

## Using enabling learning and the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings as reflection tools, in house and across a cluster

### Who are we?

Ely and Caerau Integrated Children Centre serves the Ely and Caerau community in Cardiff. Alongside maintained nursery education we offer full wrap around care, holiday club and a full-time community programme for families with children under 5. Our maintained nursery offers families a choice of Welsh Medium or English Medium nursery education and our day-care provides for babies and children from 6 weeks to 4 years which includes Flying Start provision.



Our curriculum ethos is centred wholly around play, exploration, and children's well-being. We firmly believe that putting well-being at the heart of all we do will result in the best possible learning experiences for children. We know that a curriculum centred around children's interests and fascinations will encourage high levels of involvement which is when deep level learning can take place.

### Curriculum ethos

As a centre we have always aimed to provide authentic learning experiences, where children's rights are valued, and childhood is respected. We don't rush the learning process, we gently build on children's existing knowledge, skills, and experiences, helping them make links in their learning. Children enjoy long periods of uninterrupted play where Enabling adults observe and interact when appropriate. Experienced practitioners plan responsively following children's interests and fascinations. Practitioners have a deep understanding of child development and high regard is given to family cultures when planning inclusive experiences for all children.



## Cluster work

Like many clusters our collaboration started with a focus on the four purposes and the integral skills and then focussed on working in 'progression step teams' and / or



'Areas of learning and experience teams'. We soon felt that whilst it was extremely beneficial to work in a cluster, as a children's centre with children from 6 weeks to 4 years, it wasn't always beneficial to focus on progression steps and the Areas of learning and experience. Our children fall within what is described in the Welsh Government ['Enabling learning - Hwb \(gov.wales\) guidance'](#) as 'the period of learning leading to progression step one' we felt it important to invest our time in developing a deeper understanding of this guidance alongside

'A [curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings - Hwb \(gov.wales\)](#)' to support the

development of an appropriate curriculum for our children. Many of our nursery and reception cluster colleagues also wanted to look more deeply into enabling learning with a focus on the three enablers and the identified pedagogical features suitable for children in this period of learning. It advises that;

*'While the **twelve pedagogical principles** apply to all curriculum design, particular attention should be paid to the following key features, which are essential for this period of learning:*

- *play and play-based learning*
- *being outdoors*
- *observation*
- *authentic and purposeful learning*

We soon formed an early years' cluster where practice was shared, and curriculum ideas were developed. The guidance gave us confidence to consider if we were all providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum as it clearly lays out;

*'The value of this period of learning should not be underestimated. It should be thought of as the gateway to the **statements of what matters** in the six areas of learning and experience (Areas) and the **descriptions of learning** at Progression step 1. It provides the firm foundation that all learners need to support development, at their own pace, towards realising the **four purposes** of the curriculum.'*



The majority of the cluster meetings were held at the centre. As well as sharing our practice, we were asked to present the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings to the cluster schools, introducing and explaining all key elements. As part of the presentation, all elements were introduced and explained with a clear focus on the three enablers: enabling adults, engaging experiences, effective environments. This was an opportunity to unpick, discuss in-depth and reflect. Staff openly shared where they were on their journey and how it would look in our different settings. We discussed how a focus on the enablers would have a direct impact on the way we plan for children's learning which encouraged discussions about resources, the learning environment, observation and responsive planning.



### **Observation**

As a cluster of reception and nursery staff it became apparent that each setting had a different approach to observation and used their observations in a variety of ways. Some schools used responsive planning whilst others were using more traditional planning styles. We also discussed that whilst whole school approaches and consistency was important, sometimes documentation and approaches needed to be adapted to suit the needs of children in this period of learning. This led to interesting discussions around planning styles, reasons for planning and when, how and why to observe. We have an evening workshop planned on observation and hope to

continue learning together and sharing research-based practice.

### **Child observations and documentation**

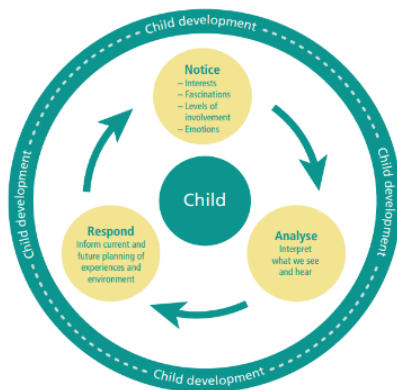
*‘These observations need to capture and describe how children engage and interact thoughtfully in play and explorations.’ Stella Louis 2023*

It soon became apparent that some of our documentation would need to change to reflect our curriculum. We were also inspired as a team to deepen our understanding of observation, schemas, and stages of play.

We have always recorded the children's learning through observation in their individual Learning Journals and Learning Stories; these include the skills and experiences as well as developmental stages and dispositions to learning. However, as a staff team we wanted to further develop our understanding of observation and embarked on some research and professional development.



