

### Early Years Curricula.

#### Section 1.

The new curriculum for Wales was introduced in September 2022 to be used alongside the existing Foundation Phase framework. The curriculum has been designed with inputs from early years practitioners and leaders who gave input of experience and expertise of children and their learning (Welsh Government, 2022b). The new curriculum gives practitioners more freedom to design their own curricula that focuses on child-centred learning (Family Community, 2022). The Welsh Government (2022e) calls for the reform of the curriculum to improve aspects of learning and development, the reform aims to support children into becoming individuals who are not only well educated but ready to lead fulfilled lives as valued members of society. This assignment aims to analyse all factors of the curriculum reform and discusses previous implementation and barriers that were met and improved in the new curriculum (Audit Wales, 2022).

According to Estyn (2011) there was a minority of schools who did not understand the principles and practice of the foundation phase, in these cases due to the confusion from teachers and practitioners the framework was not implemented to its fullest potential. The new curriculum attempts to rectify this statement by giving schools and practitioners more freedom to design their own curriculum by using the foundation phase as a real strength to build on (Donaldson 2015), it aims to create an ongoing conversation engaging all relations to the children so practitioners, parents and the wider community (Welsh Government, 2022a). This is further supported by Welsh Government (2014) who state that there was an exceptionally low take up of training of the framework by teacher and practitioners as there were no targets or provision to check the completion of training. High quality training of practitioners is paramount in the outcomes for children (Maynard *et al*, 2010), however, training attendance differed between local authorities which created an unclear picture of the standard of training in the workforce (Estyn, 2010). The Siraj-Blatchford and Kingston (2014) stocktake recommendations state that a consideration should be made to make it compulsory that early years leaders undertake training to support their understanding of the principles and practice of the foundation phase in order to underpin these in settings.

In the Foundation Phase framework, according to Waters (2016) it aimed to promote play based learning with a strong emphasis on wellbeing and personal development; the aim was to create a balance between structured learning through both child-initiated play and adult led learning. Play based learning comes with a range of benefits for the child and has proven itself to be a powerful and effective pedagogy (Edwards, 2017). Danniels and Pyle (2018) further this and highlight how if several types of play-based learning is available to children in the classroom it allows the learning of both developmental and academic skills in a child-centred and engaging way. However, observations were made that adult led activities were more prominent in these foundation phase settings (Welsh Government, 2015a). They go on to say that whether the guidance was adhered to depended on the setting and the practitioners within the setting, so it would vary class to class and school to school (Welsh Government, 2015). Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2007) supports this and mentions that the foundation phase conveyed mixed messages to practitioners about the meaning of learning through play, this point furthers that due to the mixture of interpretation that the delivery of the framework will vary. Wood and Attfield (2005) claim that play cannot be easily defined and therefore cannot be consistent in every setting. The Welsh Assembly Government

(2008) further this and detail that it is important that the value is play is acknowledged and explained and not seen as easy, trivial or purposeless.

The new curriculum focuses on a child centred approach (Family Community, 2022), according to McLachlan, Edwards, and Fleer (2010) a child centred approach is an effective way to teach as the needs of the child dominates rather than the needs of the practitioner, therefore, the curriculum can be loosely drawn upon for every individual child's needs and interests. Changing attitudes and values are key components of learning; knowledge, skills, attitudes and values should not be seen as competing concepts but should be developed interdependently (OECD, no date). In spite of this, Power *et al.* (2018) argues that a child centred approach can often favour children, it is argued that the children who do not gain as much from this approach are boys or children in poverty. Mondal (no date) suggests that teachers are not equipped to provide excellent teaching for all children as they lack proper training in both theoretical and practical teaching that is absolutely essential in achieving momentous results for learners. Jha (2022) agrees here and believes that by providing teachers with more vigorous and better training it gives teachers a wider knowledge on the children they teach and how to combat inequalities in the classroom such as poverty, gender or ethnicity.

The new curriculum aims to make training for teacher easier, the curriculum has been simplified in order for settings to design their own curriculum. The curriculum sets out four purposes which will be a shared vision and aspiration for every child in the early years (Protheroe, 2022). The four purposes of the new curriculum are to create ambitious capable learners, to create enterprising, capable learners, to create ethical informed citizens, and to create healthy and confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2022a). Pacey (no date) imply that training for the new curriculum is simple as the principles of effective pedagogy are embedded throughout the curriculum and that settings should feel as though they have freedom to create learning environments that are enabling but are still consistent from local authority to local authority. The Welsh Government (2021a) further supports this and details that the school's curriculum should be everything that the learner experiences in pursuit of these four purposes that are set, the learning environment is utmost important in what and how the child will learn and how the teacher will teach. Pacey (no date) outline that the new curriculum sets consistencies to be adhered to, these include play and based leaning, being outdoor, authentic and purposeful learning and physical literacy.

