

Big changes! The Great Outdoors and the Curriculum for Wales

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Abstract

The Curriculum for Wales 2022, and the enabling learning approach which informs the development of early years provision and foundation learning, have provided a strong focus on the benefits of outdoor learning. Such learning promotes children's curiosity, their urge toward exploration, and holistic learning. This article describes the ethos and approach of the new curriculum, with a specific focus on the significant place given to outdoor learning. It considers the opportunities offered by implementing outdoor learning within the curriculum, and the barriers to doing so, and draws on evidence from past curriculum experiences. The article addresses the implementation of outdoor learning at *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels.

Keywords: outdoor learning; Curriculum for Wales; Forest School; enabling learning approach; macro, meso and micro levels; child-led play; holistic assessment

Since Donaldson's 'Successful Futures' report¹ the Welsh Government has set on the task of making significant changes to the education system in Wales with the creation of the Curriculum for Wales. The focus has been on creating a curriculum which will support children and young people to be:- 'ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society'.¹ With a focus on schools and settings actively designing their own curriculum for the 3-16 age group, and an emphasis on cross curricular learning via interconnected areas of learning and experience, the new curriculum offers (if implemented successfully) a significant move away from previous, more prescriptive, approaches.² It also provides a platform to acknowledge the expertise and

professionalism of educators in developing the learning environment and pedagogy in partnership with their learners.³

Early Years: A new context in Wales

In relation to early years learning the new Curriculum for Wales refers to Foundation Learning, with phases and key stages removed across the whole curriculum to reflect a continuum of learning. There are now five progression steps (3-16 years old) ‘which provide reference points for the pace of that progression’.⁴ Progression step expectations are conceived from the learner’s perspective and are framed broadly so that learning can be sustained over a series of years. There are no stand-alone tasks, activities or assessment criteria. Assessment guidance for the curriculum underscores that assessments:

...contribute to developing a holistic picture of the learner – their strengths, the ways in which they learn, and their areas for development, in order to inform next steps in learning and teaching. Assessment should not be used to make a one-off judgement on the overall achievement of a learner at a set age or point in time against descriptors or criteria on a best-fit basis.⁵

In line with the aims of Donaldson’s ‘Successful Futures’, ‘assessment should use a ‘wide range of techniques’, ‘engage students’ and ‘assess what matters’.⁶ The progression steps are designed therefore to provide a learning continuum which is the same for each learner however the pace of progress differ for individuals.

In this context, Foundation Learning is designed to reflect the needs of children up to 8 years old, and learners who have additional developmental needs in school. The Curriculum for Wales includes specific guidance to support practitioners in designing their own early years pedagogically-appropriate approach to help children make educational progress. Macdonald⁷ discusses the complexity of the education and care divide in relation to delivering early years

provision. This complexity may explain why the Government have also designed *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings* for those children who access Government funded nursery provision (3-4 years old) outside of school nursery provision.⁸

Both the learning guidance and *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings* focus on three enablers: ‘enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments’, with a significant status given to ‘play and play-based learning, being outdoors, observation and authentic and purposeful learning’.⁹ There is also a specific focus on five developmental pathways. These are: ‘belonging, communication, exploration, physical development, well-being’. They are understood to underpin Foundation Learning and again reflect research and progressive early years discourse in relation to child-led, holistic, play based pedagogy, children’s rights and inclusion.¹⁰

The enabling learning curriculum has been greeted positively by many early years practitioners and organisations.¹¹ This may be a result of the co-construction process which informed the design of the curriculum and incorporated the views of practitioners and other stakeholders. Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley suggest that this has been a genuinely collaborative process.¹² The OECD note: ‘The co-construction process succeeded in engaging many and in developing trust, while systemic adjustments in institutions and other policies are helping set in motion a professionally-led education’.¹³ *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings* was also developed through ‘co-construction by practitioners, for practitioners... drawing on expertise from across our non-maintained sector, and on the views of experts in the field of child development and early education’.¹⁴ This suggests that the Welsh approach has similarities with New Zealand’s development of the Te Whariki curriculum and the Finnish curriculum, a process which also took into consideration and collaborated with voices within the early years / education sector.

