

Progressive Early-Years Education and the Disadvantaged Learner: Insights from the Welsh Foundation Phase

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Abstract

This paper investigates the implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales, a progressive early-years curriculum reform inspired by models such as Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki, as well as Scandinavian approaches. It was designed to promote holistic, play-based, and child-centered learning and aimed to enhance educational outcomes for all learners and reduce inequalities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, this mixed-methods study reveals persistent challenges in achieving these goals. Drawing on a national survey of Foundation Phase Lead Practitioners and semi-structured interviews with teachers in socio-economically deprived schools, the findings indicate that although the pedagogical vision aligns with many practitioners' values, its enactment is hindered by contextual constraints. Key barriers include inadequate adult-to-child ratios, complex learner needs, and material deprivation, all of which limit the intended use of play-based environments and child-led learning. The curriculum's assumptions about children's prior experiences and resources further exacerbate inequities in these settings. These insights have important implications for the scalability and equity of progressive educational reforms, especially as Wales extends these principles through its new Curriculum for Wales to learners up to age sixteen. The study underscores the need for targeted policy interventions, adequate resourcing, and sustained support to ensure such reforms do not inadvertently reinforce the inequalities they aim to address.

Key Words

Progressive education, early childhood curriculum reform, socio-economic disadvantage, child-centered learning, play-based pedagogy, educational equity, curriculum enactment.

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Introduction

Globally, early-years reforms have increasingly adopted progressive or child-centered pedagogical approaches, aimed at enhancing educational outcomes for young learners. The term “progressive” refers to educational philosophies emphasising child-centered, developmental, and experiential approaches to learning (Dewey, 1938; Schweisfurth, 2013). While such curricula promote autonomy, creativity, and holistic development, their implementation is resource intensive and requires sufficient staff capacity to support individual and small group learning (see Power et al., 2019). Prominent models such as those from New Zealand (e.g., see Mutch, 2013), Reggio Emilia (e.g., see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998), and Scandinavia (e.g., see Jensen, 2009), have gained international recognition and contrast with traditional teacher-centered curricula. Such programs are aligned with “Progressive” curricula, when understood as a common set of pedagogies associated with child-centered, developmental, experiential and active learning (e.g., see Howlett, 2013; OECD, 2001; 2006; Schweisfurth, 2013; Tippet & Lee, 2019).

Progressive, child-centered curricula have long been promoted as a means of improving outcomes for learners disadvantaged by poverty (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Edwards, et al., 2012; Freire, 1970; McMillan, 1904; Meier, 2002). Throughout this paper, “learners from disadvantaged backgrounds” refers to children from families who are likely to experience disadvantaging circumstances related to poverty. This definition broadly aligns with global understandings of educational disadvantage caused by material or socio-economic poverty (OECD, 2018), although specific indicators vary by region. A growing body of research has demonstrated the role that good early-years provision can play for these learners (e.g., Burger, 2010; Heckman et al., 2013; OECD, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Despite this, there is a notable lack of robust empirical evidence supporting the use of progressive curricula in reducing educational disparities between learners. Although this has been widely commented upon (e.g., Biroli et al., 2017; Blaiklock, 2010, 2013, 2017; Chambers et al., 2010; Jensen, 2009; Nuttall, 2005; Sommer, 2019), the persistent gap in the literature raises critical questions about the efficacy of model adoption without robust evidence of their ability to deliver equitable educational outcomes and experiences at scale.

The Foundation Phase¹ is a statutory early-years curriculum for children aged 3 to 7 in Wales, emphasising child-centered, play-based, and experiential learning which aimed to improve children's life chances, especially those disadvantaged by poverty (Maynard et al., 2013). Although it represents a distinct national initiative, it aligns with global trends prioritising developmental and holistic early childhood education and concerns about equity. Marking a significant shift in Welsh early-years educational policy, the Foundation Phase serves as a useful case study with distinct implications for the scalability and equity of similar approaches. Despite its ambitious goals, early research questioned its potential to address educational inequalities in pupil outcomes and educational experiences (e.g., see Taylor et al., 2015; Power et al., 2019).

This paper presents findings from a wider mixed-methods evaluation of the Foundation Phase and explores some of the complexities of enacting this curriculum in schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Following recognition of the gap in literature and the study's methodological design, the findings are presented by drawing on elements of the theories the Foundation Phase was based on. Beginning with survey data to

¹ *The Foundation Phase has now been incorporated into Wales' new curriculum (Curriculum for Wales) for 3-16-year-olds. While the 'Foundation Phase' itself no longer exists in name, the approach for 3-7-year-olds remains largely the same.*

provide a more global picture of issues related to practice, the paper then explores more contextual interview data of teachers working in schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Together, the findings suggest that while teachers frame the program and its pedagogical approach positively, its translation into practice in schools in deprived areas is hindered by issues related to material disadvantage. The findings hope to inform future policy decisions in Wales and elsewhere, and reforms aimed at mitigating the detrimental effects of poverty in education. This is especially important in Wales, as it rolls out the Curriculum for Wales (CfW), which extends the principles of the Foundation Phase to learners up to age 16. CfW for example grants schools autonomy in curriculum design and emphasises cross-curricular competencies over standardised testing. This approach echoes trends in competency-based curricula globally but the findings of the present study raise questions about equity and consistency in implementation.

The Welsh Foundation Phase and its empirical foundations

The Foundation Phase

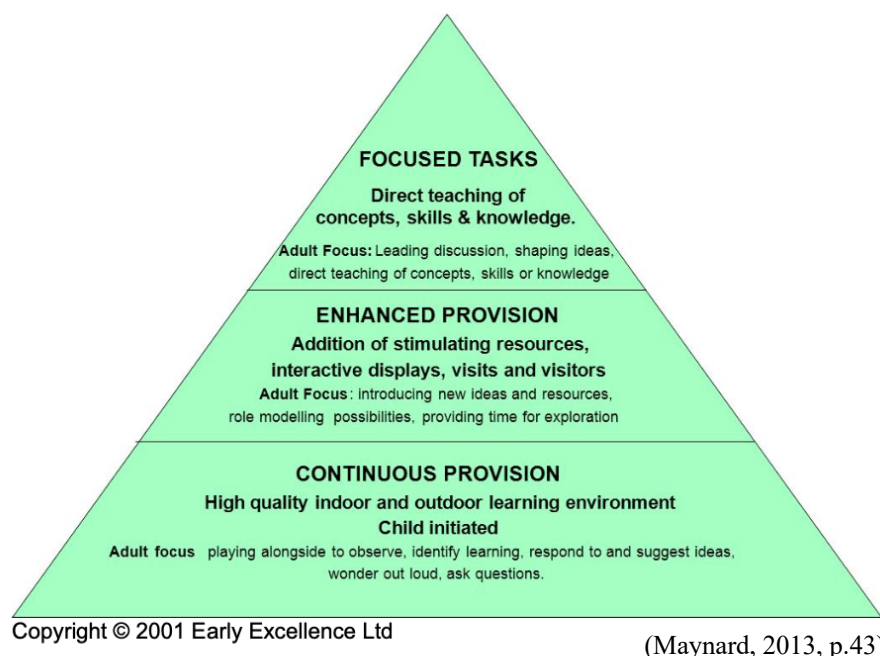
The nationwide roll out of the Foundation Phase began in 2008 and represented a radical overhaul of early-years education in Wales. Part of a broader effort to improve educational outcomes and address systemic inequalities, (see NAFW, 2001, 2003; Welsh Government, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a) it had broadly progressive aims including greater motivation, concentration, and enhanced learning dispositions by age seven, and improved engagement, wellbeing, social and emotional development, and learning dispositions, particularly for disadvantaged learners (Maynard et al., 2013).

