

Introduction

As Wales progresses from the Foundation Phase into the new curriculum the question can be asked of just how well the reform will go and when will we see the results. Looking at the PISA test scores over the decades it is clear to see that even though Wales has been below average the test scores have been increasing. A 2021 article by the Senedd shows how from 2006 to 2015 wales' PISA test scores fluctuated but was always significantly less than the other three nations of the united kingdom. However from 2016 onwards test scores have been on a steady incline. Could this be due to the implementation of the foundation phase? Why change the foundation phase?

Section 1 – Implementation of early years Curricula

Donaldson (2015) emphasises how the foundation phase curriculum was a crucial move for Wales, very successful and “one of the best things” to happen. However looking at the Stock take of the foundation phase many issues can be outlined such as the vagueness of what is expected of a practitioner in early years and assessment criteria.

Since the foundation phase was introduced into settings over a decade ago in Wales there have been many negative global events. Two most prominent for wales have been Coronavirus and the terrorist scares. The Welsh Government, 2021 elaborates the effects CoronaVirus had on the education system and the strain it put on successfully implementing the foundation phase in settings. Developing from the struggles Coronavirus produced, Wales adapted and made the new curriculum for Wales. Within a document released by the Welsh Government, 2020 named “The journey to 2022” it is outlined how the new curriculum has been developed To deal with Coronavirus and other pandemics. Within the Curriculum for wales from ages three up till sixteen children will experience the new digital competence framework; the framework entails teaching children on their digital footprint and providing them with skills to learn Through the form of digital media, be it if we face another pandemic or coronavirus spikes again (Welsh Government, 2018). Consequently, with how little the foundation phase was prepared and the effects Covid had on the world can any Curricula be prepared for another pandemic?

The foundation phase was first implemented in September 2010 before being revised in 2015 covering the age range three to seven (foundation phase framework). Within the foundation phase framework, 2015, there are seven areas of learning outlined:

“Personal and social development, wellbeing and cultural diversity. Language, literacy and communication skills. Mathematical development. Welsh language development. Knowledge and understanding of the world. Physical development. Creative development.” outlining the importance of personal social development and wellbeing. Nonetheless With the new Curriculum for Wales, N.D, it has been reduced to six areas of learning with a broader variety of names. An example of this could be humanities, covering religious studies, history, geography. This allows the practitioner to be more in control of assessing children.

A big drive of both the foundation phase and the new curriculum is play. On page four of “Guide for parents and guardians' ” by the Welsh government, 2018 they delve into how learning through play is a fundamental part of education; through playing children are developing holistically. There are multiple types of play in which children can engage with and will be more focused on a certain area of learning and development than another type of play would be. Within the same document it is highlighted how crucial it is to implement outdoor learning providing the example of forest school. Forest school can be linked back to theorists such as Maria Montessori.

Maria Montessori was a passionate Italian physician, her main interest being in human development. Montessori wanted the future of education to be about progressing from one step to another through their own learning and play instead of having a test to prove themselves within the education system (Montessori.org, N.D). Maria’s vision can be seen within the new curriculum where there are now progression steps rather than the age centred assessment criteria with the intention to replace exams as an age-old process (Welsh Government, 2022). Montessori is still making an impact now seventy years after passing away; with all settings leading from her example of learning through play and using the outdoors as a vital tool for child development.

Returning back to the concept of learning through play, a theorist to learn from is Friedrich Froebel. Froebel was a pioneer in educating children and through this he learnt the key to teaching and children learning efficiently is to just let children play. Through their play children will gain an in-depth understanding of the world and most importantly the environment surrounding them (Froebel.org, N.D). A video by Sprouts, 2021 shows us how froebel viewed young people as seedlings, comparing the process of a child’s development to the nurturing of plants in a nursery. furthermore, Through his work froebel imported the term “Frei-Arbeit” more commonly known as “free work”; this

is when children were free to engage in an activity of their choice be it as a team or as an individual, most saw this as pointless unmeaningful activity whereas Froebel saw this as children taking charge of their learning all whilst expanding their resilience and concentration skills. Through Froebelian activities such as free work and Froebel gifts, a box of twenty different wooden objects based on different patterns and shapes children may see in nature, children would be learning different aspects of STEM without realising.

Looking at the Te Whariki curriculum in New Zealand it is driven by four unpinning principles:

“Whakamana- Empowerment.

