

Section 1

The curriculum as we know it is changing in Wales. The New curriculum for Wales is moving in an unshackling direction according to Professor Graham Donaldson, (Education Cymru, 2019) In this interview, Donaldson describes the promise he sees in the passion and fierce dedication in Wales, to capably drive the new curriculum reform forward.

(Gov.Wales, 2017) Draws attention to the imperative requirement to recover and respond from damaging assessment results, issued by the Education and Training inspectorate of Wales and, the international evaluation system PISA. This combined data highlighted the diminution of previous high achieving scores throughout the 3 principal areas of assessment. English, Mathematics and Science, in examination results at school leaver age. (Welsh Government, 2015) (Gov.Wales, 2017) Thus, kickstarting a mission of National proportion to actualise genuine change (Donaldson, 2015) This assignment aims to research and analyse the history of the curriculum reforms in Wales and how they have contributed to the quest for change. To discuss deliverance and expected implementation of the Foundation Phase Framework, with a focus on the Early Years and play-based learning, as well as its impact on the New Curriculum. And finally, explore some of the potential concerns and disagreeing responses regarding the implementation of a play-based strategy. (Sinnema, C. Nieveen, N. and Priestly, M. 2020) (Newton, 2018)

Taken from (Senedd Cymru, 2021) The establishment of the Welsh Board for Education in 1907, prompted the political agenda which would lead to many campaigns for devolution for Wales. On St David's Day 1979, yet another rejected proposal resulted in the Welsh office believing this was the end of their fight. However, as the years went on, so support grew, and new Acts were passed beginning to equalise Wales' rights. In 1997 Wales along with Scotland had another opportunity to be included in the referendum to allow devolution, and by .3 percent Welsh history was made! (Senedd Cymru, 2021) This decision caused some documented controversy, (Jones and Lewis, 1999) journalled their views on the devolution success, describing it as dramatic and theatrical, and with only half of the known electoral vote submitted, saw this as a significant dismissal of interest and lack of commitment in the Welsh people. However, in their conclusion the writers claimed to admire the skilled politicians who achieved the outcome of devolution regardless of the support and wished them well to face the 'treacherous' journey ahead of them.

According to (Evans, 2022) these first steps towards education reform in Wales and the liberating journey stepping away from the rulings of Westminster and the umbrella of UK Government, invited an energised, innovative drive for Welsh education ministers. This (Evans, 2022) refers to as 'Phase One' in making positive changes in the Welsh education rollout from 1999 to 2010.

On the 1st of August 2008, the Foundation Phase framework in Wales was given its legal introduction by the Education (National Curriculum) stipulating given ranges, setting areas of learning, expected envisioned results and programs of education. (Legislation.gov.uk 2014)

Combining the previous curriculum stage of 'Early Years' for children aged three to five, with the five- to seven-year-old Key Stage 1 pupils, created a single phased

transition in education from three to seven years. (Welsh Government, 2015) In full swing by September 2010, the statutory curriculum set out to promote a more satisfying and valuable learning experience, with play, creativity, and imagination at the core of its approach for life. (Welsh Government, 2015)

Following this the Welsh Government developed a 10-year plan for professionals and service providers working with families and children aged 0-7 years. (BASW, no date) The multidisciplinary workforce including midwives, health visitors, school staff, health care providers and more, were now committed to communicate and come together, to improve outcomes holistically. With the aim to positively impact the child and family's journey through early years and foundation phase pedagogy. (Welsh Government, 2013)

The Welsh Government adopted the International Human Rights agreement [UNCRC] to develop a summary of responsibilities needing to be insured for each child in Wales, to roll out a national approach to education. Along with the needs to access an all-inclusive series of learning and educational provision, and a focus on health, well-being, and safety, there is a responsibility that children and young people can have the opportunities to play, have time for sports and leisure and explore their own culture. (Welsh Government, 2015)

The main aims written into the framework in 2008 and then revised in 2009 are to offer the best possible prospects moving through development, accessing opportunities, and obtaining a range of insight into social interaction, personal and emotional health and wellbeing and freedom from harm or neglect. Entitlement and ease of access to play/leisure activities, and connections to identify personally with cultural history. Additionally, non-discrimination towards social circumstances. (Welsh Government, 2015)

When constructing the deliverance of the Foundation Phase, recognised international influencers in education such as Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki created innovative models for their approach towards the play-based curriculum. (Wainwright, *et al.* 2020) Additionally (Taylor, Rhys, & Waldron, 2016) document similar opinion and state that these influencers from New Zealand and Northern Italy, who's constructivist theories towards education and learning, structured the pathway to the foundation phase framework, through play, experience, and empowerment for the unique individual. (OECD, 2004) Delve into the curriculums of Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki along with other influential international approaches and have established regular international workshops and communication links to continually improve policy, share good practice, and explore ongoing development.

