

Part 1

Early years Curriculum.

The foundation phase framework (Welsh Government 2015 and Welsh Government 2019) was set up in 2008 for children ages three to four years old. Research shows that children develop and progress their need and ability to learn through play-based activities. Moreover, their experiences from birth to seven years old can shape their future. Therefore, the foundation phase was introduced in Wales progressively over three years. This was designed for children to be involved in their learning. Having the freedom to choose an activity within the seven areas of learning. The use of the indoors and outdoors should be fluent, staff to be fully trained in the pedagogy of this framework, gaining the knowledge of how to develop children's learning, by enhancing the seven areas of learning. Through play-based activities children could not only develop academically, but they can also acquire social, emotional and physical development, enhancing their self-esteem and confidence. Building a Brighter Future plan by the Welsh Government (2013) and Pacey reporting on this plan (Pacey 2013), including the foundation phase framework, the ethos of the framework was exceptional, and believed to be delivering positive results.

Reports by Estyn (2011) and later by the Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government 2014), Successful Futures report (Donaldson 2015), and Wiserd report (Taylor *et al.* 2015) all supported the positive results, stating that this framework was inclusive for all pupils. The Successful Futures report argues, that in settings where the Foundation Phase was running as expected, was highly successful and should be carried through Key stage two and three. The Wiserd report and the Independent Stocktake consider the fact that, the adult child ratio increased, therefore, allowing more contact time with a knowledgeable other. In contrast to this, Estyn, Independent Stocktake and the Wiserd report all found that, practitioners in some settings where the foundation phase was not running as expected were not fully trained.

According to Kingston and Siraj (2017), practitioners with little or no qualification working alongside a practitioner with a degree, fully qualified, can offer a wide range of learning opportunities to children, together or separately. As each individual's adventure through life is unique, moreover, having a different viewpoint on an activity, consequently, offering a different learning opportunity for the children. However, this

is not sustainable for furthering development. Research shows that children can progress further from higher educated practitioners, hence, practitioners need to be responsible and strive towards their continuous professional development (King 2013). Page and Eadie (2019), suggest that collaboration between settings can improve professional development. Coaching professional colleagues can build relationships links between settings, outside agencies and families, where sharing ideas can offer professional development for all practitioners, which in turn can build on children's own development. An Estyn report dated 2010, suggests that most practitioners had attended some of the training courses available, although figures recorded were not very clear. They agreed that collaboration between settings was good practice for the Foundation Phase practitioners, as this was a new initiative and information, positive or negative could be shared in order to develop skills between practitioners. However, in the Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government 2014), the Wiserd report (Taylor *et al*, 2015) and a later Estyn report (Estyn 2011) all set recommendation of practitioners needing further training and better communication with other settings, to who were exercising good delivery of the foundation phase.

The Welsh Government invested over £45 million on training and support for the foundation phase yet not all practitioners were able to access the courses, settings that had nearly all practitioners fully trained, ran the foundation phase framework successfully with improved outcomes for children according to Taylor, Rhys and Waldron 2016 and 2014. In contrast to this, the Wiserd report (Taylor *et al* 2015) and the independent stocktake (Welsh Government 2014) state in their recommendations that training courses needs to convey the pedagogy of the foundation phase clearly. The theory of why we respond and encourage certain activities, what the children will learn and develop from this. In some settings, access to the courses was not available for all practitioners, funding, staffing and time were some limitations, therefore, training could then be offered to practitioners from others that had attended the courses according to The Journal of Emergent Science (2018). However, one practitioner view and understanding could differ from another (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron 2014). The Successful futures report by Donaldson (2015) elaborates on the success of the foundation phase and builds on this, moving towards the new curriculum set by the Welsh government (2022b). This curriculum will be set by the individual settings; therefore, all staff should have input and training collaboratively.

