Early Years Curricula

Critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula referring to evaluative research evidence and reports.

According to Sicart (2014) play helps form an understanding of the world and begin to engage with others. It offers challenges and creates a movement between order and chaos. Similarly Cohen (2018) states that play is a crucial component in early years in further development by socialising and emulating behaviours of others. Vygotsky (1978) implies that play is not just for pleasure, that it fulfils children's needs and is a leading factor for development. Sicart (2014), Cohen (2018) and Vygotsky (1978) all share similar views in that play is significant to children and fundamental to learning through life. Bennet, Neville and Rogers (1997) state both Frobel and Montessori ideas that children learn best through self-directed play which is closely linked to intrinsic motivation. For this to take place in early years practitioners will need to support play. Lynch (2015) develops this supposing that early years practitioners should value play and ensure it is implemented regularly in order for children to enhance a wide variety of social and academic skills. Furthermore Langston and Doherty (2013) highlight the significance of early years practitioners encouraging and facilitating play. Meaningful observations will need to take place in order to facilitate the child's needs.

Samuelsson and Wendell (2016) describe a play based curriculum as teachers incorporate freedom of choice with everyday experiences to enhance knowledge of the children's understanding of the world. Moreover Van Oers and Duijkers (2012) indicate that a play based curriculum is when the teacher combines the curriculum with the children considering the children's interests and ambitions as well as considering mandatory goals. A play-based curriculum is no '*laissez-faire*'-event. Bordova, Germeroth and Leong (2013), Eberle (2014) and Fisher *et al.* (2011) define play-based curriculum as using the children's intrinsic motivation from engaging in play to promote curricular goals. Van Oers and Duijkers (2012) insists that a play-based curriculum will take longer for practitioners to learn and begin to carry out but when they have learnt it they transform teaching into a meaningful lesson that celebrates individuality. Children help choose their topic and contribute to their lesson plan and class setup.

The Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum in Wales for three to seven year olds. It promotes children to be creative and imaginable in order for them to enjoy whilst learning effectively (Welsh Government, 2015a). Welsh Government (2014) states that on the one hand implementing the foundation phase curriculum promoted a positive relationship between practitioners and the child however other aspects were not seen so successful. In an independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales the Welsh Government (2014) they recognise the achievement outcomes of children have benefited since implementing the foundation phase. Estyn looks for excellent performance so this will be looked at positively in an inspection (Estyn, 2011). Additionally children are more enthusiastic about learning, especially boys. The evaluating foundation phase final report reveals that the foundation phase demonstrates elements of Scandinavia, Reggio Emilia and New Zealand (Te Whãriki) that are successful play-based curricula (Welsh Government, 2015b). According to the Welsh Government (2015b) these centralise well-being which Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) (2024) look for during an inspection.

Despite this, In an independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales the Welsh Government (2014) recommended that training needs to be developed so that all staff have an understanding of the importance of adult roles. Similarly the Welsh Government (2015b) in the evaluating foundation phase final report also states that more training should be implemented to improve early year practitioner approaches and pedagogies. This is likely to prevent confusion. Additionally Welsh Government (2015b) recommend to emphasise the significance of assessment and observations on the children. A curriculum for funded non maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2022a) is a play based curriculum with an emphasis on authentic and meaningful learning through physical literacy in the outdoors. A curriculum for funded non maintained settings states a clear explanation of how the adult should teach and provide learning opportunities through encouraging natural curiosity and supporting their needs through observations and facilitating a safe environment. This will be taken on board when implementing the curriculum as staff will need to be trained to ensure they have an understanding. This highlights that implementing this curriculum overcomes the lack of training previously criticised on foundation phase curriculum.

