

Section1

When changes to the curriculum are made to make teaching and learning a more effective process it is called curriculum reform (Cambridge, 2020). A country decides to reform its curriculum because of shortfalls in the current education system or new demands that the existing system cannot meet (Taylor and Power, 2020). Following a 2014 report commissioned by the Welsh Government about what Wales wants from its education system, it was agreed that a curriculum change was necessary to provide promise for the future (OECD, 2020). Welsh Government (no date) states that to achieve curriculum reform it must be a clear and shared aspiration and understanding of how the system works to realise the objectives for Wales as described in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The purpose of this section of the assignment is to analyse the implementation of Early Years curricula in Wales and the importance of professional development within it.

The Foundation Phase was the Welsh Government's flagship policy of early years education that was implemented following the country's devolution from the UK Government in 1999 (Waters, 2016). Implementation of the Foundation Phase signified a massive change from the previous national curriculum which was a more competency-based formal approach. The Foundation Phase advocated an experiential play-based approach to teaching and learning (Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron, 2016). Practitioners within the Foundation Phase were seen as facilitators of learning and the curriculum was planned around meeting the needs of the child to enable progress (Waters, 2016). The Foundation Phase was a critical reform designed to promote Wales and the Welsh language and culture and more specifically to improve basic skills and close the gap for disadvantage which would lead to the construction of strong communities that embrace multiculturalism (Kingston and Siraj, 2017).

In 2014, the Welsh Government commissioned a former teacher and school inspector named Graham Donaldson to undertake an independent review of the curriculum in Wales. The subsequent report by Donaldson in 2015 was entitled Successful Futures and made a set of recommendations to the Welsh Government for consideration (Welsh Government, 2015c). The sixty-eight recommendations from the Donaldson report were accepted in full by the Welsh Government and are

the force behind a massive change in education for children between 3 and 16 years old (Macdonald, 2018; Welsh Government, 2019a). The intention of the new curriculum for Wales is to provide every child equal access to a high-quality, balanced, and thorough education (Senedd Cymru, 2019). Based on four purposes and structured around six areas of learning, the Curriculum for Wales champions literacy, numeracy, and digital competency as cross-curricular responsibilities regardless of age or subject specialisation (OECD, 2020; Evans, 2021). The curriculum aims to provide holistic, interdisciplinary learning by integrating knowledge, skills, and experience while also providing tailored assessment of learning by using progression steps. Progression steps are seen as markers of the educational journey of each student and reflect an approach that embraces the concept of the unique child (Power, Newton, and Taylor, 2020) and steers Wales away from the more formal dichotomy of previous systems (OECD, 2020).

In Wales, Curriculum reform has been positioned as central to efforts to improve learning but also to improve the teaching profession (Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020). The introduction to the Curriculum for Wales document states a clear intention to support educational professionals and practitioners so that they can enjoy the autonomy of teaching while also being protected within a common framework (Senedd Cymru, 2019). Successful curriculum-making requires teachers who are skilled with a firm foundation of professional knowledge and a vision for the future (Hughes and Lewis, 2020).

By looking at evaluations of previous curriculum models it is possible to gain knowledge and to improve future curricula. In the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase Report (Welsh Government, 2015a) it was highlighted that practitioners understanding of current pedagogies was not in line with those expected to deliver the Foundation Phase correctly. The pilot evaluation demonstrated that despite most practitioners being in favour of the Foundation Phase principles, strong guidance on areas of learning and associated pedagogy was lacking and there was a requirement for better planned and funded training (Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron, 2016). A strong investment in educators was endorsed as it was argued that the development and motivation of practitioners working with children would be vital to the success of any curriculum introduced (Kingston and Siraj, 2017). Similarly, UNESCO (2015), stated

that to enhance the professionalism of Early Years practitioners, policymakers would need to improve the education of teachers and provide incentives such as better pay to create attractive career paths (Kingston and Siraj, 2017). Evans (2021) agrees and believes that to provide education of a high-quality for all, governments need to focus on quality, creating a workforce of informed professionals. Studies have shown that quality education does not always depend on the provision of physical resources but on the quality of the practitioners working with children (Bilton and Waters, 2016). To improve learning outcomes for children a workforce of highly skilled personnel, trained in the art of sound decision-making, reflective practice, and professional love is required (UNESCO, no date).