The seven areas of learning, highlighted in the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government 2015), all explain that children should have fluid access to the indoors and outdoors. The Independent Stocktake (Welsh Government 2014) recognised that settings with successful application of the foundation phase had started to transition the outdoor, indoor fluency in their Key stage 2 classes, which is a recommendation from the successful futures report (Donaldson 2015). To remove transition stages from foundation phase and key stages to progression steps, resulting in fluidity throughout the child's development stages. Additionally, the Wiserd report (Taylor *et al*, 2015) commends settings that have made adjustment to accommodate the outdoors by, re-configuration of their setting, or even organising links with local facilities. It is also noted that use of the outdoors within the foundation phase was productive. The Welsh government allocated grants to settings, in order to facilitate this new framework, and evidence shows that was done successfully in some settings. However, the Wiserd report recommended that the budget should be pliable to the settings. Whereas, Allen-Kinross (2018) believes that school budgets are reducing and that the new initiatives being released and offering £10million to schools, in order to allow children to connect with nature, is positive that the outdoor environment is being recognised to enhance children's development however, the amount of money will not stretch between the settings needing it.

Recommendations from the Wiserd report (Taylor *et al* 2015) are to ensure, where possible, that access to the outdoors should be continuous. Support to practitioners with the lay out of the areas and enhancing these areas to support further development. Estyn (2011) also agree stating that progression was noted however, more support was required for practitioners to enhance some areas of development. Van Dijk-Wesselius *et al*, (2020) suggest that barriers for outdoor learning can be practitioners with lack of confidence and knowledge in the outdoors, they have limited training with the curriculum in the outdoors therefore, lacking in confidence. In contrast to this Norodahl and Johannesson (2014), states that Icelandic practitioners appreciate the learning and development that can happen in the outdoors, following Vygotski's socio-cultural theory, acquiring knowledge from a well-informed other and not to mention the positive effects on a child's health and well-being. Donaldson (2015) successful futures report highlights the recommendation of health and well-being as a focus area for development, which is included in the New Welsh Curriculum (Welsh Government 2022b) Although, some early years settings have adopted the funded

non-maintained nursery settings curriculum (Welsh Government 2022a), which displays an emphasis on children having the ability to move between the indoors and outdoors, having authentic experiences. This includes assisting staff with ideas of how to facilitate needs.

Children need to play. They also have a right to play according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2018), and Wales was the first country in the world to have this right in law. Welsh Assembly Government (2002) introduced the Play Policy, which changed to Wales: A Play Friendly Country in 2014. This policy recognises the importance for play, which is child-led. The developmental benefits for the child in society, health and well-being, physical, cognitive and self-worth. Although, practitioners' attitude towards play can have a detrimental affect to childhood experiences and development. Some practitioners themselves, do not fully appreciate the benefits and believe that it is a waste of valuable teaching time according to Gray and Ryan (2016). Alternatively, research by McInnes et al (2011) demonstrates the children's interaction and readiness to learn with practitioners using effective play pedagogy, like going on children's cues and not overexerting themselves.

Practitioners can feel they are under qualified for covering the curriculum through play-based activities, as this was not part of their teacher training (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland and Wollscheid 2019 and Loizou 2017) However, the Foundation phase framework (Welsh Government 2015) offered training courses, additionally, the independent stocktake report recommended practitioners gain a better knowledge and understanding of learning through play and to take responsibility for their own continuous professional development (Welsh Government 2014). In agreement with this was the Successful futures report by Donaldson (2015). Moreover, contributing to the development of the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, which is a play-based curriculum (Welsh Government 2022a).

In Finland (The Finnish National Agency for Education 2022), compulsory education starts at seven years old, before this age, children in pre-school are taught through a play-based curriculum. The idea of an inclusive environment, easily accessible to all children, can give a sense of belonging. Favourable learning opportunities, which access physical, emotional, cognitive and social skills. The outcomes by the end of a child's education are in the top achievements out of numerous countries in the World. Also achieving one of the smallest divides between

financial background according to PISA (2015) and Clausnitzer (2022). However, Transforming Education Summit (2022) released a preliminary national statement of commitment of Finland to transform education. The main aims of this statement were to increase standards in all the areas above we have just commended Finland for. The decrease in outcomes had sparked concern.

