

Section 1

It is evident that there are many different definitions of play. Theorist Vygotsky believed that play revolves around the concept of make-believe, pretend play (Scharer, 2017). This differs from theorist Piaget's definition of play, which states that play is purely cognitive development and explores the idea that play is a tool for children to learn information. Through play, children learn basic discoveries such as balance, colours, and depth whilst also develop skills such as memory, problem solving and creativity (Ahmad *et al*, 206). To further contradict, Theorist Froebel believed that play is a means through which children express themselves and make sense of the world (Early Education, 2021).

Consequently, there are no clear definitions of play, however all definitions have contributed to the understanding of play and its significance.

According to the Welsh Government (2014), Play is a fundamental aspect of early childhood development and is recognised for its importance in advancing a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development.

Through this belief, the Welsh Government designed their curriculum that considered play based learning as a pedagogical approach for supporting learners (Welsh Government, 2023a). This essay will critically analyse the implementation of play based early years curricula.

Learning through play is paramount for children's development. Children should be provided with the resources, time and space to engage with free and organised play as well as have the opportunity to play by themselves and with others (UNICEF, 2018). The Welsh Government specifically developed their core aims following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sharing the same values, the Welsh Government recognised the importance of play in children's learning and incorporated play throughout the curriculum, calling it an 'essential ingredient' to the Foundation Phase (The Welsh Government, 2008a).

Finland shares similar values. With their Finnish National core curriculum for early childhood education and care, they state that children have the right to play and are constantly learning when they play. They believe that when children play, they feel joy and so learning through play brings a joyful learning experience that develops children's holistic growth and well-being (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

However, while some countries like Wales and Finland have embraced play-based approaches in their early years education, others may adopt a more structured or formal approach.

Asian countries such as China have a strong emphasis on academic achievement and are based on structured formal learning and standardised exams (Feng, 2006). They have a perception that a strong focus on academic subjects is essential for economic success (Britannica, No Date). According to Pan, Zhou and Shek (2022), students in China have a demanding workload and so there is little time for extracurricular activities. Students are heavily scheduled with academic classes, tutoring, and homework. It is clear that Wales adopts an entirely different curriculum that aims to provide a developmentally appropriate and holistic educational experience for children. The framework focuses on encouraging children to explore, inquire and engage in meaningful activities. Through a balance of child-initiated and adult-guided play, the foundation phase aims to support the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of each individual child. The foundation phase also promotes positive relationships (The Welsh Government, 2017).

Furthermore, reports showed benefits of successful implementation of the foundation phase. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016), demonstrated that pupil attendance increased in the majority of schools. To Add, higher levels of pupil involvement and pupil well being were identified in settings where play-based learning was effectively implemented. The report also highlighted improvements in children's engagement and attitudes to learning.

However, Siraj and Kingston (2014) found that approximately one-fifth of foundation phase settings implemented it effectively.

Despite the aims of the Foundation Phase. Several reports have shown that implementing the play-based curriculum throughout Wales proved to be challenging for several reasons. To illustrate, some of the main challenges highlighted in the evaluation of the Foundation phase included, lack of funding and infrastructure, misconception of what 'play-based learning' really means, lack of resources and accessibility of indoor/outdoor environments, poor adult:child ratios and finally lack of staff training and guidance on how to implement it effectively (Welsh Government, 2015a).

Moreover, it is notable that teacher training and guidance is a key challenge in implementing a play-based curriculum. A study by Manning, Wong and Garvis (2019) found that there is a significant correlation between higher teacher qualifications and the quality of early childhood education and care. It is also clear that child development can be detrimentally impacted by poor quality early childhood education and care. This emphasises the importance of teacher training/qualifications for children's development and educational achievement.

As stated by the Welsh Government (2015b), there are no current requirements for qualifications for those working in a school classroom. Settings only seek certain professional attributes including communication skills, positive values, behaviours and commitment.

