

Early Years Curricular

Section 1

In January 2020, the New Curriculum for Wales framework was first published (Welsh Government, 2023b). The aim of the Curriculum for Wales is to support each school in Wales to develop its own curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022c) and (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2023).

Therefore, allowing their learners to develop into ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals. These are the four main purposes set out by the new Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022c). It is these four purposes that Donaldson believes should underpin all teaching and learning in Wales (Dauncey, 2015).

According to Welsh Government (2015d) Professor Graham Donaldson conducted a review in 2014 of the current curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, following the request by Welsh Government. The new Curriculum for Wales was largely based upon the recommendations that Donaldson, the former head of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, made in his review (Welsh Government, 2015d). The new curriculum provides opportunity for an integrated cross-curricular focus, with three cross-cutting competencies being literacy, numeracy and digital competence, organised around areas of learning and experience, rather than narrow, separate subjects such as in the Foundation Phase Curriculum (Power, Newton and Taylor, 2020) and (OECD, 2023). However, Welsh Government (2015d) states the Foundation Phase Curriculum did also focus on areas of learning and it was Donaldson that suggested to build on the president of the Foundation Phase concept and widen it to recognise the great value of learning through play and experiences.

According to Gatley (2020) play-based learning is a crucial component of the new curriculum for Wales, much like it was in the Early Years Foundation Phase curriculum. Play should be fun and stimulating and provide children with the opportunity to experience a range of emotions and make sense of the world around them (Welsh Assembly Government, no date). Similarly, Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012) agree and state that play is essential for young children to become self-aware and is crucial to the way in which they learn the rules of social behaviour. In addition,

it is fundamental to their intellectual, physical and creative development (Welsh Government, 2023c). According to UNICEF (no date) and Welsh Government (2022a) play is a fundamental right for all children, in accordance with article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Welsh Government (2023c) believes that the implementation of a play-based curriculum promotes and supports young children's holistic development, as future learning and development is laid by early years curricular (Welsh Government, 2022b).

The new curriculum for Wales places emphasis on the role of the adult and encourages practitioners to take a child-centred approach and allow for child-led, open-ended learning opportunities within play which extend and apply to cross-curricular skills such as, mathematics, science, language and literacy (Welsh Government, 2022b). Previous to this new curriculum the Foundation Phase was the statutory curriculum for all three to seven-year-olds in Wales in both maintained and non-maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2015c). The Foundation Phase was progressively rolled out so that by 2011-2012 it included all three to seven-year-olds in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015c). Welsh Government (2015a) states this curriculum was designed to encourage an experiential, developmental, play-based approach to learning and teaching, which Waters (2016) believes is fundamental in this early developmental stage of a child's life.

According to an evaluation conducted by OECD (2018), where the Foundation Phase curriculum was being implemented well, there was positive evidence of improved school attendance, numeracy, literacy and learner well-being. In addition, research conducted by Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2018) concluded that the attainment of all children was on the rise. The introduction of the Foundation Phase Curriculum marked a radical change to the more formal, competency-based approach associated with the previous national curriculum (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2018). Similar to the new Curriculum for Wales, the Foundation Phase curriculum places the child at the centre and believes that children learn through first hand experiences and activities during play (Welsh Government, 2015a) and (Waters, 2016). Children's holistic development, their skills and building on existing knowledge and learning experiences is at the core (Welsh Government, 2015a). This links well with Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, which suggests that each stage is built upon the previous one (Holzman, 2017). Vygotsky believed that imagination and

play is the vehicle for learning and supports children's holistic development (Bodrova and Leong, 2015).

Between the months of September 2013 and March 2014 an Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase was led by Professor Iram Siraj, commissioned by Huw Lewis (Minister for Education and Skills), who explored how the Foundation Phase in Wales was being implemented (Siraj, 2014). Professor Iram Siraj reported his findings and provided recommendations on how the curriculum could be improved in the future (Siraj, 2014). Having visited good and excellent schools and funded non-maintained settings in Wales, as determined by Estyn, and conversed with the teachers and practitioners, one of the findings was that the principles of the Foundation Phase were effectively being put into practice (Siraj, 2014). However, each setting was implementing it in slightly different ways and with some variables across the ages (Siraj, 2014). It was found in schools that children in year one and two had the most distinct impact, due to the pedagogy was in place for nursery and reception classes prior to the changes (Siraj, 2014). One report being children's attitude to learning had improved, they were more independent and active as a result of the change in Curriculum (Siraj, 2014). Siraj believed it was evident that the practitioners were keeping their focus on standards, planned efficiently, and adjusted their pedagogy to suit the different children and families (Siraj, 2014). Furthermore, there was evidence of these schools having a clear vision of what constituted an effective Foundation Phase with an appointed leader, being the head of Foundation Phase. This leadership role comes with the power to make decisions and implement change and development should they see fit (Siraj, 2014) and (Naicker, 2016).

