

Early Years Curricula ECEY6010/C

Section 1

Nationally there is a general movement to recognise early years education as a distinctive and influential phase in children's learning that should be classified by a curriculum that focuses on whole child learning and development alongside teaching methods that are appropriate for every child. Bertram and Pascal (2002). There are clear tensions between pedagogical traditions which tend to adapt formal subject orientated curriculums and new play-based ideas for children's education which adapt a more child led approach where children learning through a play-based curriculum. Munn (2010) support this by stating that within early years education there is a tension between the concepts of play and learning. Play is held to be fundamental as a means of learning and as a route to healthy socio emotional development, however this is not always reflected in practice and policy. There is a distinction between play and learning and the construction of these two opposites can have a clear complicated effect on the way early years curriculum is constructed and read.

There are ongoing debates around the prescriptive and holistic curricula and issues regarding training of the early years workforce, arguing that a holistic curriculum relies heavily on a knowledgeable workforce in order for it to deliver. Recommendation 8 of the independent stocktake Wales 2014 aids this argument by recommending that training needs to be developed that ensures all staff have a good understanding of language, literacy and numeracy and how to actively support each child's development across the foundation phase including emphasis on the role of the adult within curriculum to positively support play and learning. In 2002 the Welsh government published its play policy which would be the first national play policy in the world, it was founded on the key principle that all children have the right to play. It clearly reflects the Welsh governments commitments in ensuring children and their needs are central to any policy making that involves them. An article by Play Wales states that the Welsh government recognise the need of appropriate environments for play both inside and outside the classrooms and in 2010 became the first country in the world to pass a law about opportunities for children's play. The curriculum in Scotland has similar positive views on the implementation of play being embedded in early years curricula and state its influence on brain development as both the neural and chemical reactions in the brain created by the act of play supports the development of coordinated physical and mental capabilities. Play Scotland was reformed in 1998 with the clear aim of making children's rights to play a reality in Scotland, in January 2024 children's rights to play was incorporated into Scots law integrating it into education.

Donaldson (2015) reviewed the assessment arrangements and curriculum in Wales and founded that developments in education policies have seen major positive changes in both assessments and accountability arrangements in recent years, however the Welsh government have acknowledged weaknesses in its assessment

frameworks as being not well understood. Its educational improvement plan recognises the need for improvement in this section by aligning assessments with the purpose of learning and assessing what matters as the validity of any assessment rests wholly on its relationship to the purposes and intended outcomes of the teaching and learning process. Recommendation 33 states that educators should plan their teaching around the key pedagogies to ensure that activities are related directly to the curriculum purposes therefore enhancing learning outcomes in Wales.

Parker et al (2022) argue that our understanding that children learn through the natural inquiry process of play has a strong basis in research. Whiteread et al (2012) state that most organisations surveyed agreed on the view of play as a natural behaviour that is beneficial and fundamental for wellbeing and holistic development, some organisations however further stress the fact that play and leisure is a right stated in the CRC. Even with these agreed views each organisation differs from another related to the view that play takes. With some focusing on the instrumental value of play for purposes such as educational, learning values and skills. Whereas others focus on play for its own sake, seeing it as an activity, concerning themselves with the expert researchers views rather than focusing on the definition. 'Play should be spontaneous, flexible, unpredictable, imaginative and directed by the'. Playboard Whitebread et al (2012) also states that early year's settings should advocate the need for spaces and time for play. Within schools the view was expressed that breaks between lessons are an important chance for all children to engage in different types of play therefore schools should have outdoor areas that enhance play. Further organisations advocate more play provision for children is vital to consider going forward, in terms of time and space with additional play-based activities and recourses. Ludemos and Playboard NI favour this and recommend that school based, freely chosen and self-determined play programmes supported by adults should be considered.

