

Early Years Curricula

Section 1

This section of the assignment aims to provide the importance of reforming an existing curriculum, the improvements needed to be implemented and the best practice for its success.

Every child as stated in article 28 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 2019) has the right to an education. A National curriculum is important as it provides a standardised framework for education and ensuring consistency what children learn across regions. A National curriculum is fabricated by the input from teachers, practitioners, the wider community and shaped by the best ideas from around the world, for example Te Whariki approach from New Zealand where children are seen as competent learners from birth and learn by engaging in meaningful interactions with people, places and items and a process that continues through life (Welsh Government, no date;).

Many more young children in today's society are being enrolled in various form of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) due to parental working commitments; it is therefore important a child's well-being and development are nurtured from an early age (Wyslowska and Slot, 2020; Howard *et al.* 2018). The implementation of a play based early years curriculum is a positive continued commitment by the Welsh Government. It allows settings to implement age-appropriate activities that are tailored to each child's needs, supporting holistic development, curiosity, and lifelong learning (Welsh Government, 2019).

A curriculum needs to be reformed to meet the needs of an evolving world we live in. The process involves accessing, reviewing, and implementing changes and adopting planned and unplanned changes to the current curriculum with the intent of making teaching and learning more effective, meaningful, and improving children's outcomes (Cambridge, 2020).

This section highlights the importance of a play-based curriculum, its strengths, weaknesses and why a curriculum reform is needed in Wales. Wales during the PISA ranking system (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2023 run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) scored the

lowest out of the other three UK nations at 466 and significantly lower than countries such as Singapore, Macao and Taiwan ranking first. second and third out of 81 participating countries.

These results have prompted Education Minister, Jeremy Miles to announce in December 2023 plans to bring together education leaders across Wales to drive up standards in reading, maths, and science through supporting schools (Welsh Government, 2023b). These plans along with the recommendations in Education 2030 (OECD, no date) outlines the competencies and areas of learning also identified in 'Successful Futures' such as knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills to enable the New Curriculum for Wales to succeed and giving children the tools needed to adapt in a fast-paced developing world.

The Welsh Government (2017b) identified early years education as one of the areas that has the potential to make a great contribution to long term prosperity and well-being to children. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2017c) identified, early intervention can have a positive outcome to children's lives however these outcomes can only be achieved by learning and adapting together. Results demonstrated from Ladwig and McPherson research (Parekh, 2017) is that practitioners shape the curriculum around the children's ability and pedagogical approaches and strategies for example, to learn mathematics successfully it requires activities and exercises that encourages a high degree of cognitive engagement, this can be extended to outside the classroom.

According to the recommendations of the Donaldson report and Welsh Government (2019) the new curriculum has benefited from the strengths of the Foundation Phase, enabling improvements. However, the Donaldson report identified sixty-eight recommendations. such as extending teachers' development and training to create a more challenging and interesting educational experience that will help the children to thrive and succeed as documented in the Donaldson Report (Welsh Government. 2015b). This is demonstrated in the study by Aukerman and Schuldt (Parekh, 2017) where a teacher taught outside the regimented curriculum by engaging children in a dialogic pedagogy, this had a positive impact where students interaction in class increased and new knowledge learnt were used confidently, making the learning experience a positive one.

Welsh Government (2014) and Welsh Government (2015a) reports both highlighted that further training was needed, nine out of the twenty-three were relating to training for leaders and practitioners to understand what the role of the adult is within the curriculum and to develop appropriate pedagogies that will support progression for all children. Furthermore, a research report by Social Mobility Commission (2020) states it is not always possible to allow the time for training due to time, budgets, staff ratios within the settings and staff lack of confidence to participate.

Bottrill (2022, p. 25) suggests play is fundamental within early years for learning and development. Furthermore, McInnes *et al.* (2013) states that play is central to teaching and learning and is most beneficial when it is considered as an approach by the child's perspective. Moreover, research by Grindheim (2017): Gascoyne (2017) suggests that these can only be achieved by allowing multiple ways of play, such as indoors, outdoors, and messy play, giving the children the freedom to choose and to be challenged, to extend experiences and learning opportunities. This should minimise the impact of transitions, however this may take time as practitioners are used to the old system and therefore need to transition the way of observing and accessing children (Welsh Government, 2019).

McInnes *et al.* (2011) research suggested that using children's perceptions of play as a basis for understanding may be helpful and beneficial to practitioners by using a pedagogy that co-constructs activities with children. This may be achieved according to Welsh Government (2019) and the study by Howard and McInnes (2012) by observations, gaining knowledge of the children's likes and dislikes. Children may also be asked to reflect on the play experiences giving the practitioner a further insight to the children's thoughts and feelings. This will give a firm foundation in implementing suitable resources and activities for children to enjoy, learn and help with appropriate pedagogies that support progression for all children.

