

Early Years Curricular

One of the most important events in Welsh history was when Wales held a referendum in 1997 which resulted in the passing of the Government of Wales Act 1998, thus forming the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. Results of the referendum granted Wales a forcible number of powers, one including Education and Learning. Wales had had little control over its education system until 1999, the Welsh Assembly Government were eager to address children's early years educational experiences, giving policy makers opportunities to create and develop a Welsh approach to education (Dauncey and Boshier 2019, Delamont, Rees and Power 2008, Welsh Government 2013). This section critically analyses the Early Years Curricula, implementation of the Foundation Phase and benefits and challenges that have been identified throughout the process.

Part 1

The Foundation Phase (FP) was introduced between 2004 and 2009, it was symbolic as it demonstrated the profound departure from the standard attainment tests and formal competency-based approach known as Key Stage 1, National Curriculum, changing the design of the curriculum and pedagogy. The heart of the Foundation Phase is the holistic development of children's skills, focus being developmental, experiential, and play-based approach to teaching and learning, furthermore an important element was to reduce inequalities in social and education outcomes (National Assembly for Wales 2001; Welsh Government 2013; Welsh Government 2015). These approaches are still recognised today, Welsh Government (2018), and play is paramount to a child's development in physical growth, cognitive, social and wellbeing. However, the FP was based on a Scandinavian model, child-centred education, and The Country Background report (2018) also recognised Early Years programmes in New Zealand, Te Whariki, and Italy, Reggio Emilia, indicated experiential play-based approaches resulted in higher standards of attainment. A key challenge for practitioners was to make sense of new terminology used throughout the FP and how best to integrate the new pedagogy. Additionally, this had to fit in with the statutory curriculum and the Literacy and Numeracy Framework. Therefore, it was recognised there would be numerous implications for all professionals working in the Early Years in Wales and Siraj-

Blatchford *et al.* (2005) addressed this, stating the Welsh Government would need to make a commitment to the FP by raising standards in both the quality of education provision, staff training and improving qualifications. Furthermore, McInnes *et al.* (2011) states although play is fundamental to a child's development and learning, research has shown practitioners views and beliefs on play and the way it is delivered show a discrepancy throughout their practice.

Another factor for the FP has been previous PISA publications over the years and the disappointing results of the primary schools across Wales. This brought a new change of focus on school accountability, returning to basics and a whole new regional approach to school improvement, looking at deprivation and low attainment. Andrews, 2011 believes as PISA is internationally recognised and respected, the results of the survey conducted are indicative of the quality of any curriculum. Andrews further suggests as Wales failed to improve or even maintain the 2006 results in 2009, the need for analysis and change of the Welsh curriculum is essential. This was highlighted in the outcomes of children in Wales through qualifications and evaluations obtained in 2018 (Welsh Government, 2018), however, this did not make much difference to the PISA results in 2018, with very little change (Dauncey and Boshier 2019).

The Welsh Government (2018) recognised the importance of play through evidence, based on assessment, as a dominant method of learning for children in the early Years. Additionally, play enables children to learn in a holistic approach for all Areas of Learning within the Curriculum for Wales, becoming problem-solvers and investigators, explorers, and scientists, having different valuable experiences every day. Furthermore, the introduction of the FP made practitioners embrace a different approach of pedagogy and avoid formal teaching, which can have a negative impact on children who are at a young age. Allowing children freedom and opportunity to learn through play results in them having no feeling of failure, builds their confidence and support them to challenge themselves with new experiences. It also gives children opportunities to initiate and direct their own learning, practical and physical, indoor and outdoor (Welsh Government 2015 and Macintyre 2001).

Piaget valued the importance of play and identified different types, linked to his four stages of development, furthermore his theories have been influential on the way we

understand children's cognitive development, he was one of the first theorists to study how children think and learn. He believed that children could construct their own knowledge from their experiences and learn many things without the presence of an adult, intensifying the need for children to have that freedom to explore for themselves. The older the child becomes; the environment and play should encourage further language and cognitive development. Montessori, influenced by the work of Piaget, also suggested that children learn at different developmental stages, and the environment children play in should be one to support free exploration for cognitive development to progress (Aubrey and Riley 2019).

