

Section 1.

In 2010 , the Early Years foundation Phase was rolled out across primary schools in Wales with the aim of raising the standard of education for Welsh children as part of a 10 year plan, Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013).

The Early Years Foundation Phase in Wales, took inspiration from the pedagogy of other successful early years curriculums, who have successfully implemented child centred, holistic learning strategies supported by research from educational theorists to ensure children progress in the way that is optimal for them, Dewey theorised that a child is a free, individual with an aptitude to learning and will do so naturally when provided with the appropriate stimuli (Sikandar, 2015).

One of these curriculums is as Te Whāriki, a curriculum founded in New Zealand in 1996, that centres the child, addressing their development, by weaving together, family, community, child empowerment and creativity to create a collaborative approach to learning from indigenous and non-indigenous groups, resulting in an inclusive, multi-cultural curriculum that allows all learners to feel a sense of value and belonging in their educational settings (Richie, 2018).

Through creativity and play, children could engage more meaningfully with the curriculum, making the teaching more effective, and through holistic learning, children would not suffer poorer outcomes due to reasons of low socio-economic background, additional needs, or cultural difference, because the Foundation Phase being a child centred approach, would ensure that the individual needs of each child were respected and reflected in their early years setting (Welsh Government, 2015).

However, The Foundation Phase was criticised for not being inclusive of children with emotional and behavioural issues, many families complaining that their child was not accessing education that they are legally entitled to under the UNCRC because they has been expelled from school after Teachers felt they could not provide for these children and struggled to work with other agencies to get help in the classroom. (Building blocks report, 2020) The report suggested that legislation should be amended to prevent children under Eight years old being excluded, and an action plan being enacted instead to give clear guidance on how to support these children in the classroom. Early Years professionals

understand that children's behaviour is a result of their experience and creating a team around that child, involving family, caregivers and other agencies, just as Te Whariki does, to meet those children where they are developmentally can give us the information we need to improve their outcomes, by promoting inclusion through meeting their individual needs and making efforts to provide the correct resources (Welsh Government, 2012).

An evaluation of the Early Years Foundation Phase undertaken by the Welsh Government found that it had been successful, improving the educational attainment of children in receipt of Free School meals and has had a positive impact on children's wellbeing and attitude towards learning, as observed by practitioners (WISERD, 2011).

When a school prioritises the wellbeing of its learners, it creates an environment where children feel safe and supported, free to be themselves and explore their learning environments (Fraillon, 2004). The New curriculum for Wales which has now replaced the Foundation Phase, clearly states Health and Well-being as an area of learning (Donaldson, 2016) and Little and Kerr (2020) go on to explain that feeling secure is not a universal experience and trusting relationships must be built between children and responsive, empathetic practitioners who are sensitive to the needs of children in order to reassure them they can depend upon their new caregivers and relax enough to begin exploring their new surroundings (Johnson, 2010). This leads to active engagement with learning materials, which when supported by enabling adults and knowledgeable others, can become a meaningful, hands-on learning experience which feeds back into the self-esteem of that child, empowering them to experiment and explore further (Welsh Government, 2018).

A traditional curriculum that must be taught and followed chronologically does not allow for children to take their time to get to know a subject well, or at the stage they are ready to do so, this negatively effects their self-belief and makes those who struggle to keep up feel inadequate, these children are more likely to give up on education and themselves, leading them on a path of lower lifelong attainment (Welsh Government, 2018).

An article discussing Wales low Pisa scores informed us that student wellbeing continued to be low, a contradictory view to the Study performed by the Welsh Government that Lewis (2016) would contribute to there being no consensus on how to measure wellbeing - particularly of a very young child who has not emotionally developed, or have the language to convey their own opinion about their wellbeing yet -, this suggests that without

commitment to the parts of the foundation phase curriculum that support self-esteem and confidence, Holistic learning cannot be achieved and overall academic progress suffers (Wightwick, 2019).

Alessandri, Caprara, Di Giunta, Gerbino, Kanacri, Milioni, and Zuffianò (2013) inform us that self-belief is as much of an indicator of academic attainment as intelligence, which is why successful Early Years curriculums prioritise the development of self-esteem in their learners.

The recommendations from the report were to improve practitioners understanding of the pedagogies used to develop the Foundation Phase curriculum and to advise them on how to provide experiential learning opportunities and vary their approaches to teaching, particularly numeracy and literacy so that they are age and stage appropriate to the children in their settings, making better use of outdoor areas, recognising outdoor learning environments to be as important and useful as the indoor classroom (Welsh Government, 2015).