This is a concern with the Foundation Phase as shown in Waters (2016) report that highlights how several teachers only have a generalist primary route to education and did not have specific teachers' education in an early years provision. Waters (2016) goes on to state that practitioners are not informed and supported with the transition of the Foundation Phase. This lack of professional knowledge may result in poor quality pedagogic decisions. Consequently, the play based curriculum will not be implemented effectively.

The role of the practitioner is significant within the Foundation Phase approach. Practitioners have a number of expectations in order to effectively teach within the Foundation Phase. Some include having thorough knowledge of child development, to carefully consider every individual child when planning, to plan and resource a variety of

learning opportunities including a playful indoor and outdoor environment, to engage in continuous observation, to create an inclusive environment and collaborate with professionals and families (Welsh Government, 2008b).

The Government has high expectations of staff to provide quality education but does not provide funds and quality training for them to do so.

Blatchford *et al* (2007), found that many practitioners felt settings should increase their amount of higher-trained staff as a lot of staff members were not trained and could not support children appropriately. Blatchford *et al* (2007) goes on to highlight how the settings who did have a higher proportion of trained staff had a higher quality setting.

The report highlights how the allocated funding to cover staff training was inadequate.

Furlong *et al* (2021) also notes that student teachers need support in how to use the knowledge and experience they have gained through university and school observations. In Wales, student teachers are expected to apply knowledge. Continuous support and professional development should be implemented.

With these reports and findings, the Welsh Government recognised the challenge and introduced a 'National Network for implementation' which involves an open platform available to all practitioners as part of the New Curriculum. The National Network will allow practitioners to gather and share understanding, co-construct approaches, connect with other professionals and experts and drive change. This will create support and opportunities to gain insights and ideas on how to develop and implement the curriculum effectively (Welsh Government, 2022a). Following recommendations from the Foundation Phase, The Welsh Government also provided a professional development area on Hwb and school improvement services to support effective professional learning. However, these are not compulsory and include only documents of information. A study by Khan and Ahmad (2014) argued that cooperative learning is better than traditional reading methods for learning and retaining information as it engages learners. Consequently, the professional development area on Hwb may not be an effective way to support professional development.

Additionally, the funding challenges were recognised by the Minister however, there was no additional funding available to support professional development in the new curriculum (Welsh Parliament, 2021).

Furthermore, Tabberer (2013) states that the Welsh educational system differs from those around the world. Many countries revised their teacher education programs and recognised the need to focus on preparing practitioners within school settings as opposed to focusing primarily on academic preparation. This system allows practitioners to have a balanced integration of theory and practice, giving the opportunity to enter classrooms earlier, spending more time gaining experience and having increased support throughout the process.

To be specific, teacher training is extensive with the requirement of a bachelor's degree to become an early childhood education practitioner and a masters to become a class teacher (European Commission, 2023). However, in Wales teachers only need to hold a Qualified Teacher Status, with masters being non essential (Welsh Government, 2023b).

According to Ferreria (2021) a play based curriculum is effectively implemented throughout Finland. Play is demonstrated in all spaces of practices with the environment being carefully planned to give children the best outcomes. It is also notable that Finland's curriculum provides a balance between guided and free play. With this evidence, the Welsh Government can learn from Finland's approaches and effectively implement a play based curriculum just as much as Finland and other countries. However, 14.9 billion euros was funded on education in Finland from 2021-2022 (Clausnitzer, 2024) and only 2.6 million pounds was funded on education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023c). Lack of funding may be a reason why the Welsh Government does not follow Finland's approaches. According to the Welsh Government (2023d) there are planned funding cuts to the 2023/2024 education budgets which may make it harder for schools to implement a play based curriculum as they are expected to.

