

The Foundation Phase in Wales – time to grow up?

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ABSTRACT

The Foundation Phase for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales is an innovative play-based curriculum that was introduced in the country over a period from 2008–11. This article provides an overview of the life of the Foundation Phase in Wales to date. It reviews the history of the curriculum innovation following devolution from UK central government, outlines the issues and challenges facing the early years education sector at the current time and sets out ‘where we might go’, in relation to early years education provision in future. With reinforced governmental backing for the future of the Foundation Phase, the article considers what lessons can be taken forward to scaffold the effective longevity of an initiative that, in general terms, enjoys warm support locally and the envious attention of external observers. The article spends some time establishing ‘where we have been’, in order to fully set the context of ‘where we are’ and, using evidence from evaluation studies and from national and international early years education research, explores priorities for the future. The article suggests that serious attention to high-quality professional learning should be top of the priority list as we move forward.

Key words: Foundation Phase, early years, education, professional learning

Introduction

This article provides an overview of the life of the Foundation Phase in Wales to date. It considers where we have been, where we are now and

where we might go, in relation to early years education provision since devolution. With reinforced governmental backing for the future of the Foundation Phase, the article considers what lessons can be taken forward to scaffold the effective longevity of an initiative that, in general terms, enjoys warm support locally and the envious attention of external observers. The article spends some time establishing 'where we have been', in order to fully set the context of 'where we are' and 'where we might go'.

Where we have been – development of the Foundation Phase

The establishment of the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) in 1999 involved the devolution of responsibility for education within Wales from UK central government. The National Assembly's vision document *The Learning Country* (NAfW, 2001) set out the intention to 'build stronger foundations for learning in primary schools with a radical improvement for early years provision' (p.12). The subsequent consultation document: *The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3–7 years* (NAfW, 2003) set out the specifics of the proposals for the Foundation Phase which included developing a curriculum that linked and strengthened the principles and practice embedded in the existing curriculum document for children aged 3–5 years, *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning Before Compulsory School Age* (ACCAC, 2000a), with the programmes of study and focus statements in the National Curriculum for Wales Key Stage 1 (ACCAC, 2000b), providing for children aged 5–7 years, to 'create a rich curriculum under seven Areas of Learning for children in the Foundation Phase' (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2008: 3). This radical overhaul of early years education in Wales signalled a shift away from UK central government education policy, in that it set out to legislate for the provision of a single phase of education spanning 3–7 years in which play and experiential learning are the pedagogical priorities, rather than continue to mirror policies for the early years in England. It was also predicated upon a concern, supported by research literature, about the 'detrimental' (NAfW, 2001a: 8) effect of an overly formal approach to early years education for children below the age of 6. The central role of the practitioner within the Foundation Phase was stated to be a 'facilitator of learning' (WAG, 2008a: 12), where learning was seen as a continuum and the curriculum was planned to meet 'the needs of the individual children and facilitate progress' (ibid.). This requirement was situated within the broader context of

WAG's overall vision for children and young people, as described in *The Learning Country 2: Delivering the Promise* (WAG, 2006), and based around seven core aims developed from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (WAG, 2008: 3). The Foundation Phase sat within this overarching and emancipatory vision for children and promoted a play-based approach to learning for 3 to 7-year-olds with an emphasis on the centrality of personal development and well-being of the child to provision:

Children learn through first-hand experiential activities with the serious business of 'play' providing the vehicle. Through their play, children practise and consolidate their learning, play with ideas, experiment, take risks, solve problems, and make decisions individually, in small and in large groups. First-hand experiences allow children to develop an understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. The development of children's self-image and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem are at the core of this phase. (WAG, 2008: 6)

Seven areas of learning were identified, the first of which was situated 'at the heart of the Foundation Phase' (WAG, 2008: 16):

- Personal and Social Development, Well-Being and Cultural Diversity;
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills;
- Mathematical Development;
- Welsh Language Development;
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World;
- Physical Development;
- Creative Development.