Practitioners using The foundation phase framework has to interpret the meaning of new terminology such as 'Structured play' to carry out their role under the new curriculum, which is to scaffold learning in response to a child in a rich and stimulating learning environment, rather than deliver the National curriculum to provide children with the basics for formal learning as they progress through the school(Waters, 2016).

The creation of the foundation phase and the subsequent move away from traditional learning, recognised that the traditional way was detrimental to the wellbeing and subsequent learning of children (Aasen and Waters, 2006) therefore, teachers should take an active role in facilitating play based learning, considering the individual needs of the child over where they should fit on a developmental timescale, supporting the development of their confidence and self-esteem by allowing them to comfortably access their own learning from the stage they are, the foundation phase references early learning theorists such as Vygotskysy, and practitioners should be able to observe the zones of proximal development in the learning environments and be available to scaffold any emergent learning (Wilder and Lilvist, 2018), research tells us that this style of learning is much more effective in the Early years as it builds from a foundation created by and for the child doing the learning and becomes meaningful to them.

however, teachers in primary schools feel they have to adhere to more formal teaching styles to meet targets and provide the evidence to perform well in Estyn inspections. The New curriculum has identified progression steps for children to follow, which should keep the learning age and stage appropriate if adhered to so that no child is left behind, or unchallenged.

The Independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase (2013) noted that there needed to be shift in school culture in order for the foundation phase to work as intended, with staff being motivated and supported to commit fully to the new pedagogy.

The New curriculum for Wales, which came into practice in 2022, effectively ended the Early Years Foundation Phase, incorporating the Early Years into Progression Step one. This New Curriculum has four core purposes which remain the same for every child at every stage in their school careers. These are for children to become.

“Ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives.

Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work.

Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.

Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.”

Allowing schools the freedom to choose what matters to their pupils when it comes to their learning and design a curriculum that is personal to each individual school and the children who are a part of it, should allow for Teachers to move away from the rigid teach and assess timeline that they have been governed by previously and allow a truly child led curriculum to take place and prepare Welsh children for a future that, although uncertain, they should still feel excited for, however, there needs to be continued support from Senior staff to make sure teaching staff feel confident enough in their abilities to provide learning experiences that meet children’s needs across these areas of learning. (Donaldson, 2015).

Section 2.

No two children are alike, even children who follow the developmental milestones and progress at the rates medical research predicts they should, have their own specific interests, thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences of their world that shapes who they are and how they behave. Taking the time to observe and understand the uniqueness of

each child can enhance practice and reduce inequality, tailoring the daily routine to best meet the needs of all children, instead of training them to fit into a standardised and inflexible routine, improving wellbeing for the children, and enabling adults who they share time and space with (Messiou, 2006).

Assessments should make space for each child's evolving capacities; the adult's role is to form a trusting partnership where they can balance the child's interests and needs while challenging them enough to make progress. (Varadan, 2019).

The Early Years Foundation Phase developed an assessment tool to track the development of learners during their time in the Early Years setting. There is guidance for Early years staff to use alongside the assessment which informed practitioners to collect baseline information from observations as not to be too obtrusive while children are settling into their new, unfamiliar settings. This would give those practitioners ideas to plan activities to observe and record emerging skills in future assessment of the children in Foundation Phase.

The Foundation phase profile was intended to track children's development across four Areas of Learning: Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity, Language, Literacy and Communication Skills, Mathematical Development and Physical Development and was to be completed through observations of the children during play based learning and through more formal assessments.

Initially, the Foundation phase profile sounds like a positive assessment tool as it seeks to gather information about the holistic development of children and there is more than one method to obtain those results.

However, when assessing children whose first language is not the primary language used in their school, they will already be at a disadvantage if they have not understood an instruction given by the practitioner, the baseline for this child may be lower than their peers and not be a true reflection of their ability.

Another barrier to this assessment tool is that the preferred learning styles of children may not be the style used by the person doing the assessing, or the activity suggested to gain the data for a certain area of development may not appeal to the child, who will go on to underperform on the task and score lower than they are truly able to if the task was something that they were interested in taking part in.