The program and its pedagogical principles are informed by Piaget's (1952) and Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist ideals that children learn best when they are engaged in self-directed learning, supported by learning environments that foster autonomy, reflective thought, and scaffolding by adults. Embracing the progressive practices of New Zealand, Scandinavia and Reggio Emilia (see Maynard et al., 2013), children are seen as active participants in their learning, exercising choice through hands-on and exploratory activities. What are loosely termed "progressive" pedagogies are emphasised; learning is framed as play-based, child-centered, and experiential, involving individual and group activity, and family engagement (see Welsh Government, 2016a). Furthermore, the environment has an important educative role and should be well-equipped, "fun, exciting [and] stimulating" inside and out (Welsh Government, 2015b, p.3). Practitioners should "observe", "facilitate" and learn "alongside" children, responding to individual needs while prompting, challenging, extending and supporting children as they play, initiate, and direct their own learning (DCELLS, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d; Estyn 2017; Welsh Government, 2015b; 2016a).

The program advises that teachers aim to achieve a balance of child-initiated and adult-directed activities, using a mixture of three different types of learning provision illustrated in Figure 1 (see Maynard et al., 2013, p.43). These include: continuous provision, where children should spend most of their time, using constantly available resources for independent access in the indoor and outdoor learning environment (such as role-play, construction, reading and creative development); enhanced provision, where additional challenges or tasks within the learning environment are provided matching children's interests or the current topic of learning; and focused provision, where adults teach specific skills, knowledge, and concepts, through whole-class teaching, group work or alongside individuals (Estyn, 2017; Welsh Government, 2015b; Welsh Government 2016a). While intended to offer a more engaging and effective learning environment, it is a resource-intensive curriculum predicated on higher adult-to-child ratios than its predecessor. Having

clear differences in curriculum and pedagogy, and higher recommended adult-to-child ratios, the reform signified a major shift from the more formal, teacher-directed methods that had previously characterised early-years education in Wales (Taylor et al., 2016).

Figure 1: Curriculum Development Model illustrating the balance of provision



Alongside the emphasis on wellbeing and “whole child” development there was an expectation of improving outcomes and reducing achievement gaps for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. see Maynard et al., 2013; Welsh Government, 2016a). Indeed, 2016 saw narrowing gaps stated as a main priority in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2016a) and a central goal of the country’s wider “national mission” (Welsh Government, 2017a). Therefore, unlike most child-centred, play-based early-years approaches, the Foundation Phase also required children to develop key skills and outcomes, aiming to improve attainment in literacy and numeracy by the age of seven (the end of the Foundation Phase).

In 2012, during the reform’s infancy, Welsh Government commissioned a comprehensive evaluation. This revealed that the program’s core pedagogical principles and practices were not being applied consistently, and the methods of enactment varied across the country (Taylor et al, 2015). Furthermore, the evaluation’s authors raised concerns about the program’s efficacy for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and its ability to significantly impact attainment gaps (see Power et al., 2019; Taylor et al, 2015). However, the research literature suggests that major reforms require at least three years to become well enough practiced to effect outcomes and, complicated designs, even longer (e.g., see Felner et al., 2001; Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977), and Taylor et al., (2015) concluded that the programme likely required additional training and more time to embed and become consistently practiced and take full effect. Welsh Government heeded Taylor et al.’s (2015) recommendations and provided additional training and guidance for practitioners, but little evaluative work followed.

Empirical research

Existing literature on the progressive early-years practices of New Zealand, Reggio Emilia, and Scandinavia lacks empirical evidence to suggest that an approach like the Foundation Phase, inspired by these models, would reduce socio-economic inequalities in outcomes (see Jones, 2023). Commentators note that few rigorous studies on the effectiveness of these programs have been conducted in their countries of origin, with even fewer focusing on disadvantaged populations (e.g., see Blaiklock, 2010, 2013, 2017; Nuttall, 2005 on New Zealand, Biroli et al., 2017; Dodd-Nufrio, 2011; Emerson & Linder, 2021 on Reggio Emilia, and Jensen, 2009; Sommer, 2019 on Scandinavia). It thus appears, that the Welsh reform was not empirically grounded in the efficacy of the models it was based on.

Research on progressive approaches tends to focus on localised programs or specific interventions rather than comprehensive system-wide reforms, particularly concerning learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., see Abbott et al., 2003; Burger, 2010; Chambers et al., 2010; Elango et al., 2015; Feinstein et al., 2017; Grudnoff et al., 2017; Jensen et al., 2013; Payler et al., 2017; Sosu & Ellis, 2014). This appears to be the result of two main tensions, complicating the evaluation of large-scale progressive reforms. First, the gap between the written curriculum and its translation into classroom practice can undermine the validity of findings, especially for pedagogical models defined by loosely structured, complex concepts. This first tension has long been acknowledged in the research literature (for e.g., see: Blignaut, 2007; Braun et al., 2011; Fullan, 1993, 1997, 2000; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Durlak & Dupre, 2008; Priestley et al., 2021; Priestley & Minty, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002; Stenhouse, 1975; Supovitz, 2008). Secondly, the emphasis on broader developmental goals rather than traditional academic outcomes complicates the use of conventional attainment data for assessing their success (Jones, 2023). Not only are the goals and softer outcomes less easily measurable, but the traditional collection of administrative attainment data is seen as antithetical to the philosophy of progressivism (Jones, 2023). This means little system data exists for evaluative research.

These tensions underscore the value of investigating teachers' lived experiences when evaluating reforms. This is an approach supported by a substantial body of research, particularly in recognising the gap between policy as intended and policy as lived or enacted in practice (e.g., Ball et al., 2012; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Priestley et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2002). Teachers are major stakeholders who contextualise curricula and their associated outcomes within the unique socio-economic, social, cultural, and structural realities of their classrooms (e.g. see Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015; 2016; 2021). Research suggests that their perceptions of reforms —shaped by their beliefs and lived experiences—can either facilitate or hinder enactment and effective translation into practice and learning outcomes (e.g., Arrellano et al., 2022; Ball et al., 2012; Brown & McIntyre 1982; Fullan, 2007; Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Roorda et al., 2020; Spillane, 1999).