Kotahitanga- holistic development.

Whanau Tangata- family and community.

Nga Hononga- relationships.”

Looking at these it is clear there is a drive for the child to be at the centre of their learning experience (Te Whariki, 2017). Similarly within the new curriculum for Wales there are four purposes for children to reach. These are: “Ambitious, Capable learners ready to learn throughout their lives; Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play full part in life and work; Ethical, Informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world; Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society” (Dauncey m. 2021). As similar as Te Whariki and the Welsh curriculum is, we can also see a very clear difference between them. Looking at the four principles of Te Whariki they are all about children becoming independent within their own development and building strong relationships that will benefit them with the child’s family being vital in their education. On the other hand the Welsh curriculum is more focused on getting the children ready to “play a full part in life and work” with even when wellbeing is mentioned it is linked back to fitting into society instead of standing out. Looking at the PISA test scores we can see that New Zealand with the Te Whariki curriculum ranked seventh for science, eighth for reading but twenty second in maths (NZ GOV, 2019). With Wales not making it into the top twenty for reading and science but being twentieth for maths (GOV.WALES, 2019). Furthermore looking at stats from Wales online, 2019 Wales did the worst in the United Kingdom too. Could Wales learn a lesson from Te Whariki and their fellow nations?

Within the foundation phase framework it says “Children of all abilities should have access to appropriate assessment and accreditation”. With the new curriculum comes an upgraded Routes for learning framework. Routes for learning has been made to provide practitioners in contact with additional learning needs and special educational needs children adequate resources to assess the child and track their progress. Within

the Routes for learning criteria children are being observed on how they communicate and react in their environment (welsh Gov, 2021). Within routes for learning is a route map detailing where a child should start and where they should finish but how there are multiple directions and routes they could take in order to get there. For example a child will start with recognising a stimuli but from this they could go to responding with contact from a safe person to them or replying to obvious stimuli and so on from there (routes for learning, 2022).

Consequently we can see the Foundation phase had many downfalls all of which are outlined in different documents. Starting with an article by Jane Waters, 2016 on page five it is mentioned how the foundation phase had the intention for change but it never happened. Continuing on to page six it discusses how the foundation phase framework said it wanted a lot of things but never explained any of them, this can be highlighted in the lack of explanation of terminology. Moreover the document failed to clarify how much play is practitioner led in comparison to child led. Reflecting upon the recommendations made for the welsh government there is a clear consensus that there needs to be more of a focus on the staff, with a recommendation mentioning staff to student ratio, another discussing qualified teachers, and one suggesting more staff training (Siraj, L and Kingston, D. 2014).

Section 2 - assessing the Early years curricula

Assessments within the early years curriculum has changed as the reform from the foundation phase into the new curriculum for Wales has begun to be implemented. Within the foundation phase children and young people had age specific goals set for them which was catered to their year group in school with the first assessment being based on the child in nursery and progressing up to year two. Each area of learning/development is broken into different strands to be assessed with different elements making up the strands. For example within mathematical development one of the strands is “using geometry skills” which has two separate elements to it with 3 goals the children are expected to meet within that year of school (Welsh Government, 2015). Building upon the foundation phase assessment criteria the new curriculum for Wales, 2020, has kept the strands but has changed age specific goals to progression steps instead. Where it used to be Nursery to Year two it is now progression step one to progression step five allowing children more time to meet their goals.

Learning from the foundation phase within the successful futures, 2018 document on page nine it outlines the findings from Donaldson’s review. He found that there were

many underlying issues with assessments in the curriculum suggesting that assessments need to be more “light-touch” and allow children to be interested in their own learning whilst taking responsibility for learning. Furthermore young people need to have the freedom of access to an electronic portfolio to allow them to work with their educators and add achievements themselves; providing them with electronic badges and medals they can show their friends and family.

As Wales continues to become a multicultural country children engaging with the curriculum may not be english speaking and their first language will be their families native tongue. This may cause issues to arise when assessing the child as the other children in their class will be assessed in english. However it is crucial for the practitioner to treat the children equal to their peers and therefore it is beneficial to assess the child in their first language; especially when it is their literacy and communication skills that are being tracked. Consequently the child should be provided with equal opportunities to engage in activity in both English and their first language (Devarakonda, C. 2021). Looking at the official Welsh government presentation on EAL it is a national requirement for settings to annually part take in an EAL survey as part of the PLASC, allowing the government to see where they need to provide help for ethnic minority and EAL students allowing time to update the five stage model ready for the next academic year. The five stage model is composed of letters A to E. stage A is when a child is new to english and stage E being fluent in english. Progression from A to E needs to be monitored and supported regularly as on average it will take children five to seven years with some children taking ten years. The Welsh Gov reiterates within the presentation how every child is individual and will progress differently but EAL children may be stuck at a certain stage for a while.