Similar to the Independent Stocktake, in 2011 the Welsh Government, on behalf of Welsh Ministers proposed a three-year independent evaluation of the Foundation Phase (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). The evaluation took place between 2011-2014 by a multi-disciplinary team of researchers which was led by Professor Chris Taylor from Cardiff University (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). According to Taylor, *et al.* (2015) one of the main aims of the evaluation was to evaluate how well the Foundation Phase was being implemented and bring to light ways in which improvements can be made for future practice. Using a mixed methods approach of both qualitative and quantitative data, Professor Chris Taylor and his team presented their findings (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). There was evidence of greater levels of pupil involvement and well-being

during lesson times in schools with greater use of this pedagogy (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). Taylor, *et al.* (2015) states the majority of practitioners interviewed believe the Foundation Phase is having a positive impact on children's English and Welsh literacy and numeracy. In addition, similar to the Independent Stocktake, the Evaluation also found that overall school attendance was improved as a result of the Foundation Phase implementation (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015).

The recommendations set out for both the Independent Stocktake and the Evaluation are believed to have the potential to lead to greater educational success as the children grow older (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015) and (Siraj, 2014). The overriding recommendation is that further compulsory training should be provided for leaders across the sector, including consortia, primary head teachers, and leaders of funded non-maintained settings to better their understanding of the practices and principles of the Foundation Phase under recommendation four and 15 of the Independent Stocktake (Siraj, 2014) and (Welsh Government, no date). Under recommendations five, six, eight and nine of the Independent Stocktake and recommendations six – nine of the Evaluation it is suggested that further and regular continued professional development (CPD) is to be made available for teachers and practitioners to improve their understanding of the pedagogies and approaches now being emphasised (Siraj, 2014) and (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). All training offered to staff should be underpinned by theory and research, highlighting the value of effective early education, and the importance of learning through experiences and play (Zosh, *et al.*, 2017) and (Alharbi and Alzahrani, 2020). Furthermore, training for practitioners to include more exemplar materials to promote understanding when it comes to literacy and numeracy, as opposed to illustrating examples of best practice (Taylor, *et al.*, 2015). In agreeance with this statement, research conducted by Kim (2020) states that children learn better through practical, hands-on experience.

When implementing curriculum reform such as the new Curriculum for Wales Macdonald (2018) and Davies (2018) suggests there can be many challenging factors. One barrier being how well a practitioner understands the importance and value of play-based learning (Davies, 2018). Each practitioner may have a different understanding, therefore there is a variation in delivery quality amongst different classes/schools (Chapman, 2020). Equally, if the head teacher or leader lacks experience in this area, then this will directly impact on the implementation of the

new curriculum (Davies, 2018). As recommended in the Independent Stocktake and Evaluation appropriate training is advised for staff to support and develop their understanding of how to implement a play-based curriculum successfully (Siraj, 2014) and (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). According to Wightwick (2023) some teachers reported a pedagogy vs outcomes issue, focusing more heavily on 'box ticking' and working off a tick list rather than focusing more on in the moment, open-ended play experiences, as they believe they simply do not have the time to do both.

Research conducted by Thomas *et al.* (2023) found that some senior leaders reported that their staff appeared to have a fixed mindset regarding curriculum reform. They appeared reluctant to steer away from a well-established framework and system, especially in areas such as assessments. Others reported feeling overwhelmed with the scale and complexity of the reform (Thomas *et al.*, 2023). However, Thomas *et al.* (2023) believes with more time and support this will inevitably build the confidence and knowledge of these practitioners, enabling them to successfully implement the new Curriculum for Wales.

Bilton and Waters (2016) and Bilton and Crook (2016) suggest the benefits of learning through outdoor play, sparking children's natural curiosity, however, Oberle *et al.* (2021) and Waite (2020) suggests that lack of appropriate environments, staff, and time prevent this from occurring as regularly as the new Curriculum for Wales would like. Another barrier according to Marchant *et al.* (2019) is inappropriate staff to child ratio in certain settings. Lack of staff has a direct effect on the children, meaning they miss out on certain learning opportunities or quality of learning experiences as a result (Iluz, Adi-Japha and Klein, 2016). A way to resolve these issues would be to provide more qualified practitioners, who will continue to train and develop their understanding of the ever-changing curriculum (Siraj, 2014) and (Taylor *et al.*, 2015).