This documentation is currently still in place. Educational settings are required to provide children with access to 'indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe' and to 'promote children's development and natural curiosity to explore and learn through first-hand experiences' with 'greater emphasis on using the outdoor environment as a resource for children's learning' (WAG, 2008: 4). The Foundation Phase requires that 'there must be a balance between structured learning through child-initiated activities and those directed by practitioners' (WAG, 2008: 6). Interaction between adult and child is also centrally placed in the learning process, with certain types of interaction specifically highlighted, in particular practitioner involvement in children's play and 'shared and sustained thinking' (WAG, 2008: 6). The Foundation Phase, then, sought to extend experiential early years pedagogy into the 5–7 age-range, ensure

that the outdoor space became an integral element in a child's daily experience, and shift pedagogy away from a dominance of formal approaches towards one in which children's interests were clearly visible within the curriculum and pedagogical interaction included episodes in which children and adults contributed, on an equal footing, to the development of a shared understanding of experience.

As part of a government-funded evaluation of the Foundation Phase, commissioned in 2011, Maynard et al. (2013) retrospectively reviewed the 'official discourse' of the Foundation Phase as outlined by the Welsh Assembly Government at the time of its development in a policy logic model. The model details the main aims of the Foundation Phase as: to raise children's standards of achievement; to enhance their positive attitudes to learning; to address their developing needs; to enable them to benefit from educational opportunities later in their lives; and to help them become active citizens within their communities. It is also noted that '[i]n the official discourse for the Foundation Phase, there are no more detailed objectives or related targets outlined' (Maynard et al., 2013: iv).

The Foundation Phase – a significant change in approach?

The early years curricula that preceded the Foundation Phase adopted a developmental view of children's learning in which the role of the adult educator was to manage, in age-related stages, the child's learning and development and to measure this progress against culturally agreed and accepted norms associated with age (Fleer, 2006; Wyness, 2006). The Foundation Phase requires teachers to take an active, participatory role in children's play and activity, to facilitate environments that support children's play and exploration and to seek to build on children's interests. The child is viewed as inherently curious and active in the search for meaning. In its introductory pages, the Foundation Phase (WAG, 2008) promotes an holistic approach to children's development in which practitioners consider children's prior experience as the base from which to develop, rather than assume age-related norms of performance. This approach, alongside the requirement to assess children along a 'continuum' of learning (WAG, 2008: 43), implies a shift away from the dominance of developmental views of the child that were inherent in the previous curriculum (Hall et al., 2004). The Foundation Phase (WAG, 2008), at the time of its implementation, represented the potential for a significant change in approach

(WAG, 2010; Wood, 2007) in which the construction of the learning child is philosophically altered from that inherent in previous curricula (Aasen and Waters, 2006). This approach was in line with international developments in which child development is seen as ‘culturally determined’ (Edwards, 2009: 82; Brooker, 2011), rather than a universally similar process delineated in age-related steps.

So, in requiring a ‘significant change in approach and delivery’ (WAG, 2010: 1) the Foundation Phase had the *potential* to challenge the dominance of developmental approaches to understanding child development (MacNaughton, 2005; Grieshaber, 2008) in favour of approaches that have been described as post-developmental (Edwards, 2009). Post-developmental approaches challenge ‘assumptions about the normative and objective basis of developmentalism ... and the presence of a universal description for development’ (Edwards, 2009: 81) in favour of approaches that focus on ‘understanding and interpreting the contexts of childhood, development and learning’ (Edwards, 2009: 82). These approaches have been described as being based on sociocultural theory (Edwards, 2009; Flear, 2003). However, Maynard et al. found that analysis of Foundation Phase documentation revealed that there is *no single clear explanation* for the approach and pedagogy of the Foundation Phase that practitioners could use (2013: vii). Indeed, Maynard et al. report the approach underpinning the Foundation Phase remains explicitly developmental in places with a clear focus on the individual child, despite implicit messages that are in tension with this position. They argue that the approach put forward broadly relates to a constructivist theory of learning which was also reflected in the discourse associated with expected pedagogy: ‘We find that aspects of suggested pedagogy also reflect constructivist theory although ideas resonating with sociocultural perspectives are emphasised – for example, a clear role is indicated for the practitioner in supporting children’s learning and development’ (Maynard et al., 2013). So, it seems that the original Foundation Phase documentation was conflicted with regard to its underpinning principles. Given international evidence that suggests the development of new pedagogies as an alternative to a cognitive-constructivist developmental view of learning is not straightforward (e.g. Flear, 2003; Flear and Richardson, 2004; Flear and Robbins, 2004), it may be unsurprising that there was a lack of coherence regarding Foundation Phase pedagogy during the initial roll-out period (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2005).

