Foundation Learning in the Curriculum for Wales: a qualitative study

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Glossary

ALN

Additional Learning Needs

AoLE/Area

Area of Learning and Experience

HLTA

Higher Level Teaching Assistant

NNC

National Network Conversation

OECD

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

TA

Teaching Assistant

ToA

Theory of Action

1.   Introduction

The Welsh Government has commissioned Arad Research to lead a formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales. Arad Research is working alongside a number of organisations as part of a wide-ranging programme of research, including Cardiff Metropolitan University, Bangor University, the Open University in Wales, the University of Stirling, the University of Auckland and AlphaPlus Consultancy Ltd.

The evaluation adopts a mixed methods approach, including surveys of practitioners, surveys of parents/carers and learners, longitudinal case studies to understand schools' curriculum realisation journeys and several topic-based qualitative studies exploring specific elements of Curriculum for Wales.

This report presents the findings of qualitative research on Foundation Learning, led by Arad Research and with support from Cardiff Metropolitan University. The report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 1** provides an overview of the formative evaluation, before focusing on the context and guiding research questions for this study

- **Chapter 2** sets out the methodology employed during the study, describing the approach to recruiting participants, data collection methods, analysis and the limitations of the research

- **Chapter 3** provides an overview of research findings and key implications

- **Chapter 4** presents conclusions and areas for further consideration

1.1.   Background to the Curriculum for Wales reforms

Curriculum for Wales is the cornerstone of Welsh Government's efforts for educational reform and to build an education system that raises educational standards in Wales and ensures public confidence. Curriculum for Wales has four purposes which are the starting point and aspiration for every child and young person in Wales. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 'Improving Schools in Wales' report (OECD, 2014) and Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015), the report published following Professor Graham Donaldson's independent review of curriculum and assessment arrangements, set out the rationale for the reforms as well as recommendations for how to design a new curriculum fit for modern day Wales. Under the reforms each school is required to develop its own curriculum, within the nationally defined Curriculum for Wales Framework, enabling learners to embody the four purposes of the curriculum by becoming:

- ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives

- enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work

- ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world

- healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society

High-quality early education provision is essential to children's development. The early years provide a foundation for learning and progression in experiences, knowledge, understanding and skills that are needed for lifelong learning, active citizenship and future employment

Curriculum for Wales aims to create positive attitudes towards learning among children in Wales and to support them to realise the four purposes of the curriculum. Welsh Government states that foundation learning:

> "…forms part of the 3 to 16 Curriculum for Wales and is designed to reflect the specific learning and development needs of children up to the age of 8 or learners who have additional developmental needs. Foundation learning focuses on the pedagogical teaching and learning approaches which scaffold the learning and development for all children in the early years, or learners who might have similar developmental needs. This reflects the importance we, as the Welsh Government, and our partners place on this unique period of teaching and learning and is designed to support practitioners in consistent discussions to meet the needs of these learners." (Welsh Government, 2022a)

1.1.1. Curriculum design and realisation

The Curriculum for Wales Framework requires schools to design their own curriculum and assessment arrangements, while involving learners, parents, carers, partner agencies and the local community. In order to support schools in developing their curriculum, Welsh Government published the Enabling Learning section of the Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance (Welsh Government, 2023) which is particularly relevant in the period of learning leading to Progression Step 1. Further information is set out below on the requirements on schools to design and realise a curriculum that supports foundation learning.

A National Network Conversation (NNC) in 2024 (Welsh Government, 2024b) focused on how the Enabling Learning guidance could support practitioners in planning, designing and implementing a developmentally appropriate and inclusive curriculum. The NNC forum highlighted that child development is not consistently understood across the education sector but practitioners who had used the guidance found it to be useful in shaping their curriculum vision. A conclusion from the forum was that understanding how to embed the Enabling Learning guidance could support practitioners in their approaches to planning, self-evaluation, reflection and progression.

The guidance highlights that, when planning and designing a curriculum, the practitioner's knowledge and understanding of a child or young person's development is essential. The Enabling Learning section of statutory guidance notes that learning and teaching should consider and, where appropriate, include the established areas of child development expressed as the following five developmental pathways:

- belonging

- communication

- exploration

- physical development

- well-being

Pedagogy is an important part of realising Curriculum for Wales. In designing their curriculum, schools and settings should consider and adopt developmentally appropriate, learner-centred pedagogical approaches, meeting the learners' needs and supporting them to develop, at their own pace, towards realising the four purposes (Welsh Government, 2022b) of the curriculum. Key features of successful foundation learning pedagogy include play and play-based learning, being outdoors, observation and authentic and purposeful learning.