To summarise it is evident when introducing a new curriculum such as the new Curriculum for Wales, there will be barriers and challenges. However, with the right support and identifying schools/settings of excellence to support with continued professional development and identifying methods for sharing best practice between schools and all non-maintained settings, will ensure the new curriculum is being

implemented successfully (Siraj, 2014). Doing so, Siraj (2014) and Taylor *et al.* (2015) believe this will have the potential to lead to greater educational success for our children, as they grow and develop.

Section 2

According to Langston and Doherty (2012) and Early Years Matters (2023) every child is unique in their own way, with their own individual social, emotional, physical and intellectual qualities. The Early Years Foundation Stage believes that every child will develop differently, as development is not linear (Langston, 2019). It is dependent on each unique child having the opportunity to engage in enabling environments, that encourage participation and highlight their strengths (Welsh Government, 2021a). Langston (2019) believes all children have a natural curiosity to learn, however they will interact with other people and the world around them in different ways. The role of the adult is to create an environment that offers inclusive practice and supports children's well-being and celebrates each child's uniqueness (The University of Warwick, 2023). In addition, recognise that children from the earliest age are considered competent learners and will develop in their own ways (Worcestershire Government, 2023). Welsh Government (2021a) places emphasis on the importance of the adult taking an equitable approach to teaching, recognizing and catering to the diverse needs of each child.

According to The University of Warwick (2023) inclusive practice is paramount in being able to support the unique child. Culture is one aspect that contributes to a child's uniqueness. A practitioner will interact with many children with different cultural backgrounds within their role, it is their job to ensure all children and their families are valued and respected for who they are (The University of Warwick, 2023). Bove and Sharmahd (2020) believe it is important to welcome children of all cultures and celebrate the diversity they bring to the setting, as well as the challenges. When practitioners have a child from a culture they are not familiar with in their care, there may be barriers, such as the practitioner lacking knowledge and understanding. Devarakonda (2013) believes that common knowledge of different cultures is superficial. Within schools culture is often perceived to relate to language, food, dress and festivals, however, practitioners may have very little awareness

about the rational and backgrounds of these different festivals, resulting in not being able to support the child as they would hope too (Devarakonda, 2013). Morton and Guerin (2018) suggest that practitioners can learn from children and their families about their culture, by asking questions and showing interest in them can help to ensure they feel valued and understood, in turn, developing the practitioners understanding.

According to Alsubaie (2015) practitioners could incorporate more culturally diverse activities into their curriculum, such as basing whole topics around different cultures. Reviewing the books accessible for the children in the class to ensure more culturally diverse ones are readily available. Involve the children in cooking activities to explore different types of cuisine from around the world. Children will learn about different ingredients and cooking methods from around the world during this tactile activity, recipes can also be sent home for the children to practice with their families, to encourage broader cultural understanding (Jabali, no date). Exploring different currencies with money; create or explore the world map with different activities for each country; explore and create cultural art, learning about origami from Japan, or native American dream catchers (Jabali, no date). The inclusion of more diverse topics and activities will help to develop a multicultural classroom (Banks, 1988).

Within the early years it is mandatory that practitioners conduct assessments through observations of the children learning, to gain a deeper understanding of the children's ability (Welsh Government, 2015b). Welsh Government (2023b) believe that assessments play a fundamental role in ensuring that each individual child is challenged and supported accordingly. According to Neaum (2016) when a practitioner observes a child learning, they are able to observe the richness of their play and interaction. Observations are a way to help a practitioner understand what children are interested in and their level of development (West Sussex County Council, 2021). In addition to this, having good communication with the child's parents/care givers to understand the children's care and learning needs will be beneficial when it comes to assessments (West Sussex County Council, 2021). Taking these steps will enable the practitioner to plan the next steps for the child's learning and development (Welsh Government, 2022d).

With the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales, it has changed the way in which practitioners assess and measure progress in children (Welsh Government, 2022d). The Curriculum for Wales allows schools and settings to be flexible in designing their own curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022d). "A successful curriculum, supported by effective teaching and learning enables learners to make meaningful progress" (Welsh Government, 2021b, p. 5). Following the landmark review of the Welsh curriculum carried out by Professor Graham Donaldson in 2015, he argued that in the new Curriculum for Wales progression should encompass a broader range of outcomes, rather than measures of attainment that are much narrower (Dauncey, 2015) and (Welsh Government, 2015d). Donaldson's vision for the new curriculum is that long-term reference points will be developed for each progression step, to represent achievement outcomes (Dauncey, 2015). Welsh Government (2022d) state that progression is to be measured at three yearly intervals, with progression steps being introduced at age five, eight, eleven, fourteen and sixteen, providing teachers with time to plan for learning and assessments. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2022d) advise that achievement outcomes for each area of learning and experience will be developed as broad expectations, in comparison to the age or stage progression tracker used in the Foundation Phase curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015a).