There have been many independent evaluations completed with relation to the FP, commissioned by the Welsh Government, the final report printed in 2015 (Welsh Government 2015). It explains the FP policy for early education for 3-7 years old and advocates developmental, experiential, and play-based approaches. It was implemented in three stages and 2009/10 seen the FP delivered throughout Wales. The aims of all reports have not changed, the focus being the implementation of the FP, to evaluate the impact made, assess the value for money and to put in place an evaluation framework for the outputs and outcomes of the FP (Welsh Government 2015). However, implementation of the FP varied substantially, with the introduction of improved adult: child ratios and recruitment of additional staff, concerns were raised regarding the level of qualifications and experience and could be factor.

The success of the FP was the implementation throughout primary schools in Wales, how it was received and delivered by practitioners and children. For the FP to prevail, teachers and practitioners alike need to be actively involved in activities and play for children's learning (Waters, 2016). Moreover, opportunities for children to initiate and lead their own learning needed to be part of everyday practice, extended by adults who engage using a skilful and meaningful approach (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Waters, 2016; Welsh Government, 2015). In practice, this would mean practitioners recognise the cues children display during play and knowing when to intervene and enhance the learning experience (Wainwright, *et al.* 2019).

Implementation of the Foundation Phase has not been without challenges. Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016) suggest staffing as an issue, for the FP to work as intended the adult to child ratio meant an increase in staffing costs, furthermore, this

led to an emphasis on meeting the ratio rather than expertise and knowledge in the early years. Wainwright, *et al.* (2019) agrees and suggests that this increase in the early year's workforce led to a variation in the level of quality practice due to inadequate training and experience. Furthermore, the principle of the FP is pedagogy through the continuum of play, most of the training took place in pilot areas where practitioners experienced first-hand the purpose of the FP, this led to a substantial variation of implementation across Wales (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016; Wainwright, *et al.* 2019; Siraj and Kingston, 2014). Taylor, *et al.* (2013) review into the FP recognised that practitioners who had higher levels of training and experience were better equipped to implement the FP pedagogy, however only a small percentage of practitioners had finalised the Welsh Government Foundation Phase training modules. The Welsh Government (2017a) recognised the need to ensure appropriate training and qualifications were available for the early year's workforce and with an emphasis on understanding of child learning and development and are committed to developing the skills of the early year's workforce.

Donaldson's (2015) review suggests Welsh education needed reform due to concerns regarding current curriculum and assessment arrangements. The Welsh education system is currently implementing radical changes aiming for inclusion and equality for all learners, with the ethos that every child is unique and capable of achieving regardless of needs, ability, or socio-economic status (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Part 2

To ensure the best start to life early years practitioners have a duty to ensure equitable, equal learning opportunities and environments are accessible to all children, regardless of needs or ability (Department for Education, 2014). The fundamental basis of The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the significance of everyday practice through the principles of the unique child. Dallimore (2019) argues that early years is crucial for development, additionally, each child must be seen as unique and capable of achieving success, through curiosity and actively acquiring knowledge whilst being supported by caring and supportive adults. This supports the principles of the UNCRC, that every child must be regarded as unique,

with varied personalities and traits, diverse backgrounds, and unique developmental needs (UNICEF, 2018).

Early Years Matters (2023) suggests observation is crucial, it enables practitioners to witness children's unique abilities in action. The purpose of assessment is to support children's progression and is pivotal to the Curriculum for Wales, placing the learner at the centre as unique and active participants in learning and development (Welsh Government, 2022b). McLachlan (2018) believes experienced adults' continuous observation of behaviour enables more in-depth evaluation which is vital for planning to meet the needs of each child. Bohart and Procopio (2018) and Admin, (2012) argue that observation and assessment is a simultaneous process whether observing in action or observing data, the two processes work hand in hand.

The Foundation Phase in Wales is based on the principles of Scandinavia, New Zealand (Te Whariki) and Reggio Emilia's constructivist learning theory through developmentally appropriate provision which is child centred and based on individual needs and ability (Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron, 2016). The Welsh Government (2017b) Foundation Phase Profile is a tool to support practitioners in assessing children's learning and development in the Foundation Phase. The design of the profile identifies possibility of additional learning needs allowing early intervention and support, moreover, practitioners using observation with formative assessment can provide learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate (Welsh Government, 2017b).