1.1.2.   Assessment

As part of the introduction of Curriculum for Wales there has been a move away from nationally required end of key stage teacher assessments as part of a nationally prescribed curriculum. Instead, schools are now responsible for developing assessment arrangements that align with their own curriculum design and reflect the needs of their learners and contexts.

Assessment guidance (Welsh Government, 2024c) published as part of the Curriculum for Wales Framework notes that on-entry assessment arrangements should be used to identify learners' starting points and determine how the school or setting can best support progress in learning.[footnote 1] The legislation that underpins the Curriculum for Wales specifies that these on-entry assessments should assess the abilities and aptitudes of learners to determine how to support learners' progression and the learning and teaching required. As such, there is an emphasis on ensuring practitioners understand each individual learner's background, experiences and needs. The guidance also notes that practitioners should take account of information provided by those who have previously supported the education of the learner. Proactively engaging in the sharing of information to support a learner's progress in learning is an important part of this process.

Foundation learning is provided to children aged three and four years in schools or funded non-maintained nursery settings. This study will focus on the experiences of schools in designing and realising a curriculum for their youngest learners and funded non-maintained nursery settings are not included in the sample. In view of the scale and diversity of the funded non-maintained sector, it was decided that including a limited number of settings

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Footnote:
[1] 'On-entry' assessment is used in this report, reflecting wording used in The Education (Arrangements for Assessing in the Curriculum for Wales) Regulations 2022. 'Initial' assessment is used in other contexts.

alongside schools would result in a sample of schools and settings that was overly diluted. In addition, the experiences of non-maintained nursery settings have been collected as part of other work taken forward by Welsh Government.

This Qualitative Study presents an opportunity to carry out focused research that explores foundation learning pedagogy and practice in more detail and aims to understand how Curriculum for Wales is being realised for Wales's youngest learners. By exploring how specific elements of the Curriculum for Wales Framework are being implemented across primary schools (both with and without nursery provision), the study aims to develop an understanding of whether approaches are consistent with the vision and aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales reforms.

1.2.   Overview of the Foundation Learning Qualitative Study

The aims of the Foundation Learning Qualitative Study were to explore how schools are:

1. designing and realising a pedagogically and developmentally appropriate curriculum for foundation learning that supports learners in ways that reflect the Curriculum for Wales Framework (Research Question 1)

2. using guidance and professional learning to ensure the approaches they employ are pedagogically and developmentally appropriate for foundation learning - in line with the vision of the Curriculum for Wales (Research Question 2)

The over-arching research questions above and topics included in the topic guide for this Qualitative Study were informed by discussions between the research team and Welsh Government officials during the planning phase of the study. The topics used as a basis for structuring research conversations with school representatives were as follows:

- curriculum planning and design to support foundation learning (Research Question 1)

- pedagogy (Research Question 1)

- assessment (on-entry and ongoing assessment) (Research Question1)

- collaboration (Research Question 1)

- guidance and sources of support relating to foundation learning (Research Question 2)

- professional learning (Research Question 2)

A topic guide can be seen in Annex A.

2.   Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed during the research. This includes information on recruitment methods, fieldwork conducted, the analytical approach and research limitations.

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. One of the main advantages of qualitative research is that it allows researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' views and experiences within the particular contexts in which they were working.

2.1 Recruitment and sample

The opportunity to engage with the evaluation was publicised by Welsh Government including through the Dysg newsletter, Foundation Learning team newsletter and Hwb and schools were invited to express interest in participating in the qualitative study. The expression of interest form included a small number of profiling questions to help ensure that a broad range of schools were included in the sample including a question on understanding of requirements to design the curriculum in accordance with Curriculum for Wales (options from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and a question on their progress to date in realising Curriculum for Wales. A total of 28 schools expressed interest in participating in the qualitative study.

Additionally, some schools who had completed the Senior Leaders and Practitioners survey in 2024 and had consented to be recontacted for future evaluation activities were invited to participate in the qualitative study. Inviting these schools to participate was done to aid in ensuring a cross-section of schools by geography and language medium.

