

Professional Learning

According to Fenwick and Nerland (2014) professional learning is an aspect of practitioners which should be continuously growing throughout their practice because as there is increasingly more information being discovered. Goodnough and Murphy (2017) agree as they believe learning for practitioners will never end due to the ever-growing expansion of knowledge on the ways children develop efficiently, they believe that practitioners must engage in professional learning to provide children with sufficient development opportunities.

Waters and Payler (2015, p.1) believe practitioners should “achieve systematic, sustainable and transformative change” as it allows practitioners to evaluate the approach they take to practice within settings, enabling continual progressive development how they facilitate and scaffold children’s holistic development. Parekh (2017) discusses that professional learning includes reflecting on practice to understand pedagogy, aspirations and values they have demonstrated when providing children with learning opportunities.

The Foundation Phase Framework is the Curriculum for ages three to seven, this Curriculum sets out stages and developmental milestones which are aimed to be achieved by children with the support and guidance of practitioners through seven areas of learning with maintained settings (Welsh Government, 2017). The Framework also discusses, it is the responsibility of the practitioner to follow the Curriculum to ensure children are provided with their right to education with Article 28 in the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 2019).

Welsh Government (2018, p.23) discuss the Foundation Phase aims to focus on “leadership, professional learning, and excellence and equity within a self-improving system”. This enables practitioners to understand how to improve children’s development through efficient practice and what strategies enable practitioners to support children with unique capabilities (Welsh Government (2018).

Welsh Government (2016) discuss one stage of their action plan which is professional learning because improving professional learning enables leadership development and increased abilities in adapting activities to suit children's unique abilities. Within the Foundation Phase, professional learning is conducted through reflecting on practitioners' own practice through assessing children to understand if they are developing at an efficient rate on the guidelines of the Foundation Phase Profile (Welsh Government, 2015). This shows practitioners if their strategies are providing efficient opportunities, therefore allowing practitioners to change and adapt their current approach to the areas of learning (Welsh Government, 2016).

Furthermore, to achieve profession learning improvements the Foundation Phase includes professional courses and teacher training opportunities for practices to engage in to further their understanding of children's development (Welsh Government, 2016). Welsh Government (2015) state the training opportunities provided to practices show how to plan appropriate activities for children and how to ensure children with learning difficulties are considered, this enables all children to achieve developmental milestones.

In contrast, within the Evaluation of the Foundation Phase Taylor *et al* (2015) states a recommendation for the Foundation Phase is that practitioners engage in professional courses to extend their professional learning, as there is a common lack of understanding of the ways they can implement play, child-initiated activities, practitioner-directed activities how to conduct observations during play. Taylor *et al* (2015) believes teacher training programmes would enable the lack of understand to be overcome, as current practice involves only one practitioner going to professional courses and returning to the setting to discuss with other practitioners on what it included, however this can cause misinterpretation and miscommunication of the information delivered. Kakumanu (2018) supports this because teacher training expands practitioners' knowledge, ensuring activities for children are captivating and enjoyable therefore developing children's educational opportunities. Additionally,

Kakumanu (2018) also believes professional learning through training, promotes cultural diversity, individuality and a child-centred approach to their learning.

Furthermore, to improve the lack of understanding practitioner may face there are new professional learning standards which includes “setting clear expectations about effective practice”, this gives practitioners the strategies they can use to improve their practice and the standards their practice should be for children (Welsh Government, 2020, p.1). Therefore, as Darling-Hammond (2013) shows this allows for a baseline of the measurements that should take place ensuring all practitioners enforce efficient practice in achieving goals, without creating confusion and practitioners becomes overwhelmed on how they can approach specific areas of learning. Clear expectations provide structure which as Cheon, Reeve and Vansteenkiste (2020) show enables practitioners to understand the strategies which are most effective in scaffolding children through their development. According to Cheon, Reeve and Vansteenkiste (2020) during a study all five practitioners who participated in the new teaching standards, showed long-term improvements to their practice and ability to self-initiate professional learning.