According to Welsh Government (2019) the fundamental difference between the old and new curriculum for Wales is the four purposes. Gatley (2020) agrees, however the New Curriculum does not make an entire clean break with the old curriculum but places improvements on the New curriculum ensuring that all children and young people should have the same support and consistency for a successful future by becoming, ambitious, aiming high, competent students who are eager to learn,

Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world, enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work, and healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society: (Welsh Government, 2015b). The curriculum is influenced by Bronfenbrenner Ecological system theory where the child must be in the centre of any decisions made, the school-based curriculum and decision making could be viewed as the microsystem, leadership, guidance, and support could be viewed as the mesosystem and policies can be viewed as the macrosystem. Every component functions together to offer a complete system of support and education. (Bradbury and Swailes 2022, p,19; Beckley 2012).

The Welsh Government (2023a) states improving education is a national mission and believes it is crucial to how practitioners teach and the reason they are teaching. Furthermore, Welsh Government (2014) recommended in The Foundation Phase final report for Wales it is important practitioners need to experts and understand how young children learn. This success can only be achieved through developing suitable training that ensures all staff have a good understanding of how to support children's development and the important role of the adult (Welsh Government, 2015b). Furthermore, Alsubaie (2015) agrees training is important, but practitioners should also be provided with professional development opportunities and provided with the knowledge of several cultures that will help teach how to assess, train in a multicultural classroom. This will help build a positive relationship and make children feel respected and safe.

Furthermore, Peterson-Katz, *et al.* (2023) and Oberhuemer (2015) states training on its own is not enough, continual coaching and work-placed learning after training from managers or team leaders has demonstrated to be beneficial through continually gaining knowledge, confidence and strengthening the role of the practitioner in the early years setting. However, with many practitioners and teachers leaving the profession due to poor pay and increasing workload a wealth of experience and knowledge is being lost and the education sector is currently in crisis and immediate action is needed to keep experienced staff and recruit new staff (Brightley-Hodges, 2023).

In conclusion, the implementation of a play-based early years curriculum is pivotal for fostering holistic child development. By emphasising experiential learning and social interaction, this approach not only supports academic growth but also nurtures essential life skills. As we reflect on the significance of play in early education, it becomes evident that a well-designed, play-centric curriculum lays the foundation for a long love of learning, encouraging creativity, curiosity, and collaboration in young minds. However, this may only be achieved if professional training of the highest calibre is made a priority.

Section 2

The purpose of this section is to evaluate the assessment techniques used in both current and past curricula and how they improve learning outcomes to the individual child and the implementations to improve assessment practices.

Every child is unique and is one of the four principles underpinned by the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (Beckley, 2012, p16) a child who is constantly learning, who can be self-assured, capable, confident, and resilient. Individuality is derived from every aspect of the child, the child's abilities and challenges, loves, and hates, hobbies and activities (Beckley, 2012, p, 81).

Every child is different and has a different temperament and learning style based on Vygotsky theory of zone of proximal development, which emphasises how important it is to view every child as an individual, who has a unique way of learning, and the emphasis on the environment, culture and knowledge surrounding the child to be able to scaffold further in developing and learning (Beckley, 2012). This can be achieved by a proactive approach according to McMahon and Dyer (2019, p. 5) to reduce barriers through allocating a key worker to each child. As a result, the key worker can tailor the care and learning needs of the child.

Assessments and observations can be precise and planned, spaced out across time, or they can happen as they happen, spontaneous occurrences, when something noteworthy or new is noticed and can be used to celebrate children's learning. Practitioners can gain a thorough understanding of every child by utilising a variety of observation techniques through learning stories. Practitioners ought to incorporate

these observations into the setting's present and future planning (Welsh Government 2023a).

Understanding children's interests is aided by observations and utilising these interests to their fullest can aid in extending learning. Participation in these encounters, the child actively participates in the learning process and contributes their uniqueness to each new experience through words, sounds, expression, sense of humour, own way of doing things and the new things learnt (Welsh Government 2022a).

The Foundation Phase Profile, or "the profile," was the previous form of assessing children and was an essential element of the Welsh Government's Early Years Development and Assessment Framework (EYDAF) that facilitated evaluation of children's learning and growth during the Foundation Phase through observations (Beckley, 2012, p. 194; Welsh Government 2022b). The principal was to offer a baseline evaluation for the first six weeks of reception class, that was consistent across the country and in line with phase-end results. However, many schools decided to not use the profile beyond the Foundation Phase and used alternative methods best suited the setting (2023b). The profile helped practitioners to assess what stage of development each child was at in the four areas of learning and to help design and develop an appropriate, holistic curriculum for every child (Welsh Government, 2017a).

