

The Foundation and Early Years Curriculum

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Section 1

In September 2010, The Foundation Phase became a statutory holistic play-based curriculum for all three to seven year olds living in Wales. Through seven statutory Areas of Learning, the curriculum aims to create more effective and enjoyable learning experiences for young children (Welsh Government, 2015). The curriculum aims to enhance children's early childhood development through a child centered approach (Aasen and Waters 2006; Estyn, 2017). Welsh Government drew upon the good practice of International approaches to help develop and influence the Foundation Phase framework. Maynard et al. (2013) explains how the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase use a mix of both sociocultural and constructivist theories, with the child centred approach underpinning the constructivist theory and drawing upon the practices of Italy's Reggio Emilia, New Zealand's Te Whāriki and Scandinavian education systems to underpin sociocultural theories. There are many influential educational theorists and psychologists whose work were also considered during the creation and implementation of the Foundation Phase. Piaget's constructivist theory believes children are 'active participants who construct learning by interacting with their environment and making connections between new experiences and previous learning' as noted by The Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) (2008). This theory can be seen weaved into the Foundation Phase with the framework highlighting how the curriculum aims for children to be actively and creatively involved in their own learning journey and build upon previous knowledge, which in return enhances and extends their development (Welsh Government, 2015).

Waters (2016) explains that for the Foundation Phase in Wales pedagogical priorities focuses on the importance of play and experimental learning to meet the needs of individual children and promote developmental success. Welsh Government (2014c) express how play is 'essential' for children's cognitive; social; emotional and physical growth and therefore contributes to the holistic development of children. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states how children have the right to play. In 2011 Wales became the first country in the United Kingdom to make UNCRC part of the countries domestic law, therefore, the rights of the child are placed at the core of education in Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021). This is reflected and supported through the Foundation Phase play based curriculum. The Welsh Government (2015) strives to ensure the rights of children are being met,

setting seven core aims to coincide with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) international agreement to ensure children have what they need to grow up safe, healthy and happy. One of these aims relates to Articles 15, 23, 29, 31 of the UNCRC where the benefits of play are considered to be 'central' to a child's holistic wellbeing and level of life enjoyment. However, Maynard et al. (2013) suggests that the sociocultural pedagogies of the Foundation Phase tend to focus on using play as a tool to support the development of children as opposed to seeing play as a right of the child needed to promote personal growth and wellbeing.

Knight 2009; Davies and Hamilton 2016, both note how the importance of learning in the outdoors has influenced policy and pedagogies in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Finland and Norway. It is argued that Finland's continuous success in Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) is partly due to their high regards for the importance placed on outdoor learning. Wales have adopted similar pedagogy within their Foundation Phase framework. DCELLS (2008), notes that the initial intention of the Foundation Phase for Wales was for a curriculum based on active learning, play and experiential learning, with a strong emphasis on the use of the outdoors environment. DCELLS (2009) explains how the Welsh Government considers the outdoors as a 'vital element' for experiential learning. Dillon et al. (2006) and Peacock, (2006) both reported that learning in outdoor environments provide more memorable and stimulating learning experiences. Tovey (2007) also emphasises how the outdoor is a unique environment which offers rich learning opportunities that are not available indoors. The outdoors offers less constraints than the indoor environment, allowing children to experience more freedom to explore and experiment. Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) explain how research on the implementation of Foundation Phase found that children who were considered to be 'underachieving within the classroom' had more positive experiences in the outdoor classroom, through child initiated, hands-on learning these children were found to show better engagement with their learning and were able to demonstrate themselves as 'strong, competent' learners. However, although the Foundation Phase curriculum aims to not be driven by assessment (DCELLS,2008) it has been noted by Davies and Hamilton(2018) how children are being assessed less often and less effectively outdoors than indoors. Therefore, children who show increased engagement and skills

outdoors could potentially be at risk of having their developmental milestones missed by practitioners (Estyn 2011).