Furthermore Welsh Government's (2014) independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales states that foundation phase curriculum lacked families and carers involvement. Elfer (2013) and Koralek, Nemeth and Ramsey (2019) state that building a strong relationship between the practitioners and families is important to support the child's individual needs and celebrate their differences. This will also reduce the families anxiety of leaving their child at the setting. however the non maintained funded curriculum for wales recognise and value families. It states settings should have an open door policy for any information sharing which will provide opportunities for the staff to get to know both the child and their families (Welsh Government, 2022a). When implementing a curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, families and carers should be aware they are welcome into the setting at any time to promote diversity and provide a sense of belonging.

Welsh Government’s (2015b) evaluating foundation phase final report suggests that the foundation phase needs an increase in outdoor learning and lacks support for practitioners to provide suitable outdoor facilities. Estyn (2011) recommended outdoor learning was more involved in their learning and that local authorities should offer support for this. In contrast a curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings is based around the awe and wonder outdoors with images and detailed information on how to implement the purposeful experiences in order to meet the holistic needs of the child (Welsh Government, 2022a). Again the critics highlight the need for appropriate training when implementing a curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.

Both evaluating foundation phase final report (2015b) and independent stocktake of the foundation phase (2014) recognise the lack of understanding the practitioners have in the foundation phase curriculum and limited support with implementing a ‘play-based’ curriculum. This is a challenge to implementing the curriculum as it is not clear on what play is or the extent to allow it in the classroom. Also the different perceptions the early years practitioners have on play itself. Kushchner (2008) supports this by stating that play is an ongoing debate and discussion. Everybody will have different definitions. Waters (2016) reveals that 9 out of the 23 recommendations from the stocktake were about carrying out training so the

practitioners understand the impact of their role and provide the highest quality of care for the children. Estyn (2011) found that there needs to be more of a balance between child-led activities and adult-led, suggesting that the adults are unaware of how they should be carrying out a play-based curriculum. Maynard *et al.* (2013) supports this as the Foundation Phase documentation provides no single clear explanation for practitioners to use in regards to approaching or teaching the foundation phase curriculum. Lynch (2015) argues some practitioners try to make play more academic rather than allow them to “just have fun” and prioritise academic work over play. Moreover some practitioners oppose play and believe that the play-based curriculum is lazy. Fesseha and Pyle (2015) also highlights that the practitioners perception on play affects their implementation in the setting. They found that some practitioners kept play completely separate from learning, therefore emphasising the need for the adult to understand how children learn significantly from play (Welsh Government, 2008). Fesseha and Pyle (2015) argue that even practitioners who have a positive opinion on the play-based curriculum did not reflect that in their setting. The curriculum for non maintained funded curriculum shares ideas and images to incorporate play into the setting to support the practitioners with ideas which will reduce confusion and support ideas (Welsh Government, 2022). To overcome the lack of understanding when implementing the foundation phase, it is clear that professional learning is necessary in order to prevent this when implementing a curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings. Professional learning can be expensive making it difficult for every setting to have all their staff on (Sommers *et al*. 2016). If only some staff are trained they could report back incorrect information. Murray (2013) indicates that online learning reduces the funding issue. Training online opportunities would not have to pay out to cover the staff whilst they are training because you can choose when and where to do it. Also a lot of online training is completely free. It is important that practitioners are implementing the curriculum properly and providing the top quality care. This will be what CIW admires during an inspection (CIW, 2018). Donaldson (2015) announced the 4 purposes into a curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings. These are embedded throughout the curriculum to set a high standard for all children whilst promoting individuality and well-being. These are encouraged and role modelled by the practitioner when implementing the curriculum. Overall Welsh Government (2015), Welsh Government (2014) and Estyn (2011) all similarly state that if the practitioners

are trained and share the same understanding of the curriculum then the children are likely to thrive throughout school and receive the best quality of care to meet the needs of each individual child.