Outdoor learning

The Curriculum for Wales aims to ‘allow learners of all ages to experience authentic learning opportunities both indoors and outdoors’.¹⁵ The Foundation Phase 3-7 curriculum, which pre-dates the current curriculum changes, also highlighted interconnected areas of learning, a focus on children’s wellbeing, and a play-based pedagogy. It noted that: ‘The Foundation Phase environment should promote discovery and independence and a greater emphasis on using the outdoor environment as a resource for children’s learning’.¹⁶ This acknowledgement of outdoor learning tallies with the significance it is given in both historic and contemporary early years literature.¹⁷ Engaging in outdoor learning could provide opportunities, among other things, for awe and wonder, curiosity, exploration, physical development, wellbeing and belonging which have been given significant status within the curriculum documents.

However the ambition to provide comprehensive and regular outdoor learning opportunities has not always been fulfilled consistently across the sector, despite the 10 years which have elapsed since the Foundation Phase fully replaced key stage 1 in Wales. This article will now consider the opportunities and barriers that may exist in providing outdoor learning within Foundation Learning.

Outdoor learning – a central feature?

As an early years lecturer, I have found *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings* to be a very worthwhile document to share with students. This is partly due to its aesthetic design. 24 of the 35 pictures used to illustrate the curriculum involve the outdoors, with over two-thirds of the images highlighting children or learning resources in an outdoor space. The visual content alone suggests the significance given to outdoor play and learning.

Additionally, the enabling learning guidance of the Curriculum for Wales highlights many of the benefits which the outdoors offers, including that:

...learners can explore, practise and enhance their skills. Being outdoors supports social, emotional, spiritual and physical development, as well as providing authentic opportunities for learners to develop and consolidate cross-curricular skills...The outdoors provides opportunities to inspire awe and wonder, and allows learners to be themselves in open, relaxed and stimulating spaces. The use of natural and open-ended resources enhances the development of imagination, creativity and curiosity. Rich and authentic opportunities outdoors stimulate learners' senses through what they hear, touch, see and smell, and encourage them to express themselves.¹⁸

Discussion in the Senedd on introducing an Outdoor Learning Bill in November, 2022 confirmed the high regard given to outdoor learning and its benefits in the Curriculum for Wales.¹⁹

When discussing curriculum as a social practice, Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley recognise *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels to the implementation of a curriculum.²⁰ I simplify these in this article to *macro* (National Government level), *meso* (guidance and setting leadership) and *micro* (practice level). At the *macro* level there would appear to be support for providing outdoor learning and for recognising the outdoors as a significant learning environment. Organisations linked to the outdoors, such as Natural Resources Wales, indicate they are '...thrilled that being outdoors is now recognised as equal to the indoor classroom, and outdoor learning is positioned as a central pedagogy (teaching method) which all settings will engage in'.²¹

Macro, meso and micro levels

The approval of and support for outdoor learning was a feature of the initial roll-out of the Foundation Phase at a *macro* level. Its implementation was considered in the *Evaluating the Foundation Phase* report,²² (a three-year independent mixed methods evaluation of the Foundation Phase for the Welsh Government) which included (alongside other data) interviews with Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2 practitioners; systematic classroom/setting observations in 41 randomly selected schools and 10 funded non-

maintained settings; surveys of education setting leaders, parents/carers, Year 2 students and focus group discussions with Foundation Phase students. The Evaluation highlighted increased opportunities for outdoor learning. Observations demonstrated a ‘strong relationship between children being able to access outdoor environments and them being physically active, and participating in practical and explorative activities’.²³ It was also acknowledged that educational settings had developed access to outdoor learning environments, as well as ameliorating a possible lack of outdoor space in the setting by enabling community access to resources such as Forest Schools and park visits. The research acknowledged that capital funding was made available to settings in order to develop outdoor provision, with schools on average spending £18,000 and funded non-maintained settings on average spending £3,500 on outdoor environments.