Current trends in curricula reform internationally, demonstrate the requirement for educators to have greater autonomy when developing their pedagogical approaches (Priestley and Philippou, 2018). Likewise, the OECD (2018) states that it is becoming increasingly common internationally for system reforms to devolve decision-making powers regarding curriculum to the local school level which will provide them with greater autonomy. There is a need to move away from the practice of policy borrowing which has been a feature in previous decades, this provides a neat, standardised set of policies but does not consider the reality of practice (Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020).

Hughes and Lewis (2020) discuss the professional learning model where one teacher is initially trained externally and will then act as a school expert and cascade training to other staff within the school, as being an effective model. The Welsh Government has adopted this practice within its pioneer schools' network (Wiserd, 2017). The Pioneer Schools network provides highly skilled staff who are knowledgeable in child development and in assessing this and are supportive of children's socio-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive development while ensuring children are safe, stimulated, and primed for learning (Wiserd, 2017). To train educators to be fluent in such skills they require mentoring by tutors that are proficient with the concepts, can model them well, and can apply relevant theory to real-life practice (Hughes and Lewis, 2020). Emerging evidence in Wales shows that involvement in the Pioneer schools' network when writing the curriculum is starting to

already provide dividends (Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley, 2020; Crick and Priestley, 2019).

It is important that teachers see their professional learning as being key to curriculum development and that collaboration with colleagues will support them in this aim (Evans, 2021). Hyson, Tomlinson, and Morris (2009) however, have indicated that the provision of these resources and specialised training will not guarantee greater effectiveness.

Highlighted in the Evaluating the Foundation Phase Final Report (Welsh Government, 2015) recommendation twenty-one was the need for continued support into higher ratios of adults to children within the classroom environment. Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron (2016) believe that this gives more focus to the number of adults to children rather than the quality and expertise that the adults should possess. They believe that although a larger number of adults in a classroom is welcomed, there is predominantly a clear division of labour between teachers and support staff (Taylor, Rhys, and Waldron, 2016). Qualified teachers spend more time involved in direct indoor teaching whereas the extended provisions and play-based experiential outdoor learning are often left to the support staff. There needs to be a fairer division of work and a greater emphasis placed on the importance of play-based learning (Evans, 2021). Likewise, this demonstrates the importance of ensuring that all staff are thoroughly trained in the curriculum and that the pedagogical approaches encouraged are used correctly. The stocktake of the Foundation Phase, which took place 10 years after its introduction, highlighted the inadequacies in training overall and that the lack of accessibility to staff was concerning. It also demonstrated that the content of the training provided initially was deficient (Welsh Government, 2014; Kingston and Siraj, 2017;).

Professional autonomy is an interesting and appealing proposition but to be able to understand how to properly teach core concepts and meet policy expectations without clear guidance can be a challenge (Pietarinen, Pyhältö, and Soini, 2019). Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley, (2020) believe that when clear criteria are absent there is a risk that anything goes. Priestley and Minty (2013) discuss the implementation of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence and highlight the fact that the new curriculum was welcomed in the first instance but a lack of understanding of

the core ideas and a lack of fit with the teachers' own beliefs meant that it was not implemented correctly. Moreover, this continues to be an issue impacting Scotland's curriculum and demonstrates the importance of ensuring staff at all levels are appropriately trained and supported (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson, 2015, cited in Kirby and Mclaughlin, 2016).

This ties in neatly with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological system theory where the policies themselves could be viewed as the macrosystem, the mid-level practice, guidance, leadership, and support (Pioneer schools' network) could be viewed as the mesosystem and the school-based curriculum decision-making could be viewed as the microsystem. All elements work in conjunction with each other to provide a comprehensive system of education and support (Beckley, 2012; Sinnema, Nieveen, and Priestley, 2020).

In conclusion, the evidence presented within this section clearly shows the importance that professional learning and development have within the current early years' education curriculum. To enable the new curriculum for Wales to grow and prosper and to provide children in Wales with vital skills and knowledge, investment must be placed in the educators that shape children's futures.