Considering the concept of the 'Unique Child' , critically evaluate methods of assessment, progress tracking and age or stage related development models within play-based curricula

Nijland, Van der Meer and Onderwater (no date) state that every child is unique. Allingham (2023) develops this revealing that there are unique children in every setting and school. Teacher TV (2015) highlights the significance of children having and using their own voice. It shows the significance of including parents and valuing their relationships. Including families and carers in the setting allows celebration of diversity (Ephgrave, 2020 and Teacher TV, 2015). According to Ephgrave (2020) settings can value their differences and prevent the invisible child from not being seen as quality interactions with the child and their families help practitioners learn more about them. Department of Education (DfE) (2014) states the statutory framework that practitioners must provide equal opportunities and ensure the setting is anti-discriminatory. Every child should be supported and celebrated. Dalton (2018) explains that children with additional learning needs (ALN) are not the only unique children. Although each ALN is different, children without ALN also have their individual ways. According to the ministry of education (2017) Te Whariki considers the unique child and teaches the individualism of each child . Te whariki creates competent and confident learners that feel safe and have a sense of belonging which is covered under the 4 purposes in a curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings (Welsh Governement, 2022a). Devarakonda (2013) suggests children will have different cultures. Practitioners seem to have knowledge of different cultures maybe through displaying posters of different festivals but there is a lack of indeoth knowledge on the background of different festivals. This may be due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of practitioners (Devarakonda, 2013). Banks (2004) theory of multicultural education has 5 concepts. One of which is equity pedagogy. This is the approach that educators develop pedagogy strategies that support all children in their class especially those who are in the minority.

Ephgrave (2020) states it is significant to observe the child as an individual. Everyone being assessed the same creates a picture of ability in the child's head. Parekh (2017) states that ability is hard to define and even harder to measure. Moreover, Dweck (2017) believes that children become fully aware of ability and this

results in children becoming more concerned about their ability which can make them feel negatively about themselves affecting their well-being negatively.

Welsh Government (2015) states that the foundation phase curriculum respects that all children develop skills at different paces. Children should be given opportunities to develop these and reflect on their work. All children's work is respected and valued. Each child is encouraged and supported to progress. Welsh Government (2017) explains that the foundation phase uses a skills ladder in order to assess the children. This has different columns for each specific age and outcomes to where they should be at per age for every subject. Every child is assessed in the same way and they can provide valuable insightful information for the child's development. Hart Barnett *et al.* (2015) states that standardised tests help identify any learning gaps for each child and highlight ALN. Practitioners can then target particular intervention and enhance academic skills early on. Parents might like a guide on where their child is at in comparison to others in their age category to emphasise additional help they might need. Tierney (1991) argues that on the one hand every child has a fair opportunity as they are given the same opportunity and measured in the same way however on the other hand children might be categorised as low ability but have higher ability in other aspects of learning that would be reflected in the assessment. Although standardised testing provides equality it doesn't consider equity. Furthermore, Parekh (2017) states teachers then group children based on their ability from the assessments. They will sort and rank the children based on their standardised assessment. Parekh (2017) reveals that the groups could be seen as inaccurate as different teachers have different perceptions on background depending on their cultural background. Although this method of assessment can be seen as fair and equal opportunities the standardised skill ladders do not consider the individual child. Welsh Government (2022b) state that the standardised skill ladders do not meet the ethos of valuing the individual child. Testing should be more flexible and individual not generalised.

In contrast, a curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings looks directly at the unique child through assessment using learning journals (Welsh Government, 2023). To begin they are blank and if parents or carers would like to get involved they can write specific targets or aims they would like to see their child achieve. Teacher

