

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

With schools and early years settings in Wales now focusing on the Curriculum for Wales, who's pedagogical approach is highly focused on a play based education where the child is central in their own learning journey (Education Wales, 2022), it is an essential part of professional practice and development of provision to reflect on previous implementation of curricula and to understand how other play based curricula can influence and support implementation of a play based approach in Wales (Lindon and Trodd, 2016).

In 2008, Welsh educational settings started implementing the foundation phase Wales. Welsh government emphasised the importance of a play-based approach as a fundamental part of children's learning in this newly reformed curriculum (Welsh Government, 2015), with a truly play based pedagogical approach, this was designed to be a new approach to learning, developing motivated and independent learners with seamless links between child led play and adult initiated activities (Wainwright *et al.* 2016). The approach was built with inspiration taken from international curricula such as Te Whāriki in New Zealand, the Scandinavian approach and Reggio Emilia in Italy and was promoted as a drastic move away from previous formal educational styles (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). However, Wainwright *et al.* (2016) noted that across many schools in Wales teachers were struggling to implement a play-based curriculum due to the pressures of feeling children needed to be prepared for progress tests, and that children struggled with the transition to key stage 2, where the learning style was far less play based. This is reflected by Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2015) who noted the challenges faced by practitioners to find the balance between a play-based curriculum and the seemingly contradictory language and numeracy framework. Furthermore, many teachers and practitioners felt undereducated as to the benefits of a play-based curriculum, with the definition of play being subjective, members of staff had contradicting views of what play based learning means and how staff could scaffold this learning (Watters, 2016, Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2015). Furthermore, an independent stocktake of the foundation phase released in 2014 noted that it should be made a priority to

focus on staffs continued professional development to ensure that staff have full knowledge of how to implement the foundation phase and that there is continuity across Wales (Welsh Government, 2014). Moreover, a three-year evaluation of the foundation phase found that where implementation of the curriculum was true to its key aims, children's academic attainment and wellbeing was higher (Welsh Government, 2015b), however the same document reiterated the importance of continuous staff training in the implementation of the foundation phase. Although Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) explained that the foundation phase was no longer a reflection of the international curricula it had set out to mirror, Wainwright *et al.* (2016) praised the implementation of the foundation phase curriculum stating it was implemented with loyalty to the aims set out by policy makers and should therefore be considered successful. Despite this, in 2013, following the publication of the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) results the then Minister for Education, Huw Lewis released a statement acknowledging that Wales's results were significantly lower than other countries and that substantial educational reforms were needed (Lewis, 2013). These results, along with the findings of previous independent reviews of Welsh curricula led to the commissioning of what we now know as the Donaldson report. The findings of the Donaldson's successful futures report validated the conclusions from previous reports, determining that for the successful implementation of curriculum that will support the holistic development of children a significant emphasis needs to be placed on ongoing training of staff and the continuous assessment of children's progress in the place of standardised tests. Donaldson advised that the curriculum should be a more child centred "curriculum for life" which developed with the child through education and beyond (Donaldson, 2015) Following the Donaldson report, Education minister, Huw Lewis, explained that the findings showed that the curriculum needed more than adapting and Wales would build an entirely new curriculum from the ground up (Dauncey, 2015)

As a result, Wales set about creating a new curriculum, based on four purposes, the curriculum was built from the ground up by practitioners working in schools and settings across Wales who took inspiration from curricula around the world (Welsh Government, 2021).