A total of 19 schools were recruited to participate in the study which represented a good cross section by region (North, Mid and West, Central South and South East), by school type (schools with and without nursery provision, special school) and by language medium. The 19 schools that participated comprised:

- four Welsh-medium schools; the remaining schools were English-medium

- schools located across all four regions and in 13 local authorities including a mix of rural and urban locations

- a mixture of schools with and without nursery provision and one special school

- the percentage of learners with additional learning needs (ALN) in the schools in the sample ranged from less than 5% to over 15% [footnote 2]

- a mixture of schools by size based on learner numbers, for example the largest primary school had over 500 learners and the smallest had fewer than 90 learners

A summary of the schools involved in the study with further details is presented in Annex B.

2.2 Research methods

In-depth discussions with senior leaders and practitioners were conducted in 14 of the 19 schools at two points in time. Initial discussions were arranged with senior leaders who expressed interest on behalf of their schools in participating in the study and senior leaders then selected practitioners from their schools to be involved in follow-up discussions. Representatives from the remaining five schools in the sample participated in online focus groups. The in-depth discussions and focus groups took a semi-structured approach to allow for a structured discussion focusing on key areas whilst allowing for flexibility to explore issues raised by participants. Themes were provided to participants prior to discussions/focus groups.

The initial in-depth discussions with the 14 schools and focus groups were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. The follow-up in-depth discussions were mostly held in-person on school sites. The in-depth discussions lasted between 30 and 90 minutes depending on the participant and focus groups lasted 60 minutes. The discussions and focus groups were recorded with participants' consent.

A total of 47 participants took part in an in-depth discussion or focus group. Participants reflected a range of roles who were relevant to foundation learning (for example, Deputy Head Teacher, Foundation Learning Lead, Nursery and Reception teachers) and length of career (early career, mid-career, experienced). Some participants held both senior leadership and practitioner roles within their school.

The design of the topic guide used for in-depth discussions and focus groups (see Annex A) and methods were informed by a desk-based literature review and the professional expertise of the research team. This provided an understanding of the policy context surrounding foundation learning. The topic guide was developed to be consistent with the overarching approach to the evaluation, in consultation with Welsh Government and is reflective of the time and resource available for this phase of research.

Footnote:
[2] ALN/SEN data are drawn from the 2024/25 Pupil-level Annual School Census (PLASC) (Welsh Government, 2026). Data was not published for schools where there are between one and four learners with some categories of ALN/SEN. For these schools, an assumed value of 2 learners was assigned to enable a total number and percentage of learners with ALN/SEN to be derived. The phased implementation of the ALN system was ongoing at the time this report was produced, which is reflected in the PLASC data used.

The discussions and focus groups were facilitated in a way that reflected the Theory of Action (ToA) framework. This involved consistently framing questions around:

- what schools are doing

- why they are taking those actions (what are the factors/conditions that are driving their actions)

- what consequences or outcomes are emerging or are being observed.

Supplementary questions were then asked to explore detail (see topic guide in Annex A). The benefit of this approach was that it opened up conversations, allowing the researchers to anticipate and direct discussion through a series of specific prompts related to the research questions. Discussions were steered to relate to the general research questions, with the ToA utilised to provide prompts and further questions for gathering more detail.

2.3 Analysis

At the beginning of the analysis phase, the study team met to confirm the stages of the process and to ensure consistency of approach and interpretation of emergent themes from the study.

Transcripts from audio-recorded conversations were produced and analysed, along with field notes. Transcripts were anonymised and checked for accuracy. The researchers re-read the transcripts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content and to identify preliminary patterns or recurring ideas.

Thematic analysis, drawing on and adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach was adopted, involving an iterative process to coding and analysis comprising:

- familiarisation with the data - reading each of the transcripts of discussions to clarify understanding of the content and key points raised in discussions

- generating initial codes - initial codes were generated through a deductive process based on the research questions and topics set out in the discussion guides

- generating themes - drawing on the codes identified, the research team looked for connections between these codes and grouped them into themes

- identifying shared themes - establishing the most prevalent and notable themes across the data to provide a structure for the report

- producing the report - presenting the themes in a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions.

The topic guide shown in Annex B was organised around five key areas. These were:

- curriculum design and planning for foundation learning

- pedagogy

- assessment and progression

- collaboration

- guidance and support

- professional learning

The study team explored these areas against the research questions and the ToA framework was referenced to give consideration to the relationships between actions, the conditions and the consequences.