Many early childhood pioneer theorists first introduced the importance of outdoor play for young children and the positive impact it has on a child's holistic development. Joyce (2012) notes how theorists including McMillan, Froebel, Rousseau and Pestalozzi valued the importance of play in the outdoors and shaped the pedagogy surrounding modern day practise in Early Years settings in Wales. Continuing the theories of these historical early years pioneers' there has been extensive research and on-going research over the years on promoting the benefits of outdoor play in the Early Years with DCELLS (2009) noting how outdoor learning arenas should not be seen as an extra but as an integral component of the Foundation Phase . Many people including Donnelly et al. 2016; Ouvry & Furtado 2019; Ouvry 2013 agree that the positive benefits of learning through play in the outdoor environments include increased physical activity benefitting the health of children, cognitive improvement, improvements in mental wellbeing and improved cardio metabolic health. Not only does outdoor play improve physical health, but it can also support the holistic development of children notes Rickinson et al. (2004). Children's personal, social and emotional development can increase through group work, problem solving and enhanced social and communication skills states Brodie (2020). However, Louv (2005) raises the alarm of a decrease in children's time spent outdoors labelling it as 'Nature Deficit disorder' and notes how this can affect the rise of childhood obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

The extra space of the natural environment also encourages more movement possibilities increasing physical activity and motor skills (Maynard and Waters, 2007). On the contrary, lack of outdoor space was one of the main barriers during the piloting phase of the Foundation Phase for Wales with Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) reporting that many settings did not have access to suitable outdoor areas therefore limiting the amount of time children spent outdoors. Almost a decade after Siraj-Blatchford et al. findings, the 'Evaluating the Foundation Phase Key findings on the Environment (Indoor/Outdoor)' (Welsh Government, 2014a) report that funding is still an issue with the implementation of the Foundation Phase with many practitioners reporting that developing their outdoor classrooms is still ongoing. However, the report also noted how schools who have limited access to effective outdoor space substitute their lack

of natural space with Forest School measures and visits to parks. Furthermore, Scandinavian countries facilitates opportunities for children to play in natural environments in order to promote their holistic development (Fjortoft, 2001). Fjortoft and Sageie (2000) also notes that natural landscapes benefits children's skill development more than traditional playgrounds. Therefore, Forest School opportunities may prove to be more beneficial than the use of man made environments; where there are less opportunities to experiment with risky play and creativity. Many researchers have explored the benefits of risky play in the outdoors and even though the outdoors can present many risks, risky play can provide children with opportunities to test their limits, explore boundaries and challenge themselves this is reported by Little and Wyver 2008; Sandseter 2007; McFarland and Laird, (2018). The Welsh Government (2015) respect the importance of risky play with the Foundation Phase Framework, stating that 'Through outdoor play children have the opportunities to experiment and take risks to become confident explorers of their indoor and outdoor environment'. Rodgers (2018) explains how it is the responsibility of practitioners in early years settings to supervise at all times to ensure the safety of the children but at the same time find a balance to allow them to explore their curiosities independently.

Although risky play offers many benefits to children's development, Moore (1997) states that findings from recent studies highlight how children are losing contact with nature through several restrictions which affect their access to the natural world. Moore (1997) and Gill (2010) both note that new digital attractions that the indoors offer combined with the perceived ideas that the outdoors pose as a safety threat can have a negative impact children's development. Frost and Shutterby (2017) agree with these barriers stating that increased technology, pressure for higher test scores and tensions surrounding child safety are all factors contributing to children becoming less active and less connected to the nature around them. Also stating that whilst some perceive outdoor time to be critical for healthy whole child development others perceive time in nature as a privilege. This was also recognised by Estyn (2011) noting that there are still schools and settings in Wales who are 'sceptical' about the positive impact the outdoors has on children's learning and development, therefore, resulting in these schools and settings not utilising the outdoors effectively. Pether (2012) notes that the more training practitioners have on how to use the outdoors to support learning

and development, the more the outdoors are used effectively and therefore promotes children's outdoor learning experiences. Moreover, Muñoz (2009) explains that It has been widely discussed how the role of parents, guardians and teachers acting as boundary setters in relation to children's use of outdoor spaces can set limitations on how children utilise the outdoors and how much time they spend in their natural environment. A factor relating to parents attitudes towards outdoor learning could be a consequence of parents not receiving enough information from settings regarding what their children are learning outdoors reports Estyn (2011).