According to (Welsh Government, 2016) an independent evaluation (WISERD, 2015) and an Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government, 2014) were entrusted to reinforce, through inspection, the pledge to assess and improve the curriculum in Wales. The outcomes and evidenced findings from both reviews were encouraging. (Welsh Government, 2016) The areas in which implementation of the Foundation Phase were in force, were reported to be attributing to a rise in whole school attendance, progression in targeted core subjects and an overall advancement in student well-being evaluations.

The outcome of the Independent Evaluation (WISERD, 2015) produced findings and recommendations to support the Foundation Phase' progress. A high percentage of the recommendations revolved around professional practice, knowledge, and training. For example, for practitioners to be more informed, and have a deeper understanding of their expected approach to implementation. Training to be revised with a focus on the role of the facilitator. Leadership training, again to inform the workforce from the very top and feed down through a consistent coaching approach. Access to examples of best practice and continuous follow up training in line with the developing curriculum.

The Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government, 2014) prioritised the appointment of a faction of knowledgeable Welsh professionals and experts from areas outside of Wales, to evolve a 10-year plan, to monitor and reinforce the consistent implementation of the Foundation Phase throughout the Country. Like (WISERD, 2015), the Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government, 2014) also targeted training and professional practice within many of their recommendations, especially in relation to cross curricular skills. Also like (WISERD, 2015) recommended that, the sharing of maintained and non-maintained facilities' best practiced outcomes and cross sector communication is required to support not just consistent learning but social and economic improvement.

At the heart of the original Foundation Phase Framework is a 'play-based' substructure. Within the first few lines of the Foundation Phase curriculum framework, play is described as fundamental and far reaching. (Welsh Government, 2015) The framework goes on to acknowledge how personal play experiences can be a vital mode of transport, directing the child throughout their early learning journey and beyond.

The skills the foundation phase recognises that can be approached through play, are those such as experimentation, learning through trial and error, risk taking, cognitive problem solving and evaluation. Additionally, through the act of play a child can develop an understanding for their surroundings and a link to self-awareness and self-esteem. (Welsh Government, 2015)

Play based learning, while written into many framework policies and structural education documents, is a phrase that is notoriously difficult to define. (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019) acknowledges that researchers such as (Rogers 2010) label play-based learning as a pedagogy that induces contestation and increases pressure for practitioners, to be confident in their delivery of qualitative content. Froebel (no date) professed that play had a significant position in the education of a child, central to their development. While it is evident through age-old theory and extensive literature that learning through play has a firm purpose (Bubikova-Moan et al, 2019) The study carried out in 2018 showed that the definition of play and how it is implemented is so complex it could potentially override the power it may have to assist the developing child.

The 2018 study researched the conformity and perspectives of a worldwide selection of practitioners, and the challenges and experiences of implementing play-based learning. (Bubikova-Moan *et al.* 2019) Some of the results shown, suggested that

most English-speaking countries were heavily guided by curriculum, ergo resulting in adult led play preempting most sessions. (Bubikova-Moan *et al.* 2019) From the study, the writers imply that there are many practitioners worldwide who appreciate the role of play, to amplify the child's holistic development. These professionals have tried to adopt a route whereby they have a relaxed approach to play encompassing it within their classrooms, however it is also apparent that there are issues with consistency and professional support, finding the correct balance between the two is problematic.

(Welsh Government, 2008) describes areas of play that can focus the development of implementation in a setting. Independent play, Parallel play, co-operative group play, spectator play and solitary play to name a few. This publication also discusses the enabling environment and the role of the adult as key aspects of a successful play-based rollout.

While the findings of the forementioned Independent Evaluation and Independent Stocktake applaud the facilitation of some of these methods practiced in the Foundation Stage, there is evidence to suggest some confusion when assessing the concerns of practitioners implementing a play-based approach to learning. During surveys, implementors report ambiguity in terms of direction and boundaries surrounding play and, notice vast varying differences in delivery even across classes within the same setting.

(Welsh Government, 2014) while undertaking the Independent Stocktake, state that throughout their investigation into the implementation of the Foundation Phase Framework in schools, and non-maintained settings, they established a pattern of professional staff who had lost trust in the deliverance of the play-based learning method, as it had led to disorderly situations and the delivery of weakened educational practices. The recommendation from (Welsh Government, 2014) was to structure and roll out support to enable professionals to deliver a curriculum of learning based upon experiences through playful activities, as the definition of play and its place in the setting is difficult to understand without a level of structured guidance.