TV (2015) allows parents to set aims and targets and has proven really popular. It has helped build a positive relationship with families and is less telling parents what to do and more listening. Ephgrave (2018) and Welsh Government (2022) state that then the practitioner simply observes the child playing and assessing. Writing key information down and if necessary planning hope to respond in order to expand their learning. These are called teachable moments that are a unique way to help the individual child to develop in the moment. These will be recorded on their sheet. Ephgarve (2020) expands on this stating that this cycle will repeat throughout the day. Sancisi and Edgington (2015) imply that there will be lots of teachable moments but any that are not major will not be recorded. According to Ephgrave, (2020) an example of this is watching a child trying to use scissors. If the practitioner believes they will gain from their assistance they will help. Indeed, if they are now able to use the scissors after the practitioner has modelled how to use them, this would be a teaching moment. But if they are still unable to use them it would be recorded as a focus point. Practitioners will go abc and look at this section to know their developmental needs as well as the parents so they can practise at home. Ephgrave (2020) states that a learning journey benefits the childrens well-being as they are not under any pressure to complete tests whilst still meeting the legal requirements and are not feeling pressured to be at a certain level. They also have opportunities to build relationships with the practitioner and the invisible child becomes visible throughout these interactions. Pound (2017) suggests this supports Bowbly's theory that a child is more likely to have a positive emotional well-being whilst having close relationships with an adult. Children learn and develop in the moment by using a learning journey children ache the opportunity to action their development immediately (Ephgrave, 2020). Additionally Barber and Paul-Smith (2010) suggest that 'snapshot observation' will present more meaningful observations. Snapshot observations take away the paper work and allow more time with children resulting in less stress for the adult too. Ephgrave (2018) develops this further highlighting that involving the parents creates a positive relationship between the care worker and the children's families. This reinforces Frobel's theory that when children's parents are involved the child is more likely to benefit holistically (Pound, 2017). The parents will have a copy at home that they can then add feedback too if they would like. According to Ephgrave, (2020) and Paul-Smith, (2010) observing the child without the adult interfering and enabling self-directed play is very beneficial to the child.

This considers the unique child within the play-based curriculum. Learning journeys have been used in Te Whariki and have been successful in assessing the individual child. Parents have given positive feedback too (Chicken and Whitehouse, 2022). On the other hand, in order for learning journeys to be a successful way of assessing, staff have to be knowledgeable and have a clear understanding of what they are observing, therefore a challenge is staff might not feel confident enough to complete them (Barber and Paul-Smith, 2010) . If the child does not feel comfortable around the practitioner it might not be a true reflection of the child (Barber and Paul-Smith, 2010). Also there is a risk of biassed observations however all staff are involved so this is unlikely. Barber and Paul-Smith, (2010) observations could be too basic if the child does not explore the setting. In order for this observation method to be successful the environment must be enabling supporting Bronfrenbrenner's theory that an enabling environment is needed for children to learn and holistically develop (Ephgrave, 2018 and Pound 2017). Ephgrave, (2020) says that each child will be observed once a term but depending on ratios at each individual setting there might not be enough staff or time to complete for every child. Depending on numbers it can be too time consuming to complete for each child and therefore not complete all the children too. If children are completed first they might not feel as comfortable as the ones assessed later on which could give inaccurate results.

Overall although the foundation phase gives an equal opportunity it does not consider equity like a curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2015 and Welsh Government 2022a).

Write a blog suitable for a professional publication (for example, Nursery World, Small Talk) linked to considerations needed when implementing a play-based curriculum/curriculum changes

Consider process over product

Article 31 of the The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is that children have the right to play (Voce, 2015). According to Gray (2013) and Liquin and Lombrozo (2020) children are born intrinsically motivated and naturally curious about the world. Through play children are able to explore and learn about the world (Sicart, 2012). Lynch (2015) develops this insisting it is the practitioners job to promote and support play. Andrews (2012) reveals that play is the main source of holistic development. This supports Vygotsky's theory that play is closely linked to development (Pound, 2017). Both Sicart (2012) and Cohen (2014) highlight the significance play has on engaging in social skills. Play also allows children to learn basic life skills such as trial and error. Watanabe (2022) states they need time in order for this to happen without being interrupted by the adult. Bottrill (2022) supports this stating adults should never interfere or interrupt play as real play is led by the child. Bottrill (2022) and Ephgrave (2020) state that no real play will result in no learning as the child will not be engaged. A curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings suggest instead of this, observe for teachable moments (Welsh Government, 2022). Smith (2009) emphasises that play should be enjoyable. Additionally, Piaget believed there was a strong relationship between play, language and thought. This can be demonstrated through schema 2 step process. Accommodation which is adding new experiences to an existing scheme and assimilation which adjusts the existing schema with the nature of the environment (Smith, 2009). Ephgrave (2020) supports this stating that plays envelope the brain creating new synapses. This all highlights the significance of play and child-led play, so why do adults prevent this?