Welsh Government (2015a) highlights that the foundation phase framework outcomes were supposed to be met through both indoor and outdoor environments that are stimulating, fun and promote children natural curiosity. In spite of this, an evaluation of the foundation phase found that the outdoors was rarely used as a continuous extension of the classroom and that only 34% reported using the outdoors everyday (Welsh Government, 2014). Copeland *et al* (2012) suggest that the reason children are not being taught outdoors is due to teachers and practitioners' attitudes of the outdoors, this is furthered and it is detailed that practitioner's views on weather, getting dirty or chaos of playground sway them away from using the outdoors as an extension of learning. In light of this, the Welsh Government (2021b) suggests that as schools and practitioners are able to have more input in designing their own curriculum it should spark a light in why all environments are essential to a child's learning.

The evaluation of the foundation phase by the Welsh Government (2015b) showed that only between 43% and 45% of schools are meeting their recommended ratios of 1:8 and between 87% and 90% of school are meeting their recommended ratio of 1:15, according to Archer (2014) when ratios are compromised and not met the quality of experience for children that is met is significantly lower than if ratios were met purely due to the lack of supervision and staff. Correct ratios in the foundation stage framework are essential in achieving a high standard, by there being a correct number of adults to children it ensures individual needs are met and children are supported (NSPCC learning, 2019). Bonetti and Brown (2018) emphasises the importance of high quality in the early years and urges the importance of correct ratios along with qualified staff to create this standard. Tapper (2018) also comments on the bigger class sizes making teachers jobs harder, by teachers becoming overworked by their increasing class sizes increased teachers are losing their passions and become unmotivated in regard to the children and their learning.

Siraj-Blatchford *et al* (2007) highlights the issues surrounding funding in the foundation phase of resources, training, staff and management. School funding is a highly topical issue as lack of funding in schools is detrimental to the experiences of the children (Welsh Government, 2022c). Bonetti (2022) details that the lack of sufficient funding in the early years is becoming an increasingly prominent issue as due to the difficulties in raising pay it is difficult to keep hold of valuable staff. Guant (2022) takes this further and stresses how settings are understaffed due to the inability to pay staff due to lack of funding especially in regard to SEND children. This lack of funding has a serious impact on the early years as with a lack of resources, staff and training children's education and development is being harmed (MA education, 2017).

## Section 2

Every child is unique who is constantly learning, adapting and changing (Early Years Matters organisation, 2022). The Foundation Phase framework (2015) support this and highlight that each child grows and develops at different rates and should be able to develop their skills at their individual pace. Barnardo's Early Learning (no date) talks about the Te Whariki curriculum, this curriculum shines light on the child as a unique individual and how the vision of the Te Whariki is that it is flexible in order for it to be implemented in diverse ways to suit each child's learning pathway. This viewpoint is furthered by Margrain (2017) who details that a child learning is individual to them and therefore teaching should be individual. However, Dehaene (2009) combats this idea of every learning needing to be different by stating that all children have roughly the same brain and therefore the learning sequence. Adams (2020), however details it is outdated to think all children learn the same so a one size fits all approach to teaching will never work.

As according to Sancisi and Edgington (2015) an observation is described as an unbiased method of documenting occurrences demonstrated by a child through their actions and speech. The Development Matters guidance (2012) sets straight that an observation is a description of a child completing an activity or task. The observation must contain context of what the child is doing, how, when and needs to be clear to the reader (Sancisi and Edgington, 2015). According to Pacey Organisation (2016) observations of children is an essential part of practice that allows practitioners to support and understand children as individuals. Observations are a way to connect with children by gaining knowledge on their interests, personality and how to interact with them (Penn State Extension, 2018). Penn State extension (2018) further this and say that by observing and understanding the children it allows them to feel safe and secure with practitioners and therefore more likely to develop skills and engage in the world around them. Foreman and Hall (2005) support this and detail that by observing children closely it allows practitioners to learn a lot about the child as an individual, for example their interests, their levels of cognitive and social development and their skills and accomplishment. This knowledge of the child is valuable as it allows practitioners to develop and change their planning and approach to learning opportunities according to the child (Kids@ Churchill Park Blog, 2018). Sancisi and Edgington (2015) state there are three main types of observations that can all take different forms, these are informal, participant and focused. Practitioners often use an informal observation to observe children's behaviour or personality, it has no pre planned aim but involves practitioners just simply watching children play or just complete simple normal tasks (Peterson and Elam, 2021). Participant observations are quick observations that are often documented on sticky notes or a small hand notebook the practitioner will observe when amongst the children rather than observing from the outside (Machan, 2016). A focused observation is undertaken with a clear goal where an activity or setting is often pre-planned for the child (Booren, Downer and Vitiello, 2012). Pacey (2016) make a point to go against observations and detail that sometimes practitioners are confused about observations and result to trying to tick off a checklist, they say that this therefore creates bias in the observation and makes it likely that all the things that will help to support the child in further learning will be missed as it does not fit the checklist. This is supported by (Parlakian, 2016) who highlights that observing children too much is unfair and takes away from their learning as they are worried about being watched or judged even at an early age.