The Foundation Phase – the role of the practitioner

The Foundation Phase required a change in practitioner behaviour in order to support play-based, child-initiated learning. An initial challenge for practitioners was to identify what is meant by key terminology, including 'structured play', 'active learning' and particularly 'child-initiated' and 'practitioner-directed' learning (Maynard et al., 2013: vi); further, the Area of Learning descriptors and Foundation Phase guidance documents reflected a commitment to a developmental approach *and* to constructivist and sociocultural pedagogies 'rather than one clear underpinning approach' (ibid.) as explained above. In an early evaluation of the Foundation Phase, commissioned and funded by the Welsh Assembly Government during the pilot stage of implementation, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2005) highlighted the pedagogical practice of the practitioner in the Foundation Phase as problematic. During the pilot stage the Foundation Phase was introduced in forty-one settings across the twenty-two local authorities in Wales for 3- to 5-year-olds; the evaluation found that 'further support was needed to develop and maintain play-based and experiential pedagogies giving sufficient emphasis to activities that involve adult guided play and learning and interaction with appropriate challenge' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2007b: 8–9).

Wood (2004) highlights that in international models of early years curricula where similar play-based approaches are taken, learning through play 'is not left to chance, but is channelled through complex reciprocal and responsive relationships, and is situated in activities which are socially constructed and mediated' (p. 20). This suggests that, in Wales, the Foundation Phase practitioner needed to adopt a pedagogy based on a theoretical understanding of the child which is informed by sociocultural theory. The role of the practitioner in international models is to be both proactive – in the creation of the learning environment – and responsive – to the children's interests and learning styles (Wood, 2004). This represents a significant change from previous pedagogical approaches that were adopted to prepare children for formal learning between the ages of 3 and 5 years (ACCAC, 2000a; Aubrey, 2004), and then to deliver a directive, content-driven National Curriculum (ACCAC, 2000b) between the ages of 5 and 7 years. Aasen and Waters argued, at the time, that without time and support to recognise, accommodate and appropriate such philosophical and practical changes, practitioners are left with little choice but to maintain a 'fallback position' (2006: 128) in their own pedagogical

practice that reflects (developmental) approaches inherent in the previous curricula.

Fleer and Robbins's (2004) research with early years practitioners highlights the complexities involved in the transition from enacting pedagogies informed by developmentalism to those informed by sociocultural theory. Similarly, the findings of a number of projects in the UK, undertaken as part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) in the first decade of the new century, suggest that in order to fully evaluate, understand, embrace and enact significant pedagogic change teachers need time and adequate support; this is particularly the case when the change involves a review of underpinning philosophies of practice (see, for example, Maynard et al., 2010). In addition, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2007) report 'mixed messages' (p. 56) being received regarding play within the Foundation Phase 'seemingly as a result of the Welsh Assembly Government's Play Policy' (ibid.), resulting in a laissez-faire approach to children's play in which 'less attention was paid to adult pedagogy and ... some staff were not always gainfully and appropriately deployed' (ibid.) and this position is also supported by the comments of practitioners involved in small-scale projects early in the implementation of the Foundation Phase (e.g. see Maynard et al., 2009).

The Foundation Phase – play-based approaches

The Foundation Phase framework (WAG, 2008) can be aligned with international approaches to the education and care of early years children that are predicated upon a commitment to play (Brooker, 2011). Wood (2007) identifies that a shift from a pedagogy based on achievement of specific curriculum outcomes to one that requires a play-based approach is significant and full of inherent tensions. These tensions centre on the problematic nature of how 'play' is understood (e.g. Wood and Attfield, 2005), the regulation of play within early childhood curriculum frameworks (Wood, 2007a, 2007b) and the reification of play within early years practice (Cannella, 1997; Stephen, 2012).

