

Section 1

The Foundation Phase, as outlined by Waters (2016, p.2) emphasised the importance of a child's personal growth, well-being and encouraged a play-based approach to learning for 3- to 7-year-olds. According to Ntshangase and Venketsamy (2022, p.149) a play-based pedagogy requires a supportive environment, with recourses to promote discovery and exploration. Play based learning supports all areas of development and includes all the strategies and methods considered to start the learning process. Meeting Article 31 from UNCRC (UNICEF, 2019) that states every child has the right to play. According to the Welsh Government (no date b), children learn best when they get their knowledge from first-hand experiences, whether planned or unplanned and when they are allowed uninterrupted time to play.

In contrast, the perspective of Early Years Advisor's, as cited by the Welsh Government (2015, p.27), implies that headteachers expressed concerns about possible declines in academic standards during the initial implementation of the Foundation Phase. Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2015, p.27); Welsh Government (2014, p.21) observed that this could be because practitioners lacked knowledge of the ways in which play, and experimentation help children learn. However, an independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase (2014, p.19) says that settings reported improvements in children's well-being, literacy, and numeracy when the Foundation Phase was implemented. This shows that the play-based approach to learning supported children's development. Despite this, practitioners had a misunderstanding of the different types of play. For example, the Foundation Phase uses phrases such as, play, pure play, and active learning says Welsh Government (2015, p.28). As highlighted by Waters (2016, p.6) this misconception caused uneven implementation of the Foundation Phase.

Donaldson (2015, P.10) emphasises the importance of reforming the curriculum to engage children. An effective approach is to include a thorough glossary at the end of the curriculum, as seen in the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2022a, p.52-53). With the use of the glossary that provides exact definitions for key terminology, practitioners will be able to minimise adult-led

activities and develop a more refined understanding. Unlike in the Foundation Phase where practitioners did not have a clear understanding of the different types of play stated by Welsh Government (2015, p.27). It is clear from the Foundation Phase review (Welsh Government, 2015, p.113) that specific definitions are sufficient for guiding practitioners when introducing a new curriculum. For instance, child-initiated activities and continuous, enhanced, and focused provision (Welsh Government, 2015, p.113). By including this level of clarity, practitioners may more effectively relate their practices to the curriculum's aims and create an environment that allows children to learn successfully.

The purpose of implementing a play-based curriculum was for children to develop transferable skills across the seven areas of learning in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, no date a, p. 8). Additionally, according to Bianquin (2018, p.53) when it comes to encouraging play, an adult's role is an observer, with the goal of discovering the children's play abilities and interests. Similarly, Vygotsky cited by Wilkinson and Jones (2017, p.42) believes that learning happens when it is scaffolded by a more knowledgeable other. Through social engagement and communication with adults and more experienced peers, children can learn at a greater level than they could on their own states Welsh Government (no date a, p.30). In the same way Waters (2016, p.17) says that better results for children are achieved when practitioners ask open ended questions that draw on the interests of the children in a playful learning environment.

However, children use a variety of cues to determine whether an activity is play or not, such as, activities setting, presence of adults and the element of choice (Howard and McInnes, 2012, p.738). According to Howard and McInnes (2012, p.737) children display greater signs of emotional well-being when they perceive an activity as play than non-play.

In contrast, the Welsh Government (2014, p. 21) state that during the initial implementation of the Foundation Phase, classrooms had a chaotic, unstructured play environment. This challenge arose from schools' unfamiliarity with supporting children in learning through play. McInnes, *et al.*, (2011, p.122) suggests that practitioners, traditionally have been discouraged from involvement in play, and may

have led to an overreliance on adult-led activities due to lack of knowledge about play and child-initiated learning.

Furthermore, the independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase (WG, 2014, P.30) and the evaluation of the Foundation Phase (WG, 2015, P.114) highlighted the need for additional training for practitioners in understanding the role of the adult. The Welsh Government emphasises the importance of practitioners having a good understanding of child development, positioning adults as facilitators of learning in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, no date, a).