To conclude, now, in 2023, the New Curriculum for Wales sees the end of the 'Foundation Phase' as a separate entity as it merges with a new approach to a seamless educational journey from 3-16 years. The New Curriculum aims to focus on supporting its practitioners in the deliverance of a curriculum that is led by skilled, perceptive professionals, keenly committed to providing a quality experience and enabling stimulating, fun surroundings. (Protheroe, C. 2022)

Section 2

With the New Curriculum for Wales at a critical point in its delivery, assessment of progression is a fundamental indicator in a child or young person's purposeful development. (Welsh Government, no date) The New Curriculum promotes sustained shared thinking throughout its assessment pedagogy, while implementing a curriculum that is centred around the unique individual. However, there are

documented concerns regarding the freedom for flexibility associated with the New Curriculum and its assessment process, (Power, Newton, and Taylor. 2020) highlighting the potentially limiting progression for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This assignment explores the play-based curriculum with the 'unique child, as a central focus, conducting research into the advantages and concerns of the intended assessment approach, and investigation into how the proposed progression will be measured within the new curriculum.

The word 'unique' is defined by (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023) as being a 'one-off' and differing from the next person. The phrase 'unique child' does not simply refer to their DNA make-up but represents the way in which a child grows and develops. (Centre for Parenting Education, 2023) An example given on this information website is understood in terms of parenting. Regardless of approach, structure and consistency as a care giver, children will respond differently as they are a culmination of individual components and experiences, combined to exist in that person uniquely.

(Nutbrown, 1996) Emphasises in detail, the empathetic approach all practitioners working with children should adopt. Treating every individual child like the next, with the same care and attention, the same amount of respect and interest, regardless of their appearance, attitude, capability, culture, spoken language, family history or needs.

It is the responsibility of the professional to allow each child to naturally, and in their own time frame, develop ideas and cognition without pressure. (Welsh Government, 2014) While the enabling adult is there to nurture and guide, learners should have the opportunity to advance at a level of comfortable progression. (Welsh Government, 2015) Within the Department of Education – Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, it describes an in-depth principle to view all learners as individual and unique. The framework, much like Wales' Foundation Phase, attributes strong developmental links between the characteristics and rates individuals can learn, and the relationship they have with the professionals and the environment. (Department for Education, 2020)

(Welsh Government, 2020) state that it is imperative that the professional or care giver, must adopt the style in which the child learns to allow them the time, care and attention required to get the most from their education experiences. (Shaw, 2019) supports this with the suggestion that service providers are obligated to observe and understand the needs of each child.

According to (Aubrey and Riley, 2019) Maria Montessori was a leading theorist in the developmental education of children, with her focus designed around the unique child. Her holistic ethos within the learning setting gave way to a pathway of self-paced, self-actualising cognition, where learning through trial and error, play and

exploration in an exclusive manner, elevates each individual child in their own unique way. (Aubrey and Riley, 2019)

Bronfenbrenner also suggests that a child's development is a personal and individualistic process, however, his theory describes the uniqueness of a personalised relationship with the environment surrounding them and how they characteristically respond to it. (Soyer, 2019)

Uniqueness can be depicted in many forms. (Early Years Matters, 2007) describe personal diverse circumstances that need the compassion and respect deserved to allow a child to develop. According to this information, the practitioner has a bound duty to the individual child to acknowledge and research cultural upbringing and be inclusive and considerate in the deliverance of curriculum choices.

UNESCO (2017) produce a guide to support equity and inclusion within emerging curriculums, it suggests that the outcomes show an inconsistency in professional training to engage and develop ways to be entirely inclusive in the setting. Individual learner diversity needs, require an increase in professional understanding and development to ensure up to date, knowledgeable representatives, delivering an inclusive curriculum.

Supporting these concerns, (Shaw, 2019) acknowledges the possible discrimination that may take place when considering each child's unique abilities. The implementation of activities must therefore be carefully constructed to guarantee a mindful approach to play. Aswell as arranging appropriate group activities. Assessing an individual by singular needs and requirements and removing them from an activity that may seem inappropriate or too challenging/simple, may result in them being isolated from a friendship group. (Shaw, 2019) According to (Every Child Matters, 2007) discrimination can arise in disability, specialist educational needs, social situations, cultures, community, refugees, or those seeking asylum, additionally, individuals and families with communication barriers.

So how can progression be fairly assessed?