Furthermore, investigating teachers' experiences of reforms can offer critical, additional insights into the curriculum's enactment and efficacy in different circumstances. Thus, in a contextually diverse country like Wales, exploring their accounts of practice is crucial to understanding the program's effectiveness for learners impacted by poverty. This piece of research therefore responds to multiple calls for high-quality quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research to investigate the benefits or effectiveness of large-scale progressive approaches (e.g., Dietrichson et al., 2020; Emerson & Linder, 2021; OECD, 2004; Schweisfurth, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015) especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Chambers et al., 2010; Francis, 2015; OECD, 2004; Semel et al., 2016).

Research Design and Methods

This study was part of a larger investigation exploring the program's impact on attainment in the early-years and how it is enacted and perceived by practitioners, particularly in relation to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Jones, 2023). It adopted a three-phased sequential mixed methods design incorporating the collection and analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data and drawing on the design of Taylor et al.'s (2015) research and study findings. Focussing on the second and third phases of the research, this paper explores teachers' views and experiences of the program, rather than its measured impact on attainment (see Jones, 2025 for the latter). The paper draws on 289 responses to a national survey of Foundation Phase Lead Practitioners, data from semi-structured interviews of 21 teachers from seven case study schools in predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged areas and the 361 survey responses of Foundation Phase Lead practitioners from Taylor et al.'s (2015) research.

Data collection

Most schools have a 'Foundation Phase Lead Practitioner,' or a staff member delegated to lead the Foundation Phase. Using a database compiled of all available school email addresses in Wales, 1,197 schools were approached and their Foundation Phase lead invited to participate in an anonymous online survey in 2019. 289 responses were received, representing roughly 24% of schools.

The survey investigated perceptions about the program, its benefits and how it is enacted, whilst repeating some questions used by Taylor et al., (2015), enabling direct comparisons between two time points and providing a quantitative idea about how widespread certain views, experiences, and practices were.

Responding to recommendations by the early research on the Foundation Phase (e.g., see Siraj & Kingston, 2014; Taylor et al., 2015), Welsh Government provided new guidance and training materials. Taylor et al., (2015) argued that the success or impact of the program was heavily dependent on whether teachers fully embraced specific pedagogies in their practice, which led to the resultant publication of eleven pedagogical principles to help practitioners enact the program as it was designed (see Welsh Government, 2016a). The principles fall under three central areas: the child (and how they learn and should be supported); the learning environment (what it should provide and enable); and the practitioner (how they should plan and observe learning, engage with children and their parents/carers, and continue their professional development). The survey undertaken for the current study focused on these principles to provide a rough gauge of evenness of practice.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore patterns identified in the survey data and obtain more nuanced insights from participants, especially in relation to learners affected by poverty. Schools were recruited from a subsample of Taylor et al.'s (2015) 41 case study settings using multiple selection criteria including cohort characteristics (year size and free school meal eligibility), attainment and type of pedagogical practice observed by Taylor et al., in 2012. In the UK, Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility is commonly used as a proxy indicator of socio-economic disadvantage, as it identifies children from low-income households who qualify for government-funded school meals. Internationally, similar markers of economic deprivation include the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in the United States and the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) in South Africa.

Using Taylor et al.'s scores of pedagogical alignment, the sampling strategy ensured that schools with a variety of scores were included in the sample (see Jones, 2023 for further

details). Selecting schools with an above average number of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) helped to ensure we recruited teachers in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (areas with high levels of material poverty), which was particularly important for this study. In total, seven Headteachers from schools across South Wales agreed to participate. Five of these served areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Interviews with 21 teachers were conducted in the Autumn of 2020. These included three Headteachers, eight Foundation Phase Leads and eleven Foundation Phase classroom teachers. All participants agreed to interview audio-recording.

Data analysis

While acknowledging the difficulties associated with determining pedagogical practice from self-reports, the survey was useful for collecting practitioners' views on the extent to which they believed the Foundation Phase provision within their school embraced each of the pedagogical principles and how difficult they felt it was to do so. Offering a quantitative picture of Lead Practitioner perceptions, it also helped provide a rough idea of the extent to which the intended approach was universally embraced and highlight if there were any elements practitioners particularly struggled with. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the results.

Interview data were transcribed and coded using NVivo 12.0. Data were analysed thematically adopting an enactment lens drawing on the work of Braun et al., (2011) and Priestley et al., (2012, 2021), for example, and broadly followed the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2020). This approach helped create a more dynamic and locally specific understanding of teachers' experiences (Bragg et al., 2022). Analytical observations mapped onto key themes identified in the enactment literature and the study loosely drew on the heuristic developed by Braun and colleagues to assist with understanding policy enactments within education (e.g., see Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011). This paper focuses on the situational and material dimensions of practice (See Braun et al., 2011).

Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds were broadly conceived as children from families who are likely to experience detrimental circumstances related to poverty. References made to "children affected by poverty" or "children from disadvantaged backgrounds" were without definition, leaving the concept open to participant interpretations. This allowed for broader groups of children to be considered than those typically captured using FSM eligibility and was deemed important from a social justice perspective.

Findings

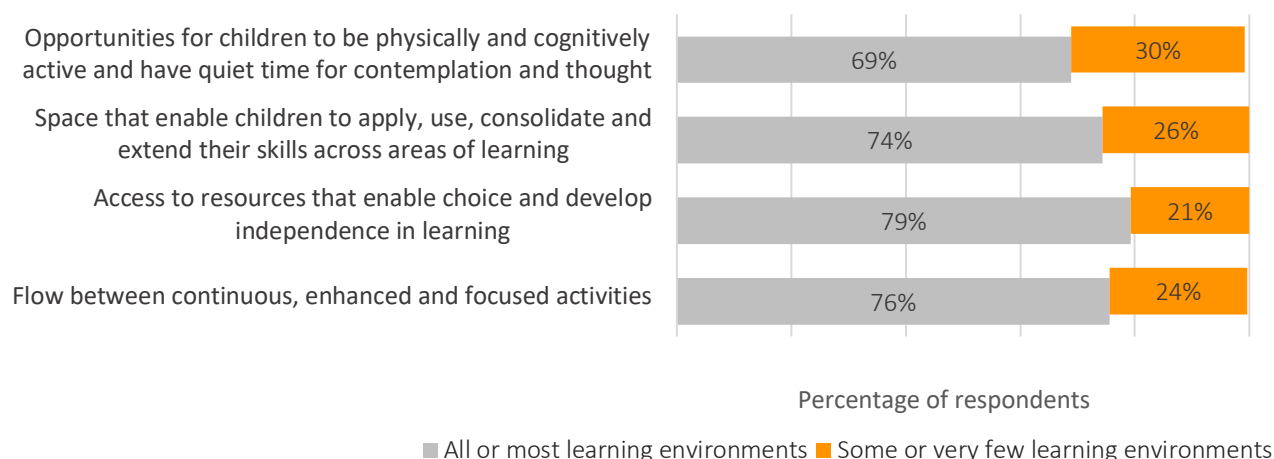
The picture of curriculum enactment in Wales

The analysis begins with survey data about the enactment of the pedagogical principles. In so doing, it references some of the well-established educational theories and frameworks that underpin them (revisited in the discussion to illustrate how closely practice aligns with theoretical ideals). The first section especially focuses on the learning environment and the practitioner's role, offering a broad perspective on practice and perceived challenges in Wales.