To achieve this the Foundation Phase curriculum improved the adult-child ratio for children aged 3 to 7 says both Welsh Government (2015, p.29) and (2014, p.35) . The ratio improved in reception classrooms to 1 adult to 8 children. Although, the Welsh Government (2014, p.35) emphasise that the quality of the adult is more valuable than the number of adults in the room. This improved ratio allowed practitioners to undertake their own professional development and training without needing extra cover in the classroom (Welsh Government, 2015, p.34). Whereas the independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase (2014, p.35) saw the improved ratio as a challenge as it resulted in cheaper, less qualified staff working in the Foundation Phase to meet the new ratio standards. Even though, Kingston and Siraj (2017, p.47) implies that there is no guarantee that any level of professional training and education makes practitioners more effective.

The Welsh Government (2014, p.36) suggests that during the curriculum reform it would be beneficial to review the adult to child ratio in settings. This is because they believe it could be improved to 1:10 without affecting the quality of teaching and learning. Whereas the evaluation of the Foundation Phase (2015, p.120) advises that higher adult to child ratios should continue to be supported. Meanwhile, increased monitoring is advised for the new curriculum to ensure that the funding provided for additional practitioners is spend on them.

According to the Welsh Government (2014, p.35) teaching assistants at some maintained schools take part in active training and contribute to the Foundation Phase's planning and evaluation. A case study by Welsh Government (2015, p.33)

says that additional practitioners were considered an important aspect when implementing the Foundation Phase, especially when a combination of focused, continuous, and enhanced activities were carried out. As stated by Kingston and Siraj (2017, p.47) practitioners who participated in professional development, that covered child development topics, are better equipped to support children's development, and encourage learning through play.

Nonetheless, in other maintained schools teaching assistants did not receive the sufficient support for implementing the Foundation Phase. Alternatively, the Welsh Government (2014, p.35) implies that they could have been employed for managing the classroom, interventions, and often without having knowledge about the role of the adult. Although, head teachers found that a barrier to implementing the improved ratio was funding (Welsh Government, 2015, p.28).

According to Donaldson (2015,p.96), the effectiveness of the curriculum reform depends on how actively leaders, teachers and practitioners engage in professional development. Donaldson highlights the need for well thought out training programmes that align with the implementation date of the new curriculum and are tailored to the specific requirements of each practitioner's role (Donaldson ,2015, p.96; Welsh Government, 2015, p.114). The need for strategic training stems from previous Foundation Phase implementation issues, where poor content and audience mismatches hindered effectiveness says Welsh Government, (2014, p.38). It is important to create training that is not only well-structured but also takes into consideration the various requirements of the participating practitioners when the curriculum changes. For example, the role of the Foundation Phase leader will be different to the role of a teaching assistant. According to the Foundation Phase Evaluation (Welsh Government, 2015, p.115), schools and local authorities should monitor training event attendance closely. It is also suggested that practitioners take responsibility for updating their own training and learning records to prove that they have undertaken professional development.

Section 2

According to CPD College (2015) the concept of the unique child is to recognise and embrace each child's individuality within a learning environment. This emphasises the significance of recognising and celebrating each child's specific features, characteristics, and potential. The concept of the unique child is important to consider when assessing children as it is necessary for ensuring that each child progresses at their own pace and receives sufficient support or challenge suggest Welsh Government (2022a, p.42). Through assessing children practitioners gain an insight to their individual strengths and weaknesses. In a similar way, the curriculum for funded non-maintained settings (2022a, p.42) emphasises that learning is not linear, and that each individual child will progress in their own way. It is sufficient to remember the concept of the unique child when assessing children as it has the potential to significantly increase teaching and learning says Kanjee and Mthembu (2015, p.143).