Parker and Thomsen (2019) describe the impact of playful pedagogies on learning outcomes in early education settings where frameworks to explore quality in learning through play is paramount. It is argued that there is four key dimensions of quality learning through play, the learning outcomes, the play experience, design and the facilitation. Early year's framework should incorporate the child's experience as a key component and implement playful pedagogies in schools where consideration of how children experience learning as playful can aid positive developmental progress. This means that educators require to experience learning through the child's eyes rather than taking the perspective of the teacher. Educators taking an old-fashioned approach to educating children can lead to negative impacts on children's learning and development where new play based curriculum ideas are not promoted. Alle-Herndon and Roberts 2020 focus on the child as a whole and their holistic development as a key feature of learning through play when compared with other less playful approaches regarding outcomes. All learning gains made by children are valued when learnt through play and it is vital as educators to carefully consider the suitability of impact measurements and assessment tools to capture holistic skills.

Wood and Bennett (1999) suggest the formal approach within education as being predominantly teacher led and somewhat structured basing learning on literacy and

numeracy in order to achieve mastery and competence. However they argue the benefits of a developmentally appropriate approach that highly promotes play is a key primary medium for learning and development, giving children the balance of independent choice and alternative activities to enhance stimulation. According to Walsh and McGuinness et al (2010) there is a clear mutual understanding both from classroom observations and teachers themselves the shift from teacher led and formal approaches towards more play centred and informal classroom practice and the majority of parents of primary aged children who were surveyed were happy with the movement in education direction and the new approaches within the curriculum. Stated in the new Welsh curriculum there are five key developmental pathways belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and wellbeing where children are able to make progress at their own pace within their preferred learning environment. These are expressed from a child's perspective rather than structured learning outcomes, putting children are the forefront of all decision making regarding their education.

Ward (2020) suggests that a play-based curriculum expands intelligence, encourages problem solving and allows children to learn emotional literacy. By offering a play-based curriculum filled with STEM focused activities can encourage growth in a friendly and interesting environment, moreover one of the best ways to predict school success is to measure impulse control as children who learn by exploring sand and painting together with others leads the development of socialising and understanding emotions where they will then grow to be able to negotiate, compromise and resolve conflicts in adulthood. The Foundation Phase framework in Wales 2015 discusses that educational provisions for young children should be holistic with the child at the heart of any planned curriculum. For children, play is not only crucial to the way children become self-aware and the way in which they learn the key rules of social behaviour but it is also fundamental for intellectual development, learning through perseverance and concentration.

It remains true that even the most thoughtfully designed learning experiences can fail to achieve the intended outcomes if teachers are unable to effectively facilitate playful learning in the classroom Parker et al (2022). Teachers can be seen to be sceptical about adapting play pedagogies without a clear understanding of how it can be successful, Martlew et al (2011). While elements of facilitation may be planned, effective facilitation will inevitably involve monitoring during the experience, adjustments in responses to emerging needs and continuous assessments of children's learning and experience, in order for learning through play to be effective. The evidence that play supports and facilitates learning is considerable and the understanding of learning through play has greatly expanded over years where problem solving and socio emotional learning are essential skills which are learnt through playful pedagogies.

Section 2

The idea of the unique child is one of the four key guiding principles which should shape all early years practice. The UNCRC argue that for children to fully thrive all their key needs to be met, from the right to education Article 28 to the right to life, survival and development Article 6. These vital rights support the unique child as a whole and leads governments to implement policies into practice. The EYFS (2023) in England describe this key principle as 'every child is a unique child whom is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self assured'. However within Wales they argue that in order to understand every child and their development equally we need to keep in mind three important aspects; the child as an individual, their environment and socioeconomic culture which surrounds both the child and their families. Siraj-Blatchford et al (2012). Children in Wales state that every child is unique and their individual needs with reflect this, most of what children learn in their first years of life they will often to naturally in their own way at their own pace. Therefore the environment that children grow in both the physically and socially play a vital role in their overall learning and development. early years professionals should strive for positive and nurturing interactions as well as a physical learning environment enriched with opportunities.