Observation, assessment and planning all work alongside each other in the foundation phase to support children in continually making progress through experiences that are well planned and enabling (Learn Together, 2022).

The Foundation Phase framework (2015) describes itself as a progressive framework that meets the needs of all children when spanning through their stages of development. Through the foundation phase three statutory assessments must be completed these are the progress check at age 2, the Reception Baseline assessment and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (Learn Together, 2022). These assessments are important in regard to tracking progress, planning next steps and in general supporting children in developing the best they can (Foundation Phase framework, 2015).

As according to the Welsh Government Foundation Phase framework (2015) children should be assessed on their development stage rather than focusing solely on age related outcomes, they should move onto the next stages of learning at their own pace. However, Waters (2016) suggests that the stage and age-based foundation phase is still underway and the way to assess children on their stage rather than age was never explained to practitioners and therefore cannot be conducted. Another issue faced with is grouping children by ability in classrooms, by grouping children by ability it can create anxiety and panic in children if they are classed lower ability (Early Years Alliance, no date a). Goddard (2018) state that teacher's group by ability as they believe it allows children to work at their own pace and do not know how else to group them however, she believes it may be stopping children in developing. The Welsh Government (2022d) furthers this and states that the proposed national evaluation and assessment framework needs to be clearly define standards and outcomes expected from the reform, the report recommends that the school's curriculum should include all learning experiences and assessment activities in line with the four purposes of the new curriculum.

The progress check at age 2 consists of practitioners observing and noting down the development of each individual child, the child's strengths should be identified as well as and areas in which the child may need support to develop (Kelsi Organisation, no date). However, the Department of Education (2022) emphasis that noting down development is not enough, practitioners, parents and all adults around the child need to discuss and listen to the child in order to be effective. This parent partnership is essential in achieving the best possible support system for the development of a child (Cottle and Alexander, 2013). The next assessment in the Foundation Phase is the Reception Baseline assessment which entails an assessment of mathematics, literacy, communication and language (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020). The Reception Baseline Assessment gives teachers and parents an idea of the development stage the child is at when they begin school (National Foundation for Educational Research, no date). Children are assessed through a 20-minute planned activity in which a teacher will observe and upload their results online (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020). However, Lobley (2019) offers some negatives of assessing children like this, she states that it may be seen as unfair to base a child's ability off just 20 minutes and that by assessing them at such an early age can risk reducing time for play. Bradbury and Robert-Holmes (2016) also disagrees with the use of the baseline assessment and says that it is inaccurate and could potentially have damaging impacts on children's self-esteem and well-being. The final assessment in the foundation stage is the Early Years Foundation Stage profile, it consists of day-to-day informal documentation of what children have learnt and what support children may need to develop in their next stage (Department for Education, 2022a). On the other hand, Standards and Testing Agency (2013) suggest that these profiles are not always dependable as without input from children and their parents it can give an unclear picture of the child's ability or development.

Assessments in the early years is different for every child as every child is unique and has different strength and weaknesses (Child Law Advice, 2022). Ofsted (2015) found that there was a desperate need for improvement of assessment for children as individuals as they found that 21% of plans to support did not clearly demonstrate how the child would benefit. The Bell Foundation (2021) state that children have a disadvantage in regard to assessments when English is not spoken at home and because of this they struggle to access the curriculum. Evelyn and Ganim (2022) highlight that children with English as an additional language face a challenging time during assessments and throughout school in general as their language barrier can sometimes be misinterpreted as learning difficulties rather than just language difficulties. Murphy, Kyriacou and Menon (no date) support this and states that children with English as an additional languages assessment score for writing and literacy was 6.3% lower than children who spoke English at home. Development occurs as the outcome of a child's participation and interactions in culture, home life and peer groups (Fahim and Haghani, 2012). However, Flatman (2016) suggests that through play English as an additional language has insignificant effect, and that play is a catalyst for social interaction allowing children to develop language and communication effectively. Bright Hub Education (2008) develops this and highlights that visual cues or prompts in play can help children with language and is an effective way to aid development.

This piece has aimed to critically analyse the implementation of the play-based curriculum. Contrasting viewpoints have been critiqued and argued in regard to potential barriers and improvements that can and should be made during the implementation of the curriculum. Overall, it is clear that to understand and properly implement teaching through play more training is needed for practitioners to fully understand the curriculum.