It is vital that early years practitioners understand the idea of process over product whilst implementing the curriculum for funded no maintained nursery settings as the ethos of the curriculum is to recognise that each child is different and support their needs in order for each child to develop holistically (Welsh Government , 2022). This

means we should not have children on a conveyor belt to complete a craft that they potentially do not want to do anyway (The curiosity approach, 2019). Rather than focusing on the product the child is creating, we should focus on their process. Danni (2021) states that crafts are predominantly led by the adult which prevents the child from expressing themself. When implementing the curriculum it is essential to get a balance between adult-led and child-led play. Adults should only interfere if it will further the learning opportunity for the child (Welsh Government, 2022). Danni (2021) expands on this by stating each child is unique and diverse which will reflect through their process. Although it can be argued that parents like a specific craft to keep safe, it is taking away the freedom of expression of the child and reducing their learning opportunities (The curiousity approach, 2019). Allowing the children to create their own product reduces pressure for the practitioners too. A curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings states children should have access to loose parts in order to use their imagination (Welsh government, 2022a). Loose parts will develop their control and strength. Ephgrave (2020) supports the curriculum by suggesting that they provide a variety of loose parts for the child to experiment with and allow them to develop their self esteem with the autonomy for leading their learning.

Loose parts child led craft. Red Ted Crafts, (no date).

The outdoors can expand the child's creativity and is heavily promoted in the curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings. Grindheim, Sorensen and Rekers (2021) reveal that outdoor play creates fundamental learning opportunities through exploring, collaborating and playing. Moyles (2012) expands on this stating that a child will become aware of cause and effect. Knight (2011) states that forest schools are a child-led play-based setting that encourage risky-play. The children have the freedom to explore the outdoors and create their own learning opportunities. If the practitioners step back and observe children they can witness some skills develop that would take years looking back at previous curriculums. This should be implemented into settings as similarly to forest schools, the curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings encourages independence and creates challenging and risky play opportunities. Danni (2021) argues that children can use a variety of tools and a wide range of methods to engage their imagination and curiosity whereas the pre determined products are standards that can be unattainable by a child. For example children will naturally work together to move different loose parts and create what their imagination allows them to such as ramps and balance beams. If the practitioner told the children what to do they would not have been able to communicate naturally and all would have made the same exact product limiting their divergent thinking. Danni (2021) argues that children can use a variety of tools and a wide range of methods to engage their imagination and curiosity whereas the pre determined products are standards that can be unattainable by a child.

Loose parts used by children outdoors.
Child Care Providers, (no date).

A curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings includes 4 purposes that help children develop skills that will be beneficial throughout life as a citizen in Wales and the world (Welsh Government, 2022). When implementing this curriculum it is essential that as well as practitioners allowing the children to lead their learning and considering the process over product they need to provide and role model a joyful and consistent approach. Through observing the hobbies and interests of the children they can provide an enabling environment that will promote a good

well-being. Considering process over product supports the 5 pathways in the curriculum as they are implemented for children to learn to express themselves as well as valuing others.

Overall, encouraging high quality experiences are essential in early years. Children are able to create something that connects them with home providing a sense of belonging. These authentic experiences should be appreciated not interrupted and practitioners should be passionate about prioritising their process. Watching them problem solve and appreciate the materials will meet the 7 areas of learning naturally (Welsh government, 2022). So next time practitioners are working with the children, remember PROCESS OVER PRODUCT.

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