Overall, practitioners expressed satisfaction with the Foundation Phase Profile's quality, but the feeling that a curriculum should be devised around the unique child, observations and assessments methods should reflect this and not measured against benchmarks that are considered normal. The profile was frequently criticised for being excessively time consuming, overly checklist-oriented, and inadequately customised for each individual child and many setting opting to devise own assessment and observational methods to achieve outcomes (Welsh Government, 2022a).

The UNCRC states in Article 29 settings and schools must encourage to develop abilities, talents, and personalities to encourage respect for own and all other cultures. According to Alsubaie (2015) there may be multicultural children in a classroom which presents new difficulties to practitioners. A child needs to be able to

communicate with people and other children, but this is not always easy or possible as there may be a language or a cultural barrier (Bornman *et al.*, 2010).

Practitioners have the additional duty of guiding children towards success in uncharted territory (Jenkin, 2017). When children are observed, a practitioner can plan what the best activities is suitable indoors and outdoors of the classroom and is best to unite the class. Diversity of traditions, values, beliefs and adjusting to a new unfamiliar cultural environment can contribute to a negative outcome, such as a low academic achievement. Children can sometimes achieve low academic achievement if a particular approach is unfamiliar to them, such as a Chinese child asking the teacher not to ask him questions during class as the direct questioning approach is unfamiliar in his culture (Thomas, 1995 (cited in Alsubaie, 2015)).

To guarantee that children received the support needed, the profile was created in accordance with tests conducted by medical specialists and to encourage the early identification of any developmental delays, special educational needs (SEN), or additional learning needs (ALN) who require it. All parties involved in the learning and development of children will find value in the assessments gathered for the profile, which will facilitate transfers between settings and schools. However. the research carried out by Sigley and Wilkinson (2015) suggest that if a child is not confident in language it does not define the child to be poor in another subject such as mathematics. Waiting for a child to reach a certain target in one subject may have an impact on another subject, putting the child at a disadvantage. Therefore, it is important to focus on what a child can do, rather than what the child cannot do.

The New Curriculum for Wales champions the changes in assessment where the whole curriculum is a learning experience through real life experiences and play opportunities. The main difference to the Foundation Phase profile is it provides support to each individual child to progress at the appropriate pace to the child ensuring support and are challenged accordingly (Welsh Government, 2022c). Practitioners learn a lot about what intrigues, drives, and captivates children via observation during play. It aids in the comprehension of the children's engagement levels, emotional states, friendships, and abilities. It is an engaging and informative model that does not have a rigid structure and formality like the Foundation Phase Profile (Welsh Government, 2022b).

An observational assessment needs to be manageable and purposeful and is not overly-time consuming (Welsh Government, 2022a). The 'framework for evaluation, improvement, and accountability' specifies that assessments should not be conducted for the goal of accountability; rather, they should only be used to enhance teaching and learning. To better support children's learning and development should be the goal. A practitioner may choose a format that best suits the child, themselves, or the setting for example a learning story where the observations are noteworthy and shows an insight into the child's learning journey, highlighting key moments of growth, and identifying areas of improvements (Welsh Government, 2023b).

Children are more relaxed when oblivious to being observed, this is demonstrated in the study carried out by Lafgren and Lafgren (Parekh, 2017) where students felt uneasy and mistrusted as the teacher's own behaviour changed during set exams conditions from caring to suspicion and surveillance. Therefore, are national tests or any tests an accurate reflection of a pupil's ability if all involved are not able to be themselves, it can also have the reverse effect of what should happen according to Tierney (2013) as it may stop some children from further learning opportunities if the required results are not achieved.

Both assessment methods encourage involving parents in the children's education and believes it is an integral aspect of a successful pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2019). Vygotsky believed all new knowledge and skills are influenced by the child's culture and family environment; therefore, it is important to communicate with parents. McMahon and Dyer (2019, p. 31) believes this relationship is built up over time by practitioners being friendly and learning from parents what the child does at home, making parents feel valued and providing the reassurance that the child is receiving the best care.

In conclusion, assessments need to be structures, but observations are an excellent method in providing first hand insights into a child's development, behaviour, and learning styles, enabling practitioners to tailor interventions and support based on each individual child needs. Additionally, it fosters a holistic understanding of a child's strengths, challenges, and interests, promoting effective and personalised teaching strategies.

Section 3

Examining the challenges faced by settings and the value of outdoor learning within a play-based early years curriculum.