The structure of the profile assesses across four areas of learning and begins with the baseline assessment on the compact profile which began as a compulsory assessment within the first six weeks of starting Reception. However, according to Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2007) views of stakeholders across Wales suggest baseline assessments are time consuming to complete and may not demonstrate a true reflection of a child's ability partly being due to adult led assessment activities. Although, the views of practitioners who used the baseline assessments were positive and many felt the use of observation enabled accurate planning for provision tailored to children's developmental needs and interests (Taylor, *et al.* 2013; Welsh Government, 2015). Despite this, the baseline assessment was discontinued in

2012 and a new assessment, the Foundation Phase Profile which included a revised baseline and additional assessment at end of each phase. (Thomas and Lewis, 2016; Welsh Government 2017b).

For the compact profile (baseline), observation takes place during the first six weeks of entering Reception, allowing children to settle into their new environment. It is suggested that beginning with an observational baseline allows practitioners to evaluate assessments and through Foundation Phase Pedagogy, practitioners are better informed and understand the development needs of each child. The outcomes from the compact profile are reported to the Welsh Government. The full profile consists of all skills ladders for all areas of learning. The purpose of the full profile is to assess outcomes at the end of year two, which encompass all areas of learning, these assessments are statutory, and results must be sent to the Welsh Government. Outcomes from the foundation phase profiles are indicative of the skills children have achieved whilst being observed, the purpose being, when children reach the end of the foundation phase, year two, they will have mastered all foundation phase profile outcomes (Welsh Government, 2017b).

Thomas and Lewis (2020) point out assessment in the Foundation Phase must be purposeful to ensure accuracy in ascertaining ability. This specific assessment tool enables professionals working to use observation and formative methods to assess children when they start the Foundation Phase and when they finish at the end of year two. (Welsh Government, 2017b; Welsh Government, 2019). According to Bohart and Procopio (2018) formative assessment enables practitioners to make informed decisions for future practice and to use the process effectively practitioners must be both observers and participants in children's experiences. This requires practitioners to be knowledgeable about child development, how children learn, and to be skilful in recognising children's cues to participate in child led play opportunities (MacBlain, 2014). The Welsh Government (2019) recognised the need to support practitioners for clarification of the assessment framework within the Foundation Phase and recommends training is made available to ensure the framework is utilised effectively.

Morgan, *et al.* (2022) suggests as children develop at individual rates during the early years, regular assessment is important to build an accurate picture of a child's growing ability. Moreover, Morgan further suggests due to some activities being assessed via a focus task, for example being adult led, has a negative impact on the assessment result, where an activity is undertaken which is child led the result is more likely to be an accurate outcome. Similarly, Howard and McInnes (2013) believes when children work with an adult on any task, they see it more as a test which results in inaccurate assessment results, however, when it is child led, they view it as a play opportunity and more likely to succeed. Research by Morgan *et al.* (2022) suggests practitioners view daily assessment as effective and gives a true reflection of a child's ability, the suggestion is actively verbally interacting with learners and effective planning of activities aids practitioners to understand a child's ability. However, when using the Foundation Phase Profile, it was felt that practitioner and teacher knowledge when assessing children creates a clearer picture of the individual ability due to the amount of time and interaction spent with learners and should be taken more seriously when it comes to the Foundation Phase Profile (Grigg, 2016).

New Zealand's national play based early years curriculum Te Whariki, core aims to empower children acquire knowledge, to support children to grow holistically, to embrace the family and community as participants of the child's learning, to build positive relationships with people and the world around them (Glazzard, 2010; Hamilton and Vermeren, 2016). Cooper, Hedges and Dixon (2014) describe Te Whariki as the driver for practitioners to view all children as capable of success and competent learners. Te Whariki's emphasis on the unique child and child led learning formed the basis for the play-based approach to learning in Wales through the Foundation Phase (Lewis, 2012).

The purpose of assessment through Te Whariki includes careful observation by skilled and knowledgeable practitioners with a view to obtain relevant information regarding children's individual learning and development via formative assessment, to share with practitioners, children, and their family (McLauchlan, 2018; Reese, *et al.* 2021). Views and beliefs of the child's family are seen as important aspects of children's learning and part of the assessment process is to collaborate with children

and their family to create meaningful learning experiences and build positive relationships in the process (Cooper, Hedges and Dixon, 2014).