Firstly, according to Welsh Government, (2022b, p.27) the Foundation Phase Profile was viewed as compatible with the Foundation Phases' pedagogical ideas as both the baseline and end of phase assessments could be carried out through observation. According to Howard and McInnes (2012, p.738), when practitioners observe children playing, they gain an authentic insight of the children's skills. This is because children's performance improves when they view an activity as play, showing their true capabilities says Howard and McInnes (2012, p.738) and Kanjee and Mthembu (2015, p.144). This considers the concept of the unique child as it gives the practitioner a true insight to the child's individual ability in a natural play environment.

Nevertheless, the Welsh Government (2022b) implies that many settings had to set up specific tasks, often at a desk to test key skills that were not as easily noticed through play. For example, reception children are required under the Foundation Phase Framework to be able to distinguish between capital and lower-case letters as well as be aware of punctuation marks. Due to the specific nature, these skills may not be easily observed during play. This approach overlooks the principles of the

unique child, as Welsh Government (2022b, p.28) states that focused assessment activities can be challenging for some children, potentially inducing panic or fear of making mistakes.

Additionally, the Welsh Government's (2015, p.14) and Waters (2016, p.4) design of the Foundation phase Framework categorises children into age related norms that represent the expected developmental expectations for children at different ages. Waters (2016, p.4) explains that practitioners would observe children and measure their progress against national norms linked to age. However, this does not consider every child's individuality, especially when it comes to the large age differences that occur in a single school year. For example, in reception, some children may turn five in September, while others might not reach five until the following August. This variation of age can result in notable differences in developmental readiness among children in the same class.

Whereas the new curriculum for Wales has broad statements that cannot be set up at a table it has to be observed. For example, a broad statement in the progression steps is 'I can understand and apply the language of time to my daily life' (Welsh Government, 2020). Significantly the emphasis of the progression steps is on what children can accomplish rather than limitations or what they cannot do. This change in the new curriculum emphasises a positive strength-based approach that values and enhances the accomplishments of each child.

Also, under the new curriculum for Wales (2020) it is recognised that not all children progress at the same rate unlike the Foundation Phase Profile (2022b) which set age-related targets for children. The progression steps are designed to identify the developmental stage in which each child is working at. For example, a 7-year-old may be on progression step 1, whereas a 5-year-old may be on progression step 3. The change in focus from age-based milestones to individualised progression steps, shows that the curriculum accommodates each child's unique pace of learning.

Learning story assessment is an observational and recording approach that involves using narrative-style writing to capture and document children's experiences, activities and development over time says Pack (2016). This assessment approach

prioritises children's unique abilities. The objective is to develop a thorough and individualised understanding of every child, valuing their individuality and range of skills says Pack (2016). Practitioners in Wales can assess children using learning stories as under the Curriculum for Wales schools can establish and create their own assessment arrangements suggests Welsh Government (2022b, p.15).

However, as indicated by the education hub (2019) learning stories do not identify problems with children's learning or signal if they need early intervention. This means that learning stories are not linked to a stage of where the child is working at, meaning additional assessment methods might be necessary alongside. Also, Blaiklock, (2008, p.80) says that the observations are frequently undertaken when the practitioner is working with the children. This indicates that practitioners are unable to give their full attention to observing the child when they are recording information. Similarly, if there is a class of 30 children it would take a lot of time for practitioners to write a learning story for each child.

Section 3 – Blog

Unveiling the social benefits of forest school for children.

In this blog, I will explore the various ways that forest schools offer a distinctive and rewarding social environment, encouraging the development of self-esteem, communication, and an understanding of the natural world for children. According to Murphy (2020, p.195) forest school is ideally suited to fulfil curriculum objectives as it allows children to apply what they have learned in the classroom in a real-life setting. For young children, being outside is important. It promotes well-being as well as the growth of social, emotional, and physical development says Welsh Government (2022a, P.16) and the Curriculum for Wales (2020).