Part 2

Every child is unique. Fingerprints and brain development are what makes a child unique. Genetics and experiences determine the development of the brain. Experiences, good or bad will make connections in the brain and repetition will make these connections stronger. Genetics or lack of genetics can also impact on the structure of the brain according to the University of Zurich (2018). Therefore, every child has the ability to develop, the rate and course of development, is unique to each child. Practitioners need to build a relationship with the child by learning their likes and dislikes, their capabilities and encouraging independence, be supportive yet still have clear rules. The environment should offer engaging playful activities, some with an element of risk which can spark exploration. This combination can create the learning environment accessible for the unique child suggests Early Education (2012).

In addition to creating an environment for the unique child, practitioners have to assess all children. This is to gain knowledge and understanding in detail of the children's capabilities, their developmental stage and how the learning can be moved on. Informing parents / carers which can help to build relationships and inclusion into the child's development from both parties (Education Scotland 2023). Assessing children from three to 16 years old is the law for practitioners, this is to ensure the best possible educational provision is provided for the child (Legislation.gov.uk 2021). Therefore, observational assessments are a necessity for practitioners. Informal observations need to take place initially when a child joins the class, to build the relationship and understand the child's needs, likes and dislikes. The practitioner can gain knowledge of resources required to engage the child into the environment furthermore, when a child is captivated by an activity, they are more likely to show their abilities and be more susceptible to learn and develop according to Neaum (2016).

Settings can record observations using a tool called Taith360 (Wilkinson 2022), use to record ongoing progression, known as formative assessment. The information can be collected by practitioners and peers, this forms a picture of the achievement outcomes for that child, highlighting areas of development. The limitations are that the practitioner is looking at a certain area of development, however, with a unique child, they may not display the progression in that area, but may display development in other areas. Moreover, suggests Fawcett and Watson (2016), the practitioner could not record that, their frame of mind whilst carrying out observations could determine the recorded achievements. Practitioners need to be open minded and have knowledge of progression steps when carrying out observations. The time observations take is a limitation for all. The unique child may have no time restrictions and display progression after the observation has taken place. Although, observation can be an effective way to assess a unique child's progress.

In New Zealand, where they have a Te Whariki curriculum, they record a child's progress through learning stories according to Lee *et al* (2012). A picture of the child's achievement will be taken, and a practitioner will then write about the process, the conversation (if relevant), and may add where the learning can progress. This evidence is displayed for children and parents / carers to view and interact with, developing an inclusive ethos. Celebrating their achievement can encourage and support the child, by covering the core principles of their curriculum. Similarly this assessment process would meet parts of the four core purposes in the new Welsh curriculum (Welsh Government 2022b). The taith360 assessment tool supports practitioners planning and continuous development with the unique child. Additionally, the learning stories in Te Whariki, concur this and make the achievement visual, this can give the unique child a sense of belonging and respect for others. In contrast to the Te Whariki curriculum stating inclusive for all learner, Hamilton and Vermeren (2016) found that children with special educational needs could not always access their curriculum, the pedagogy of Te Whariki can create barriers with outside agencies.

The Maori culture believes that children are raised by all the elders in the family, including older brothers or sisters, entitling them to have the same duties and responsibilities as the parents. The unique child then becomes dependent on the support network around them and altruistic, being selfless states Lee *et al* (2012) and The education hub (2022) agrees, stating that children benefit from mixed age classes. In contrast to this, the unique child could feel that they have been held back due to

their ability, or have their confidence knock by older children around them suggests Connell (2020). Alternatively, Ken Robinson (2010), believes that children learn from the more knowledgeable other, and that their peers can be included in that. Practitioners may decide that a child is cheating or just copying the answers. The unique child can develop many skills from their peers, through discussion and may even observe the method the child used to obtain the answer.