Learning Stories are a narrative form of assessment in Te Whariki, the emphasis on children's learning as continuous responses and relationships with people and the world around them (Carr and Lee, 2012; Perkins, 2013). Blaiklock (2010b) describes the learning story assessment process as dependent on practitioners to write a story which reflects the child's learning experiences on what is viewed rather than knowledge and skills. Learning stories are well established with New Zealand early years providers and as well as written stories regarding learning experiences includes photographs to illustrate progress and make learning visible (Perkins, 2013). Gunn White and Williams (2022) report on the use of photographs for assessment purposes, are an integral part of assessment and visualization of children's learning. Blaiklock (2010a) argues partial success of learning stories for assessment is they are useful for assessing all young children and for every type of learning experience. However, Blaiklock further suggests wider reservations exist regarding the use of Learning Stories for assessment purposes including, limited guidance for areas of learning, learning stories do not display changes in a child's learning or development, and issues with providing credibility to learning stories. Although, Gunn, White and Williams (2022) argue the use of photographic evidence in learning stories adds credibility and trust to assessment, furthermore, teacher evaluation at the end of the learning story incorporates both image and review of learning experience adding substance to the content and paves the way for future learning (Blaiklock, 2010a: Gunn, White and Williams, 2022). Moreover, though using images, video, or audio to evidence children's experiences over time allows for the tracking of children's interests and abilities, practitioners must be knowledgeable about using synthesis and analysing data gathered which creates analysis of assessment (McLachlan, 2018).

Though the Learning Story approach has been highly commended globally, there remains scrutiny about the value of this type of assessment (Blaiklock, 2010b). Cameron (2014) questions whether teacher and practitioner understanding of the time-consuming nature when creating and using learning stories and how to utilise effectively for assessment and planning of learning and experiences. In addition to

this, Blaiklock (2010a) suggests the difficulty in concluding what the intention of assessment is with regards to learning stories it due to the fact as it is a formative assessment, the nature of the assessment outcomes is unclear, moreover, learning stories display specific learning experiences observed rather than skills acquired through the process. Cooper, Hedges and Dixon (2014) suggest through continuous professional development, practitioners must develop knowledge and understanding of the nature of learning together with assessment and their role in scaffolding children's experiences. The Early Years Advisory Group report (Ministry of Education, 2015) recommends clarity is needed for expectations on assessment strategies including formative assessment and feeding back, the assessment process needs to be aligned with the curriculum throughout the early years and understanding must be strengthened between practitioners and families to understand the framework of assessment and reporting, furthermore, staff training to increase knowledge, understanding and confidence for the assessment process and inclusion of families through the process.

Part 3

Support and inclusion of children with behavioural emotional and social difficulties, the importance of positive attitudes amongst practitioners and building relationships enabling access to the curriculum.

To provide children with the best start in life, practitioners are perfectly placed to nurture children's emotional health and wellbeing and in turn develop social skills and minimise stigma attached with children who experience Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). All children, including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) have the right to an education, to have their voices heard and not experience disadvantage due to poverty, disability or ALN. This assignment aims to define what BESD looks like, challenges children and adults involved in their lives experience, support which can be put in place to minimise the negative effects of BESD and enable children to develop a sense of trust, safety and belonging which leads them on to live fulfilling lives.

The Welsh Government (2016) describes inclusion as an action where all children have access and opportunities in equitable learning environments regardless of their needs or ability. Inclusive education has increased globally since countries have pledged allegiance with the UNCRC and the rights of children with disabilities or ALN (Zdoupas and Laubenstein, 2022). To ensure effective inclusion, schools have a responsibility to adapt the learning environment to ensure individual needs of children are met (Welsh Government, 2016).

Children who display challenging behaviour which cause multiple problems are defined as experiencing BESD (Welsh Government, 2010). Due to the negative effects of their behaviour, these children experience difficulties in social situations, the learning environment and difficulties forming relationships (Zweers, *et al.* 2021; MackFarlane and Woolfson, 2013; Welsh Government, 2010). Cefai and Cooper (2010) argues though the principles of the UNCRC and the voice of the child is recognised in education, voices of children with BESD are rarely heard.

Furthermore, an investigation by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) found for some children in the Foundation Phase, their right to an education were not being fulfilled due to exclusion, reduced, reduced timetable or being supervision in isolation.