The Reggio Emilio approach takes much of its inspiration from John Dewey's social constructivist ideas (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Dewey's ideas have inspired many

educational approaches with much inspiration being taken from his project methods, where children and professionals work on looking for answers to questions together, his ideas were child centred and encouraged a holistic approach to education, where children were motivated to learn. (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014. p.43). Malaguzzi used this child centred style of education as one of the key elements of the Reggio Emilia approach, viewing the child as a capable learner, which, when immersed in rich environments filled with curiosities and practitioners who scaffold learning, could lead their own learning (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). This style of education, along with a real focus on promoting the child's sense of belonging has to this day ensured that the children thrive within this educational system and that the curriculum is held with high regard across the world (McNally and Slutsky, 2017). This is reflected in the Curriculum for Wales which places Cynefin, a sense of place or belonging, as one of its overarching principles, with a child centred approach based on the importance of play based learning being fundamental pedagogies. These principles are also reflected in the Te Whariki approach of New Zealand, where Curriculum for Wales also gained inspiration, this approach shows us that each strand of a child's learning weaves together as they grow, that this work is ongoing and the child will continue to build their future as they grow, each strand of this contains areas of development as well as overarching principles which put the child's values, relationships and community as important factors in their learning journey, in synthesis with both Welsh and Reggio Emilia curriculum, Te Whariki places value on a child's sense of belonging (Ministry of Education, 2017)

With the curriculum for Wales stating that play is a fundamental aspect of education (Education Wales. 2022) and the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, which is embedded in law in Wales, article 31 stating that play is a child right, McInnes *et al.* (2011) explain that there is still much misunderstanding in education as to what play is and how educators can facilitate real and immersive child led play experiences as apposed to teacher led not play activities. Furthermore, Howard and McInnes (2013) suggest that although the positive effect of play on children's wellbeing has been shown, it is important for practitioners to have continuous training on this vital aspect of education for teacher perceptions of play and not play to be consistent. However, Van der Klink *et al.* (2017) explain that many teachers find it difficult to access continued professional development, often stating that there

is little support and encouragement to do so from senior leadership and that it is often down to the teacher themselves to do their own research. Furthermore, with teacher motivation at an all-time low Department for Education (2023), engaging teacher in professional development which takes up many hours of their free time can be a challenging task, especially when the staff feel that the pressures of their role are demanding enough without added work (Kennedy, 2016). Moreover, senior management expressed their concerns about staff wellbeing as workload increased during the early roll out of the Curriculum for Wales (Thomas *et al.* 2023). Teacher wellbeing has been shown to link with child's wellbeing thus having a knock-on effect on a child's academic attainment, therefore school leadership must focus on ensuring staff wellbeing (Harding *et al.* 2019).

With the 2023 PISA results showing Wales scoring below average in all areas, with its lowest scores since joining the rankings in 2006, it is worth noting the drop in score since 2018 was mirrored in many countries across the world (Lewis, 2023). Through the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales it is hoped that over the coming years these scores will begin to rise and Wales will in future climb up the rankings (Welsh Government, 2023. Lewis, 2023)

The now withdrawn foundation phase for Wales taught us that even when an education system is modelled from successful curricula around the world with processes based on educational research, successful implementation can only be achieved when all professionals are continuously trained and fully understand the underpinning values of the curriculum they are to deliver. As Wales embarks on the delivery of a new curriculum it is essential that staff are consistently supported to understand the benefits and value of a play-based approach and that there is continuity with this across the whole education system in order to provide the best education possible in Wales.

BLOG

Blog - Breaking down barriers to implementing outdoor curricula when staff wellbeing is at an all-time low.

There is currently a huge push to get children to spend more time outdoors, with a number of studies showing the holistic benefits of spending time immersed in nature, although somewhat anecdotal, the results appear to show an increase in academic

attainment and overall wellbeing when children spend prolonged periods utilising outdoor spaces (McCree, Cutting, and Sherwin, 2018. Pimlott-Wilson and Coates, 2019. Tiplady, 2018. Tiplady, and Menter, 2020).

And children are not alone in reaping the benefits of spending time outdoors, with Pearson and Craig (2014) explaining that spending time in nature can support recovery from mental fatigue and boost overall health and wellbeing in adults when outside green spaces are utilised regularly.