Section 2

This section of the assignment aims to provide an evaluation of assessment methods within previous and current curricula and their direct relation to the concept of the unique child.

The unique child is a concept mentioned in many early years curricula and is based on the teachings of Vygotsky. Vygotsky regarded development in terms of a child's potential rather than the point at which they should have reached (Beckley, 2012). Vygotsky placed a strong emphasis on the child's culture and environment and believed that children's knowledge is scaffolded by those around them within the Zone of Proximal Development and learning should be underpinned by the principles of the unique child, enabling environments and positive relationships (Beckley, 2012).

Vygotsky proffers that the chronological age of a child cannot be relied upon as an accurate criterion for assessing their actual level of development (Miller, Drury, and Cable, 2012). The zone of proximal development demonstrates the difference between the child's actual level of development and their potential development when supported and guided by those around them (Beckley, 2012).

Curricula that are built around the child-centred approach should see the child as intrinsically curious and capable, place a high value on first-hand experiences, and use play as a vehicle for learning. However, Cannella and Viruru (2004, cited in Miller, Drury, and Cable, 2012) point out that many parents do not see the importance of play and its role within the early years' curriculum. Furthermore, the definitions of work and play seem to be vastly different, with the former conceptualised by seriousness and commitment and the latter being defined by frivolity (Cannella and Viruru, 2004, cited in Miller, Drury, and Cable, 2012).

Parekh (2017) states that traditional academic-related pedagogy is closely linked to the concept of student ability. The education system in the modern age aims to develop and assess for the ever-accelerating growth of the student and the demonstration of new skills and knowledge but fails to take into account anything other than the baseline of normal. A curriculum based around the unique child should have an assessment and observation system that reflects this and does not measure

the child against a benchmark of what is deemed normal (Welsh Government, 2022a). A postmodern point of view will encourage the practitioner to challenge the concept of the normal child and to ask questions about the traditional methods that have been devised to measure this (Parekh, 2017).

Miller, Drury, and Cable (2012) state that there is no such thing as a normal child. 'Normalising gaze' can be seen in such assessment instruments as the Foundation Phase Profile. The Foundation Phase profile was developed to support the assessment of children's learning and development throughout their time in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015b). Using observations and assessments, the profile supported practitioners to provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum for all children (Welsh Government, 2019b). It was compulsory to use the Foundation Phase Profile to undertake a baseline assessment of each child within the first six weeks of entering their reception year. There was no compulsory requirement to use the profile when the child reached the end of the Foundation Phase and instead, schools were encouraged to use methods of assessment that were a best fit against all outcome descriptors (Welsh Government, 2019b). The positive of the Foundation Phase profile is that they are standardised and are viewed as neutral and objective. However, it is because of these practices that the identification of 'normal' and 'abnormal' children has developed (Welsh Government, 2015a; Welsh Government, 2015b; Welsh Government, 2015c). Developmental milestones work towards structuring parents' observations of their children and also act as a neutral baseline from where they compare their child's development against others. Traditionally children are measured against these norms even before school age and it can foster a belief that when a child has not reached what is deemed normal for their age, the parents have not optimised their child's development (Miller, Drury, and Cable, 2012).

Overall, practitioners were positive about the quality of the Foundation Phase Profile and specifically noted that the compact profile provided a good account of the overall ability of the learner and included a wide range of skills to observe and assess. The profile was described as being most useful for identifying targets and for planning next steps (Welsh Government, 2022b). Practitioners commented on the baseline and end-of-phase assessments being able to be mostly conducted through

observation which was a positive factor. However, practitioners also describe having to set up specific tasks to assess particular skills that were not as easily observed through play. This could have an impact on already limited time reserves and provide difficulties when assessing for additional learning needs or those with English as an additional language (Welsh Government, 2015a).