Donaldson believed, the Welsh Assembly Government admit to failings in their approach to assessment strategies throughout previous curriculum, highlighting a lack of consistency and understanding. (Welsh Government 2015) The targets set in the educational improvement plan pinpoint assessment as a formative process, to gather relevant information to be passed on to the next stages of educational progression.

One of the main policy reform propositions in Wales surrounds the assessment and analysis of the New Curriculum. (OECD, 2023) Donaldson also identifies this as critical having reported that a regular concern during the curriculum survey, was that Pioneer schools and other sources of information criticised the current assessment process.

(Gov.wales, 2016) evidence throughout their action plan, that continuous observation and assessment are key in the early years when carrying out play based curriculum. The Welsh Government welcomes the support to inform and improve through

pedagogical services. The plan also suggests 'Regional consortia' to share relevant working concepts to enhance provision. (Gov.Wales, 2016)

EYFS use baseline assessments as pupils enter their classes and settings, these outline the levels of a child entering the setting, however only communication and language and maths are tested. This is not a clear indicator of the pupils' strengths and weaknesses; these additional holistic approaches follow later through observation and interaction with the environment and are less formal. (Gov.uk, 2022)

In Wales, as mentioned, formal assessment is being replaced with a broader progression structure. Based on the six areas of learning and the four purposes at the core of the reform, children and young people will now be central in planning their own educational journey. While literacy, numeracy and digital competency will still be tested as an indicator of progression, observation and self-reflection will be the critical tools within the roll out using the 'I can' and the 'I have' statements. (Education Wales, 2022)

Exploring the Te Whariki curriculum and its play-based assessment framework, it is clear the pupil takes the lead in their progress, guided respectfully by the practitioner. Te Whariki use both formal and informal assessment to review progression. The informal assessment being more about observation at the time of engagement in play and discovery. Using techniques such as listening, observing, and responding can inform the service provider and through reflection, make changes in the learning environment to benefit the user. The more formal course of assessment is to document engagement and build a portfolio unique to the specific child to monitor the learning journey and progression. This can be documented with written observations, pictures and photographs, examples of work and recordings and can be tracked to consider individual pathways and outcomes. Within Te Whariki, self-assessment is important. Personal goal setting and recording of achievement or areas to improve can be a developmental focus for the child and professional. (TKI, 2023)

While influences from worldwide curriculum and regional consortia have been and will continue to be key in moving the curriculum forward, (Estyn, 2022) warns of the lack of effectiveness in delivery of curriculum built upon some provisions that are successful in other areas of the world. These may perhaps not be suitable or meet the unique needs of some Welsh settings, expressing the dangers they observe when these processes and activities are not evaluated within context.

Within the development of the New Curriculum, guidelines are emerging and developing for practitioners to assess progression in a new way. The curriculum's 'Progression Principles' reflect its 'Statement of What Matters' which epitomise the reformed curriculum and its core four purposes. To create enthusiastic, competent learners. To nurture inspired participants in the lifelong world of work. Awareness and critical knowledge of morals, good character, and integrity, and finally to be thriving and self-assured. (Hwb, 2022)

The Welsh Government outline guidance for progression, reflection will be increasingly beneficial in the ongoing support for progression assessment and

underpin the nations expectations for advancement through education. (Hwb, 2022) Through the principles of progression which involve; Developing effectiveness, emergent knowledge, deeper understanding, refinement of skills and transferable skills, create the supportive structure to allow assessment to seamlessly blend with learning and engagement holistically. Linked closely and respectably with literacy, numeracy, and digital competency in all areas. (Hwb, 2022)

Many professional leads within the education setting continue to remain sceptical when advancing into assessment and progression within the new curriculum for Wales, and do not have a clear idea how progression should look going forward. (Estyn, 2022)

(Power, Newton, and Taylor, 2020) Report that while teachers welcome flexibility of the innovative approach to assessment, they are nervous of the evident implications arising. The more expressive flexibility given to service providers has the potential to result in varying levels of outcomes, particularly highlighting the disadvantaged students and settings previously discussed, widening the gap in attainment, and amplifying unevenness and discrimination based upon socio-economical inequalities.

To conclude, there are many changes taking place in the New Curriculum for Wales, practitioners and leaders are both excited and apprehensive. In a lot of cases there are evident concerns regarding inequality and guidance, however, through published research and findings the new curriculum clearly focuses on the unique child and their individual progression, and this can only be commended as an encouraging progressive way of thinking. (Welsh Government, 2015)

Section 3 - Blog

The Early years is a perfect time to ignite the interest of a child, and through imaginative play, create scenarios that enable discovery and interpretation of the world in which they live. A well-planned dramatic play-based structure can support growth through expression of thoughts and emotions. (Eustaquio, 2021)

Taking on a new role within play can allow children to identify with each other, understand how other's think and act, critically problem solve, collaborate, empathise, and respond.