If we contrast the FPP with the guidelines for assessment in Non Maintained settings, we can see that the FPP relies on a linear progression, with the child needing to tick boxes in order to be seen to be making progress, whereas the non-maintained curriculum assesses children by identifying and reflecting on the progress of individual children over time across the five mandatory principles of progression and the evidence feeds back into the planning cycle so that early years educators can create enabling environments which reflect the cultures, interests and personalities of its learners so they can create their own meaningful learning experiences and progress effectively. This method of assessment is similar to the assessment style carried out by Nordic Early Years teachers, who view their role as complex and explain how they use reflective practice to meet their primary concern of meeting their children's needs, when they use formal assessment tools with the awareness that they are context sensitive and prefer not to use them to discuss progress with parents who are mostly concerned with their children's wellbeing (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2022), this culture of placing the wellbeing of children before providing proof of development could potentially be key element in why these child centred approaches are more successful in other countries than in Wales and the United Kingdom.

The new curriculum for Wales aims to make assessment a part of children's learning process, encouraging them to think critically about what they are doing and feedback to their teachers what they know or want to know more about. This style of assessment celebrates the uniqueness of each child, giving them a chance to co construct the curriculum so it truly reflects their interests and areas of expertise, if they are verbal or can communicate well enough to contribute to an assessment this way.

Analysis of feedback on Welsh Government public consultation process on draft assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings() showed that practitioners found that guidelines for assessment under the new curriculum were clear and supported them to enact observations that formed the assessments, which is an improvement o the Foundation phase profile (The Independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase,2013).

Nijland, Van Der Meer, and Onderwater remind us that additional Learning needs are not always visible, it is important to assess children to ensure no potential issues that could affect their holistic development are missed so we can continue to plan for that child to thrive in education and have the best possible future.

The Foundation phase profile assessment tool was unable to provide a fair account of the Progress of children with Additional Learning needs, the closed statements left no room for an inclusive alternate observation to be ticked off so a child who was making progress outside of the linear stages of progression, would be recorded as not developing their skills (Enquire, 2023).

The Birth to 5 matters document recognises the importance of understanding Children develop skills at their own individual rates. Inclusive early years practice is built on determining what each individual child "knows and can do" (Birth to 5 matters, 2021).

This document recommends we get to know each child individually by observing them during play, making assessments on their current level of development in order to plan to achieve their next steps in a way that celebrates and supports their sense of sense, values and culture, with regards to supporting children with Additional learning needs, Early years Practitioners should be able to identify areas each child may need support or intervention in and support their needs that way.

A tool like a Learning Journey could be implemented to record early years assessments in a way that satisfies the criteria set out by the Birth to 5 matters document, Learning journeys are a series of written observations of children that give practitioners, parents and other agencies that may need insight into the development of a child, chronological snapshots of what a child enjoys, is able to do and working to achieve.

Patterns in behaviour can be tracked to support any referrals that may need to be made and more specific information can be recorded than may be available in a pre-written assessment tool, which is important when assessing children who have very different life and cultural differences to the overall culture of the setting they belong to (Wilder and Lilvist, 2018).

The learning journey is a good assessment to support children during transitions as it gives a true and detailed account of their holistic development for their next teacher to use to better understand and plan for them.

The New curriculum for Wales gives practitioners scope to assess children in the Early Years this way, however, in practice, there are barriers to being able to execute this type of assessment.

Section 3.Why practitioners need to prioritise communication with learners in the Early Years.

The relationships built between a child and their first caregivers can shape a child's attitude towards themselves, their learning, and have a lasting effect on their future, which is why our practice should prioritise and facilitate a healthy flow of communication between us, and the children we are caring for.

The links between mental health and educational success are inextricably linked, with reciprocal relationships being noted by Roberts (2017) as an important factor to educational success. Roberts goes on to say that a holistic approach to teaching that recognises the mind, body and spirit are linked, is key to cognitive, physical, and social development.

As adults, the need to be heard and respected is important, we have all felt frustrated when someone was rude to us on the commute to work, or annoyed after an interaction with customer services team who didn't seem to care about our problem, so we can imagine how that must feel for someone who has yet to develop the same range of vocabulary as us!

Practitioners in the Early Years can use their understanding of the universal language of play, to encourage positive relationships with children to grow.

The socio-development of children at the age which they first experience the curriculum sets the ball rolling along their learning path, so it is imperative that early years workers prioritise building secure attachments with the children in their care if they want to ensure they become capable and confident learners (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). A child must feel safe in order to communicate their wants and needs with the Early Years team, and we can look to the most replicated models of early education to find evidence of these early interactions being supported to achieve positive holistic development. For example, the Te Whariki curriculum's 15 basic principles of early childhood, centre around each child feeling safe, respected and being able to express themselves freely and learn in ways that are appropriate to them, wherever they are developmentally, (Lee, Carr, Soutar, and Mitchell, 2013).

