Whilst outdoors children are given time to be on their own to process feelings and emotional resilience. Children gain multi-sensory experiences whilst outdoor through exploration. (Nazir and Pedretti, 2016)

When playing outdoors the role of the practitioner is to be responsive to the child's needs, practitioners should also support the voice of the child and be observant and efficient to plan the next steps of development. (Welsh government ,2023) Froebel tells us that that practitioners see the real version of the child in play and that children gain knowledge from nature. (Tovey, 2013)

The outdoor environment allows children to build resilience by being pushed out of their comfort zones which can be unpredictable to help them face their fears such as climbing trees or picking up insects. Regular time outdoors allows the children to observe and reflect based on their constantly changing surroundings. Children may find it easier to communicate outdoors as there is a large open area where they do not have to fight to be heard resulting in improved communication skills and peer relationships. When playing outdoors children become more energetic and enthusiastic. (Jucker and von Au 2022)

Through experience children tend to feel happier when playing and learning outdoors. Children show that they are inquisitive, eager, curious and want to learn by asking questions and exploring independently. Children are supportive and work together as a team following Vygotsky's theory of learning from the more knowledgeable other. (Davidson, 1994)

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