Assessments within early years is an important way in which within everyday practice early years educators are able to observe children's learning, strive to understand it and then put our understanding to good use, Drummond (1993). Assessments, progress tracking and age of stage related development models within a play based curriculum can be challenging due to the informal and spontaneous style and nature of play itself. However it is part of the early years care for educators to assess children's learning and development in order to support progress. According to A Curriculum for funded non maintained nursery settings (2022) Observations play a key role in practice, they helps practitioners to understand the unique child and what motivates, interests and engages them as well as analysing what we see and hear to make informed decisions on how we support children's progress. These holistic observations give rich, authentic data about a child's individual skills, knowledge and dispositions. Allowing educators to capture children's natural behaviours and interactions. According to Harcombe (no date) observational assessments should both be planned and spontaneous with majority of them resulting from child initiated learning undertaken through continuous provisions. Children should not be aware of the observations and by educators keeping them low profile it poses the advantage of the child being less self-conscious meaning a more holistic result. However on the contrary if an educator is making it obvious they are observing and has stated to other children not to disturb it can cause issues where the child being observed change their behaviour resulting in a non-accurate observation, as well as attracting other children to be inquisitive leading the educator not being able to collect the correct data. Other weaknesses of observational assessments is they can be time consuming and subjective as interpretations of children's play and behaviour can differ amongst educators including challenges in recording and capturing observations in a manner that is consistent and standardized.

According to the Welsh Government (2022) Research into assessment practices within the foundation phases founded that practitioners unanimously identified observation as the best means of carrying out assessments. Described as being able to provide 'rich evidence' on what early years learners are able to do independently. Continuous assessment as an ongoing daily practice was noted by the majority as being important to education. However practitioners relying on previous written assessment scores was flagged as an issue as specific judgements could be carried forward providing a misleading picture. Furthermore a number of practitioners further pointed out that rapid developmental changes occur within foundation phase aged children which clearly puts an emphasis on the importance of continuous assessments. Barriers within early years settings can lead to pressures for educators to complete assessments that are rightly suited to every individual child. Time and resources are argued to be an ongoing problem within early years where numerous practitioners are impacted by time pressures and lack of resources to assist them in observational assessments.

Stated by Dr Nick Morgan One key recommendation was that best practice examples should be readily available for practitioners within the foundation phase on how best to set up opportunities to successfully assess skills which shy's away from formal tasks. It is argued that children learn best in stimulating and nurturing environments therefore access to creative and innovative means of assessing skills is key to alleviating tensions between pedagogical principles of the foundation phase and the need to evidence certain skills. Furthermore Gov.Wales state that through observing and listening practitioners are able to gather evidence and assess how much progress children have made and whether they need further learning opportunities to consolidate their learning. Using various methods enables practitioners to determine the learning styles each child has.

A number of researchers have developed methods of observing and assessing children's abilities and argue it is not important for practitioners to record all that is seen or heard but instead relevant judgements concerning children's development and significant achievements should be assessed and recorded in order to make adjustments in future planning. The Welsh government mark in the curriculum for Wales a significant shift in the role of assessments within early education, stating it is clear that the primary purpose of assessments is to support each individual learner to progress at a pace appropriate to them ensuring they are supported and challenged accordingly. Therefore, the Curriculum for Wales has set assessment guidance for supporting individual learners on a day to day continuous basis. Identify, capture and reflect on learner's progress over a period of time and understand group progress in order to reflect on practice. For this to be effective it has meant that aspects of the Welsh curriculum arrangements that do not support this ethos have been removed with the introduction of new requirements that put early learners at the heart of all assessments. As well as this change the phases and key stages will be replaced with one continuum of learning from the ages of 3 to 16 years which will help ensure smoother learning journeys for learners. Recommendation 7 within the evaluation of the Foundation Phase 2015 suggests training and guidance material needs to place a larger emphasis on observation and

assessment, delivering enhanced provisions to make key changes in the environments and skills in early years. Welsh Gov (2015).