Outdoor learning and the experiences gained are a major element of the new curriculum (Welsh Government, 2019). The outdoor experience for the children does not have to be on the same scale as Forest School where children visit natural spaces, but it does have to offer the children an opportunity to connect with the natural world, to nurture and enable (Prince and Diggory, 2023; Bottrill, 2022, p. 107).

There is a need to raise awareness amongst practitioners and parents regarding children's rights to play outdoors Unicef, (2019) due to the potential it fosters in supporting children's well-being, development, and learning. Concerns regarding outdoor playtime and space should be incorporated into educational planning and intervention, this should be implemented from birth, but especially from day-care settings given the amount of time children spend in educational settings and day-care (Bento, 2017).

There should be no distinction between the outside world and the classroom experience; rather, they should seamlessly blend to produce a space that ebbs and flows and complements one another (Bottrill, 2022, p. 108). The outdoor world can offer opportunities unlike the classroom due to the constant changing environment, the freedom, open air, sunlight, and the contact with natural elements (Bento, 2017).

Many theorists and approaches influence the success of outdoor learning and play and helps enhance the five development pathways of the curriculum with a child centred approach. Piaget's Cognitive development theory emphasised the importance of play in a child's cognitive development. Outdoor play provides opportunities for children to actively engage with the environment, promoting cognitive growth (Mooney, 2013). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlighted the social nature of learning. Outdoor play supports social interaction and collaboration among children, contributing to the children's cognitive and social development, Mooney (2013) and Bronfenbrenner' eco-systemic theory considers the influence of

various environmental systems on a child's development. Outdoor play exposes children to different elements of their environment, fostering connections with nature (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).

Outdoor play promotes various aspects of development, it helps children develop gross motor skills, enhances coordination, fosters social interactions, stimulates creativity, encourages problem-solving and engage in shared thinking (Schneller *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, exposure to nature during outdoor play has been linked to improved mental well-being in children as recorded in the research by Fiennes *et al.*, (2015) and increases levels of physical activity which reduces obesity and sedentary behaviour (Aronsson *et al.*, 2015: Bento, 2017).

Settings face the continual issue of financial constraints to provide a functioning outside play area, however an outdoor space can be minimal, a small area can be transformed into a functional area with creative planning (Bottrill, 2020). Some practitioners believe walking or travelling to a special outdoor area is necessary but due to staff/child ratios and time this could be seen as a barrier (Bottrill, 2020).

Other barriers hinder effective implementation of outdoor play, practitioners may face challenges in aligning outdoor experiences with curriculum requirements and this may be due to lack of training as previously acknowledged here in Wales (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Lack of training has also led practitioners to supervising the children rather than educating (Davies and Hamilton, 2016).

Furthermore, overcoming these barriers requires knowledge, summative evaluations for every subject covered in the early years curriculum and must be conducted outside just as successfully as they may indoors with careful planning, risk assessments, discussing the risks and boundaries with the children but also listening to the children and coming to an agreement (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Sharing outdoor experiences with the children contributes to secure attachments, this has a positive impact on emotional development for the children and practitioner as demonstrated in Bowlby attachment theory (Beckley, 2012, p. 226).

Professional development for practitioners to integrate outdoor learning seamlessly and to overcome the fear of outdoor playing. Some practitioners prefer to spend their time indoors because they believe it to be safer and more comfortable and they also

feared negative responses from the families due to potential mishaps or illnesses that could harm the children (Bento, 2017).

A growing culture of fear of potential accidents affect practitioners and parents understanding and the true value of risk-taking, misunderstanding the importance towards outdoor play, therefore children are kept occupied by adult led and structured activities (Singer *et al.*, 2009, (cited in Bento, 2017); Bottrill, 2022), However, children need to assess own risk as it fosters confidence and helps the children to become capable learners by exploring and testing boundaries (Storli and Sandseter, 2019).

Weather constraints can impede regular outdoor activities, however with the appropriate clothing such as wellies and appropriate waterproof clothing the children are protected. The changing weather provides great learning opportunities such as seasons, textures, different colours of the landscape including trees and flowers (Bottrill, 2022. P. 116).

Children have the world at their fingertips through technology but is becoming disconnected from the great outdoors (Veloigne *et al.*, 2012; Loebach *et al.*, 2021). Children spend longer time during the winter months in enclosed spaces, where they are more likely to be exposed to contaminated air and diseases this may lead to long term illnesses (Bento, 2017). Parents need deeper contribution and to encourage children to play in the community, however parents may reduce the level of mobility independence and would rather transport the children in vehicles, damaging the impact of engagement with nature on walks around the community (Loebach *et al.*, 2021).

In conclusion, most learning and development domains can be overcome during outdoor play with proper planning and continued discussions between children, practitioners, and parents. The outdoor environment offers a wealth of natural resources, and practitioners continued professional development must include learning to recognise them.

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