Firstly, the findings surrounding the curriculum's pedagogical principles, suggest that a significant number of schools are still some way off embracing them, despite the Foundation Phase being in practice for over 10 years. Starting with the principles related to the environment (Figure 2), over a fifth of Lead Practitioners felt that only "some" or "very few" of their learning environments were pedagogically aligned with the various

environmental principles, with almost a third reporting that providing opportunities for children to be physically and cognitively active and space for quiet contemplation and thought was only provided in some or very few classrooms. This means that in a significant number of schools, educational provision was falling short of realising Vygotsky's and Piaget's constructivist ideals, or those related to Reggio Emilia's theory of children's learning and autonomy being supported by the environment as the "third teacher" (e.g., see Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Figure 2: Perceptions of the extent to which the principles related to the environment are embedded



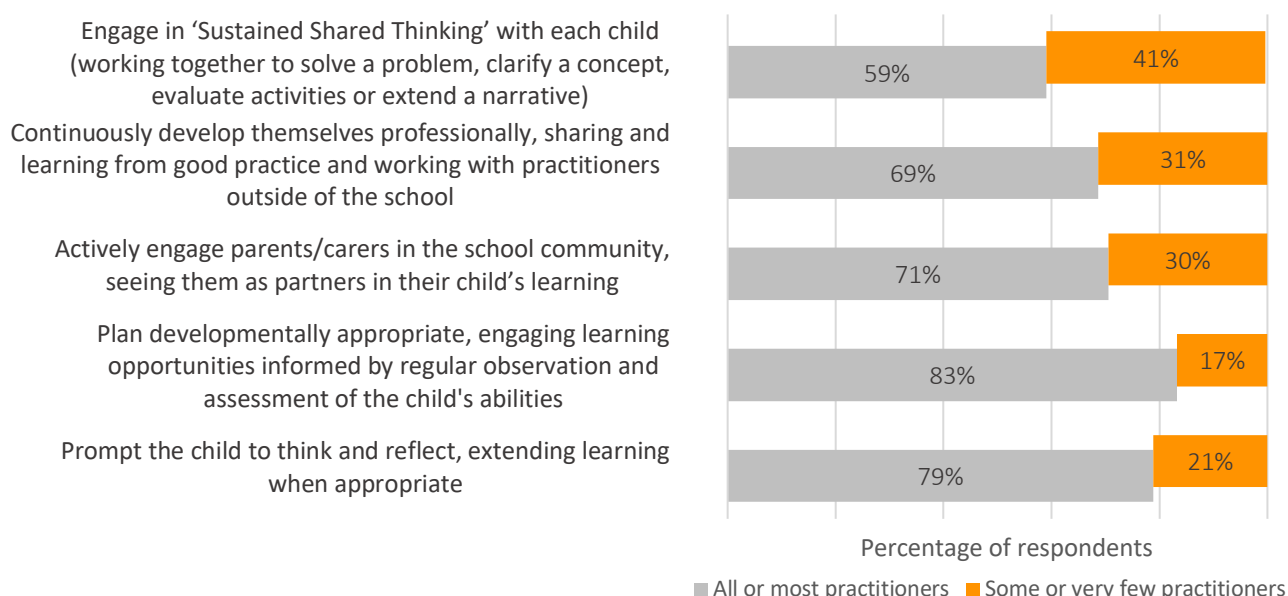
n= 249 to 251 responses to the question: "Thinking about all the learning environments that make up the Foundation Phase in this school, how many provide:"

Furthermore, in 25% of schools, teachers felt the provision of flow between continuous, enhanced and focused provision was only achieved in some or very few classrooms. Indeed, the data suggests that access to a range of resources that enable choice and develop independence is not provided in a significant number of schools. This is despite the alignment of this principle with theories of autonomous learning (e.g., see Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1970), Montessori's carefully prepared environment (see Isaacs, 2018) and Reggio Emilia's principle of environment as the "third teacher" (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Based on these theories, learning spaces designed to engage pupils' interests and allow choice, support sustained engagement, and fosters responsibility, confidence, and independence.

Figure 3 illustrates the extent to which Lead Practitioners felt that the Foundation Phase staff in their school engaged with the principles related to how practitioners are expected to work. The results suggest that a significant number may not be engaging with these principles, since 41% of Lead Practitioners indicated that only "some" or "very few" Foundation Phase staff engage in SST or "Sustained Shared Thinking" (working together with the child to solve problems, clarify concepts, extend a narrative). Furthermore, a fifth reported that only "some" or "very few" Foundation Phase practitioners prompt children to think and reflect and extend learning in their schools. These practices have both theoretical (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) and empirical (e.g., Davies & Dunn, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004) support and relate to the process of providing temporary support, extension or guidance to learners as they develop new skills or understanding. Furthermore, the principle of engaging parents/carers as partners in children's learning, underpinned by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) for example, was only met in

30% of schools, leaving a substantial number unable to actualise the promise of these theories.

Figure 3: Perceptions of the extent to which the principles related to the way practitioners should work are embedded



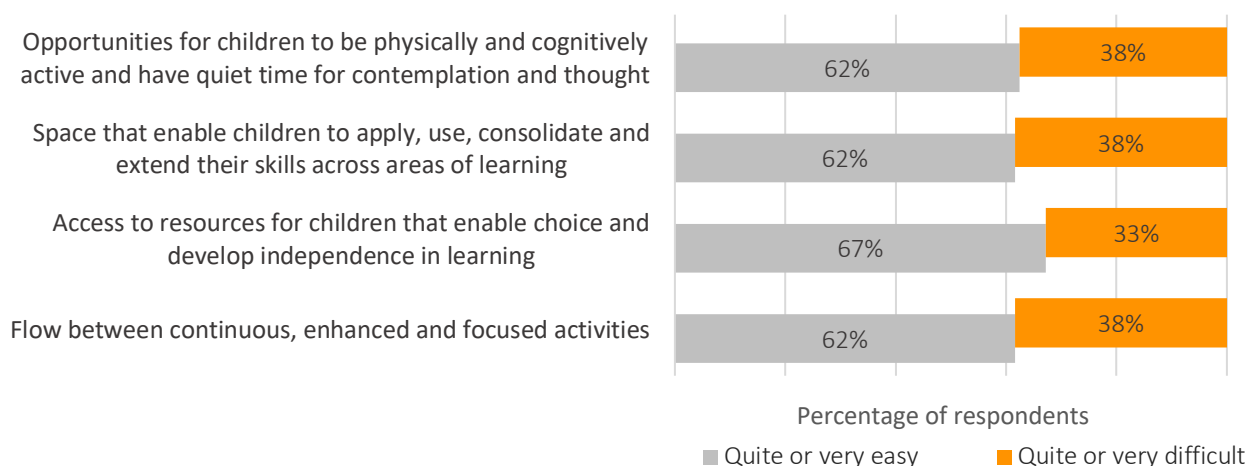
n=248 to 251 responses to the question: "Thinking about the ways that Foundation Phase practitioners work in this school, how many:"