However, with the pressures placed on teachers increasing massively in recent years (Marshall *et al.* 2022), it is becoming more obvious that retaining a highly motivated team of staff is ever more challenging. According to the Department for Education (2023), in the 2021- 2022 academic year, nearing 40,000 educators left the profession for reasons other than retirement in England alone, and Education Support (2022) state that the teacher wellbeing index showed that nearly 60% of teachers were seeking to leave the profession due to the negative impact their work has on their mental health. These difficulties are only heightened with the introduction of new curriculum (Ferguson, Frost and Hall, 2012).

With this being known, is it possible that if teachers and early years professionals spent more time outdoors during the working day, not only could children's holistic wellbeing be better supported but also the wellbeing of the professional themselves, thus, having a positive impact on staff retention?

However, with some Welsh early years settings believing that only specific groups of children, for example 6 year old boys, benefit from time outdoors, with no mention of the benefits to staff and furthermore, placing the advantages of indoor learning as equal to or greater than that of outdoor learning, there is little incentive to leave the classroom (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). And with staff mindset being viewed as a key barrier to outdoor education internationally, followed closely by low staff confidence and lack of training as to how immersion in nature links to curriculum (Waite, 2020) is it any wonder staff lack the motivation to get outside and effectively implement a Curriculum for Wales that focuses on the importance of being outdoors, when, due to these perceived barriers, the outdoors has historically been an underutilised resource (Davies and Hamilton, 2016) and the impact of implementing

this curriculum could, in itself, reduce staff motivation (Ferguson, Frost and Hall, 2012).

Education Wales (2022) explain that outdoor environments are rich in opportunities which promote the skills identified in the four purposes of the curriculum for Wales, allowing for the holistic development of future generations, but to really understand how this can be implemented all year round it is worth looking at the Scandinavian approach to early education.

It is well documented that the lack of sunlight during the winter months can lead to seasonal affective disorder also known as SAD, and this is all the more likely in Scandinavian and Nordic countries where there are very few hours of sunlight (Leibowitz and Vittersø, 2020), yet year on year the world happiness report suggests that the people living in these areas are the happiest in the world (Helliwell *et al.* 2023). This could be explained in part by a deep rooted understanding in Scandinavian culture that being immersed in nature has far reaching benefits which touch the soul (Gelter, 1999), where it is the norm for children to take daytime naps outdoors in temperatures as low as minus 27 degrees Celsius (Tourula, Isola, and Hassi, 2008). Leibowitz and Vittersø's (2020) study showed that focusing on the beneficial aspects of winter months has a positive impact on the wellbeing of those living in such cold and dark climates and promotes the feeling of joy when partaking in outdoor activities even in the coldest of months. Thus, this positive mindset makes it the norm in Nordic and Scandinavian countries for the majority of early years settings to spend more than half their time outside, with Government recommendation in Norway spanning back to the 1960's, suggesting children spend not more than two hours per day indoors (Rethinking Childhood, 2013)

So, it seems that changing the mindset and boosting the confidence and knowledge of Welsh early years practitioners may be fundamental in bridging the gap to accessing outdoor learning, but how can this be achieved?

The Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning (no date) have created a fantastic guide following the curriculum for Wales which gives background information on the benefits of being outdoors as well as handy insights as to how being outdoors meets curriculum aims. The Welsh Council for Outdoor Learning suggest one of the best

ways to embed an outdoor learning approach in settings is to provide staff with opportunities for high quality training.

It is also essential that the whole setting gets involved, with leadership becoming knowledgeable in the benefits of outdoor learning, empowering their staff to utilise spaces in all weathers (including seeking funding for all weather clothing) and providing staff with the training necessary to see the benefits of play as an integral part of a child's learning journey (Learning through landscapes, no date).

With an ongoing whole setting approach and focus on getting outdoors, it is possible, with a bit of work and a change of mindset that a bit of fresh air could not only boost the learning capabilities of our children and young people but also support the wellbeing of early years educators and keep teachers teaching for longer.

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