Communication

Swales (2017, p.62) states that children use five times more words outside than they do inside. According to Massey (no date, p.4) practitioners engaging in conversations with children about their specific curiosities during forest school, improve children's language significantly. For example, during the initial visits to forest school, children could express their excitement with statements like "Look at this!". Additionally, as children become more confident with the surroundings, their questions become more specific like "Do they live in the soil underground like worms?" when becoming curious about a woodlouse. This progression emphasises how beneficial it is to follow the interests of the children within the forest school environment suggests Massey (no date, p.4).

Teamwork skills

Teamwork is an essential component of the forest school experience encouraging collaboration and communication. Natural Resources Wales, (no date, p.8) implies that children are better at collaborating, sharing tools and playing co-operatively in a forest school environment. Teamwork is promoted by having limited resources, so to maximise the number of materials available, children learn to compromise and work together which builds a sense of resourcefulness.

Moreover, practitioners have observed a positive correlation between forest school environment and improved behaviour in children (Natural resources Wales, no date, p.8). When it comes to learning environments, forest schools provide less structure, more open spaces, and freedom for exploration. Here children can make decisions and take ownership of their learning. This empowerment contributes to positive behavioural outcomes as children feel more in control of their learning, they become more engaged and cooperate.

Self-esteem development

Murphy (2020, p.194) says that the goal of forest school is to develop children's self-esteem and confidence through active participation in various activities. These activities vary from going on scavenger hunts to discovering plants and insects, jumping in muddy puddles, and climbing trees. Children not only improve their social skills but also thrive in the rich sensory environment of nature as they cooperate and

communicate throughout these activities says Murphy (2020, p.194). The natural curiosity of children, questioning the natural world, is an essential aspect of developing self-esteem in children as they will feel like their ideas are valued emphasizes Murphy (2020, p.194). With the help of in the moment planning practitioners can focus on the specific interest of each child. This will in turn help the children become more involved, enthusiastic and in control of the learning, encouraging self-esteem suggests National day nursery association (no date, p.1). For example, if the practitioner observes a child looking at a ladybird through a magnifying glass, the teachable moment could be “shall we see if we can count how many spots the ladybird has?”.

Hands on activities such as building dens and identifying minibeasts provide children with an overall sense of accomplishment, contributing to their sense of achievement. Murphy (2020, p.194) emphasised how important it is to support children’s social, and self-esteem needs to encourage a child’s holistic development, which aligns with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Simply Psychology, 2023).



Source: Simply Psychology, (2023).

According to Harper (2017, p.6) children participating in forest school are exposed to risks rather than hazards. For example, when a child climbs a tree to a height that makes them feel a sense of fear, they must then use their judgement and conduct their own risk assessment, which is a skill that is developed through repeated risk taking. Additionally, practitioners that allow children to take part in a variety of risky activities empowers children’s independence and curiosity says Blackwell, (no date, p.30). This aligns with the Reggio Emilia approach, which is where practitioners view children as naturally capable individuals in their learning and development journey (Arseven, 2014, p.167-168). However, forest school priorities the safety and well-being of children suggests Natural Resources Wales (no date, p.6). To manage and reduce risk, practitioners and children will collaborate to establish and agree on rules. A rule could be ‘no eating anything you find’ for instance to stop children eating

wild berries that grow. This will also encourage children's listening skills to ensure that they keep themselves safe.

Empathy

Drawing on Vygotsky's theory, as cited by Wilkinson and Jones (2017, p.42), learning is most effective when supervised by a more knowledgeable other, such as the adult leading forest school. The Welsh Government (no date a, p.30) emphasises the relevance of social participation and communication with adults and experiences peers in enabling children to achieve greater levels of learning. For instance, a practitioner's message, such as "minibeasts have feelings too, so let's not hurt them", not only instils empathy in young children but also promotes communication amongst their peers. This shared understanding motivates the children to communicate the importance of caring for wildlife to their peers, showing the importance of guidance from adults.

Conclusion

To conclude, forest schools create the perfect environment for the development of social skills in children. The combination of outdoor exploration, teamwork and adult guidance develops a basis for effective communication and collaboration. These are qualities that are not only critical for successful social interactions but also lay the foundation for lifelong learning and personal development.

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