In additional, Welsh Government (2020, p.1) states that practitioners must be given the time “to reflect on their practice, individually and collectively” because as Welsh Government (2015) state within the Foundation Phase Framework enables practitioners to critically reflect and discover solutions to developing their professional learning through acquiring a deeper understanding on the impact that their practice has on children. Additionally, Welsh Government (2015) also believe when practitioners reflect on practice, they can include activities which improve children’s development, expanding their learning opportunities efficiently.

Donaldson (2015a) supports this as he believes practitioners self-reflecting on their practice enables professional learning opportunities as they can understand the impact their practice has on children, however when assessing own practice there needs to be an understanding that children’s outcomes in correspondence within the

Foundation Phase Profile does not reflect reliably on the practitioners' practice. This is because Foundation Phase Profile does not consider unique capabilities, cultural influence or additional learning needs as there is an expectation that children in each year group can achieve the same milestones within their education (Donaldson, 2015).

Additionally, Donaldson (2015) states within the New Curriculum 'Successful Futures' practitioners will be given the time to partake in professional learning opportunities with the direction of improving their confidence in approaching topic, as during the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase in Wales practitioners lacked the confidence to address topics such as play, and they lacked the confidence to intervene to adapt activities to suit the needs of children (Welsh Government, 2014). Within the Independent Stocktake, it states Foundation Phase settings need to support practitioners in understanding policies and procedures and allowing practitioners to feel comfortable in asking questions and discussing the topic; allowing practitioners to feel confident in planning appropriate and effective activities (Welsh Government, 2014). Dewey (1904) cited in Korthagen (2016) agrees as he shows there is a "a gap between theory and practice" which is usually in correlation with a lack of professional learning opportunities including how to implement their learning into practice. Korthagen (2016) demonstrates when practitioners are not shown how to implement theory into practice, they lack the confidence to challenge or attempt implanting the aspect, this became aware during the Evaluation on the Foundation Phase as practitioners lacked the confidence to apply their professional learning into practice (Taylor *et al*, 2015).

Lee, Zhang and Yin (2011) believe a lack of professional learning can impact practitioners' relationship with children, parents and agencies because they lack the understanding of how to communicate effectively with each person. When practitioners lack professional learning with children, they do not understand the influence that positive reinforcement, collaboration or sustained-shared thinking has on children, and these enable children to become involved in their own learning and provides practitioners an understanding of the activities which would benefit

individual children more efficiently, including observing children during deep level learning (Lee, Zhang and Yin, 2011). In addition, practitioners without professional learning would be unable to identify strengths, weaknesses, possible additional learning needs (ALN) and possible abuse children may be receiving which could be identified during observations and would enable practitioners to implement appropriate activities for children (Schleicher, 2016). DuFour *et al* (2013) state that professional learning is needed to understand what the signs are for identifying if a child could have ALN or are possible abuse victims, enabling practitioners to refer children to agencies and implement strategies of support.

Professional learning can assist practitioners to understand how to communicate with parents in an appropriate way, enabling them to work together to support the child of the parent; parents are children's first educators in life meaning they are the main influence on children's holistic development and wellbeing (Ward, 2013). Foreman and Arthur-Kelly (2017) support this as they believe parents should be involved in enhancing children's learning, this enables practitioners build a relationship with parents and work in cooperation to identify and recognise areas children are struggling with which would not be recognised without professional learning skills. This promotes early intervention programmes being implemented which prevent possible harm to children's holistic development (Foreman and Arthur-Kelly, 2017).

A barrier to professional learning is lack of funding as the New Curriculum for Wales 'Successful Futures' aims to provide care and scaffold children through play activities which are child-initiated and promote inclusivity and uniqueness, for practitioners to implement these strategies they will need to have funding for teacher training (Donaldson, 2015). Additional funding is also required with the New Curriculum to achieve aspects such as smaller adult-child ratios and non-contact pay for practitioners to have the time to plan an enabling environment and the time to create the learning stories (Donaldson, 2015a). Welsh Government (2020a, p.1) state that an inquiry has been made to re-evaluate the amount of funding, which is being

provided to early years settings, as it is believed the current funding does not sufficiently meet the needs of every child in early years settings.