#### Are settings using the outdoors enough?

As an Early Years practitioner myself I understand the importance of outdoor play in regards to development of children. However, when observing and recalling when I was in education I do not remember a lot of outdoor learning. This sparks a big question within me as if children are outdoors enough and if they are really reaping the benefits the outdoors can bring?

Children benefit greatly from the outdoors and outdoor learning boosts confidence, social skills, communication, motivation and physical skills (Gill, 2016). The Welsh Assembly Government (2009) encourages practitioners to get outdoors with children and details that the outdoors is the ideal learning environment for children as they are exposed to the opportunity to experiment, take risks and take in the world around them by actually experiencing it themselves. The outdoor environment being used as an extension of the classroom holds unbelievable learning abilities and can allow children to become independent inquisitive learners who are seeking knowledge and answers through play. The exploratory play which can happen outdoors allows children the time and facilities to discover and learn about their surroundings but actually getting down and dirty in doing it (Padayichie, no date).

According to the Early Years Alliance (no date bt) unfortunately it has been found that children with additional learning needs do not spend anywhere near enough time outside; this is something very topical and can be heart wrenching when practitioners talk about the advantages and benefits that ALN children can get from the outdoor environment. By ALN children spending it gives them a space to explore movement, discover different textures

and help improve gross and fine motor skills. The outdoor environment can be liberating for children who struggle with the structure of the school atmosphere and this can often be shown with improvement of behaviour and social skills (Tissler, 2011).

Outdoor environment can aid significantly in experiential learning. Experiential learning is learning that takes place by hands on experiences, for example learning about properties of water by playing with water. Practitioners should aim to create environments that allow children to learn and experience at the same time (Western Governors University, 2022). By allowing children to learn and play outdoors it helps in creating ethical well-rounded citizens in line with the Curriculum for Wales, the education children have outdoors improves children understanding about the environment and develops their environmental knowledge.

Children love the outdoors and the Welsh Government (2015) emphasis the importance of learning being met through both indoor and outdoor environments that are enabling. Children experience freedom during outdoor play that they do not experience indoors, this creates a natural environment for children to thrive and learn how and what they would like to learn. However, during an evaluation it was found that only 34% of settings used outdoors as an extension of the classroom everyday (Welsh Government, 2015).

This sparks the question of if the outdoors are proven to be so beneficial and is in the curriculum for children the why is it not used? Kalpogianni (2019) believes that there are many factors in correlation with if children spend time learning outdoors such as the physical environment, educators attitudes and the children themselves. Adults and practitioners are arguably the most prominent reason why children do not go outside, it is practitioners who can create enabling environments and encourage children to learn outdoors and without their passion for it children miss out. Practitioners believe they face barriers when it comes to the use of the outdoors as an extension of the classroom, they detail that barriers they face are the weather, children having appropriate clothing, setting aside time for dressing and outdoor equipment; however, they believe that what the children can gain from the outdoors they can gain indoors (Greibrok, 2018). This is not the case that children can learn the same as children often need to experience topics such as weather to actually understand (Lindon, 2006).

It is important to note that with the reform of the curriculum and the increasing importance of technology in everyday life children's learning timetables also include an amount of screen time. However, this may be one of the reasons why children are not spending as much time outside. As much as the use of technology is absolutely essential in this new digital age we are all living in it does not mean that outdoors is any less important. Oxford Home Schooling (2022) state that children in the UK now spend 56% more time on technology than they do playing outside, this is a staggering more amount of time on screens that out in nature. Therefore, with the increase of screentime it can be argued that to get children outdoors is even more important now than ever for their holistic development, for them to be at one with nature and supporting their emotional and social wellbeing (Padayichie, no date).

In order to get children learning outside the Curriculum for Wales needs to encourage and promote the use of the outdoors as an extension of the classroom rather than separate to learning time. Marchant *et al* (2019) suggests that if the curriculum makes the outdoor a clear environment for active and experiential learning to take place then perhaps practitioners would become more serious and passionate about the benefits of the outdoors. The institute for Outdoor Learning puts forward a range of resources to support teachers and practitioners in

using the outdoors in their curriculum, these include resources such as an activity passport that involved a checklist of activities for children or practitioners to plan activities.

Wales Council for Outdoor Learning (2021) brings together all these pieces of information into one. They bring together different practitioners, professionals and researchers to create a resource that will aid in the development of children in regard to outdoor learning. They provide training to teachers and practitioners, offer news about forest schools and mental wellbeing and put forward the notion of high quality outdoor learning. With all of this in mind and these resources to help get children outdoors it is hopeful that we will see an increase in outdoor learning and the benefits that go with them.

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