In Conclusion, The Foundation Phase in Wales, despite its positive impact on pupil attendance and well-being, faces challenges such as funding limitations, inadequate teacher qualifications and a lack of professional support. Making it difficult for settings to effectively implement a play based curriculum. The introduction of the 'National Network for implementation' and professional development areas on Hwb are steps towards addressing these challenges, but their effectiveness remains uncertain. Additionally, drawing inspiration from Finland's successful play based curriculum, Wales must face financial difficulties in order to implement play based learning. Balancing theory and practicum investing in teacher training and learning from successful models worldwide are crucial steps for Wales to execute a play-based approach in early childhood education.

Section 2

This essay will explore the unique child and its significance. It also evaluates how different countries, including Wales, incorporate this principle into their educational frameworks.

The term 'unique' refers to something that is one of a kind. It possesses a difference in characteristics, features or attributes from others. Uniqueness implies individuality (Cambridge Dictionary, no date).

Several prominent theorists have contributed different perspectives on the unique child, each recognizing the importance of recognizing and valuing individual differences.

Maria Montessori developed principles that honours the individuality of each child and believes each child has a unique ability for self development to enhance their skills and unfold their potential (Komesarovic, 2016).

Similarly, theorist Piaget highlights the uniqueness of each child's cognitive development and the importance of tailoring education to individual cognitive stages and creating environments based on the individual interests of the child (Martin, 2021). Recognising the concept that every child is unique is important for educators. Children progress at different paces in all areas of their development and so educators should tailor their teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning styles, abilities, and interest, prompting overall development (EYFS, 2011).

The Welsh Government (2017) supports this and states 'children must be encouraged to develop at their own unique, individual pace' in the Foundation Phase handbook. However, their Foundation Phase framework contradicts this belief as every child was required to take an end of phase assessment. This assessment included expected outcomes where children were ranked in bronze, silver and gold categories (Welsh Government, 2015c) and although standardised testing has benefits including reliable comparisons, quantifiable measures and simple tracking (GL Education, 2021), the concept of the unique child is not supported. Recognising the challenge with this approach, the Welsh Government discontinued the use of Foundation phase outcomes and National curriculum subject levels. Consequently, the end of phase and stage

assessments were removed (Welsh Government, 2022b). The New Curricula now shifts towards assessments that adhere to the belief that learners progress at different times and are not linked to specific ages (Welsh Government, 2022c).

This is shown through the use of Learning Stories. Learning Stories in education are a narrative approach to documenting and assessing children's learning and development. They typically involve the creation of short stories or anecdotes that capture a child's experiences, actions, and achievements. Learning stories were developed as part of the Te Whariki curriculum and are now used worldwide (Pack, 2016).

The use of Learning Stories have shown to be beneficial for practitioners, children and parents. Escamilla (2021) states that learning stories show milestones of their development in a format that is easy to understand for children and parents. It is almost seen as a gift that makes children and families feel special. Practitioners can also invite parents to add to the learning story, making it a collaborative approach. Additionally, a benefit of using learning stories is the guarantee that it is child-centred. This approach is ideal for play-based curriculums as it documents natural discoveries and milestones based on the interest of the child. This differentiates from standardised testing methods. This individualised and collaborative approach is encouraged by the Welsh Government as they state that experiences should arise from children's own choices and interests. These learning experiences should support holistic development that respects the uniqueness of the child and their families (Welsh Government, 2023e) and so if Learning Stories are used within practices, the unique child will be considered.

However, despite these benefits, Learning Stories are critiqued and accompany some challenges. According to Zhang (2016), Learning Stories can be unsubstantial and time consuming. They also lack compound data. Consequently, Learning Stories can not be solely used for assessments but used alongside other methods.

This is supported by Sands and McChesney (2022), who also states that Learning Stories can be critiqued as teachers do not document all of a child's learning experiences, only the ones they warrant good enough to become one. It may also be

seen that the quality of Learning Stories are not consistent as they are interpretation based.

Another challenge of Learning Stories is that it may not be suitable for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). According to Porthcawl School (2021), children with ALN may have limited attention span, difficulty understanding and performing spoken language and have memory difficulties. Thus making it challenging to complete Learning Stories.