2.4 Limitations

This qualitative research explored how schools were designing and realising a pedagogically and developmentally appropriate curriculum for foundation learning that supports learners in ways that reflect the Curriculum for Wales Framework. The study provided a range of valuable insights but also presented limitations.

Whilst the sample's composition was varied and provided diverse viewpoints, it was small and self-selecting, therefore findings are not generalisable. As schools volunteered themselves to engage in the study, it is possible that the more 'confident' schools with capacity and interest in participating in research or those who specifically wanted to voice frustrations regarding Curriculum for Wales were included in the sample. However, the study team sought to mitigate this by including questions around their understanding of requirements to design the curriculum in accordance with Curriculum for Wales and their progress to date in realising Curriculum for Wales in the expression of interest form. This allowed the study team to select schools who did not self-report as confident in understanding what their school was required to do and had made a lot of progress in realising their curriculum.

A number of the participants in this study had both senior leadership and practitioner roles within their schools and did not distinguish in their responses to questions whether they were answering from a senior leader or practitioner perspective.

The research provides a snapshot of practices when the enactment of Curriculum for Wales in schools continues to be an iterative and evolving process. This snapshot of a moment in time limited the ability to explore schools' Curriculum for Wales 'journey' and progress over time. Although data was collected at two points in time for 14 of the schools in the sample, discussions were held during one school term so exploring any changes over a longer period was not possible.

Due to the limitations on time available for in-depth discussions and that schools were busy and staff not always available, discussions with school senior leaders and practitioners lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. As a result of this and owing to the semi-structured

nature of the discussions, it was difficult to ensure complete coverage of the topics included in the topic guide (see Annex A).

Individual practitioners were not directly recruited to the study and there is a possibility that senior leaders may have selected staff who were likely to present the school in a positive light, or who may share a specific narrative about their school.

Learners and parents/carers did not participate in this qualitative study. The views expressed in the findings about learners' and parents'/carers' experiences of Curriculum for Wales are the opinions of the senior leaders and practitioners. The views of learners and parents/carers will be explored through further qualitative research as part of other planned research during the formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales.

2.5 Note on presentation of findings

The findings in this study report reflect the language and practices reported by senior leaders and practitioners during discussions and focus groups. The terminology used and the descriptions of practice may not always align with the language and requirements of the Curriculum for Wales Framework. Where this occurs, the authors have not commented on the validity of the practice described. At times, the authors have inserted footnotes to direct the reader to relevant guidance or information that is intended to provide contextual information relating to particular points raised in the findings chapter.

3.   Findings

This chapter presents findings to emerge through the fieldwork conducted with school practitioners. It is organised under the following sections:

- 3.1 - Curriculum design and planning for foundation learning

- 3.2 - Pedagogy

- 3.3 - Progression and assessment

- 3.4 - Guidance and support

- 3.5 - Professional learning

3.1.   Curriculum design and planning for foundation learning

3.1.1.   Summary

All schools reported that curriculum planning for foundation learning was characterised by an emphasis on learner-centred, contextualised, and developmentally appropriate practice. Schools frequently based planning on local context, drawing on community experiences to support engagement and relevance. Many practitioners highlighted the value of using local environments and real-world experiences to strengthen learners' understanding and well-being. Play-based and authentic learning were central features of provision, with schools adopting flexible, observation-led approaches that allowed practitioners to respond to children's curiosity and interests. Regular review of classroom and outdoor provision helped ensure environments promoted curiosity, independence and progression.

Schools reported employing a blend of approaches to support literacy and numeracy in order to ensure learners developed foundational skills. A blend of approaches, particularly for the youngest learners in early education, was seen as essential in supporting learners' holistic development, especially in light of perceived increases in developmental delays and additional communication needs. Practitioners noted that curriculum design continued to evolve from the previous Foundation Phase, with many also drawing directly on the non-maintained curriculum to guide approaches in nursery and reception classes. Schools reported increasing numbers of learners with ALN and increasingly complex learner needs which required them to adapt provision further, incorporating targeted interventions, setting developmentally appropriate expectations and increasing adult support where possible. However, staffing and budget constraints were identified as ongoing barriers to fully realising developmentally responsive provision as part of an inclusive curriculum for all learners.