Overall, the implementation of learning outdoors within the Foundation Phase curriculum has had a positive impact on pupil's attitude to learning and overall wellbeing with settings making reports of increased attendance, improved academic standards, better behaviour and connection to nature notes Estyn (2019). However, there is still need for more collaboration and training opportunities to ensure parents, guardians and practitioners fully understand the approaches and pedagogies embedded in the Foundation Phase, with Welsh Government (2015) suggesting that Foundation Phase training should be made compulsory for head teachers, teachers and additional practitioners. This will allow for all schools and settings to offer a rich play based curriculum to promote independence, creativity and imaginative learning experiences for all young children. In addition, the promotion of outdoor learning can create opportunities for adults to model positive environmental behaviours along with increased opportunities for children to explore in nature allowing them to develop emotional connections to nature to raise respectful attitudes towards the natural environment, which in return helps enhance positive lifelong, ecological and sustainable behaviours. This links in with New Curriculum for Wales, where one of the four core purposes of the curriculum is to support learners to become 'ethical, informed citizens who show their commitment to the sustainability of the planet' (Welsh Government, 2020).

Section 2

Assessment in the early years have been a controversial subject for many years with numerous people disagreeing with early childhood 'tests' notes Pickles (2019). However, assessment in the early years have often been misunderstood, rather than testing children through a set of questions with right or wrong answers, early years educators use observation as a tool to gather information about children's knowledge, understanding and skillset (Dubiel, 2021). This gathering of information allows practitioners to identify children's strengths and weaknesses in order to plan learning experiences effectively to support children's needs, learning and development (McLachlan, 2017). Moreover, assessment can be used as an evaluative tool to reflect on the standard of teaching within early years settings (Grossman, 2001) Palaiologou (2008) expresses that when professionals reflect on their own practice and areas in which they can improve on, they can then make the necessary amendments in order to provide an effective and supportive provision. Furthermore, Briggs, et al. (2008) believes that assessment is at the 'heart' of promoting a child's learning journey and an 'integral' aspect of education.

A key component of the Welsh Government's Early Years Development and Assessment Framework (EYDAF) is the Foundation Phase Profile. The 'Profile' is used throughout the children's time spent in the Foundation Phase as an assessment tool to observe and document their learning and development. The Foundation Phase profile explains how observations are used within the curriculum to collect evidence of children's progress and identify if children need further learning opportunities to 'consolidate their learning' (Wales Government, 2017). An assessment approach used to support the Foundation Phase pedagogy is the Compact Profile baseline assessments. This assessment is undertaken within the first six weeks of children entering Reception class. The intention of the baseline assessments is to observe rather than test in order to allow practitioners to understand a child's learning style, interests and stage of development (Welsh Government, 2017; Department for Education, 2014). However, only gathering information to measure against 'developmental norms and prescribed criteria' can set limitations to the practitioners understanding of the whole child ((Neaum, 2016). Drummond (1993,) quotes:

If we choose to see only those aspects of learning of which we approve, we will lose the opportunity to see more of the picture, to learn more about learning (Drummond, 1993).