It was found that many schools were favouring using other assessment methods rather than the Foundation Phase Profile. Practitioners found that the profile was often too time-consuming and was too much of a tick-box process that was not tailored enough to the individual learner and went against the Foundation Phase philosophy of the unique child (Welsh Government, 2015b). Many of the statements within the Foundation Phase Profile were often seen as quite broad and ambiguous. In addition to this, children entering reception can be as much as 11 months older or younger than their peers and therefore results will be vastly different (Welsh Government, 2015a).

The new curriculum for Wales gives freedom and autonomy to practitioners with the construction of the curriculum and also with associated assessment methods. The curriculum and assessment should be based on the principles of progression and at no stage should involve activities that are based on making a judgment about a learner's overall progression (Welsh Government, 2020). However, there have been concerns raised regarding assessment, some of which include the broad nature of the progression steps, the requirement for a common assessment framework to ensure all students are assessed and supported equally, and the need for more and better guidance material. Progression steps should be used as a what next for the child's progress rather than a baseline to assess against as opposed to previous curricula in Wales (Welsh Government, 2020; Welsh Government, 2022a).

Welsh Government's (2022a) report on the effective approaches to assessment that improve teaching and learning identifies the importance of teachers having a clear understanding of the role and purpose of assessment and of how it supports learning, in addition to its role in redefining the teaching process. The most effective practice will occur when leaders and policymakers invest time and money in professional learning and provide support for practitioners to develop a complete understanding of formative assessment and how they can use a range of strategies

that will best support the child. The report identified the importance of using the information gained from assessing learner progress to inform teaching practice (Welsh Government, 2022a).

Additionally, Jenkin (2016) states that early childhood teachers struggle to implement bicultural aspects of some curricula because they lack the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence. As a consequence, Alsubaie (2015) believes that traditionally students from another country or culture coming into a classroom are immediately at a disadvantage because they not only have to learn the topics being taught but must also learn how to navigate unfamiliar people, cultures, and languages. Bornman *et al.*, (2010) indicate the importance for valid and reliable assessment tools that can accommodate diversity and measure the skills of children regardless of their language, culture, or developmental disability. Traditional forms of assessment have not allowed for this in the past. Alsubaie (2015) also believes that there is a direct relationship between education and culture as a teachers culture will affect how they teach within the classroom, and a student's culture will affect how they receive that information. Low academic achievements are an issue in this regard. Teaching is not easy even with the same background as the students. Second languages add difficulty as do the distinct variations between cultures in the way people communicate both verbally and non-verbally. New cultural environments are unfamiliar and there can be a great difficulty to adapt. Concepts such as group work or individual learning which may require different forms of communication can prove difficult. Education within the multicultural classroom should focus on the value of being a multicultural country and the skills that could be contributed (Alsubaie, 2015).

Bornman *et al.*, (2010) state that a mixture of cultures, races, languages, and even dialects can also impact the outcomes of developmental assessments. Simple translation from one language to another could result in inconsistencies and alter meanings which can therefore threaten their validity. Likewise, the way members of different cultural or linguistic groups interpret information can vary. The process of cultural equivalence ensures that incongruity is diminished and that people from all cultures have the same understanding of the questions regardless of whether the terms are the same (Bornman *et al.*, 2010).

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated the requirement for a structured yet tailored assessment method that can fully appreciate the unique nature of every child. It is clear from the evidence presented that assessment protocol needs to allow for differences in language, culture, and ability and should not compare a child's ability or requirements against a standardised benchmark.

Section 3.

Examining the importance of outdoor learning within a play-based early years curriculum and the barriers experienced by settings.

Outdoor learning is not a new concept and has been endorsed by many theorists including Froebel, Montessori, and Steiner over the centuries (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Montessori established ideas for play outdoors that focused on the senses and valued the principles of using natural materials to teaching children. Theorists such as Steiner believed in devoting time to the outdoors for both informal play and more formal teaching. Both these philosophies highlight the importance of outdoor play (Dolan, 2015). Children are provided opportunities to experience how nature operates through interactions with their outdoor environment and with each other within the environment (Dolan, 2015). The rich sensory nature of the outdoors will not only support children's experimentation but also gives an excellent opportunity for group activities (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2016). These important interactions with authentic and purposeful tasks help with the understanding of concepts and the development of skills and knowledge from across the curriculum (Maynard and Waters, 2007).