However the consistency of outdoor experiences was variable, suggesting the communication between the *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels did not always support the full implementation of outdoor learning. For example, the Evaluation noted only 34% of practitioners used the outdoors daily, with 75% using it at least two or three times a week. This contrasts with the perception given by Foundation Phase-related documentation that the outdoors would be used as continuously as the indoors. The report noted that time of year and the nature of the weather influenced the utilisation of the outdoors for learning in some cases. This reflected barriers noted in the literature more generally.²⁴ Interestingly the Evaluation authors noted that of the 410 individual child observations collected outdoors, 51% involved children with an additional practitioner (such as a learning support assistant), whereas only 17% involved children with a teacher and 32% were recorded as ‘child acting without adult support’. The Evaluation authors suggested this may reflect the perceived value of outdoor learning amongst teachers in particular, and their view that learning is assessed indoors not outdoors.

Such missed opportunities to assess outdoors would run counter to the focus in the Curriculum for Wales assessment guidance on assessing holistically, and via a variety of methods and at different times. Furthermore, Davies and Hamilton highlighted through their questionnaire and in semi structured research with early years practitioners in North East Wales the significant opportunities for assessing children outdoors in the Foundation Phase.²⁵ They also highlighted the perceived barriers, and the need for specialist training so practitioners could appreciate outdoor learning in ‘enabling children to reach higher levels of cognitive understanding and for summative assessment’.²⁶ The value practitioners envisage

for the outdoors as a learning environment has also been considered by other authors in terms of limiting or enabling children's outdoor learning experiences and assessment.²⁷

At the *meso* level, leadership and guidance will evidently be needed to develop 'enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments' in the outdoors context.

Furthermore, in implementing the outdoor experiences of the Curriculum for Wales a deeper understanding the interconnections of the *macro*, *meso* and *micro* levels will be required.

One important limit in terms of supporting outdoor learning is the environment which can be available in some settings. Even before the implementation of the Foundation Phase, Forest School provision was promoted as a means of providing outdoor learning for young children.²⁸ Training has been taken up by some practitioners in order to become Forest Schools leaders and offer this provision as a regular long term experience for children. However such training can be difficult for all practitioners to access due to its expense and the time it requires.

Outdoor learning and Forest Schools

A misunderstanding may also have arisen that outdoor learning and Forest School are interchangeable, or can be regarded as essentially the same thing. This is not the case. Outdoor learning is comprehensive and diverse, including many types of outdoor experience from a walk in the local park, to playing in the school yard.²⁹ In line with the ethos of the new curriculum, practitioners should feel they have autonomy to develop outdoor learning in ways that best suit their environment and context. Forest School, by contrast, is a specific philosophy of learning originating in Scandinavia and adapted to a UK and Welsh context in more recent years.³⁰ It fits under the broader outdoor learning umbrella. Although evidence has highlighted its benefits in a Welsh context in terms of holistic development and learning, Forest School is not the only way of accessing high quality outdoor learning.³¹ Moreover, notions of attending regular Forest School, as is part of the required philosophy and pedagogy, would require access to an environment beyond the school yard, and while some settings may have this access, not all do. Those likely to lack an adequate environment include schools in older Victorian buildings and urban contexts, and nursery provision sited in pack up situations such as church halls and vestries.

O'Brien and Murray recommend the need to make Forest School provision more accessible and to consider school accessibility when planting new woodlands.³² Such comprehensive access to woodlands or land that can support Forest School is an ambitious task. Limited funding ensures that inequity of access to the outdoors continues, for some settings can access Forest School by funding their own transport or by having access on foot to appropriate land near their setting. Such inequality of opportunity for all children to experience the outdoors could be compounded if Forest School or comparable programmes are seen as being more important or prestigious than other outdoor experiences.