Furthermore Culture affects people massively and a good explanation can be seen in Edward Hall’s Iceberg theory. The iceberg model of culture is a good portrayal of how at first glance we only see a little of what makes up a person or in this case the culture that contributes to people’s daily life. The iceberg model explains how people will only see ten percent of a culture with the other ninety percent being under the surface and you as a person need to show enough interest and do research of your own. The ten percent is often referred to as the “surface culture” and the ninety percent as “deep culture”(2019, NP). This is seen in the education system from as soon as nursery. Children will join a school from different religions, ethnic origins, regional cultures (north and south wales for example) and different heritages.

Looking at the Countries and Cultures database, N.D, There are many religious communities residing in Wales with the top three being Roman Catholicism, Judaism

and Islam; all have different beliefs of how to live life which coming into one classroom needs to ensure that education is inclusive to all and open to adapting to fit each student. Implementing different religious beliefs into a classroom environment requires concise planning and deep research; giving the teacher a perfect reason to allow children to educate their peers about their culture and beliefs, ultimately teaching the children how to respect others from a different background (Dr. Vasquez, T. and Dr. Gilpatrick, M. 2020).

Having a classroom that represents a diverse range of cultures can have numerous benefits for both students and teachers. It can help to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment, where all students feel valued and able to fully participate (Lee, 2018). This can also lead to a more enriching learning experience, as students are exposed to different perspectives, experiences and ways of thinking (Tsui, 2017). One way to ensure that different cultures are represented in the classroom is by incorporating materials and teaching approaches that reflect a range of cultural experiences. This can include using literature from a variety of cultural backgrounds, incorporating cultural traditions and practices into lesson plans, and using teaching methods that are culturally responsive (Gay, 2010). It is also important to consider the cultural backgrounds and needs of individual students. This can involve adapting assignments and assessments to take into account different cultural norms and ways of learning, as well as providing support for students who may be struggling to adjust to a new cultural environment (Gay, 2010).

Culture can significantly impact how children are assessed and evaluated in educational settings, different cultural groups may have different expectations and standards for academic achievement, as well as different ways of expressing knowledge and understanding (Gay, 2010). This can lead to assessments that are not equitable or accurate, as they may not adequately take into account the cultural experiences and backgrounds of all students (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010). Additionally, the use of the standardised tests and other assessment tools that are not culturally sensitive can disadvantage students from certain cultural groups, as these tests may not accurately reflect their knowledge or abilities (Gay, 2010). This can lead to under or over estimations of a students academic potential, and can result in inappropriate placements or support. Overall, it is important to recognize the ways in which culture can influence assessment practices, and to take steps to ensure that assessments are fair and accurate for all students. This may involve using a range of assessment approaches, including both formal and informal methods, and considering the cultural backgrounds and needs of individual students (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010).

The new curriculum for Wales, known as the "Curriculum for Wales" or "Curriculum 2022," aims to create a more inclusive and culturally responsive education system in Wales. One key aspect of this is the recognition of the diverse cultural identities and experiences of students in Wales, and the importance of reflecting this diversity in the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2021). One way that culture is represented in the Curriculum for Wales is through the inclusion of cultural content and themes across all subject areas. This includes the incorporation of cultural traditions, histories, and perspectives from Wales and beyond, as well as the promotion of cultural awareness and understanding (Welsh Government, 2021). The Curriculum for Wales also emphasises the importance of cultural diversity and inclusivity in teaching and learning practices. This includes the use of culturally responsive teaching approaches, as well as the creation of inclusive and welcoming learning environments that recognize and value the cultural identities of all students (Welsh Government, 2021). Additionally, the Curriculum for Wales incorporates a number of specific goals and objectives related to cultural diversity and inclusivity, including the promotion of positive attitudes towards diversity and the development of cultural competence (Welsh Government, 2021). Overall, the new curriculum for Wales places a strong emphasis on the representation and valuing of culture in education. By incorporating cultural content, promoting inclusivity and cultural competence, and recognizing the diverse cultural identities of students, the curriculum aims to create a more culturally responsive education system in Wales.