To overcome the barrier of funding, Welsh Government (2021) states the Minister of Education believes an increase in the amount of funding considers different circumstances including levels of deprivation in specific areas of Wales, allowing for an informed decision to be made on the amount of funding needed for each setting. Therefore, there will be a 5.2m increase to the budget for early years settings in Wales this will enable practitioners to support families with low economic background to pay for uniforms, equipment, educational trips and clubs (Welsh Government, 2021). Additionally, Welsh Government (2021) also state the budget increase enables practitioners to implement efficient strategies to supporting children with ALN, allowing for external agencies to be involved in children's learning when appropriate and for equipment to be installed to assist children with ALN to learn with the same opportunities as others.

Another barrier for professional learning is practitioners having the time to engage in teacher training, to create in-depth learning stories for children and to plan activities opportunities for children, this would mean practitioners will need to have non-contact hours to give them the time which is needed to engage in these areas efficiently (Donaldson, 2015; National Education Union, 2019). The National Education Union (2019) state practitioners work one-hundred and ninety-five days a year, practitioners are given five days a year to ensure there is planned activities for children each of those days, this can equate to one-thousand, two-hundred and sixty-five. Welsh Government (2018a) discuss the workload for practitioners is overwhelming and practitioners feel overwhelmed causing them to feel exhausted, therefore affecting their health and wellbeing. Additionally, Ofsted (no date) believe the workload can be linked to practitioners not being directly involved in children's learning and development because they do not have the time to support children.

Strogilos, Stefanidis and Tragoulia (2016) believe in overcoming the challenge of time given to practitioners, settings are to set non-contact hours which are paid to engage in planning efficient activities that are inclusive to children's needs enabling practitioners to consider each child's needs and abilities and providing appropriate targets for children. Additionally, this time can also be used to create learning stories for children which track their holistic development, instead of using standardised assessments which children are less likely to present their areas of development fully (Dorrian, 2021).

Foundation Phase Profile versus Progression Steps in Promoting the Unique Child

According to Basford and Hodson (2011) the concept of the unique child does not only mean ensuring all children's needs are met or that there is consideration of any additional learning needs, but it also means considering children's personality, interests, desires and beliefs. Practitioners must do this by respecting them and enabling children to feel represented and valued, this improves children's development because they are more likely to engage and participate, and it develops the relationship between the child and practitioner; allowing for the child to feel comfortable and relaxed within the setting (Basford and Hodson, 2011).

During practice Dalton (2018) discusses considering the unique child and adapting activities to suit the unique traits of children enables practitioners to set personal milestones for each individual child and promotes individuality, which considers all aspects of the unique child. When the individuality and uniqueness of a child is considering children develop their own boundaries; they understand the difference between high and low risks, they develop to their maximum capacity, therefore improving their confidence, self-esteem and independency (Devine, 2016).

Dalton (2018a) believes considering the unique child allows for inclusive practice which considers children's beliefs, thoughts, personal interests and additional learning needs; enabling children to develop a sense of belonging, own boundaries, and improves their confidence, self-esteem and independency. When the concept

the 'unique child' is considered, it can provide children with their right to a voice which is discussed within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Unicef, 2019).

The Foundation Phase Profile includes a set of stages children are to achieve during each academic year they are within between the ages of three and seven, this enables children to be assessed the same and for there to be clear expectations for children, providing an opportunity for children to be considered equal regardless of additional learning needs, cultural differentiation or gender differences (Welsh Government, 2015). Caravolas, *et al.* (2012) believes assessing children the same allows for practitioners to support all children to achieve the same and for practitioners to use the Foundation Phase Profile to identify additional learning needs and possible development delay when they are not following the same pattern; enabling practitioners to implement strategies of support to promote the unique child. Welsh Government (2017) believe assessing children the same enables practitioners to ensure they know children's holistic development in all areas of the Curriculum, which is conducted through observations. Early Years Matters (2021) discuss that observations enable practitioners to understand children's unique skills and abilities, which can be utilised to plan activities for children in supporting areas of development children are struggling with. Additionally, Early Years Matters (2021) also states when utilising the observation outcomes, practitioners can understand children's unique interests to include in activities of focussed development opportunities to encourage participation.