Wood and Attfield claim that 'play cannot easily be defined or categorized because it is always context dependent, and the contexts are varied' (2005: 5). In a review of the attempts made by play theorists to define 'play', Wood and Attfield highlight the diverse range of behaviours that may be classed as play and the diverse range of contexts in which play may take

place, highlighting that both may have ‘multiple meaning for children and adults’ (p. 2) and that ‘clear definitions of play have proved elusive’ (p. 3). It is the intention here, not to unpick these complexities or provide a definition of play, but to highlight that the treatment of the term ‘play’ in curriculum documentation as one that has a shared and agreed meaning is problematic.

The ambiguity inherent in the claims made in Foundation Phase documentation for ‘well planned play’ (WAG, 2008c: 5), ‘free play’ (ibid.: 5) and play that is ‘structured with clear aims for children’s learning’ (ibid.: 7), without any differentiation between these play forms, may illustrate further the challenges facing practitioners seeking to implement the Foundation Phase during its pilot and roll-out phases.

Where we are now

Welsh Government have made an explicit commitment to retaining the Foundation Phase (Lewis, 2014) and have recently funded two evaluation projects, one long-term evaluation undertaken by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (‘WISERD’, WG, 2015) and one short-term, independent ‘Stocktake’ undertaken by Professor Iram Siraj of the Institute of Education, University College London (Siraj, 2014). Some key messages appear to be broadly aligned between these two evaluations.

The aims of the Stocktake, undertaken between September 2013 and March 2014, and reported in December 2014, were agreed and laid out in the terms of reference:

- understand how well the Foundation Phase is being implemented across Wales;
- clarify how language development, literacy and numeracy skills are embedded across all Areas of Learning (AOLs) in both maintained and funded non-maintained settings across the whole age-range;
- gauge how well the Foundation Phase addresses raising the quality of learning for children subject to socio-economic deprivation;
- establish how and when children enter the Foundation Phase and how progression, particularly from Flying Start to the Foundation Phase and then to Key Stage 2, is or can be demonstrated;

- identify where there is variability in quality focusing on leadership, workforce and the experience of the child;
- establish how well the Foundation Phase principles and requirements are embedded in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and ongoing Continued Professional Development (CPD); and
- make recommendations for improvement.

The final publication reports on each aspect and notes the ‘fundamental change in culture’ (Siraj, 2014: 3) required of staff working within Foundation Phase settings in order to effectively implement the Foundation Phase in future. Siraj reports that about a fifth of settings have achieved effective implementation to date: ‘The implementation of the Foundation Phase is variable within and between maintained schools and funded non-maintained settings, however there appears to be a general move in the right direction with this very complex change process’ (ibid.). In reporting the findings of the Stocktake, Siraj refers to misconceptions about the Foundation Phase approach leading to a ‘watering down’ of pedagogy, concern over standards, and reversion to more formal approaches, likened to a ‘pendulum effect’ (Siraj, 2015). The Stocktake makes twenty-three recommendations for Welsh Government, nine of which are related to ‘training’; the training proposed is for leaders of Foundation Phase settings as well as Foundation Phase practitioners with a focus on understanding the *theory and practice* implications of the Foundation Phase and the development of appropriate pedagogies that support progression for all children. There is an emphasis on understanding the role of the adult in supporting learning as well as exemplification and sharing of best practice and the provision of appropriate playful learning environments to support children’s early literacy and numeracy.