The data also suggests a range of underdeveloped areas of professional practice in a significant number of schools, despite the value that research has placed on them in supporting learning specifically in the Foundation Phase (e.g., see Kingston and Siraj, 2017; Maynard et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). Moreover, findings highlight a readily acknowledged lack of pedagogical engagement, even though this curriculum aligned with professional values about how children learn and was viewed so positively by many practitioners (see Jones, 2023).

Fullan and Pomfret (1977) explain the complexity or difficulty involved in implementing a curriculum innovation is a critical factor for its successful adoption and that this can be assessed by how complex users perceive it to be. They highlight the importance of adaptations to the conditions that facilitate curriculum change for example, so if teachers express difficulty enacting specific elements of the Foundation Phase, this could signal shortfalls in certain conditions that the curriculum depends on or weaknesses in the curriculum's design.

The data presented in Figures 4 and 5 illustrate perceptions of difficulty enacting some of the pedagogical principles, suggesting a significant number of practitioners struggled to translate them into practice. This potentially explains the lack of engagement with these same principles above. Indeed, Figure 4 illustrates that over a third of respondents reported difficulty enacting most elements relating to the environment and Figure 5 identifies significant areas of perceived difficulty in how the practitioner should work. While some of the environmental challenges may speak to limitations in the physical fabric of school buildings, some appear to be resource based.

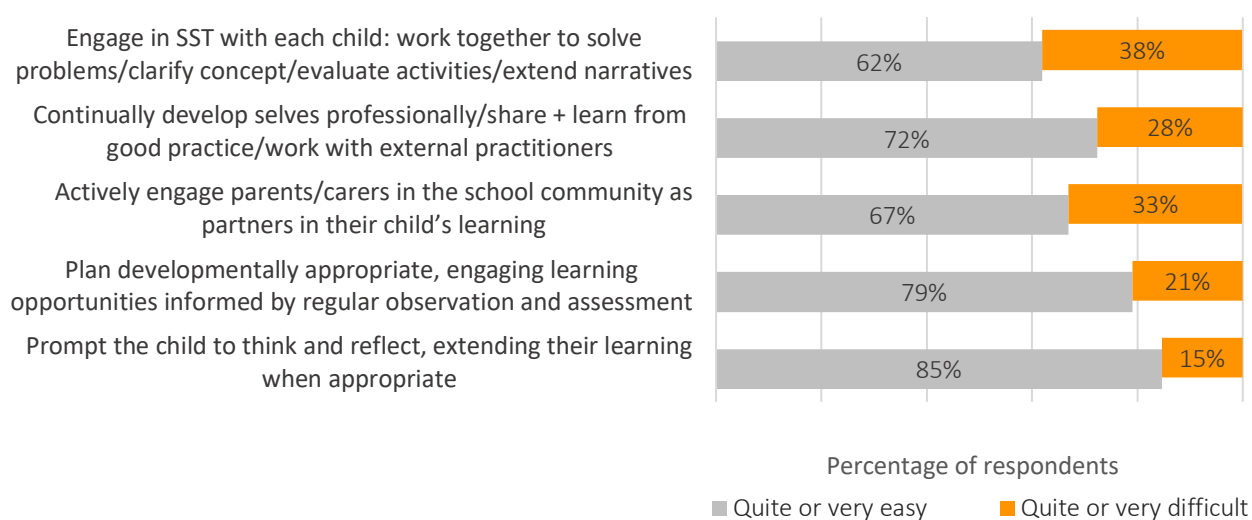
Figure 4: How easy teachers feel it is to realise the environmental principles in practice



n=246-248 responses to the question: "how easy it is to ensure all Foundation Phase learning environments provide:"

Figure 5 suggests that engaging children in SST was problematic for over a third of practitioners, and just over a fifth found prompting children to think, reflect and extend learning when appropriate difficult. The study also found that in roughly a quarter of schools (24%), practitioners experienced difficulty ensuring that children were appropriately challenged and supported by adults and the environment to facilitate good progress ($n=248$). The latter conceivably relates to difficulties enacting the former two principles of practice.

Figure 5: How easy teachers feel it is to realise the principles relating to the practitioner in practice



n=245 to 248 responses to the question: "how easy do you think it is to for Foundation Phase practitioners to:" SST = "Sustained Shared Thinking"

Perhaps unsurprisingly, substantial correlations were found between level of perceived difficulty and reported enactment of pedagogies. Spearman's Rho correlations relating to the Foundation Phase learning environment and way practitioners work were

0.517 and 0.530 ($n=247$, $p<.001$ and 240 $p<.001$ respectively). Without establishing causality, the findings indicated a positive relationship between perceived ease of pedagogical enactment and level of engagement. However, to consider the potential reasons why some, but not all teachers found it difficult to engage with elements of the approach, the interviews considered how they recontextualised the Foundation Phase (i.e., imagined, interpreted, contextualised, and translated it into practice). This helped elicit a deeper understanding of the contextual challenges of translating these theories into practice in disadvantaged settings.