The learning environments we create should be places where children can move freely, with plenty of open-ended materials for them to play with, how they choose to use them can offer an insight into their personalities and life experiences, so we can begin to understand them, even before words are exchanged.

Not all children will follow the same developmental pathways, their, medical and physical needs, experiences, cultural and socio-economic background will have already had an effect on how they view themselves and the world around them, and impact how they respond in different situations.

Assuming all children will enjoy the experiences offered by their educational settings may set practitioners up for disappointment, Furthermore, assuming that a quiet child is a happy child could be equally harmful to that child's mental wellbeing.

Practitioners can improve outcomes for each individual child by developing their communicative skills with each child, getting to know them personally and understanding their behaviours and how they make their needs known.

We should be flexible with our expectations and practices to be able to become a safe and welcoming person a child can feel comfortable enough with to approach and express their needs. Routines should be implemented gently as time stamps to help children recognise the passage of time and develop expectations and familiarity to help them feel safe, there is no need to enforce circle time if a child is responding negatively, this could be an opportunity for us to tune in to that child to let them know we want to know what they need, Understanding that challenging behaviour is a form of communication, and we must find a way to tease it out, discipline or shame based strategies do not address the underlying needs of the child, but offering time, space and gentle distractions can help form a bond with that child and help them regulate their emotions and feel safe again (Lever, 2014).

Samuel and McKim discuss how children with ALN, who do not use or respond to spoken language are still able to communicate, and benefit from positive communication from caregivers and educators.

if practitioners are willing to tune in and understand how to communicate in a way that makes sense to the individual child, they will ensure that they have a sense of belonging and that their boundaries are respected and their interests and individual needs are understood and supported

by someone they can trust, with these things in place, they can learn and develop alongside their peers (Nind and Hewit, 2013).

Bowlby theorised that there are sensitive periods in a child's development where children can form close attachments to caregivers, so the role of the practitioner is time sensitive in the early years, before we can concentrate on more formal teaching, the wellbeing of the children we want to learn must be fostered in the setting by first developing secure attachments in a safe and nurturing environment Feldman (2015).

Personal communication is essential for our well-being and may be the primary goal of human existence. Based on the theory of Bowlby, Nind and Hewit developed a philosophy called Intensive Interaction, where practitioners use all their senses to tune in and understand how to communicate in a way that makes sense to the individual child, to ensure they gain a sense of belonging, their boundaries are respected and their interests and individual needs are known and supported by someone they can trust, with these things in place, all children can learn and develop alongside their peers

Johnson (2010) supports this philosophy and explains practitioners need to be responsive to the child's behaviours, similar to the way Nind and Hewit recommend, in order to nurture positive, secure relationships, this could mean recognising when a child needs to be cuddled for reassurance, or to clap to express delight in the child when they are doing something they enjoy.

Finally, the Birth to 5 matters informs us that the foundation of inclusive practice is listening to children's voices and understanding that they express themselves in a variety of ways, including nonverbally, and Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) tells us that all children have the right to be heard and have their views respected, this should empower us to go ahead and devote as much time as we can, to getting to know our learners, and defend our reasons for doing so when questioned by staff members who may not be as informed in Early Years education. This will ensure a holistically satisfying experience for all children, and adults lucky enough to be able to share this time with them.

References.

Aasen, W. and Waters, J. (2006) 'The new curriculum in Wales: a new view of the child?' *Education*, 34 (2), pp 123-129, DOI: 10.1080/03004270600670425.

Alessandri, G., Caprara, G., Di Giunta, L., Gerbino, M., Kanacri, B., Milioni, M. and Zuffianò, A. (2013) 'Academic achievement: The unique contribution of self-efficacy beliefs in self-regulated learning beyond intelligence, personality traits, and self-esteem.' *Learning and Individual Differences*, 23, pp 158-162, DOI: 10.1016/j.lindif.2012.07.010.

Birth to 5 Matters (2021) *Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. Available at: <https://www.birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Birthto5Matters-download.pdf> Accessed on: 12/01/2024.

Children's commissioner for Wales. (2020) Building Blocks Report. Available at: https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Building-Blocks-Report_E.pdf Accessed on: 18/01/2024.

Donaldson, G. (2016) 'A Systematic Approach to Curriculum Reform in Wales', *Wales Journal of Education* 18 (1), pp 7-20.