The *Evaluating the Foundation Phase* report noted that capital funding had been used to develop outdoor provision and access in both maintained and funded non-maintained settings. The report noted the need to ensure continuous access between classroom and the outdoors. Practitioners made clear that lack of such access was an obvious barrier to using the outdoors for learning. Capital expenditure should be directed more flexibly to encourage greater use of the outdoors, particularly in schools and settings that are constrained by the amount of outdoor space available. Interestingly, Coe (in a Canadian context) argued the need to view outdoor learning and nature beyond pristine rural landscapes, implying that outdoor learning has to be provided in whatever context is available to settings.³³ A concrete or tarmacked school yard may yet provide an adequate context for outdoor learning. Providing practitioners with the support to use such spaces innovatively will be important. For example, outdoor spaces can be improved by developing loose part learning and increasing the affordance of an outdoor space by adding water, soil, sand, rocks, stones, tyres and other resources.³⁴ Or by providing opportunities to green the schoolyard and increase biodiversity with planting, flower beds or tyres filled with vegetables.³⁵ Funding the development of training and support at the *macro* and *meso* level to create and utilise interesting outdoor provision will be necessary to help make outdoor learning the norm at the *micro* level.

Valuing the practitioner and re-thinking risk

The *Evaluating the Foundation Phase* report emphasised that training and guidance materials need to underscore the effective use of the outdoors. The Welsh Government have worked with partners to develop online training opportunities to support the development of outdoor provision. The outdoor units of work are interesting, providing practical ideas and context for

the benefits of this approach in the Curriculum for Wales. However providing ideas and confidence through peer learning and practical experiences can be more valuable. I have been to many training events where the benefits and opportunities of the outdoors were discussed. Yet visiting a setting where outdoor learning is actually happening, or engineering an afternoon to take part in a practical outdoor session, have been far more valuable in terms of demonstrating what is possible. As noted by Payler and Waters, professional development for early years practitioners should be systemic, sustainable and transformative.³⁶ This would suggest a need for professional development in relation to outdoor learning to be further and consistently strengthened across the sector. For a whole setting approach, all practitioners need to be supported to gain confidence to enable outdoor learning, and to have time and opportunity to revisit ideas so they can develop their outdoor practice in the long term. The aspiration of the curriculum to acknowledge practitioners' professionalism and expertise is certainly welcome. Such an approach needs also to allow practitioners time and resources to be able to reflect deeply on their own outdoor practice and access any support required. This is especially pertinent where authors note that practitioners' own perceptions and lack of confidence in terms of supporting outdoor learning is a barrier to taking learning outside.³⁷

Practitioners are not untouched by their own social and cultural contexts. As is the case in other industrialised societies, we have spent a declining amount of time undertaking outdoor experiences in recent decades.³⁸ In Wales and the UK there still appears to be risk aversity and the very real worries of practitioners for keeping everyone safe if children are allowed to explore in the outdoors.³⁹ As a lecturer supporting students in the early years sector I am aware that outdoor modules must always include reference to risks and risk assessment. However, it's worth keeping in mind that indoor environments have many risks and hazards too, such as electricity, collisions, trips and falls. These may not be recognised as keenly as the possible hazards in the outdoors, suggesting again an acculturation towards being more afraid of outdoor experiences. Such fears are real barriers, especially where practitioners have significant responsibility and accountability for children's wellbeing and safety. They must be acknowledged if educators are to feel they can access outdoor learning. There has been a move in recent years to discuss risk-benefit analysis, an acknowledgement that any activity or experience has some level of emotional or physical risk.⁴⁰ Climbing, for example, though innately hazardous has numerous benefits for a child in terms of balance, gross and fine motor development, mathematical skills such as estimating distance, emotional wellbeing including developing self-confidence and resilience. Within a risk assessed environment, with

adult support and appropriate boundaries, the hazards of falling or getting stuck while climbing can be put into context or reduced and controlled. Of course this is a long term process, especially when, over the past 30 years, the experience of practitioners in their own early years may have not included learning or adventuring outdoors to the same extent as previous generations. Practitioners need support to consider in depth the perception of risk in the outdoors and to develop practice they are comfortable with so they can build up their confidence.