According to Gatley (2020) the use of progression steps to track children's development can be viewed more positively than previous forms of assessment. This allows for practitioners to focus more on what the child can do, and not on what they cannot do, and therefore tailor their curriculum around this (Welsh Government, 2023b). Each child will progress at different rates, therefore having broader expectations will allow more time for children to reach these goals through play and exploration (Welsh Government, 2023b). However, Conn and Hutt (2020) argue that progression may be hard to assess on such a broad spectrum. Moving past the age or stage progression tracker used in the Foundation Phase curriculum, it may be difficult to assess whether a child requires extra support as the practitioner may not know if they are falling behind or not (Conn and Hutt, 2020). In addition, Black-Hawkins (2017) states this may make it more difficult to spot possible learning difficulties in young children. In controversy to this, Robinson (2022) believes that the new Curriculum for Wales allows for more flexibility and encourages practitioners to

allow for more in the moment learning, through play. This allows practitioners to adopt the pedagogies used in Reggio Emilia, which involves the practitioner facilitating children's learning by planning lessons and activities based on the children's interests. (Arseven, 2014).

Teacher's TV (2015) believes that assessments must meet the requirements of the curriculum. Research conducted by Dubiel (2016) suggests that the assessments in the Foundation Phase curriculum, which took the form of tick lists of requirements that children should be meeting by a certain age would take over and drive the new Curriculum for Wales. Resulting in the benefits of implementing a child-centred, play based curriculum which focuses on a holistic approach to learning and developing would be lost (Welsh Government, 2023c).

Following assessments, children are often placed into groups based on their ability (Ambreen and Conteh, 2021). As a result, children with similar abilities are aggregated into smaller groups (Kim *et al.*, 2020). Roberts-Holmes and Kitto (2018) believe that doing this could be seen as positive as the practitioner could accurately attend to the different learning needs of the children within these groups. In addition, with the presence of a practitioner in the lowest ability group, this could potentially enable them to make the necessary progress (Roberts-Holmes and Kitto, 2018).

This links well with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory.

According to Eun (2017) if children are working with other children of similar capabilities, the work should meet their ability. According to Vygotsky's theory, if the work is too hard for children, they won't understand it and may zone out, whereas if the work is not challenging enough, the children will lose interest (Eun, 2017).

Dweck, (2017) argues that children's conception of ability can play a pivotal role in their achievement motivation. Research conducted by Buchanan, Hargreaves and Quick (2022) suggests that if a child is in the lowest ability group early on in their education, then it is likely they will remain in that group as they move up through the key stages. Theorist Vygotsky places emphasis on the importance of guiding children's learning through their interactions with a more knowledgeable other (Abtahi, 2014). Whether that be a practitioner, or higher ability children in their peer group. Therefore, if lower achieving children are all grouped together, they may lack the opportunity or motivation to strive to achieve higher (Buchanan, Hargreaves and Quick, 2022).

One of the inspirations for the new Curriculum for Wales is the Te Whariki approach that is used in New Zealand (Welsh Government, 2023c). The children are viewed as confident, competent learners who are at the centre of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017). Ministry of Education (2017) states the role of the practitioner is to facilitate children's learning through meaningful and intentional pedagogy. One form of assessment Te Whariki use which Sands and McChesney (2023) believe to be successful is the learning story assessment approach. Following observation of play, a learning story can be written to the child or their parents/care givers. They serve as a meaningful pedagogical tool to assess children's strengths, helping practitioners to reflect on their roles in the complex process of teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, no date). While this may be a meaningful approach to document children's progression Wightwick (2023) believes there are barriers to this such as, practitioners lacking training or knowledge on what a learning story is, or lacking time to sit and write such detailed stories for each child in their care.

Section 3

The importance of outdoor learning and the benefits it has on children's holistic development.