The responsibility of acquiring knowledge and understanding about the unique child's culture, lays with the practitioners. In order to become a multicultural setting and to build a relationship with the unique child, practitioners need to have that knowledge to accommodate the child's interests and needs. The curriculum for non-maintained nursery's (Welsh Government 2022a), suggests that home life should be recreated in the setting. A sense of culture can be rewarding for all children, whereas, lack of culture and knowledge can be detrimental to that unique child according to Moran, Abramson and Moran (2014). Research by Adam, Barratt-Pugh and Haig (2019) found that settings could not always facilitate the needs for the unique child in some cultures due to lack of knowledge grows into lack of resources. Learning the unique child's first language can be a challenge, and each child has a right to be assessed with their mother tongue. Therefore, an interpreter can visit the setting weekly and assist practitioners with their assessments, also to engage the child and support practitioners build the relationship with the unique child. Communication with the child's support network can enhance states Oxfordshire County Council (2017).

The unique child may seem to be developing in the diverse setting, when practitioners observe them. Tracking is another form of assessment, which will track the child's progress through the early years. The health visit will do regular checks with the child before the start nursery school, this tracking is based on age and stage, where the child's parent is present and it would take place at the child's home, to make them feel safe, secure and relaxed. This is when a child can display their potential states the NHS (2020). Delay in any development area can be raised by parent or the health visitor, where early interventions can support the unique child.

The first six weeks of starting a nursery setting, a baseline assessment is carried out. The practitioners will observe the unique child over this period of time, making notes on what the child can do. This data is then put onto the system and tracked throughout their time in the early years. Practitioners can update this at the end of every school year states the Welsh Government (2015). In Contrast to this

Morgan *et al.* (2022), found that practitioners would set up activities, to mark certain skills. This could then cause upset for the children, they may feel added pressure into getting things correct, or complete activity the way they may think the practitioner would like to see in order to please the practitioner, whereas this would not be a fair assessment. The unique child whose first language was different to the settings, may score significantly lower, due to lack of understanding and not ability states Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017). Therefore, with the foundation phase being replaced with the new Welsh curriculum (2022b) and the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (2022a), which are based on progression steps, an alternative assessment has been released this year by county. Tracking assessment will need to be executed to monitor the unique child's progress. Developmental delays need to be supported with early intervention. If undetected or not supported correctly, the unique child will struggle to reach their full potential according to Nursery Resources (2019).

The Funded non-maintained curriculum states that assessments should be continuous and should not impact on the unique child's learning opportunities, concentrating on what the unique child can do and is learning to do in an enabling environment which meets their needs suggests Morgan *et al.* (2022) rather than baseline, which consisted of ticking the appropriate. The alternative to the baseline asks practitioners to input comments, what the unique child can do and is learning to do. Furthermore, the future assessments carried out in the funded non-maintain nursery's will be designed by the practitioners working with in the new Welsh curriculum. The assessment process will need to be suitable for ALL learner, assessing their capabilities and the progression steps they are working towards (Welsh Government 2022b). However, Van Herwegen (2022) states that the number of children with Additional Learning Needs continues to rise, nearly one in four children will need that extra support in their setting according to Evans (2013). For many reasons, settings are not able to achieve the adult to child ratio, therefore, the unique child may not be able to receive the care and support they require, as staff are required to carry out continuous assessments, which can be more time consuming than the original baseline, hence, impacting on providing an enabling environment for the unique child with their individual needs met suggests Moss et al (2013).

Part 3

Should children as young as Three years old have access to real tools?

In September 2022 the new curriculum for Wales supported school with more involvement and freedom to navigate their own individual curriculum. Some schools in Wales have adopted the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings for children ages Three to Five years. Believed to be the best way to gain children's interest in learning, focusing on the 'Cynefin', in Wales this means to give children the feeling of belonging, to create an environment which is familiar, safe, reassuring and inviting. Therefore, enabling their development in a practical manner for the outside world (Welsh Government, 2022 and Pacey, n.d.). Supporting Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, making children feel safe, secure, giving them warmth, food and water are basic needs that all children require, and when met, the need subsides, and the child can then function to their optimal ability according to McLeod (2018). Wavehill social and economic research (2022), suggests that the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, is a valued tool in the continuum on the progression steps for the four core purposes of the new Welsh curriculum, however, this research does suggest that some practitioners would like to see more detail, more visual examples to explain cross-curricula activities in-depth. In contrast to this, some practitioner state that the curriculum needs to be simplify.