3.1.2. An emphasis on learner-centred curriculum planning

Schools consistently reported a clear emphasis on learner-centred curriculum planning in foundation learning; approaches were noted to be responsive to learners' developmental starting points and needs. Most practitioners noted that curriculum planning was informed by on-entry assessment, continuous observation and formative assessment and professional judgement, which helped shape approaches. Many described a move away from task-driven and content-focused planning towards more flexible planning cycles – often on a termly basis – that were focused on learners' interests and reflected learners' emerging needs. These practitioners highlighted that they are deliberately flexible in their planning, with learning organised around areas in which learners show curiosity, as opposed to having predetermined topics.

> "…we are far less rigid in Progression Step 1 with our topics…we take an approach where we follow the children's interests." (Senior Leader)

In other cases, schools reported using continuous observations to inform targeted planning to support learner progression:

> "If in observation we notice they are not able to sort, [we'll say] right, ok, we need to be putting enhancements out or guided play opportunities for sorting to support that child's development." (Practitioner)

Many schools also referred to a commitment to involving learners in curriculum design by routinely gathering information about learners' interests and incorporating this into planning. In many cases, schools also noted that they observe learners spontaneous play and use this to shape 'in-the-moment' and medium-term planning. Several practitioners referred to the importance of using child-initiated experiences or scenarios as authentic learning contexts.

> "We spend time watching them… [we] see how they are coping, how are they playing… and then we also just do 'in-the-moment planning'. So, if we observe somebody and maybe they start playing ice cream… we take that moment and go and teach them the skills they need in the play that they are interested in right in that moment." (Practitioner)

Some explained that foundation learning reflected a continuation of approaches used previously within the Foundation Phase (see 3.1.6 below). In contrast, in a few cases, schools explained that the realisation of the new curriculum arrangements had involved substantial change to how they plan and approach learning for their youngest learners.

> "We had quite an overhaul, completely changed how we plan in nursery and reception and Progression Step 1. In nursery over the past two years [we] have been using the non-maintained curriculum which has completely changed how we work…now [it] is more child-led. We have moved away from the approach in the rest of the school which focuses on [longer] enquiry projects to focus on mini enquiries, so this term [we] have been doing fireworks/Diwali and fostering [learners'] own

interests. Things like this have only come about since the change [to Curriculum for Wales]." (Practitioner)

Most schools described dynamic and evolving curriculum design for foundation learning, shaped by changing cohorts or year groups. The factors that were reported to influence approaches to planning were socio-economic disadvantage, ALN, and developmental delays, which many attributed to the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools underlined the need to prioritise learner well-being, literacy and communication skills and explained that they had adjusted their expectations and plans to reflect learners' starting points and readiness for learning.

Evidence revealed a recognition among many practitioners of the importance of developmental appropriateness in curriculum realisation. Some schools referred to their use of the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, which was valued for its clarity and usefulness in helping staff plan based on children's actual development and progress rather than age-based expectations.

Most schools valued the opportunity to adopt learner-responsive planning and incorporate learner-led pedagogical approaches as part of their curriculum realisation. However, many also referred to the challenges associated with these approaches, including ensuring that there is sufficient staffing capacity to support learners with ALN and those with more complex needs. There was also some evidence of tension between learner-responsive planning and learner-led approaches in foundation learning and what was described as 'more formal' learning as learners move into Year 3 (see section 3.1.5 below).

3.1.3. Incorporating local context into curriculum planning for foundation learning

Many schools reported that curriculum planning was frequently informed by their local context, with learning experiences and enquiry-based projects linked to the community, local geography, environment and history. Schools described designing curricula that reflect experiences and contexts meaningful to children and their communities, whilst also seeking to ensure learning supported progression within the statements of what matters in the Curriculum for Wales Framework. This contextualised approach was viewed by practitioners as being particularly effective in foundation learning, where authentic, place-based experiences were considered to help children make sense of their world and support deeper engagement.

Schools emphasised that planning learning around children's lived experiences allows learning to be more meaningful and engaging. One teacher explained that their curriculum is deliberately shaped around the local community and the concept of 'cynefin', noting that "the curriculum is very much [our] curriculum… it is all about the children's experiences within their locality". Practitioners noted that this approach supported a sense of identity, belonging and relevance, ensuring that learners see themselves represented in their everyday learning.