However, The Welsh Government introduced Individual Development Plans (IDP) for children with ALN. An IDP is a flexible document that is produced by practitioners to track the learners development and needs (Welsh Government, 2022d). This approach supports the concept of the unique child but again faces challenges with time, staff to child ratio and training.

A general challenge with assessing in a play-based curriculum is that practitioners decide themselves what, where and when to observe a child. According to Neaum (2016), practitioners may be prejudiced when making these decisions as they may feel assessment during play is not appropriate which therefore does not consider the unique child. Neaum (2016) goes on to state that in order for assessments to support the concept of the unique child, they need to be multidimensional. Meaning, multiple different assessment approaches to ensure there is depth and it is inclusive of every aspect of a child's learning and development.

Furthermore, many other countries thrive to incorporate the idea of valuing and nurturing the unique qualities of each child in their educational systems. Similar to the New Curriculum in Wales. Finland is often recognised for its student-centred and holistic education system, which emphasises individualised learning and the rights of the child (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022).

Despite both curriculums having a child-centred approach, their assessment processes are quite different. Assessment in Finland's early years is primarily formative, focusing on providing feedback to support and guide children's learning. Standardised testing is not introduced until secondary education (Halinen, 2018). According to Kelly, Merry and

Gonzalez (2018), Finland's assessment process is effective as the Finland Government trusts the teachers to be prepared and equipped to teach. This is supported by Hendrickson (2012) who states that the Finnish National Curriculum helps teachers become more professional and skilled. It allows Finnish teachers to have the freedom to decide how to teach and assess in the classroom.

On the other hand, Baxter (2020) states that in Wales, the government's trust in teachers has only declined over time.

Moreover, this sense of trust could stem from teacher training. Teachers in Finland generally undergo more extensive training compared to teachers in Wales. In Finland, the teacher training process is renowned for its thoroughness and selectiveness. Aspiring teachers typically complete a long academic program at university level, to then complete a Master's degree in education. This comprehensive training includes in-depth studies in educational theory, pedagogy, and subject-specific content. The Finnish teacher education system places a strong emphasis on the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical teaching experience. This ensures that teachers not only understand educational principles, but also gain hands-on experience in real classroom settings (European Commission, 2023).

In Wales, while teacher training also involves a combination of academic coursework and practical experience, the overall duration and intensity may not be as extensive as the Finnish model. Wales follows a teacher education program that aligns with the country's educational policies.. The focus on experiential and play-based learning is central to teacher training in Wales, but the duration and depth of the training may vary (University of South Wales, 2024).

In conclusion, this essay highlights the significance of the unique child in education, drawing from perspectives like Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget. Examining how Wales incorporates this concept, there is a notable positive shift in the New Curriculum, emphasising individual development over standardised assessments.

While the use of Learning Stories in Wales promotes a child-centred approach, challenges include concerns about substance and time consumption. The Welsh

Government addresses the needs of children with Additional Learning Needs through Individual Development Plans, aiming for inclusivity.

Globally, Finland's formative assessment process and extensive teacher training ensures trust in educators. This differs from Wales, where trust has reportedly declined, potentially linked to differences in teacher training.

Although progress has been made, it is still significant to work towards a curriculum that supports each unique child.

Section 3

The Silent Call for Inclusivity: Making Sign Language Education Compulsory in Schools.

“Good well-being is fundamental to learners’ progress and achievement...An equitable and inclusive school takes account of and responds to the unique challenges that present themselves to individual learners, enabling them to make good progress” - Welsh Government (2021)

In a world that increasingly advocates for inclusivity, it's surprising that a significant portion of our population is often left behind when it comes to education. The Welsh government, while championing the cause of inclusivity, seems to overlook the needs of deaf children in mainstream schools. In Wales, there are approximately 2,329 deaf children, with 81% attending mainstream schools (Consortium for Research in Deaf Education, 2022).