The requirement to assess all children in the first six weeks of starting school may not allow for fair testing. During these first six weeks children are at the settling in period and are only beginning to become familiar with their surroundings, teachers and peers. This may cause the children to become more reluctant to show their full capabilities and therefore, an inaccurate conclusion of their skills and development may be drawn (Merrick, 2016). On the contrary, Sainsbury (2016) argues that if the baseline assessment is applied sensitively it can be an enhancement to the process of getting to know the personalities and interests of the children. Furthermore, it is noted in the Foundation Phase Profile Handbook (2017) that starting school is a big transition for young children. This is recognised and respected by practitioners in Wales and therefore, rather than undertaking a number of formal tests, the assessments are carried out through a range of unobtrusive observations.

Furthermore, the use of unobtrusive observations encourages assessments within the Foundation Phase Profile to be undertaken through child led activities, underpinning the extensive research that children perform best when they see the activity as play. Therefore, showing a more accurate holistic view of their learning and development (Welsh Government, 2017). McInnes et al. (2011) report that a 'like play' activity is perceived by children when the child has a choice about participating in an activity, the location of the activity and when an adult was proximal whereas a 'not like play' activity is when an adult is directly present and have asked the child to participate. It has been researched and reported that when children see an activity as not play, their emotional well being is decreased, than when they see an activity as play, where their well being was increased. This supports the Foundation Phase aims to respect the sensitivity surrounding children's transitions into reception class. By being as unobtrusive as possible, a more holistic view of the children's development may be captured. However, even if practitioners aim to unobtrusively observe children may still become aware of the presence of an adult causing their behaviour to change and the observer to retrieve an inaccurate representation of their abilities. This may be seen as a limitation to baseling children so early in their settling in period (UK Essays, 2015).

Play allows children to feel confident and competent, therefore making play an important opportunity for observations. Lev Vygotsky believed “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Pound, 2006). Therefore, with the Foundation Phase being a play based curriculum, observing through play is integrated throughout the pedagogy. By doing this practitioners are able to gather a vast amounts of information about the uniqueness of the child through the richness of their own self- directed play (Neaum, 2016). Providing children with rich play opportunities in various contexts can allow children to ‘express themselves creatively’ (Welsh Government, 2017). Play allows adults to observe children “at their highest level of competence”, giving practitioners a clearer insight to the child’s ideas, interests and development; free from the constraint’s of formal testing (Pound,2006). Moreover, observations allow for practitioners to capture a child’s interest and preferences first hand (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008; Early Years Matters, 2021). The Foundation Phase Profile (2017) recognises how all children have their own set of unique skills and abilities and emphasise how ‘children’s own work should be respected, valued and encouraged for its originality and honesty’. However, the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales (2014) reports how some schools did not fully understand how to support children’s learning and development through play. This led to poorly structured classrooms and caused settings to retract back to more formally organised environments in order to maintain standards (Welsh Government, 2014d).

The Foundation Phase Profile handbook (2017) notes how it is the responsibility of all practitioners to contribute to the observational assessments. A range of adult-led and child-led activities are to be offered both indoors and outdoors. Practitioners should also ensure observations are made in all areas of the continuous, enhanced and focused provision. The role of all practitioners carrying out the baseline assessments in Reception is to observe and record findings next to the skill ladder within the Compact Profile Record Form. The Early Years Foundation Stage in England highlighted how schools reported that there were inconsistent interpretations of observational assessments which could potentially can create an unclear picture of a child’s development Department for Education (2010). Bromley (2009) also notes how the interpretation of observational findings is an ‘intellectual process’ and that it is the

theoretical knowledge and understanding of the practitioners when observing a child's development that can allow a child's achievements to be recognised and recorded. However, The Compact Profile assessment within the Wales' Foundation Phase Profile is clear and easy to understand, making it an accessible document. It gives a vast holistic view of a child's developmental stages (Evans, 2015). To help practitioners with their observational judgement; an example guidance statement accompanies each step on the skills ladder. Therefore, supporting the consistency between practitioners (Welsh Government, 2017).