As a practitioner in Wales in 2023, the concept of a New Curriculum that proposes a flexible framework generates an abundance of expectations, hopes and concerns, of how education could look by 2030. The new Areas of Learning are set out to support children in reaching and maintaining the core purposes defined as 'the heart' of the reform and encourage the implementation of a set of exciting skills to enhance and develop the learning pathway.

(Welsh Government, 2020) Introduce an Area of Learning titled 'Expressive Arts' which encourages exploration into the creative, artistic, and performance-based areas of development. With play being a central approach in educating children, the partnership between expressive arts and play is one of adventure and holistic enhancement.

In this blog, you will find information relating to the benefits of introducing drama in the early years and its links to the New Curriculum for Wales, the implementation of Drama through role play and dramatic play, along with some useful and practical examples to introduce Drama into your settings.

“The use of creative drama is a fundamental tool for ECTs to develop their play skills” (Loizou, Michaelides & Georgiou, 2019)

Does your classroom become a haven some days for adventure? Do you find yourself (a professional with many responsibilities) emerged in a make-believe world and comfortable to be there? These are the creative skills of a dramatic-play innovator! Imagine how much confidence it gives a child to see their teacher become an attentive pupil in THIER imaginary classroom, where they take charge of the rules and expectations. Imagine the responsibility they feel to become the ‘adult’ within this context and the personal satisfaction of marking the register as you answer your name.

There are many benefits to implementing a dramatic play-based session or regular drama games in the early year's settings. Introducing educational drama techniques can be an effective way of learning through play and instilling confidence, independence, and creativity. Having a flexible approach and including improvisation tools and loose parts into dramatic/ role-play can also enhance educational outcomes. (Loizou, Michaelides & Georgiou, 2019)

The New Curriculum for Wales states that ‘Expressive Arts’ is a highlighted area of learning and promotes confidence, self-worth, and satisfaction. These skills can be encouraged through performance and experiencing art in the community and the outside world. Drama and dramatic play are essential tools for improving cognitive performance, encouraging social skills, and teaching fundamental emotional intelligence. (Cloward Drown, 2014)

(Moretti, N. 2016) Suggests that implementing dramatic play into your planned lessons has the potential to maximise a student's progression. (Moretti, N. 2016) Some of the main forms of dramatic play come from mimicking modelled behaviour, retelling stories, traditional relationships for example; Parent and child, teacher and pupil, shop keeper and customer, doctor and patient. (Moretti, N. 2016) And not forgetting scenes from much loved films and television programmes.

If you have no genuine experience in this area you can begin by introducing a simple story into the setting, create colourful, playful intonation and repeat key information or lessons to be learned, then allow the children to re-create this story.

The first challenge you may face when children are able to independently work in groups is to help a focus on sharing information and ideas in turn. The practitioner will be key initially in this process until it becomes a task that children are familiar with. Focus on listening skills and acceptance skills by practicing some skills such as; guide not direct, staying engaged and involved, trust in the ideas of others, and support as risk is negotiated. (Gao, and Hall, 2019)

As a private drama school facilitator for many years, coaching students from 3-25 years, there are specific drama-based games and activities that have been invaluable to the success of the students. Building teamwork and confident assured relationships is without doubt the most important in drama to create a safe space to live within the imagination. This is something that comes quite naturally to young children yet more challenging as they grow.

Teach improvisation as the means to imaginative play. FREEZE! This is an ideal way to promote creativity and expression. In partners or groups, the practitioner can begin a sentence; **"I cannot find my other shoe"** the children will copy this line to begin their playful scenario and continue to tell the story amongst themselves. Do this as a whole group so no one feels uncomfortable and let it play out until you can see that the improvisations are coming to an end.... FREEZE! **"I can hear the ice cream van"** and so on.

Some examples of drama games for early years that can improve concentration, relationships, spatial awareness, dexterity, focus, and communication as well as all the other key skills mentioned above. Unlike other areas of learning, drama is an inclusive subject to teach and the recourses to empower young people from all socially and culturally diverse backgrounds are united in its experiences. (Heartmindonline.org, 2014)

But the fundamental underpinning to delivering successful dramatic play within your setting, is for the practitioner to remember how to play, (Drama Notebook, 2023) Remembering how fun and liberating it can be and most importantly how every child is the optimal child, and every environment is the perfect environment to involve drama-based play within their unique early years setting.

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