The challenges faced by deaf children in mainstream education are immense, particularly due to the lack of communication. Imagine navigating the complex world of academia when your peers cannot understand you. The isolation and frustration experienced by these children can have severe mental health implications due to the feelings of loneliness, rejection, being misunderstood and discriminated against (Edmondson, 2019), making the learning environment far from inclusive.

One of the critical obstacles for deaf children in mainstream education is the dependence on hearing for various aspects of learning. From spoken instructions to group discussions, most of a child's education relies heavily on auditory cues. Deaf children face constant hurdles in trying to keep up, and this often results in a significant gap in educational attainment. In 2022, on average, deaf children achieved lower educational milestones compared to other children. This highlights the urgent need for an education system that does not fail deaf children (National Deaf Children's Society, 2022).

However, the solution lies within our grasp – compulsory sign language education in schools. By integrating sign language into the curriculum, we not only break down communication barriers but also empower deaf children to thrive in the academic setting like other children are supported to do. Although the Welsh Government implemented BSL into the new curriculum, teachers are not required to learn sign language and the ones that do decide only have access to one session and a network group (Welsh government, 2022). This is extremely inadequate considering it takes 3-4 years to become fluent in BSL, based on learning 3 hours a week (Remark, No Date). When comparing this to the Welsh language, teachers are supported to be fluent Welsh speakers in order to be fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to develop and teach the Welsh language in schools (Welsh Government, 2022f) and so the question remains, why aren't teachers required to be fluent in BSL to implement it effectively?

Countries like Finland, on the other hand, have incorporated sign language into their education system. The Finnish experience demonstrates that sign language in the curriculum not only facilitates communication but also promotes a more inclusive society (Humak, No date).

The Welsh Government (2019) states that deaf children should have equal access to education and to be a part of an inclusive practice that is structured and modified to promote inclusion, learning and access to the core curriculum. This is contradicted by reports published showing that 80% of the 2,500 deaf children in Wales attend mainstream schools with no specialist facilities (Jones, 2022). This insufficient support results in lack of employment and higher rates of mental health problems in adulthood, making deaf children the most vulnerable and educationally disadvantaged children in the UK (Berry, 2017).

As of December 2023, pupils are able to take BSL as a GCSE (Welsh Government, 2023f). However, this is not satisfactory. BSL should be compulsory and be taught to children from a young age. Through influence of researchers such as Eric Lenneberg, it has been established that there is a critical window, often around puberty, during which the human brain is particularly adept at acquiring language (Vanhove, 2013). While this theory does not imply that language learning is impossible after the critical period, it

suggests that there may be a decline in the ability to acquire a language as easy. If the Government implemented BSL as a compulsory language in the curriculum, children will learn sign language in the same way as they learn spoken languages.

Moreover, learning sign language has benefits. Bowman-Smart *et al* (2019) states that sign language fosters analytical thinking, enhances multitasking and improves social cognition. The benefits of bilingualism, in this case, extend beyond the classroom and into lifelong skills that can enhance one's overall quality of life including social-emotional development, cognitive development and long-term success (Department for Education, 2015).

Renowned theorists, such as Jim Cummins, have long argued for the cognitive advantages of bilingualism. Cummins suggests that bilingual individuals develop enhanced cognitive abilities, including problem-solving skills, and possess a better understanding of language structure and meaning (Cummins, 2017). By incorporating sign language into the curriculum, we not only address the needs of deaf children but also create a bilingual educational environment that fosters cognitive growth for all students.

Similarly, Researcher Benice Woll Believes that all children should be exposed to sign language during the same time they are exposed to spoken language (Woll, 2021). Woll's beliefs align with the notion that sign languages should be valued and incorporated into educational settings.

Ultimately, It is time for education systems to recognize the importance of sign language and make it a fundamental part of the curriculum. Not just for vulnerable deaf children, but for the movement of an inclusive future. Education should not be a source of anxiety or frustration for any child. With the right support, deaf children can excel academically and be free from burdens and challenges they face every single day.

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