Furthermore, the Foundation Phase profile recognises how some children flourish more when they are in the outdoors and therefore, in order to gather an understanding of the whole child, children's learning should be observed both indoors and outdoors environments (Welsh Government, 2017). Hamilton and Davies (2016) report how the outdoors allows children to feel less constrained and when children are less aware about being observed they are more likely to answer questions more freely. However, Hamilton and Davies (2016) also note how the heightened pressure to formally assess children's numeracy and literacy skills is allowing for assessments in the outdoors to become less frequent.

National Education Union (2018) believes how baseline assessments run the risk of being 'unreliable, inaccurate and damaging' as summer born children are almost a whole year younger than their autumn born peers and therefore may not reach their desired outcomes throughout the foundation phase. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) also notes how the developmental stage of children when they enter schools can cause 'significant problems' to the accuracy of baseline assessments as in some cases children can have a twelve months age gap between peer. Therefore, Children with significant age gaps may show different stages of development. However, the 'Profile' notes how practitioners appreciate that children develop their skills at different rates and notes how children should be encouraged to 'develop at their own unique, individual pace' (Welsh Government, 2017).

A positive aspect of the Foundation Phase Compact Profile is that it allows for early assessment and therefore can potentially allow practitioners to identify developmental

delay or additional learning needs (ALN) (Welsh Government, 2017). This can allow for practitioners to relay concerns with parents and outside agencies and early interventions can be put into place to support the children in need. Although The Foundation Phase Profile was designed to support every child and can be used as a tool to identify potential additional learning needs, the profile is not robust enough to fully assess additional learning needs and therefore with the permission of parents and carers, more appropriate professionals should be involved in order to build a more accurate picture of the child's needs. Working in partnership with parents and carers can help build trust and strong relationships. Effective communication between practitioners and parents can allow both parties to work collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for the child (Department for Education, 2017; Early Years Careers, 2016). Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) supports this by noting conversations with a range of people who have had involvement in a child's life, including parents, previous settings and health practitioners can provide settings with a broader context to gain a more accurate picture of the child's development and background. However, a concern has been raised how pupils who are younger than their peers and are not developing at the same rate as autumn born children are at risk of being 'wrongly labelled' as having Special Educational Needs or Additional Learning Needs and therefore, considerations should be made when taking in for account the chronological age of a child (Stewart and Georgeson, 2019).

The Successful Futures highlights how the pedagogies and approaches integrated within the Foundation Phase changes as children transition into Key Stage 2 and as a consequence such change the report explains how this causes children to become disengaged with there learning which in return can 'hinder' children's progression. Therefore, the New Curriculum for Wales aims to offer a 'nationally described continuum of learning' that offers children a more consistent flow from the age of when they start school right through to the end of statutory schooling at the age of 16 (Donaldson, 2015). Considering the benefits of assessing in the early years and along with Wales' Foundation Phase pedagogies. Unobtrusive observations can allow for early years practitioners to use the plan, assess and review cycle to 'provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children'.

Section 3



How does the outdoor classroom support children's wellbeing within the Foundation Phase?

Although academic education is vital, children are not ready to learn unless their basic needs are being met (Dodge, Colker and Heroman, 2010). Abraham Maslow demonstrates this in his Maslow's Hierarchy of needs diagram. Many of the needs in the diagram such as self-actualization, safety and esteem can be specifically targeted within early years settings (Barrow, 2018).

Estyn (2019) reports how schools in Wales are recognising the importance of nurturing a child's wellbeing and as a result of this schools have seen improvements in pupil achievement, attendance and behaviour.