Assessments being vital to supporting children with their learning means that this continuum is at an appropriate pace whilst ensuring that children are both supported and challenged in order to reach their potential. The dynamic approach to observation and assessments enables us to look beyond the idea of normative developmental expectations and outcome measures, leading us to look at the child as unique and individual. Observations should also inform pedagogical approaches in all early year's settings. When practitioners have time and a good understanding of a child's abilities, they are able to positively adapt their interactive strategies. Observations can come in focused and purposeful forms where based on interests activities can be planned which assess a particular area of a child's learning whereas others can be more fluid where assessments can emerge from a free play observation, both are equally important and valid.

According to Athey (2007) using observation methods paired with working with children's schemas that are evidential in children's play which is a reflection of children's learning preferences and intrinsic brain patterns. Nutbrown (1999) coincides these views by saying that schemas when observing children can be found when they are drawing and are a representative of their independent thinking and language.

Psychologist Albert Bandura in his research often makes associations with learning through observation. He discusses that children are naturally more inclined to engage in observational learning. Where studies have suggested that imitation with social understanding tends to begin around 2 years old therefore children of this age. As practitioners to be able to assess and observe children successfully it is required to have a good understanding of child development and learning theory. If this is not the case in some settings practitioners may struggle to assess. However like many assessing methods there can be some barriers and concerns that need to be addressed. Observing children demands much time and observations should be consistent ensuring that each child is observed systematically over time so that accurate judgements can be made on development, unfortunately it can be difficult for practitioners to have time to observe all key children individually and authentically. This can be due to time and staffing levels as well as recourse availability. Children First (2021). Recommendation 21 within the evaluation of the Foundation Phase (2015) suggests a review and improvement of child to adult ratios to help reflect the age and stage of development in children with a greater transparency and monitoring to ensure funding for additional practitioners is spent on additional practitioners.

Another key recommendation stated by Welsh Gov (2015) in the final report evaluating the foundation phase suggested that there should be a greater emphasis on educational courses for teachers which include understanding of the foundation phase and assessments giving particular focus on the foundation phase pedagogies meaning that early years should focus on training practitioners to be able to successfully assess and educate the future generations. Furthermore in the independent stocktake of the foundation phase the Welsh Gov (2014) states similar with the importance of further training and qualifications needed for teachers

designed to support and improve practice as well as furthering the understanding of foundation phase pedagogies and critical thinking, evaluation and recording skills. In return will ensure that observation methods used both in schools and nursery settings can be effective and success in assessing children's abilities and tracking age and stage development.

Section 3

‘Play in the outdoors is key to the holistic development of the unique child’

Play is an important aspect of a child’s early years. Play in its purest form can only be determined by the child themselves. If they feel that what they are doing is ‘play’ that is where pure learning is developed. Practitioners may view certain activities as ‘play’ which may not be the case through the child’s eyes. Early years education should be wholly child focused, working on developmental strategies from interests and age of stage. Outdoor play has been argued over the years to hold many key benefits and its developmental outcomes can be endless.

Unstructured outdoor play has been recognised in early years for its key beneficial impact on children’s healthy development, however unfortunately opportunities for children to engage in meaningful play opportunities within an outdoor environment are limited, this needs change, Cheng et al (2022). Early years setting are essential environments where outdoor play can be promoted and educators provide a vital role in supporting children’s learning opportunities. Knight (2013) argues that outdoor learning plays an essential role in education within the early years and that forest school can actively enhance all aspects of children’s development.