Through reading and discussing the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings it became evident that it was the most appropriate tool to support our documentation of children's learning as it was so closely aligned to our ethos and philosophy. This curriculum has influenced our '*slow pedagogy*' and encouraged further research particularly into the writings of Professors Tuna Bruce and Alison Clark, Dr Stella Louis, and Helen Tovey and the founder of Kindergarten Friedrich Froebel. Following on from research and training we introduced observation weeks where the focus is wholly on observing children and analysing how and what they are learning during their play.



We observe children daily, and our observations support our responsive planning process. The observation weeks give us time and space to step back and closely observe and analyse. In an accelerated world, this slower approach to learning and reflective practice allows us to gain a deeper understanding of our children, their well-being, and their involvement in their own learning. This helps us to keep the child at the centre of all we do and plan to do.

### **Responsive planning**

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings has helped in the development of our responsive planning and there is now a more reflective and analytical process to our daily meetings. In these planning meetings, we discuss what has been observed and noticed about the children's interests, fascinations, schemas, and levels of engagement and involvement are shared and recorded. We then analyse and interpret these findings before collaboratively planning the most appropriate response.

### **Next steps as a cluster**

Having now formed an Ely and Caerau Early Years Cluster Network, we have planned further collaborative work to develop specific areas of provision as part of a cluster project, sharing and supporting each other along the way. Following some shared research on Froebelian Principles we are particularly interested in block play

and woodwork and have joint training and workshops planned for these specific areas.

### Research for curriculum design

On first reading the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings it was exciting to see the parallels with our own curriculum offer and to also see where we could develop and progress as a team. As we began to research our curriculum design for implementation in September 2022 we were delighted to read and reflect on the enabling learning and curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings as they resonated so firmly with our ethos and our values. We then began a series of engagement sessions with the two Cardiff maintained nursery schools before embarking on engagement with our cluster.



### Initial curriculum design

Within our group of Cardiff standalone nursery schools, we designed a curriculum collaboratively that aligns directly to the principles of child development and centres on the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales. We looked carefully at the language used in enabling learning and the curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings particularly the three enablers: enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments.



Some sections of the curriculum resonated with our current practice while other elements encouraged deep reflection and discussions as we thought about the curriculum offer in each of our schools.

*‘They should be rooted in real-life, authentic contexts, to engage children in deep levels of involvement and long periods of uninterrupted active learning.’*

*(engaging experiences, curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings)*

We set about focusing on seasons, celebrations, and festivals as a starting point. We thought carefully about the important rhythms of the year, as these are reoccurring experiences that children will naturally be interested in and have experience of. The reflective questions in the curriculum helped us build core experiences into our curriculum offer.

## The five developmental pathways: Reflective questions



### For practitioners:

- How will I know whether the environment in my setting is meeting the needs of all children?
- To what extent do I provide children with a range of authentic, developmentally appropriate experiences?
- To what extent does curriculum and assessment planning start with the needs and dispositions of the children in my setting?
- How well do I respond to and feed the individual fascinations and curiosities that children have?
- To what extent do I provide meaningful opportunities for children to experience the Welsh language every day?

### For leaders:

- How do I ensure that the developmental pathways are used effectively to support learning?
- How well do I communicate high expectations of teaching and learning in respect of the developmental pathways?
- How well do I support practitioners with their Welsh language delivery and development?

## Professional learning, research and collaboration

After introducing the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings to staff and engaging with it as a team, the Senior Leadership Team tailored some inhouse training based on observing schemas in children's play to further develop understanding and confidence in recognising their link to the children's holistic development and learning. We found the section on schemas helped us to 'notice', 'analyse' and 'respond' to children's schematic play when we were observing.

*'Schemas can play a key role in laying the foundations for future mathematical and scientific understanding; they provide physical opportunities to understand language concepts fully and encourage problem-solving and creative thinking.*

*Children's exploratory drive to find out how and why things happen strengthens their neural pathways making it easier for children to make connections in learning, test out their emergent thinking, and make choices and decisions. Failing to provide opportunities for children to embrace and explore their schema fully may be detrimental to their sense of agency.'* (curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings - schemas)



### Next steps for the centre



- Parent workshops on the importance of schemas and play
- Parent workshops on Froebel's gifts and occupations (such as clay, sewing and weaving, gardening, woodwork and block play) that form a major part of our children's experiences in the centre.
- Future and ongoing projects such as block play, clay and sewing.
- developing a consistent approach to learning experiences and observation across the Centre starting with baby room

### Next steps for the cluster

- Joint training on woodwork in the Early Years led by Pete Moorhouse
- Shared network and development workshops on observation, schemas, planning reflecting the three enablers.
- To look at the assessment arrangements together as a cluster.



*“Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul.” Friedrich Froebel*