Key barriers to enacting the pedagogical approach

While many practitioners felt that the Foundation Phase's philosophical and pedagogical approach aligned with their ideas about how children learn, some teachers gave clear accounts of a deliberate deviation from it, using more formal methods of teaching instead. This appeared to be the result of several key barriers, which were particularly problematic in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Insufficient adult-to-child ratios

Adult-to-child ratios had worsened over time with more schools reporting struggles in achieving appropriate staffing levels in 2019 than they did in 2012 (see Jones, 2023). While achieving the recommended ratios emerged as a common barrier to embracing the pedagogical approach among most schools in Wales, it was the "single biggest obstacle" in 15% of settings ($n=289$) and appeared particularly challenging in socio-economically disadvantaged ones. Insufficient staffing made it difficult to balance child-initiated activity with the necessary adult supervision, observation, support, and extension. This therefore impacted the curriculum's play-based pedagogy and is clearly illustrated by the following extracts:

So you're left to try, on your own and, you can't, you can't man it, you can't let people outside on their own, then do you organise it so that everybody has an outside day, or so you know all in one go? (Lowri, Heathbrook, when TAs are taken out of the classroom)

It's releasing that one member of staff to take a group outside where you perhaps think oh no, I really need my TA [Teaching Assistant] in the class, especially if you've got some behavioural difficulties ... if I haven't got that additional member then, I'm drawn away from what I am doing with a group, so it's trying to find that balance. (Sarah, Cartref)

The children need that questioning, they need that prompting, they need that inspiration and actually, if you haven't got people to be assessing them or watching or observing, how do you build on your planning you know? One person can't be everywhere, you need to have staff to make sure the learning is appropriate and supported in the right way... If you've only got two members of staff, you have to have some sort of formality going on otherwise you are simply crowd controlling. If not, there's no quality going on anywhere. (Jess, Heathbrook)

These challenges were frequently exacerbated by the diverse and complex needs of the learners in these schools.

The diverse and complex needs of learners in schools in socio-economically deprived areas

The “particular needs of children” within the school were positioned as an obstacle to enactment by a quarter of respondents, while 22% positioned “behaviour” (n=289) and 13%, “poverty” (n=289) as obstacles. This highlighted a tension between the Foundation Phase curriculum and specific characteristics of some learners. In socio-economically disadvantaged schools, learners’ needs are typically greater and more diverse as they tend to have a higher proportion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN), behavioural issues, and socio-emotional challenges². In this research, associated “well-being needs, behaviour needs, speech and language needs” were framed as placing additional demands on staff time and, coupled with inadequate adult-to-child ratios, made it difficult for teachers to support all learners and provide the individualised attention required by this curriculum. Furthermore, such needs are not accounted for by the national recommended adult: child ratios and Foundation Phase funding. Two headteachers explain that the needs associated with material disadvantage, create additional pressures on practitioner time:

We currently have 100 hours of statemented³ pupils within this school and are funded for 55, so I have to find 45 hours statemented pupil time, but all those things impact on the Foundation Phase. (George, Cartref)

In my Year 2 class, I've got I think it's 69% Free School Meals, so whatever we do in that class is based around meeting the needs of those pupils within that cohort... so in that class, a large amount of the time is linked to deprivation and where they're coming from. (George, Cartref)

We need to invest in so much support for children who've got those [social, emotional and well-being] issues, that we can often find less time unfortunately to work with the children who need bona fide educational support, because you're worrying about the others and their well-being. (Tony, Maes Bach)

The “vast range” in pupil ability in these schools was also framed as creating additional “pulls” on time, and the lengthy process of diagnosing SEN and awarding support as impacting staff capacity in the classroom. One Foundation Phase Lead, Jess explains,

It can take months upon years to get any sort of diagnosis or support and so you could have a teacher and a TA in a reception class with 30 kids and three children waiting for an ASD diagnosis, so your one TA is acting as a one to three for those children and suddenly you're on your own trying to provide all these areas with rich enhanced learning, well actually if you're not there enhancing that learning, that learning is not going on.

Indeed, much of the discourse in these deprived schools related to trying to balance these additional needs against the pedagogical demands of the curriculum and to their impact

² An eFSM learner in Wales is twice as likely to have a special educational need (Welsh Government, 2015a)

³ In UK schools, a pupil with a “statement” (now an Education, Health, and Care Plan, EHCP) has a formal document following an external assessment outlining their special educational needs and the support they require. Schools receive specific funding and resources based on the EHCP to provide tailored assistance for the pupil’s needs.

on time, focus and balancing the pedagogical approach. This is illustrated in the following examples:

You need an extra two adults here because ...you have a couple of children coming in with behavioural needs, or additional issues; woof, one adult seems to be gone straight away you know, so it's still difficult to balance it all with the children that we have.
(Carys, Maes Bach)

I don't have enough time then to fit in maybe some more of the high quality pedagogy that I want to.....because of the area that we work in we have lots of different needs for children. It maybe well-being needs, behaviour needs, speech and language needs, that there's lots of interventions and additional things we need to provide ... it's between you and your TA to deliver all these interventions...it's like you're kind of battling with yourself of what's the right thing to do. (Jen, Cartref)

Independently, left on their own, it becomes a massive free for all ... because they're fighting over each other for things, they can't work together, they don't want to work together... they can't regulate their emotion around it either, you know they can be perfectly happy one minute and then extremely angry the next because somebody has picked up the red Lego brick they wanted. (Debbie, Dalestowe)

These extracts demonstrate how behavioural, socio-emotional and learning needs manifest in what appear to be tensions between dealing with the immediate social, well-being, behavioural or SEN needs of some pupils, supporting the learning of all pupils, and embracing the various roles and pedagogies embedded in this curriculum. For these learners, this includes their ability to work collaboratively, or in small groups and learn through play. Where capacity is compromised, adult-led focused activity indoors may be prioritised over supporting learning in the continuous and enhanced or outdoor provision, a significant departure from an important area of pedagogical practice. The policy states for example, that “[p]ractitioner involvement in children’s play is of vital importance” (DCELLS, 2008b, p.6) and a “strong emphasis” should be placed on outdoor learning as “an extension of the indoor learning environment” (DCELLS, 2008d, p.41).

Nick from Heathbrook explains, “*you end up putting all your time in focused tasks because focused tasks don't work without an adult.*” He maintains unsupervised continuous and enhanced provision results in children “*going off task*” and “*poor behaviour,*” and that it doesn’t “*function to optimal*”. This echoes a wider acknowledgment that when learning is unsupported in these areas, it is less likely to be effective. Debbie admits, “*we don't feel maybe that those skills are being taught quite as well as they could be should there be an adult present to be able to do that.*” Similarly, Jess from Heathbrook explains that in such circumstances, children don’t get “*what they were meant to get out of it.*” However, this also relates to another of material deprivation’s effects on resources and experiences in the Foundation Phase.

The impact of material deprivation on pupil experiences and resources within the home

Classic accounts of material disadvantage in education have tended to focus on factors like books, study space and IT. However, teachers suggest there are other material resources relevant to the Foundation Phase that impact learning. They explained that pupils often lacked experience and knowledge of how to use key resources common to the continuous and enhanced provision (such as sand, play dough, books, scissors, and craft materials). Anna at Maycroft for example explains, “*they just haven't had the resources,*” while Jess at

Heathbrook frames these learners “at even more of a disadvantage, because they haven’t experienced these things before.” She explains,

The difference between the children is just massive. You will have children in our schools who have had all those things and are ready to learn.

Even though we believe in the Foundation Phase philosophy, actually we don't feel our children are well equipped for that.