The potential for promoting children's cognitive and physical development within the outdoor environment is enormous, in addition to encouraging communication, socio-cultural identity and social and emotional development. The outdoors is also shown to improve levels of concentration, and the motivation to learn (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2016; Loebach *et al.*, 2021). Children are also much more likely to engage in shared thinking and questioning and initiate interactions when playing outdoors (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Experiences within nature are vital to effective environmental education and the early years are a critical time for children to develop care and appreciation for nature and for fostering interest in environmental issues. (Maynard and Waters, 2007). The environmental habits that a person acquires in childhood will also be effective in adulthood (Acar, 2013).

Literature suggests children are spending less time outdoors so a massive shift in the curriculum is necessary (Dolan 2015; Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2016; Sandseter *et al.*, 2019; Loebach *et al.*, 2021). Current curricula related to the Early Years in Wales

encourages use of outdoor spaces (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). However, for some settings providing vital experiences with the outdoors can be challenging. Some settings do not have adequate outdoor spaces if they have any at all and allowing children to commune with nature with freedom and in safety can be hard to accomplish (Jayasuriya, 2016). In the past a lack of specialised training in Wales has led to outdoor learning environments that are unproductive and ineffective and do not allow adults can take more a supervisory rather than educative role (Davies and Hamilton, 2016).

In addition to this, some practitioners may not see the value of the outdoors or recognise the learning from the children's viewpoint (Ernst, 2013). The outdoors has value in assisting children to improve cognitive understanding (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Practitioners should recognise the importance of risk taking as an approach for promoting confident and capable learners (Richard *et al.*, 2023). Risky play is play that can provide an opportunity to explore boundaries and test limits (Sandseter *et al.*, 2019; Richard *et al.*, 2023). Challenge and risk need to be put back into children's environments and a philosophy of resilience needs to be fostered. Practitioners must of course ensure safety but should strive to make children as safe as necessary and not as safe as possible (Sandseter *et al.*, 2019). This will lead to confident adults who have power over their future (Ernst, 2013). There is a need for early years practitioners to seriously consider the development of independence and self-confidence in addition to the more formal aspects of education (Maynard and Waters, 2007). Educators can manage potential risks by providing simple rules that help children to engage with the environment safely and will in time help them to learn to assess risk for themselves (Howe *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, practitioners can support risky play by demonstrating it and by verbally expressing their thought processes, modeling the natural internal dialogue that occurs when a challenge is assessed (Steiner, Karabon, and Litz, 2023).

Although practitioners may see the value in using outdoor spaces their prior practice and professional knowledge of providing enriching experiences can hinder them (Ernst, 2013). Practitioners may believe that they must walk or travel to a valid outdoor space and this can be seen as a barrier. Perceptions of a lack of access to a useable outdoor setting may be misleading, as even a small unmaintained section of

a yard could be used for a valid encounter with nature. Training to recognise the value in the spaces to hand is necessary.

Changes in urban environments have prevented children from freely engaging with the outdoors. Children's opportunities for free movement and independence have become more limited (Loebach *et al.*, 2021). In the last generation, there has also been technological development which has resulted in children being drawn to more sedentary indoor activities (Sandseter *et al.*, 2019; Loebach *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, practitioners have described other barriers to them using outdoor spaces including, bad weather (Jayasuriya *et al.*, 2016). However, with wellies and coats to make the situation more comfortable, this can also provide great learning opportunities, for example, to assess risk from slippery surfaces or to discuss changes in the weather and seasons. Practitioners could be resistant due to health and safety expectations or the fear of litigation but if the child is viewed as competent and all necessary safety provisions are put in place this also should not be a barrier to outdoor play (Davies and Hamilton, 2016). Of course, financial constraints, time, ratios, and disruption to other activities must be considered as they also have an impact (Dolan, 2015; Loebach *et al.*, 2021).

With proper planning any outdoor area could be used as an outdoor classroom to support most areas of learning. The outdoor environment provides an array of important natural materials and the ability to recognise them as teaching opportunities becomes a fundamental skill supported by ongoing professional development.

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