Ironically, perhaps one of the drawbacks of the focus on Forest School in the initial implementation of the Foundation Phase (as noted earlier), is that it could be perceived as including specialist risks involving lighting fires and working with tools such as knives, saws and hammers. This may be something some practitioners feel they are not yet comfortable to support. Maybe a shift in narrative, such that practitioners realise they do not have to be outdoor experts to engage with outdoor learning, would allow practitioners to gain confidence from their own interactions with the outdoors.

Re-engaging with ourselves

Forest School provides opportunities for a depth of learning, and supports children building confidence and self-esteem. These experiences do not need to be viewed as more important than those which allow a child the opportunity to paint with mud, create potions, build dens, plant seeds or be mesmerised by a fluttering butterfly or wiggly worm in the school yard. So practitioners who may not yet be confident to use tools or make fires can nevertheless make a start. In this way more regular access to the outdoors, as indicated in the Curriculum for Wales, can become feasible. My motivation for outdoor learning is linked to experiences in my childhood. I loved watching insects on my walks around my local area. I loved making mud pies and collecting twigs, leaves and stones to create small works of art, all of which I suspect led to an interest in ecology and to my later career. For young children, such interactions with the world are valuable and can happen in all kinds of outdoor settings. Practitioners are crucial in allowing children time to be outdoors, and then in observing and extending the opportunities children have to develop holistically in such an environment.

Any discussion of accessing the outdoors takes place in the context of an early years sector where practitioners are undervalued as professionals, and underpaid. Outdoor learning

generally, and particular approaches such as Forest School, highlight the need for specialist training as well as for higher ratios of adults to children to maintain safety and boundaries and to allow for the individualized support pertinent to the play-based learning which is at the heart of early years provision. Long term developments aimed at providing the conditions to properly value early years professionals and to reimagine the sector lie beyond the scope of this article. However delivering any aspect of the curriculum, including outdoor provision, is increasingly difficult where practitioners are being lost from the sector. This situation requires socio-economic *macro* level reimagining of early years education and care.⁴¹

Providers of practitioner training such as teacher training or early years trainers at the *meso* level must also provide opportunities to model the enabling adults in an outdoor environment. As a lecturer I have found that allowing students to reengage with their own nature walks from childhood, or to undertake activities in a small set of flower beds, can be very powerful in allowing them to see that you do not need to be an expert gardener for plants to grow and for worms or other animals to colonise the soil. The students' own exploration of a favourite park or site can demonstrate to them the learning that is possible (even as an adult) when they are allowed to be curious, to explore and to investigate. Outdoor learning is made more palatable when students have experienced it themselves. Such experiences can number among the significant opportunities the outdoors offers the new curriculum in terms of developing ethical citizenship, especially in relation to considering our place in, and impact on, the natural world.

As highlighted by Coe:

Whether it is a field covered in grass, a garden along the side of the school, a patch of long, unkempt grass, or a lonely tree in the corner of a schoolyard, nature is everywhere, and can be used as a place and tool for learning. Interactions and experiences with these natural spaces—no matter how large or small, vast or narrow—provide children with opportunities to connect to and learn from the places, environments, and ecologies in which they live and learn.⁴²

To do this of course involves supporting education leaders and practitioners to feel confident and comfortable with the practicalities in terms of developing risk-benefit assessments, providing safe environments and boundaries for children's learning, and having the right

equipment such as water proof clothing and resources to allow for engaging experiences. It also involves working in partnership with parents and the community so that they are also engaged and confident to support outdoor learning.

At the macro level it is very encouraging to see that the Welsh Government has highlighted the outdoors as significant part of enabling learning in the Curriculum for Wales. However implementing outdoor learning opportunities across the sector will entail funding, training and a shift in understanding the variety and range of experiences that can enable such learning across the Foundation Learning sector. Fortunately there is scope to build on the advances made during the previous Foundation Phase.

This article has explored the early years context. It could be argued outdoor learning is not given as much prominence in terms of the learning of older children and young people. For example, the *Evaluating the Foundation Phase* report highlighted that outdoor learning was more prominent in nursery and reception age groups than in year 1 and 2. Outdoor learning has benefits across all age groups. It will be interesting to see, if, as the curriculum develops, outdoor learning is implemented beyond Foundation Learning.

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Notes

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