Indeed, Jess continues “I just feel like for children from deprived backgrounds, the more formal approach is where the difference is” and “If it had to be Foundation Phase all day every day? No. I wouldn't feel that would work for our learners”. This perspective is suggestive that some children within these schools need to be “equipped” for the pedagogical approach, due to underlying assumptions the curriculum makes surrounding access to prior experiences and resources within the home. Many teachers maintain this can lead to “inappropriate” use of key resources and further frustration over limited capacity to support the different areas of provision as intended. Andy at Maes Bach explains, “sometimes when they're just left free reign, they don't always know how to use it or access it or how to use it all most successfully.” Jess explains that “it works beautifully” for more able pupils who have accessed certain resources and experiences at home, because they “use what they have been taught discretely, more appropriately.” She continues, “whatever they play they do it with more of a purpose” and that “for other children who haven't gathered those tools yet, they can't use them”.

The findings offer important insights that suggest where capacity issues lead to a lack of support for continuous or enhanced provision, pupils who lack experience of key resources may benefit less than their experienced peers. Additionally, where teachers perceive a lack of play skills seen as fundamental to accessing the play-based curriculum, some described using interventions to equip children with a basic proficiency in them. Debbie for example describes how her TA runs interventions, “not focusing just on maths and literacy”, but rather, “concentrates on those experiences through play and turn taking and things like that and sharing”. Others discussed discretely “teaching” the skills they felt were required to access the continuous and enhanced provision, use resources appropriately, work collaboratively, independently, and learn through play. The emphasis on “teaching” below illustrates this:

With the area of deprivation, these kids aren't having a huge amount of toys at home, ...structured play, ...[or] a range of toys to play with, so we spend a lot of time teaching how to play, how to turn take, how to share, how to use these things appropriately and the real struggle for us has been the lack of funding for adults. (Jess, Heathbrook)

They need to learn the skill of working independently and learn that skill of using play in a way that enhances learning, but they need to be taught that. (Debbie, Dalestowe)

If they haven't got the vocabulary to speak about, and I know that's the point of the Foundation Phase, to have the chance to speak informally and to get the confidence and things, but actually, so much of that has to be modelled to our children, so that is more formal....they're not going to magically start doing it to each other unless they're hearing it from us first. (Jess, Heathbrook)

You've got to teach those skills, you know so then it has to be a little bit more prescriptive to start off with and then towards the end of the year you can ease off, once they've learnt key things. (Lowri, Heathbrook)

As time is limited by the need to achieve certain learning objectives and ensure play is “purposeful”, it is easy to understand this more formal pedagogical approach. Jess explains, “it takes a long time to get them ready for Foundation Phase.”

Impact of material deprivation on access to opportunities within the school

Four of the pedagogical principles relate to the physical learning environment, which should be resourced with a wide range of play and learning equipment to help pupils access the curriculum in multiple ways. While this adds to the distinctiveness of the program, the data suggests that in areas of high deprivation, the ability to provide a resource rich physical learning environment and enrichment trips to support learning appear to be limited. A uniform formula is used to calculate Foundation Phase budgets across all Welsh schools, and research elsewhere suggests that those in disadvantaged areas are less likely to be able to draw on extra donations and contributions from parents or the economic, social, and cultural capital of their Parent Teacher Associations (e.g., see Body, 2017, 2023; Body et al., 2017; Francis, 2015; Murray, 2019; Murray et al., 2019). Indeed, Jess explained, “unfortunately, we're not a school that has those funds to play with,” while many referenced supplementing resources themselves.

Similarly, a school’s ability to deliver the necessary enrichment trips, activities, and experiences for this experience-rich curriculum appear to be impacted by the ability of children’s parents to contribute to associated costs. This is particularly significant, as according to practitioners, it is these pupils who most benefit from such enrichment activities and experiences, as their access to them outside of school is limited by poverty. Together, the impacts of material deprivation on childhood experiences, resources, and the diverse needs of learners in these schools seem vast and may well explain why just under a quarter of survey respondents (22%, n=248) reported difficulty ensuring children exercise choice, participate, are involved, initiate and direct their own learning.

Discussion

This study contributes to a growing international literature on the implementation of progressive early-years curricula, particularly in disadvantaged contexts (e.g., Bennett, 2004; Burger, 2010; Hedges & Cullen, 2005; Payler et al., 2017; 2017c; Schweisfurth, 2013; Sylva et al., 2010). More specifically, it increases our understanding of the barriers to equitable progressive curriculum reforms.

International research consistently emphasises the importance of high-quality early-years provision in reducing educational inequalities, particularly for learners disadvantaged by poverty (e.g., see Barnett, 2013; Heckman, 2011; 2013; OECD; 2020; 2021; 2022; Magnuson et al., 2016; Melhuish et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2010). This was the intention of the Welsh Foundation Phase. Inspired by models such as Reggio Emilia and Te Whāriki and underpinned by constructivist ideals, it aligned with global trends in early-years education that prioritise child-centered, play-based, experiential learning, and holistic development, (e.g., see Bertram & Pascal, 2016; Melhuish et al., 2015; OECD, 2015; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Wood, 2013). However, while the Foundation Phase aimed to reduce educational inequalities, the findings of this research highlight persistent barriers to equitable enactment in socio-economically deprived schools.

Despite alignment between the curriculum's philosophy and teachers' professional values, contextual factors - particularly pressures on staffing, resource constraints, and the diverse needs of learners - impeded enactment. These findings support earlier concerns about uneven implementation of the programme and its efficacy for disadvantaged learners (Taylor et al., 2015; Power et al., 2019). Similar challenges have also been documented internationally, where resource-intensive or progressive curricula have been challenged in lower-income settings (Jensen, 2009; Johnston & Hayes, 2007; Hedges and Cullen, 2005; Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Rameka & Soutar, 2019). However, the present study has shown specifically how the interaction between material and contextual factors in schools in disadvantaged areas can work against both teacher *and* pupil engagement with this curriculum's pedagogical design.

Theory meets practice: gaps in scaffolding and support

Progressive curricula are underpinned by constructivist theories, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) concept of scaffolding, both of which stress the importance of adult support in enabling meaningful learning. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for instance, suggests that for children to fully engage in environments like the Foundation Phase's continuous and enhanced provision, appropriate scaffolding and individualised extension must be offered by adults. The theory proposes that timely adult interventions that challenge the child at the right level are needed to promote cognitive growth and, enable children to move beyond their current skill level and understanding to progress to meaningful learning outcomes.

The theory is also supported by empirical work (e.g., Brodie, 2014; Van de Pol, et al. 2010; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Wood, 2009) and these interactions are framed as *more* important in contexts where children have not had relevant prior experiences or access to resources that would help guide their independent exploration (Jensen, 2009). Yet teachers in this study described being unable to provide adequate supervision and extension as proposed by the theory, particularly in continuous and enhanced provision areas. Where staffing is stretched, adult-led focused activities often take precedence, leading to concerns about the quality and depth of learning in play-based areas.