In short, Siraj reports that there are significant professional learning implications inherent in the future development of the Foundation Phase:

moving towards the Foundation Phase pedagogy is likely to involve many maintained schools and funded non-maintained settings in making a complete change in approach and practices and a fundamental shift in philosophy, understanding and knowledge of how children learn, which needs to be reflected in the training and support they are given, to enhance the adult role in supporting the Foundation Phase. (Siraj, 2014: 22)

The three-year evaluation undertaken by WISERD (2011–14) had four main aims:

- to evaluate how well the Foundation Phase is being implemented and highlight ways in which improvement can be made (the process evaluation);
 - to evaluate what impact the Foundation Phase has had to date (the outcome evaluation);
 - to assess the value for money of the Foundation Phase (the economic evaluation); and
 - to put in place an evaluation framework for the future tracking of; outputs and outcomes of the Foundation Phase (the evaluation framework).
- (WG, 2015b)

Broadly speaking, the evaluation finds that the introduction of the Foundation Phase in Wales is associated with positive and improving children's outcomes regarding pupil attainment at 7 and 11, improved pupil well-being and increased pupil attendance, though there is no evidence that inequalities in attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 are being reduced. The positive findings are tempered by a similar acknowledgment to that found by Siraj (2014) that practice varies greatly across the nation and that the positive outcomes are associated with 'greater use of Foundation Phase pedagogies' (WG, 2015a: 3). Central to the findings of the Foundation Phase Evaluation are twelve 'pedagogical elements for teaching and learning practice' that the research team believe 'embody the principles and guidance of the Foundation Phase' (WG, 2015b: 22). These pedagogical elements were identified by the evaluation team based on 'systematic analysis of Foundation Phase documentation [and] previous expertise in early years education . . . ratified by other experts and stakeholders on the evaluation's Advisory groups' (ibid.: 23). *Foundation Phase practice*, in the evaluation, is defined by these twelve pedagogical elements. It will be important, as policy-makers, practitioners and researchers take forward early years education in Wales, to critically consider the origins, and ongoing validity, of these twelve elements, which are listed in Appendix 1 for reference. Interesting to note is the absence of the word 'play' in these elements. Given the previously mentioned difficulties in defining play in educative practice this may be purposeful, but it requires some further consideration that is beyond the scope, and word limit, of this article. The pedagogical elements broadly describe what children and practitioners may do in, and what types of environment may be described as, *Foundation Phase practice*. However, what must be guarded against in the future is an instrumental approach that is focused on *enacting* these pedagogical elements without recourse to asking *why* these pedagogical elements should be forefronted in early years practice in Wales. Both the Stocktake and

Foundation Phase Evaluation recommend that training and guidance, for practitioners, head teachers, the inspectorate and policy-makers, is critical to further development of the Foundation Phase; however, the Evaluation tends to make recommendations that imply changes in pedagogical practice come about by being *shown how*; rather than *understanding why*. International experience and research suggests that pedagogical change is more likely and more robustly embedded when educators are involved in *understanding why* their actions with early years children have an impact on children's learning and development (see, for example, *Professional Development in Education Early Years Special Issue*, 2015; *Early Years Special Issue*, 2015, and associated editorials: Waters and Payler, 2015; Oberhuemer, 2015).

It is important to remember that the Foundation Phase curriculum is enacted in maintained nursery, infant and primary schools as well as non-maintained settings that may variously cater for the 0–5, 2–5 or 3–5 age-group. Establishing consistently high pedagogic practice within and across the variety of early years education providers is a common challenge for governments at an international level (OECD, 2012) and this challenge is no less significant in Wales. A 'wicked problem' (Kolko, 2012) faced by policy-makers is that related to the professional status and accreditation of those working in the early years sector. In Wales there is no specialist route to early years teacher accreditation; however, the Minister has reiterated the value placed on the qualified status of all teachers in Wales (Lewis, 2015). This means that those children receiving the Foundation Phase in maintained school settings will continue to be learning with practitioners who hold qualified teacher status, 'QTS', though many will have undertaken a generalist primary route to qualification and will not necessarily have specialised, in initial teacher education, in early years provision. Outside of the school sector the range and variety of qualifications held by those working in the early years sector is significant; these practitioners often work in an environment that lacks the funding and structural support of a school setting and they may be working with children in communities that face challenging circumstances. The evidence available indicates that the better qualified the adult working with early years children in educative settings, the better the outcomes for the children (Sylva et al., 2010).