Welsh Government (2017) states within the Foundation Phase Framework children "develop at their own unique, individual pace" which should be scaffolded and encouraged by practitioners to provide children with effective learning opportunities. However, with the Foundation Phase Profile the assessment framework for the Foundation Phase, there are clear expectations for children to achieve by the end of each year and children are assessed the same within the Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015). However, Donaldson (2015) states this does not promote uniqueness because the expectations within the Foundation Phase

Framework do not take into consideration of children who have additional learning needs which are not considered to equate into the Additional Learning Needs Transformation Programme (Welsh Government, 2020b). Donaldson (2015) believes children within this category do not follow the same pattern as other children, although this does not mean they are incapable of achieving the same things but as an aspect which is to be understood to ensure children are not treated differently or pressured into achieving targets which are not within their capability. Due to this within the Progressive Steps in the Successful Futures Curriculum children are given generic targets which include life skills rather than knowledge because as Taguma, Litjens and Makowiecki (2013) states an acquisition of life skills enables children to understand the world around them, providing their first steps to understanding the world around them.

Welsh Government (2015a) discusses the structure of how children are assessed within the Early Years, including observations and criteria of where children should be in their development within the areas of learning. In contrast, Donaldson (2015) believes that practitioners should assess children in relation to their unique abilities and all targets to achieve should be based on children's unique areas of holistic develop, rather than an overall age criterion of what children should achieve. Blanden and Machin (2017) supports this as they believe assessments are based on cognitive abilities where children are unlikely to represent their holistic develop because during assessments and observations there is a need for physical evidence completed by children of their development, however, to gain physical evidence children do not participate in play activities where they can express themselves entirely. Blanden and Machin (2017) believe pressuring children into participating in activities promotes inequality because not every child can develop efficiently in this way and practitioners should be given the opportunity to create activities which are unique to children's individual capabilities.

Parekh (2017) states the ways in which children as assessed does not encourage inclusivity or uniqueness because children are sorted into ability groups, she believes children are aware of the categorisation and understand what it means to

be in a lower capability group, causing children to internalise these thoughts. Therefore, causing a fixed mindset where they believe they are stupid and inadequate compared to others; children with fixed mindsets believe they are not capable of the same things as others and less likely to try anything new (Parekh, 2017). A fixed mindset can result in believing failure defines who they are, feel like feedback is personal criticism and they can feel threatened by others success, leading to becoming unwilling to challenge themselves and expand their abilities and knowledge (King, 2016). Whereas a growth mindset includes children accepting constructive criticism, welcome feedback and views others success as inspirational; enabling children to participate in challenges and develop their own learning through expanding their knowledge independently (Boylan, Barblett and Knaus, 2018).

Within the New Curriculum for Wales the progressive steps use “I can” or “I am” rather than stating what the child can do, this has more of an inclusive approach because it is from the child’s directive and what they think they can do enabling children to be at the centre and for there to be a child-centred approach, promoting the unique child (Donaldson, 2015). When there is a child-centred approach children do not feel pressured into achieving certain outcomes and practitioners having high expectations, allowing children to learn at their own pace and encouraging their natural curiosity (Chapman, 2020). Klefstad (2015) believes providing children with enabled environments allows for children to be immersed in fulfilling their natural curiosity through rich, hands-on experiences which promote discovery and exploration. Brodie (2014) believes this allows for the opportunity of sustained-shared thinking, which develops their problem-solving skills and critical thinking skills because children are encouraged to ask questions and discover things through trial-and-error experiences, as hands-on experiences are more efficient in improving children’s holistic development. Halpenny and Pettersen (2014) supports this as Piaget’s theory believes children learn more efficiently with hands-on learning, because children’s first-hand experiences provide children with life skills where they can engage in risk, challenge and trying new things.