Section 3- Blog

How do children learn through play and how has this influenced the new curriculum?

Play is a crucial aspect of children's learning and development. It provides children with the opportunity to explore, experiment, and make sense of their environment in a fun and engaging way (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Through play, children are able to learn new skills, practice and consolidate their existing knowledge, and develop their social, emotional, and cognitive abilities (Garvis, Pendergast, & Williams, 2015). The curriculum for Wales, known as the "Curriculum for Wales" or "Curriculum 2022," recognizes the importance of play in children's learning and development. The curriculum emphasises the value of play-based learning approaches, which allow children to engage with their learning in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their own interests and experiences (Welsh Government, 2021).

Play-based learning can take many forms, including imaginative play, construction play, and exploratory play (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Each of these types of play can support different aspects of children's learning and development. For example, imaginative play can help children to develop their language and communication skills, as well as their social and emotional abilities (Garvis et al., 2015). Construction play, such as building with blocks or other materials, can help children to develop their fine motor skills, spatial awareness, and problem-solving abilities (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Exploratory play, such as playing with sand or water, can help children to learn about the properties of different materials and develop their scientific understanding (Garvis et al., 2015). In addition to the specific learning outcomes that play can support, play-based learning approaches can also help to create a more engaging and enjoyable learning environment for children. This can be particularly important in early childhood education, where children are just beginning their formal learning journey (Welsh Government, 2021). It is clear that children learn through play in a range of important ways. By incorporating play-based learning approaches into the curriculum, the curriculum for Wales aims to create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for children, supporting their learning and development in a variety of areas.

Play-based learning has had a significant influence on the development of the curriculum for Wales, known as the "Curriculum for Wales" or "Curriculum 2022." This approach to learning, which emphasises the use of play and other experiential learning activities to support children's learning and development, has been shown to be particularly effective in the early years of education (Garvis, Pendergast, & Williams, 2015). One key aspect of the Curriculum for Wales that reflects the influence of play-based learning is the focus on child-initiated learning and the importance of allowing children to follow their own interests and curiosity in their learning (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach recognizes that children are naturally curious and motivated to learn, and that by providing them with the opportunity to explore and discover in a supportive environment, they are more likely to engage with their learning and develop important skills and knowledge (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Another aspect of the Curriculum for Wales that reflects the influence of play-based learning is the emphasis on the use of a range of teaching and learning approaches, including both formal and informal methods (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach recognizes that children learn in different ways and that a range of teaching approaches can support their learning and development. Play-based learning, in particular, can provide children with the opportunity to learn through exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving, which can be particularly valuable in the early years of education (Garvis et al., 2015).

Overall, it is clear that play-based learning has had a significant influence on the development of the Curriculum for Wales. By recognizing the value of child-initiated learning and the use of a range of teaching and learning approaches, the curriculum aims to create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for children that supports their learning and development in a variety of ways.

One key aspect of the Curriculum for Wales that supports the use of play in the classroom is the emphasis on child-initiated learning and the importance of allowing children to follow their own interests and curiosity in their learning (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach recognizes that children are naturally curious and motivated to learn, and that by providing them with the opportunity to explore and discover in a supportive environment, they are more likely to engage with their learning and develop important skills and knowledge (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). The Curriculum for Wales also emphasises the importance of a range of teaching and learning approaches, including both formal and informal methods (Welsh Government, 2021). This approach recognizes that children learn in different ways and that a range of teaching approaches can support their learning and development. Play-based learning, in particular, can provide children with the opportunity to learn through exploration, experimentation, and problem-solving, which can be particularly valuable in the early years of education (Garvis et al., 2015). To support the incorporation of play into the classroom, the Curriculum for Wales recommends providing children with a range of materials and resources that support play-based learning, as well as creating a flexible and supportive learning environment that allows children the freedom to explore and discover (Welsh Government, 2021). It also suggests providing opportunities for children to engage in a variety of types of play, such as imaginative play, construction play, and exploratory play, which can support different aspects of their learning and development (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). The curriculum for Wales has implemented a number of strategies to support the incorporation of play into the classroom. By recognizing the value of child-initiated learning and the use of a range of teaching and learning approaches, and by providing children with the resources and support they need to engage in play, the curriculum aims to create a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for children.

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