According to research conducted by Yildirim and Akamca (2017) outdoor learning is beneficial for children's holistic development. Being outdoors provides children with the opportunity to immerse themselves in nature, exploring and developing an understanding for the world around them (Bilton and Crook, 2016). In addition, outdoor play has been linked to the development of children's confidence, self-esteem and independence (Bilton and Waters, 2016). The outdoors provides children with endless opportunities for learning and exploration, including mathematics and science, through investigating and experimenting in their environment (Ernst, 2014) and (Edgington, 2014). Welsh Government (2022b) and Williams (2022) suggest that high levels of engagement, well-being and confidence come as a result of outdoor learning. Furthermore, the outdoors helps to support children's emotional, social and physical development, as well as providing authentic opportunities for them to develop and consolidate cross-curricular skills (Welsh Government, 2022b).

Within the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings, which some schools have adopted in their nursery classes, they practice appropriate pedagogies that focusses on the needs of the ever-developing child through five developmental pathways – Communication, exploration, belonging, physical development and well-being (Welsh Government, 2022a). Brooker, Blaise and Edwards (2014) believe outdoor learning provides scope for young children to progress and develop in these five areas. According to Grigg and Lewis (2016) outdoor learning sparks awe and wonder in children and allows them to be themselves in an open and stimulating environment. The outdoor environment can provide children with unique opportunities to improve their balance, co-ordination, and develop their motor function, all whilst exploring their physical potential (Essa and Burnham, 2019). It is these experiences that Obee, Sandseter and Harper (2020) believe help children develop the ability to experience and assess risk, which helps to develop confidence and resilience.

German educator Froebel believed that for young children, play is the principle means for learning (Tovey, 2020). He believed that the role of the adult during outdoor play is to provide rich, learning experiences within effective environments for the children (Tovey, 2013). Following that, to take a step back and observe the children, whilst extending and supporting their learning and play when needed allowing for emotional, social, cognitive and physical development (Smedley and Hoskins, 2018). According to Ryder-Richardson (2014) it is also the adult's role to model a joyful and imaginative approach to learning, supporting children's curiosity and exploration and engage in sustained shared thinking in the process. Welsh Government (2023b) believe that in order for the new Curriculum for Wales to be successful, an effective, child-centred pedagogy, which is dynamic, responsive and embedded in positive relationship's is key.

The outdoors is a magnificent learning environment for children according to White (2020), as mathematics and science can be seen all around them. According to Wilson (2018) outdoor play provides children with the opportunity to learn about their ever-changing environment, including the different seasons, plant growth, the leaves falling from the tree, birds flying and the changes in weather, also opportunities for investigation and discovery. Children can engage in sensory play by jumping in puddles or mud, rolling, climbing, feeling the different textures of flowers, leaves or bark on the trees, discover different insects or wildlife and communicate with their

peers whilst building a fort, where they will also develop problem solving skills (White, 2014). Through engaging in these activities, the children are developing an understanding of mathematic and scientific concepts such as, height, weight, depth, gradient, gravity, balance, colour, shapes and textures all through play (White, 2020). In addition, children are provided with opportunities to explore the concepts of cause and effect and trial and error by experimenting in their surroundings (White, 2020). Wilson (2018) believes that through observation the practitioner can develop an understanding of the children's interests, thus using this knowledge to plan for future outdoor learning activities by expanding on these interests and ensuring the children are provided with an engaging and enjoyable experience.

According to Smolucha and Smolucha (2021) during play, it is the adult's role to scaffold the children. The term scaffolding comes from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, which means the space between what a child can do independently, and what they can do with the help of a more knowledgeable other (MacBlain, 2018). Whilst observing children, if a practitioner notices that they may not understand something, it is their role to step in and provide the necessary support to further their learning (MacBlain, 2021). Similar to Vygotsky, Bandura believed that children learn better when playing with their peers in social environments and suggested that children tend to mirror the actions of others, allowing them to develop new skills and acquire new information (Smolucha and Smolucha, 2021).

According to Grigg and Lewis (2016) repetition is the key component of learning and provides children with the practice they need to master a new skill. Therefore, it is of great importance that children have access to regular and consistent outdoor play in order for them to repeat their learning (Waters and Rekers, 2019). This enables children to understand that certain activities will have different results on different days, for example, if a child was trying to build a sandcastle on a wet, rainy day the sand would be mouldable, however if they were to make a sandcastle on a dry, sunny day the sand would be too soft and not hold any shape. The practitioner observing could take this opportunity to step in and ask the child what might happen if they added some water to the dry sand, there is a potential learning opportunity for the child here according to (Waters and Rekers, 2019). Through continuous provision of rich outdoor learning experiences by pro-active and enthusiastic

practitioners, that encourage play and exploration, Moyles (2015) believes this will aid children's holistic development. Following this practice, Welsh Government (2023b) believes this will enable children to become ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethically, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals.

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