Within the Foundation Phase an area of learning is religious education, which promotes uniqueness in inclusive practice to enable children to develop cultural identity through providing children with in-depth understanding of the variety of religious beliefs and cultures (Welsh Government, 2015). Additionally, children feel represented through these learning opportunities as they can provide their own experiences and cultural identity within the settings, whilst also gaining understanding and respectfulness of other traditions (Welsh Government, 2015). Robinson (2020) supports this as she believes providing children with in-depth understandings of cultural background enables wider understanding of the world and the traditions, they may experience through job opportunities or travelling. However, Robinson (2020) also discusses the current Curriculum 'Foundation Phase' does not provide enough detail on how to implement in-depth knowledge of culture, traditions and religions, this may lead to practitioners celebrating traditions without providing in-depth information of the cultural backgrounds.

Within the Successful Futures progressive steps Curriculum ensuring children become ethical informed citizens includes ensuring children are knowledgeable about cultures around the world enabling uniqueness and individuality to be implemented because Donaldson (2015) believes children's cultures should be represented and encouraged through the Curriculum. Additionally, Donaldson (2015) states children being provided with information enables them to develop their own values, morals and beliefs because they are given the opportunity to ask questions and extend their learning on specific cultural and traditions, promoting a sense of belonging in children. Chapman (2020) believes the New Curriculum for Wales will provide representation and encourages diversity of schools within Wales as it enables settings to create their own Curriculums and assessment criteria to ensure they promote inclusivity and uniqueness towards children within the setting. Additionally, Chapman (2020) discusses the Successful Futures progressive steps will take into consideration of settings access to resources which are effective towards children's development and the importance of ensuring settings are considered of as the same importance, regardless of the economic status of the setting.

Bronfenbrenner provides an understanding that the environment children are within can influence their holistic development and outlook on life because children's early stages in life have been shown to impact their long-term development, when their early stages in life are negative it can cause adverse childhood experiences, this would impact children's outcomes within their assessments (Shelton, 2018). Within the Foundation Phase Profile children's development is assessed in accordance with achieving the seven areas of learning, however this does not take into consideration of children's unique capabilities, background and how their emotional development is impacted by aspects such as childhood experiences (Welsh Government, 2015; Giovanelli, *et al*, 2016).

Donaldson (2015) understands the influence that adverse childhood experiences have on children in relation to assessments and emphasises the importance of understanding children's background, as he believes when understanding children's backgrounds practitioners can implement strategies to support children and their families. Practitioners can integrate agencies outside of the settings who can provide different expertise to understand how to efficiently support them as they have a larger understanding on specific topics (Donaldson, 2015). Giovanelli, *et al* (2016) states that adverse childhood experiences, such as having a low economic status can reduce the opportunities children are given because parents are more likely to focus providing the immediate needs due to not having enough money to pay for luxuries in their lives. Within the New Curriculum, there will be extra funding provided to families within poverty or economic deprivation for providing them with resources to support children, uniform and enabling all children to attend educational trips (Donaldson, 2015).

Chaudry and Wimer (2016) believe the current assessments conducted are cognitively focused and do not consider that not all children are cognitively driven, as children within low economic environment are more likely to have lower cognitive development because they are not exposed to intellectually stimulating activities within their early childhood. Donaldson (2015) believes children should be assessed

through play as they are more likely to present their development entirely through play activities, enabling children to express themselves uniquely and how they choose because they are participating in child-initiated play.

How Does Risk and Challenge Promote Diversity in Children and How can it be Utilised in Settings?

Diversity is promoting differentiation in children allowing children to express themselves for who they are, including culture, beliefs, race or additional learning needs they may have, this provides children with a sense of belonging, enabling children to feel respected, valued and represented by practitioners (Gay, 2015). Gay (2015) also states in promoting diversity in children it provides children with their *Equality Act (2010)* which enables children to not feel excluded for differences they may have, instead there is inclusivity and children feel accepted.

During play activities children should be encouraged to engage in risk and challenge as it enables children to understand their unique and diverse capabilities and become aware of their own boundaries, expand their learning, develop holistically, try new things and become aware of consequences to their actions (Little, Sandseter and Wyver, 2012). Additionally, risky play allows for children to satisfy their natural curiosity by engaging in sustained-shared thinking through hands-on experiences, which should be encouraged regardless of the diverse differences (Play Wales, 2021).