This disconnect between theory and practice was especially apparent where children lacked prior experience with key resources. Without adult facilitation, engagement in these settings was seen as limited. The result is that the intended benefits of child-led, experiential learning - central to the curriculum's design - are not realised for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is despite warnings by scholars early on that the intended educational benefits of progressive practices like outdoor learning cannot be realised without sufficient staffing and resources (Maynard, Waters, & Clement, 2013; Payler et al., 2017b).

Curriculum assumptions and material deprivation

A recurring theme in teacher narratives was the curriculum's implicit assumption that children arrive with certain play skills and experiences and have access to resources typically associated with more affluent homes. For many learners in this study, this was not the case. Teachers described having to formally "teach" the skills needed to access the curriculum: turn-taking, sharing, purposeful play, and using resources appropriately. This echoes a recognition in Danish preschool programs that targeted interventions are required to ensure

play-based pedagogies are accessible to children lacking prior exposure to such approaches (Jensen et al., 2010; 2013).

The mismatch highlighted in the present research suggests that children from more privileged homes, who arrive at school with key skills and experiences deemed important for learning in the Foundation Phase, may be better positioned to engage with this curriculum as intended. This raises serious concerns about equity. It also adds weight to the argument that progressive curricula may inadvertently privilege children whose home environments more closely align with the curriculum's expectations (Power et al., 2019). As teachers in this study explained, some children required considerable preparatory work simply to participate effectively in the learning environments the Foundation Phase promotes. Moreover, it suggests the pedagogical breadth and curriculum focus in schools serving disadvantaged areas may differ from that in more affluent ones, echoing observations by others both in Wales and elsewhere (e.g., Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012; Power et al, 2019; Taylor et al., 2015).

Home-school discontinuities

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the importance of consistency across home and school settings. However, a body of empirical research consistently demonstrates that socioeconomic inequalities profoundly shape children's access to important learning resources and opportunities at home (e.g., Bradley et al., 2001; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Evans et al., 2016). For many children in this study, material deprivation limited their access to enrichment experiences and resources outside school considered relevant for learning in the Foundation Phase. Teachers noted that this affected children's readiness for independent and exploratory learning. Furthermore, Sylva et al., (2010) argue that socio-economic disadvantage can also deprive children of experiences and materials that foster active learning, creativity, and collaboration which are all relevant to this type of curriculum. This was noted upon by practitioners in this study.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) also theorised that involving parents as partners in learning promotes continuity and consistency in, and therefore benefits, a child's learning experience. This has received empirical support (Epstein, 2011; Lehl et al., 2020; OECD, 2017; Sylva et al., 2010). However, teachers reported that parental engagement - another key component of the curriculum - was difficult to achieve in some disadvantaged communities, often attributing this to socio-economic stressors some families face. These barriers reflect findings elsewhere that targeted strategies are required to overcome the systemic challenges facing schools and families in low-income areas (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Emerson et al., 2012; Epstein, 2011). They also resonate with critiques suggesting that disparities in home environments challenge the efficacy of progressive, child-centered models (Power et al., 2019, 2020).

Similarly, resource disparities between schools were evident and likely to impact learning experiences. Unlike more affluent settings, schools in deprived areas often lack supplementary funding sources such as PTA contributions. This is noted in research elsewhere, which suggests schools in disadvantaged areas are less likely to benefit from extra donations and contributions from parents or the economic, social, and cultural capital of their Parent Teacher Association's (Body, 2017, 2023; Body et al., 2017; Francis, 2015; Murray, 2019; Murray et al., 2019). Teachers in this study reported having to self-fund materials or reduce access to trips and enrichment activities, despite these being core to the curriculum's experiential ethos. These findings reinforce the conclusion that equitable enactment requires commitment to equitable material capacity.

Implications for policy and reform

While there is a general recognition of a gap between progressive curricula ideals and practice internationally (e.g., Chan & Richie, 2016; Dalli, 2011; Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Jensen, 2009; Nuttall; Nygard, 2017; Schweisfurth, 2013; Te One & Ewens, 2019; Wood & Nuttall, 2019), the findings of this study highlight the need for sustained and carefully allocated investment in staffing and resources, especially if progressive curricula are to achieve equity at scale. While universal in design, the Foundation Phase appears to require differentiated support to succeed in disadvantaged contexts. Without such support, these schools may continue to struggle with the tension between curriculum ideals and classroom realities.

This is particularly pertinent given the current rollout of the closely aligned Curriculum for Wales (CfW), which extends some of the Foundation Phase's principles to learners up to age 16. Indeed, it adds to fears over CfW's affordability in resource-constrained settings, supporting concerns that its emphasis on school autonomy and enrichment activities risks exacerbating inequalities unless accompanied by measures to ensure consistent capacity across settings (Duggan et al., 2022; Evans, 2023; Power et al., 2020). Furthermore, the findings of the present study support fears over the impact of loosened standardised attainment reporting and roll out of universal free school meals on the ability to track gaps between learners and progress towards educational equity in Wales (e.g., Evans, 2023; Newton et al., 2019; Power et al., 2020).

More broadly, the study adds to international calls for progressive reforms to be evaluated in light of local context (e.g., Dietrichson et al., 2020; Emerson & Linder, 2021; Jensen, 2009; Schweisfurth, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015). The success of such curricula depends not just on pedagogical intent, but on the practical conditions that allow them to be enacted meaningfully for all learners.

Conclusion

While this study highlights challenges specific to the Welsh Foundation Phase, the findings hold broader relevance for international policymakers and practitioners who are considering or are already implementing progressive-early-years reforms. This examination of the Welsh Foundation Phase identifies key conditions such as staffing, resourcing, and contextual fit, that are essential to ensuring progressive reforms can equitably enhance young children's learning experiences and outcomes when implemented at scale.

The study also underscores the importance of context in determining the success of educational reforms. It reveals the inherent challenges of enacting a complex, resource-intensive curriculum in disadvantaged contexts, drawing attention to systemic issues that hinder equitable scaling. The evidenced gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities aligns with broader calls for context-sensitive and equity-focused adaptations to educational reforms (Blaiklock, 2010; Emerson & Linder, 2021; Jensen, 2009; Romeka & Soutar, 2020). To bridge this divide, policymakers must prioritise targeted investments and tailored support for schools in disadvantaged areas. Without such measures, children from underprivileged backgrounds risk missing out on the meaningful, challenging learning experiences envisioned by the curriculum's designers and its underpinning theories.

Furthermore, the findings reinforce the broader argument for ongoing monitoring and adaptation of early childhood education reforms to ensure both equity and effectiveness (e.g., McLean et al., 2023; OECD, 2017). By addressing the challenges identified in this study, policymakers may help practitioners to better translate the curriculum's ambitious design into

equitable experiences and outcomes for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background.

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The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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