Early Years Matters. (2023) *Observation, Assessment and Planning*. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearsmatters.co.uk/eyfs/a-unique-child/planning/> Accessed on: 18/01/2024.

Enquire. (2023) Identifying and assessing your child's needs. Available at: <https://enquire.org.uk/parents/getting-support/assessment/> Accessed on: 12/01/2024.

Hewett, D. and Nind, M. (2013) *Interaction in Action: reflections on the use of Intensive Interaction*. Routledge.

Lewis, A. (2016) Well-being and the early years curriculum: a case study of the Foundation Phase in Wales September. Available at: https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/98708/12/thesis_Alyson_Lewis_March2017%20FINAL%2

ODPR.pdf Accessed on: 18/01/2024.

Messiou, K. (2006) 'Understanding marginalisation in education: The voice of children.' *European Journal of Psychology and Education*. 21, pp 305, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03173418>.

NDNA (2024) Curriculum for Wales. Available at: <https://ndna.org.uk/ndna-cymru/curriculum-for-wales-2022/#:~:text=Foundation%20Learning,will%20the%20term%20be%20used>. Accessed on: 10/01/2024.

Nijland, M., Van Der Meer, M. and Onderwater, Y. (2019) *Unique Child*. GagasMedia.

Pacey. (2023) *Child observations and learning journeys*. Available at: [https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/PACEY%20member%20practice%20guides%20\(PDFs\)/PG05-Child-observations-learning-journeys.pdf](https://www.pacey.org.uk/Pacey/media/Website-files/PACEY%20member%20practice%20guides%20(PDFs)/PG05-Child-observations-learning-journeys.pdf) Accessed on: 14/01/2024.

Ritchie, J. (2018) 'A fantastical journey: Reimagining Te Whariki.' *Early Childhood Folio*, 22(1), pp.9-14, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18296/ecf.0046>.

Sikandar, A. (2015) 'John Dewey and his philosophy of education.' *Journal of education and Educational Development*, 2(2), pp191, DOI: 10.22555/joed.v2i2.446.

Taylor, C. Joshi, H and Wright, C. (2015) 'Evaluating the impact of early years educational reform in Wales to age seven: the potential use of the UK Millennium Cohort Study.' *Journal of Education Policy*, 30:5, pp 688-712, DOI: [10.1080/02680939.2014.963164](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2014.963164).

Varadan, S. (2019) 'The Principle of Evolving Capacities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.' *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 27 (2), pp 306-338. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02702006>.

Welsh Government (2013) *An independent stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales*. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/20340/1/140519-independent-stocktake-of-the-foundation-phase-in-wales-en.pdf> Accessed on: 09/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2023) *Analysis of feedback on the Welsh Government public consultation process on draft assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2023-04/analysis-of-feedback-on-the-welsh-government-public-consultation-process-on-draft-assessment-arrangements-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf> Accessed on: 19/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2023) *Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/c6383417-cd62-4d66-9d53-15a955c79d6f/assessment-arrangements-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf>

Welsh Government. (2015) *Foundation phase, final report*. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-07/150514-foundation-phase-final-en_0.pdf Accessed on: 10/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2015) *Foundation Phase Framework*. available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/d5d8e39c-b534-40cb-a3f5-7e2e126d8077/foundation-phase-framework.pdf> Accessed on: 10/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2017) *Foundation Phase Profile Handbook*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/f9d85dba-85a4-4e87-bb58-a24730ad7e57/foundation-phase-profile-handbook-revised-september-2017.pdf> Accessed on: 12/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2022) *Implementation and practical considerations*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/designing-your-curriculum/implementation-and-practical-considerations/#enabling-learning> Accessed on: 12/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2012) *Practical approaches to behaviour management in the classroom*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018->

12/practical-approaches-to-behaviour-management-in-the-classroom-a-handbook-for-classroom-teachers-in-primary-schools.pdf Accessed on: 18/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2018) Successful Futures. Available at:

<https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf>

Accessed on: 17/01/2024.

Welsh Government. (2022) *What's changing in assessment?* Available at:

<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/assessment-arrangements/what-s-changing-in-assessment> Accessed on: 19/01/2024.

Wilder, J and Lillvist, A. (2018) 'Learning journey: a conceptual framework for analyzing children's learning in educational transitions', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26:5, pp 688-700, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2018.1522736](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1522736).

Wightwick, A. (2019) *New international Pisa schools tables show Wales remains behind other UK nations but is improving*. Available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/pisa-wales-international-schools-2019-17346247> Accessed on: 17/01/2024.