Practitioners' engagement in inclusive practice includes adapting activities to suit the unique abilities of each individual child, encouraging children to feel confident in expressing their diverse differences and feeling represented by the settings in providing every child with the same opportunities to learn (Florian and Spratt, 2013). State risk and challenge allows for encouragement of individualisation, unique abilities and imagination, therefore enabling diversity as children's differences are utilised to discover and explore aspects of the environment in a child-centred approach (Anttonen, Stefánsson and Häikiö, 2012).

Odom, Buysse and Soukakou (2012) believes diversity in children should be understood by practitioners, ensuring all activities are accessible by children and children are not excluded for any reason whether it be because they have additional learning needs, cultural, racial, gender or personality diversity. Risk and challenge activities can be unpredictable and do not need planning, however children regardless of diversity differences should be given the opportunity to participate, to ensure this takes place a practitioners would need to adapt the activity to suit the needs of the child (Cook, Klein and Chen, 2020). Through child-initiated play children have the opportunity to become involved in their own learning, to include others when wanted, explore their own imagination and utilise their own skills, enabling children to challenge themselves (Donaldson, 2015).

The Successful Futures Curriculum provides an understanding of risk and challenge activities being an opportunity to support children's learning, as children can explore and discover the world around them through hands-on experiences and child-initiated play (Donaldson, 2015). Howard, *et al* (2018) states during children's play, practitioners expand children's development by providing sustained-shared thinking opportunities when children ask questions, this takes place by working with children to find out the answer instead of answering it for them children can engage in hands-on experience to find the solution.

Children may be initially reluctant to engage in challenging activities due to their diversity of adverse childhood experiences because during their early childhood they have been victim to mistreatment or have not had efficient resources or opportunities, such as play activities or a safe environment (CDC, 2021). According to Soleimanpour, Geierstanger and Brindis (2017, p.1) states children "have unique developmental needs" which are to be understood by practitioners on how is appropriate to scaffold children in achieving personal developmental milestones. Encouragement of participating in risk and challenge opportunities can develop their resilience because they can engage in trial-and-error, which assists children in understanding that if they do not succeed the first time then they can try again, which

allows children to understand that it does not define them as failure because it is temporary and an opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding further (Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012).

Children with cultural and religious diversity may struggle to feel a part of the setting because of the difference in traditions, however including celebrations of the culture the child is within whilst also providing all children with the background knowledge on why it is celebrated allows the child to feel represented, whilst also encouraging the child to talk about their religion (Devarakonda, 2020). Borkett (2018) states that during activities like these, enabling children to discuss with others about their culture and traditions provides direct information and intellectually challenges the child to express their knowledge on the culture, whilst enabling the child to feel represented, respected and valued by the setting. Salmon and Reese (2016) discuss when practitioners research cultures and traditions communication with parents and families is needed because first-hand understandings of the beliefs and why they partake in specific traditions, whilst also ensuring the practitioner is aware of the families wishes in relation to the child.

During the Islamic culture Muslims celebrate Ramadan:

“By abstaining from food, drink and impure thoughts between the hours of sunrise (Fajr) and sunset, allowing them instead to focus on prayer and connecting with Allah (SWT)”.

(Muslim Hands, 2021)

During the year 2021 Ramadan was from the 12th of April to the 12th of May which is during the time that exams and assessments are undertaken by practitioners within the current Curriculum (Al Mustafa Welfare Trust, 2021). Maslow states within the hierarchy of needs that before children can learn at their best, their needs must be met including physiological needs like food and sleep (Hale, *et al*, 2018). Within settings children who are celebrating Ramadan may feel hungry and tired, according

to Maslow the children are not at their full potential meaning this is not suitable time to assess children (Abbas, 2020). Within the Successful Futures Framework, children will be assessed when practitioners deem suitable, thus allowing for assessments to not be conducted whilst children are celebrating traditions such as Ramadan (Donaldson, 2015).

During risk and challenge opportunities all children regardless of diversity are provided with the opportunity to engage as practitioners can adapt activities to suit the individual and unique needs of children (Bruce, 2011).

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