The curriculum is centred around a holistic, authentic play-based learning. Providing children with authentic materials can spark interest, helping to develop skills, knowledge and the concept of real-life experiences.

Do we need experiences, or can listening to stories be just as effective for development?

Research shows by Boris (2017), that good, captivating storytelling can incorporate all types of learners, including kinaesthetic learners. Learners that develop through experiences, by using their senses. Storytelling can touch their emotions, therefore connecting them to the story. Alternatively, being part of the story, experiencing the act, or like using real tools during play activities, can create a greater understanding of concepts and knowledge acquisition, moreover, gaining self-empowerment which

can further a child's self-education, a theory suggested by Bruner (Olson, and Bruner, 1974 and Pappas, 2014).

The non-maintained nursery setting's curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022) emphasises the use of authentic materials and situations, giving picture examples of children using a knife, a hammer, and nails, these are sharp objects which can cause serious harm.

Children could seriously hurt themselves or others, do we really need to allow them access to these objects?

Adults assess and expect the risks, in contrast to this adults need to also assess and expect the benefits these experiences can have on a child, with enabling adults guiding and scaffolding the correct ways to use these tools, will enable children to acquire new knowledge about the weight of things, the force that needs to be used depending on the object, the movements that need to be used in order for the tool to do its job, the smell of raw materials, the list is endless, additionally, with the access to tools they may see other adults using in the real world, can build their self-esteem and confidence according to Ralphs (2022). A Montessori education, suggested by Isaacs (2018), a method devised by Maria Montessori in the early 1900's, proved to be a successful method of teaching, when her students, with developmental disabilities attained similar grades to children with no disabilities. Montessori schools are set out with the ideal of creating every day life experiences for children from birth. They allow and educate children access to real objects like sharp knives, hammers, nails, and even move onto power tools. Consequently, teaching children to have care and respect for things and the knowledge and understanding of how and why we need and use them. Imagination is crucial in a child's development, and Montessori believes that allowing a child to use real objects can captivate and ignite their creative and imaginative side. All staff are fully trained and How We Montessori (2018), Montessori North-West (n.d.), and Spring Stone Montessori School (2019) are all in agreement with Isaacs. Although, this is a progressive method, and children can only move on to different authentic tools once they have mastered the skill set, which in turn can limit their development and creativity, as they may have more success with a different tool. In contrast to this, the findings carried out by Marshall (2017), believe that authentic

tools should be introduced to all settings as this can assist with the development of fine motor skills and concentration.

In a study carried out by Ucar and Simsek (2022) revealed that children with learning disabilities and using authentic tools can acquire a deeper knowledge and understanding, as more of their senses are being activated, the feel of the object, the smell, the sound and sight. In addition to this, the parents / carers also participated in this experiment. Although, apprehensive at first with the use of authentic tools, reassurance from practitioners helped to evaporate issues. Outcomes are demonstrated to be far greater with inclusive involvement states Martinez (2015) and Gomariz *et al.* (2022). However, parents / carers have limitations with the time and skill set they can offer, therefore, practitioners need to consider this. Settings implementing the funded non-maintained nursery settings curricula and introducing authentic tools with children as young as three years old may need to assess the introduction to parents / carers of this. As well as the Risky Tools Policy (Freshfield Nursery School 2021), an invitation into the setting may build confidence with the parents/ carers. In contrast to this, a study carried out by Sandseter, Kleppe, and Sando (2020), relieved that authentic tools are not always classified as risky play due to the adult supervision and support provided to fully absorb the benefits of fine motor skills, concentration, an acquiring knowledge and understanding. This blog has been written to give parents / carers and practitioners, who feel anxious about using authentic tools with young children, some information as to why they can benefit children in a setting, that has an enabling environment with enabling practitioners able to provide enabling experiences for all children.

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