Early years pioneers, the McMillan sisters considered outdoor education to be a vital component of early childhood. They believed how nature was essential for allowing children space to move freely, explore their natural surroundings and build resilience to early childhood illnesses (Thompson, 2015). Furthermore, Scandinavian countries also value the importance of outdoor learning. Case studies and reports on the effectiveness of outdoor learning in Scandinavian countries notes how through learning in nature, children's level of well-being was significantly increased, they felt happier and social relations improved. Moreover, Scandinavian teachers also reported to have higher levels of well-being and felt less stressed when teaching outdoors compared to teaching indoors, which can also positively impacted children (Bentsen,

2013). This is also supported through studies undertaken in the United Kingdom, where 81% of children participating in the study noted how they felt that they had better relationships with their teachers when learning outdoors and 79% reported better relationships with their class-mates (Wildlife Trust, 2019).

Sir David Attenborough in Outdoor Classroom Day.org (2018) states:

Natural outdoor environments can offer a very special kind of learning experience: the opportunity for discovery and learning through touching and feeling, the chance to explore and take risks, the stimulations of the fresh air and limitless skies. And yet, we are steadily depriving our children of these wonders. This is why the quality of the last remaining external environment to which many children have frequent access: the school grounds, is so important. Barren tarmac playgrounds may have been sufficient for my generation with freedom to roam, but times have changed and so too must our attitude to these vital spaces.

Furthermore, well-being is becoming more apparent within Welsh legislation and educational curriculums. In recent years Wales has recently introduced two well-being Acts; 'Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014', and the 'Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015'. The intention of both acts is to improve public health and well-being (Lewis, 2017). In addition, Welsh Government have drawn upon effective pedagogies of Early Years pioneers and International education programmes in order to create and implement their Foundation Phase curriculum. Through a play-based curriculum The Personal and Social Development, Well-Being and Cultural Diversity Area of Learning lies at the heart of the Foundation Phase. Along with a great emphasise on learning outdoors children are exposed to rich learning experiences that can build self esteem, motivation and perseverance (OECD, 2018) , all which link into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

Additionally, it has been reported how time in the outdoors can help children with challenging behaviours. Kuo and Taylor (2004) reports in their study that time spent in nature had a positive affect on children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and that outdoor settings appear to reduce ADHD symptoms in children therefore improving their wellbeing.

However, Estyn (2011) reports in order to make the best use of the outdoors to enhance children's wellbeing, full support from leaders and managers is needed. Findings from inspections in Wales have reported how this can be a problem in some settings in Wales. This was also observed and noted in the 'Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014). Recommendations were made to ensure professionals in leadership roles are fully trained to pedagogies, principles and practices within the Foundation Phase. Moreover, it is important for all practitioners and managers to fully understand the importance of outdoor learning and by doing so outdoor learning spaces can be maintained and organised well, in order for children to experience high quality learning (Outdoors Matters, 2007).

One of the factors which seem to be influential in practitioners' valuing of outdoor learning for children in their care is personal experience in their own youth. Waite (2010) notes how a factor contributing to practitioners attitude to the outdoors comes from a personal level. Practitioners who love being outdoors show more positive attitudes and passion towards creating rich and stimulating outdoor learning experiences for young children. Practitioners who do not value the outdoors are more reluctant to use it to its full potential. Bixler, Floyd and Hammitt (2002) explains how practitioners who disvalue the outdoors may benefit from spending more time in nature in order to build confidence and environmental competencies. This can then deepen their understanding of the value nature has on children's holistic well-being and development. Although there is evidence of research to measure children's connectivity to nature, Muñoz 2009 quotes that "More research is needed to examine the inter-connectedness of play, education and the outdoors". Such research may help in understanding how parents and practitioners relationships to nature, their own level of interconnectivity and how their attitudes towards nature contribute (positively or negatively) on children's connection to nature.

Nature Days 2018, notes that One of the four core purposes of the new curriculum is for children to Become ethical citizens which involves gaining knowledge of nature and empathy towards the Welsh environment. Through promoting the connection of children and nature this can be achieved, this is agreed by Burris and Burris (2011), with their report stating that the more children are connected to nature the more likely they are to protect the environment. Another important aspect of the new curriculum

is the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience (ALOE) which link in with the health and wellbeing benefits afforded by learning in the outdoors.

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