The Welsh Government, in trying to address the qualification issues facing the early years workforce, have consulted on a ten-year early years workforce development plan that aims to 'support individuals and address the workforce development needs of all types of registered early years,

childcare and play provision, in both the maintained and non-maintained sectors' (Lewis, 2014b). This initiative responds to workforce and training recommendations from the Independent Stocktake of the Foundation Phase (Siraj, 2014), and the Independent Review of Childcare and Early Education Registration, Regulation and Inspection (Graham Review), led by Professor Karen Graham (2014). It is worth noting here that in reporting the findings of the Stocktake, Siraj refers to a fifth of Foundation Phase settings implementing the Foundation Phase well (Siraj, 2015); that is, the positive outcomes indicated by the Stocktake (Siraj, 2014) and the national Evaluation (WG, 2015a) may only be realised in less than a quarter of settings currently. The workforce plan addresses three key themes: leadership, the quality of new entrants to the early years sector and the need to raise skills and standards across the existing workforce. This medium- to long-term view of workforce development may provide a strategy by which messages related to high expectation for the future can be practically and coherently supported by central government initiative. It will be essential, given the international evidence cited above (see also Nelson and O'Beirne, 2014), that workforce development is planned in such a way that all those involved in early years provision have access to meaningful professional learning experiences that explore the *why* of pedagogy as well as the *what*: experiences that 'challenge the traditional 'theory' and 'practice' divide [and] go beyond either/or ways of thinking to both/and approaches' (Oberhuemer, 2015).

Further, following a tendering process and award of contract in July 2013, an Early Years Development Assessment Framework (EYDAF) is under development. This development responds to the recognition that currently there is no consistent assessment framework to inform and support progression and transition within the early years and Foundation Phase in Wales (e.g. see Siraj, 2014). The EYDAF will provide 'a single overarching 0–7 assessment framework and a suite of linked assessment tools which can be used to chart children's progress, longitudinally, across the early years' (Lewis, 2014b). In March 2014 the Minister for Education announced that the tool will be used in schools on a statutory basis from September 2015. Siraj notes that significant training will be required to support the use of the EYDAF: 'Such training should emphasise teacher and practitioner assessment and will require training in the use of observation as a way of measuring impact and children's progress, as well as supporting ongoing and future teaching and learning' (Siraj, 2014: 51). Siraj notes, too, that it is important that all relevant staff are equally

competent in using the EYDAF and that moderation is rigorous, whether those staff work in maintained/school settings or non-maintained settings.

Both the workforce plan and the EYDAF may be taken to imply that the period of a child's life from 0–7 years is increasingly considered, in policy terms, as a coherent phase by Welsh Government. The Foundation Phase supports learning and development within the period 3–7 years, whether or not the child is in a maintained school setting, and, in order that the coherence of the 0–7 period is maintained, it will be important that the Foundation Phase profile, currently in use to report children's attainment through the Foundation Phase is closely aligned to the EYDAF.

Where we might go

So, those working with early years children in education contexts face a number of challenges, including:

- the challenge to better implement the Foundation Phase by increasing the theoretical and practical understanding of how children learn in a play-based manner while supported by adults who have a critical role to play in that learning;
- the implementation of a new and wide-ranging assessment framework and the better management of transitions of young children into and out of various early years settings; and
- workforce development that, while welcome, requires mature and sensitive management in order to avoid the errors of the past; and
- the need to ensure and evidence coherence of high-quality early years provision within and across the nation.

Alongside these challenges, the educational landscape in Wales may be about to undertake a dramatic change in the shape of a major curriculum review (see Donaldson, this volume; Donaldson, 2015). While curriculum reform as a result of the Donaldson review (2015) is likely to be less dramatic in the early years phase of education than in those following it, the extent of change within the system will require firm leadership at all levels to ensure that the focus on pedagogical development within the Foundation Phase is maintained.

Throughout this period of possibly intense change and development it will be important to keep in mind what is increasingly known about

effective early years provision. Extensive and well-reported longitudinal studies have shown that effective early years pedagogy includes instructional modes of teaching, such as demonstration, explanation, questioning and modelling, as well as opportunities for child-initiated and playful activity, and the engagement of adult and child in co-construction of knowledge (for example, Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003; Sylva et al., 2010; Siraj, 2015). Sustained shared thinking between adult and child, and practitioners asking open-ended questions that build on children's interests in playful learning environments, lead to better outcomes for children and young people (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2014).