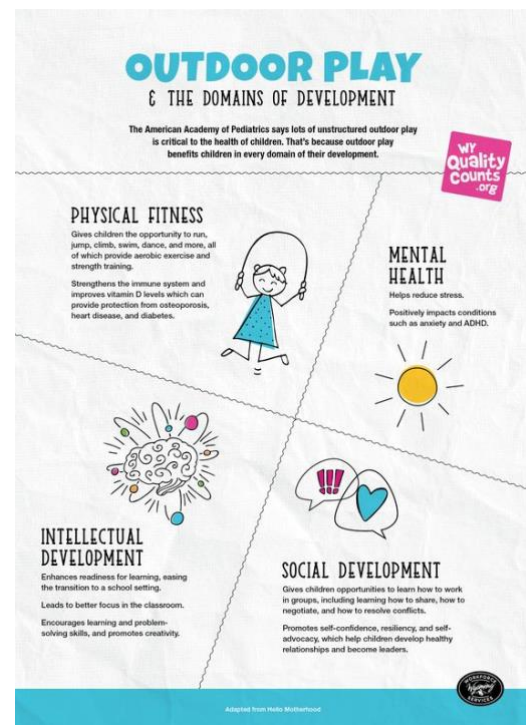
Kelly et al (2023) founded through research that early years practitioners held positive affective responses regarding outdoor play with 100% agreeing that children in their classrooms enjoyed outdoor play and further stated that outdoor play should be an integral part of the curriculum. Practitioners being aware of the learning and developmental benefits of the outdoor environment for holistic development is half the battle. Froebel and Vygotsky through their work have always promoted the importance of outdoor learning for children where they believe that children learn greatly through interactions with their environments and through social interactions with others. So by removing a child from the stereotypical classroom and placing them at the centre of their own learning in a rich outdoor setting, it enables them to explore being driven by their own learning encouraging risk taking, thinking outside the box and being provided with real life experiences that can benefit their holistic development as a whole, Higgins (2021).



(Source: parentingforbrain.com)

Lester and Russell (2007) argue there are recognising the importance of play in children's lives is the building block for respecting and promoting their rights to play. In supporting these rights to play it is important to pay attention not only to the external expressions of play itself but to the conditions in which playfulness thrives, placing great emphasis on play in the outdoor environment in the early years.

The framework for children's learning for three to seven year olds in Wales states clearly that the foundation phase environment should actively promote discovery and independence with a great emphasis on using outdoor environments as an effective recourse for children's learning and development, Gov.Wales. Being outdoor enhances all aspects of a child's development socially, physically, creatively, culturally, and personally with learning experiences being every changing where plant life, weather conditions, equipment and other outside factors all contribute to the nature of children's play.



(Source: Pinterest)

The Welsh Gov argue that practitioners within the early years need to focus on the outdoor environments provided for children and their needs to be as holistic as possible. Young Wales state the introduction of the foundation phase promoted a



(Source: Pinterest)

shift in focus on outdoor learning and play within settings unlike in previous years, this meant that settings would establish new visions and values that imbed the idea of children having access to outdoor environments that promote learning through play and review staffs' professional development in order to close the gaps in training.

Every child has the right to play, this is regardless of culture, impairment, gender, language, behaviour or background. Stated in article 31 of the UNCRC children have a clear right by law to rest, leisure and engage in play. An article created by Katie K Lockwood of children's hospital of Philadelphia (2020) further supports the idea that outdoor play goes beyond being beneficial for physical development but it also helps children to socialize, understand their bodies, engage in imaginative play and enjoy the outdoor as a whole.

Arguing the importance that school aged children need about three hours of outdoor play each day which in return will contribute to their holistic development.

Furthermore Wales have play policies and legislation imbedded in early years where Senedd Cymru have supported children's play since it was established in 1999. In 2000 they distributed a one million play grant to local authorities in order to help play provisions in the early years, actively supporting children's rights to play as a basic human right. Scotland hold similar views to play and adopt the idea that play is fundamental to children's quality of life and is foremost a child's right. A growing body of evidence supports the views that playing throughout childhood is not only an innate behaviour but also contributed to quality of life and has key elements in effective learning. Research suggests that play has a central role in developing strong attachments. Lester and Russell (2007) support this by stating that play between caregivers and infants helps to establish the neural pathways for developing wider attachments with others in their environment whether that be peers or adults. The outdoor environment for play provides experiences which cannot be replicated in indoors making the outdoors key.

There is compelling evidence alongside benefits where outdoor play is vital in the early years, like every aspect of learning there are barriers and risks however if they are managed effectively the use of the outdoor environment for overall holistic development can be utilised to gain positive experiences for both children, their parents and carers and practitioners. Incorporating effectively the idea that each child is unique will enable a more open-minded approach to early years curricula, leading education to be adapted to benefit each child holistically through the development of rich, flourishing environments for children to explore and learn.

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