Children who display challenging behaviour are commonly linked with low socioeconomic backgrounds and their home environment forms a significant role in their conduct in school due to their needs not being met (Grazuleviciene *et al.* 2017; Welsh Government, 2016). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to negative early experiences, violence, trauma, and abuse which leads to poor physical health and wellbeing, poor attainment in education, lack of trust, feeling unconnected and unsafe which can result in BESD (Welsh Government, 2021a). Children experiencing BESD are viewed as being a challenge to inclusive education when displaying distressed, confrontational, and challenging behaviours, for example, externalising behaviour such as physical aggression, verbal aggression, defiance, and vandalism Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018; Cefai and Cooper, 2010;).

Caslin (2021) argues while some teachers remain committed to inclusion, perspectives of BESD display a lack of understanding of the causes of such

behaviour, some educators are becoming less tolerant and seemingly justifying the exclusion of pupils from the learning environment. Furthermore, Caslin further suggests practitioners interpretation of BESD as unmanageable pupils remains a barrier to inclusion. Saloviita (2020) believes until practitioner perceptions change towards children with BESD, little improvement will be seen regarding inclusion of these pupils. The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) recommends training is made available to all practitioner's to fully understand the impact of how children are acknowledged influences how they respond. Moreover, the Welsh Government (2021b) is committed to the inclusion of pupils with ALN in mainstream settings and therefore committed to providing professional development to ensure practitioners can deal with BESD effectively.

An investigation into inclusion in the Foundation Phase by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) found that many children in the FP were excluded over and eighteen-month timescale between the ages of three and seven. The investigation found 768 incidents of exclusion in settings across Wales who were issuing unofficial exclusion by sending pupils home early, issuing reduced timetables and supervision in isolation. Parents expressed concerns about lack of provision for their child, lack of communication including outside agencies, perplexity around referrals, lack of support and understanding and not knowing where to turn (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2018). Exclusion and isolation have a negative impact for future education, mental health and wellbeing, criminal activity, and unemployment later in life (Power and Taylor, 2011).

Armstrong, Price, and Crowley (2015) suggest practitioners are key in supporting and meeting the needs of pupils with BESD in educational settings. Pupils with BESD often have low self-esteem, feel unsafe and lack sense of belonging (Zweers *et al.* 2021). Passionate early childhood practitioners who are motivated to improve the education and wellbeing of children and their families have the potential to change these negative feelings and create positive changes enabling children to feel safe, included, and ready to learn (Zweers *et al.* 2021; Murray and Clark, 2013; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018). When positive relationships are formed with practitioners and efforts are made for inclusion, children's perception of educational settings change, they begin to feel safe, grow a sense of belonging,

begin to enjoy the learning environment, and feel a sense of achievement, enabling them to access the curriculum (Zweers et al. 2021; Armstrong, Price, and Crowley 2015).

All children must be seen as unique and capable of achieving success (Welsh Government, 2017b). This is crucial when implementing support for children with BESD. Early identification is key in providing intervention and action plans in place to avoid exclusion to support children with BESD and avoid negative impacts on development (Commissioner for Wales, 2018).

There is a suggestion a school-based intervention such as Nurture groups are effective for BESD. Groups of up to ten children are taken out of class for a certain amount of time over a period of months to work on positive relationships, emotional literacy, peer interactions and communication skills. The physical environment is important for the Nurture Room. The room is created for children to feel warm, safe, welcomed, and comfortable in a room which replicates a caring home environment. It is here activities take place to support children to develop social skills, self-esteem, sense of belonging, trust, and communication skills with the aim to transfer these skills outside of the nurture room (Cunningham, Hartwell and Kreppner, 2019; Sloan *et al.* 2020). Sloan suggests though Nurture groups improved children's SEBD outcomes there was little evidence for improvement in academic outcomes. However, Vincent (2017) argues though more research is needed regarding academic improvement, improved academic focus was observable in the class with children who had attended Nurture Groups, with children more engaged, participating and persevering with tasks in the classroom.

Experiences in the early years have a fundamental effect on the lives of children, where children are exposed to negative experiences there is a limited window of time where positive impacts can be made to change their lives. Passionate early years practitioners who are motivated to embrace children with BESD are the catalyst for change and lead teachers and practitioners alike to create positive change in education for effective inclusion for all, this process takes time, care, and patience to implement however enabling children with BESD to feel able to access the curriculum with peers is immeasurable (Welsh Government, 2017b; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2018; Zweers *et al.* 2021; Vincent 2017).

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