We also know that the early years Home Learning Environment (HLE) is critical to children's long-term outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). Guidance offered to settings from the Welsh Government has emphasised the need to support positive transition from home to school and between early years providers and to support the development of positive HLEs in the early years by engaging early with parents and the community, by building respectful relationships and by making the school an accessible and welcoming environment for families (WG, 2013; Estyn, 2014; Chicken et al., 2015). Further, there is a significant opportunity to build on the research and development of professional learning tools that have emanated from within the UK. For example, the 4Children publication 'What to expect, when?' (2015) is a valuable vehicle for supporting positive HLE in collaboration with parents and carers; adaptation of such materials for the Welsh context and associated evaluation of their use may support sustainable and transferable models of change with regard to practice that supports child-focused and positive home-school relationships.

We know too, about the importance of teachers supporting and encouraging 'vulnerable' children and avoiding negative expectations and stereotypes (see also Egan, this volume; Siraj, 2015). This is especially important when evidence indicates that teachers, as the general population, tend to hold negative bias about the potential attainment of those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds (Campbell, 2013, 2015). Such bias can induce a self-fulfilling prophecy of low attainment by children with such backgrounds; Campbell suggests that an increased focus on tackling the process of stereotyping and associated low expectation may lead to greater parity and a narrowing of attainment gaps (2015). It is sensible, given the long-lasting impact of early years education and care (OECD, 2012), that this issue is taken seriously by the early years community and that professional learning includes aspects of development in this regard.

As stated above, *talk* in early years settings has been established as a critical factor in high-quality provision (see also Siraj, Kingston and Mehuish, 2015). There are significant development opportunities for individuals, schools and non-maintained setting leaders to engage in critical evaluation of current practice in the light of research evidence. It is suggested here that, in responding to the need to support significant professional learning in the sector, the Welsh Government should seek out opportunities to embed such enquiry-based context-relevant action research in professional learning opportunities.

It is to be hoped, then, that the anticipated period of professional learning – let's not call it 'training' – for early years professionals supports those working in, managing and inspecting the early years sector to understand that children's development requires that we consider the kind of talk that takes place in our settings, the role of the adult in young children's learning, the links we make with our communities and families and a good understanding of *why* certain pedagogical choices are more effective than others. To paraphrase Professor Graham Donaldson during one of the 'great debates' about the future of the curriculum in Wales, undertaken during early 2015: exemplification of best practice can lead to 'copying', and copying from one context to another without enquiring *why* can lead to poor-quality pedagogic decisions being made by staff who lack confidence in their professional knowledge. Let's make sure that we all avoid that.

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Appendix 1

The twelve pedagogical elements to the Foundation Phase, as identified by the Foundation Phase evaluation (WG, 2015b: 22):

- a. Child choice/participation – children involved in initiating and directing their own learning;
- b. Exploration – children learning by exploring and experimenting;
- c. First-hand – children learning from first-hand and direct experiences;
- d. Practical – children learning from practical hands-on activities;
- e. Stage not age – children should be appropriately challenged and supported according to their stage (not age) of learning;
- f. Balance of continuous/enhanced/focussed activities – for the majority of

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learning there is an array of different activities constantly available that provides continuous learning provision, this is enhanced by the occasional provision of specific activities within continuous provision that provide enhanced learning (i.e. by scaffolding children's learning), and very occasionally focussed learning activities are provided to ensure particular learning tasks are achieved;

- g. Open questioning – questions to children invite open discursive responses rather than one-word closed responses;
- h. Reflection – children are prompted to think about their own learning experiences;
- i. Physical activity – children have the opportunity to move around whilst learning;
- j. Outdoor learning – learning takes place in indoor and outdoor learning environments;
- k. Observation of children – children's learning should be monitored predominantly through regular observations;
- l. Learning zones – the learning environment offers a variety of different learning areas/activities for children to engage with.