Some schools also reported that planning learning around local context and incorporating community and 'cynefin' into curriculum design supported learners' development and understanding in a range of ways. Examples included supporting social development through shared community experiences; promoting pride among learners in their community; practising self-regulation and giving learners experience of navigating new social situations; providing experiences that children may not otherwise encounter at home. Teachers noted that many children have limited opportunities to explore beyond their immediate surroundings, and therefore the local area becomes a rich stimulus for enquiry. Through regular use of forest school, community walks and real-life role play linked to local businesses, practitioners noted that children can develop confidence, physical development and real-world understanding.

Embedding local context in planning therefore not only strengthens engagement but underpins a developmental approach to learning, supporting belonging, identity, communication, exploration and well-being. Schools consistently described this responsiveness as essential to high-quality early learning.

3.1.4. Planning play-based and authentic learning

Many schools emphasised approaches to planning play-based learning, ensuring sufficient time was made available for open-ended play. Practitioners referred to taking a flexible approach to planning learning and experiences, being prepared to 'go with children's interests' and employing 'in-the-moment planning', particularly in nursery and reception classes. Some practitioners explained that they plan for guided play and independent play opportunities, with designated areas indoors and outdoors providing spaces for role-play, block play, free-flow exploration, mud kitchens and spaces for bikes and trikes.

> "Classrooms feature designated areas – role play, block, outdoor, creative writing, reading, water, sand, mud kitchens." (Practitioner)

Some schools also referred to purposefully planning communication rich environments to support speech, language and communication, with classrooms arranged in ways that provide opportunities to engage in mark-making and reading.

Discussions revealed that planning was informed by regular review and evaluation of learners' engagement and their choices of how and where to play. Teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in some schools noted that they meet each week to discuss which areas were being used and adapt provision accordingly; for example observing when "no one has used the sand area… what do we need to do to make that more interesting?" (Practitioner).

Some practitioners also noted that play-based planning was informed by the developmental pathways, with staff designing 'open tasks' that naturally cover multiple developmental skills rather than isolated objectives. Outdoor learning was also reported to be planned purposefully, with provision that encourages 'investigative play', physical literacy, and opportunities that cannot be replicated indoors.

Some practitioners highlighted the importance of the learning environment in enabling free flow and uninterrupted play between indoor and outdoor spaces. Other practitioners referred to configuring classrooms in ways that included 'invitations to play' or provocations to instigate play; these were described as being deliberately designed to encourage exploration or self-directed learning, often related to Areas of learning and experience or interests that teachers had previously observed among learners.

Evidence reveals that authentic and purposeful learning are central to curriculum design for foundation learning. Schools reported that they frequently plan in ways that try to link learning to real-life experiences, emphasising relevance to the local area and community as part of efforts to promote the idea of 'cynefin'. Examples provided by schools included visits from people from the community (for example, fire service), incorporating local history into their learning, and using everyday materials and real objects in place of/in addition to toys to enhance connections with the real world.

Outdoor learning such as forest school sessions were reported to play an important role in supporting physical and mental well-being while grounding learning in authentic, real-world experiences. Practitioners reported that outdoor physical experiences and exploratory play can support learners' confidence to test ideas, problem-solve and build resilience. Many practitioners noted that, through their curriculum planning, they sought to ensure that learning was meaningful and relevant for learners. A number of practitioners observed that a focus on authentic learning experiences supported greater learner independence, deeper engagement and more meaningful skill development.

3.1.5. Employing a blend of approaches to reflect early years pedagogy while supporting cross-curricular skills

Evidence from a number of schools revealed that curriculum planning involves seeking to blend play-based learning with developmentally appropriate focused teaching, particularly in relation to supporting literacy and numeracy. While play remains a central component of early years pedagogy in all schools visited, practitioners also reported prioritising cross-curricular skills. There were frequent references to developing learners' phonics knowledge and other reading and mathematical skills, seeking to ensure these were taught in a 'structured' ways, often with dedicated daily sessions timetabled.

Several practitioners reported that curriculum planning was influenced by a perception that learners, especially those in Years 1 and 2, required more focused teaching to develop literacy and numeracy skills. Practitioners described this not as a shift away from the principles of Curriculum for Wales but as an adaptation designed to strengthen progression, whilst reflecting the developmental needs of current cohorts.

This shift is closely linked to a perception expressed by practitioners in around half of the schools that growing numbers of Year 1 and Year 2 learners required targeted support to develop stronger literacy and numeracy foundations. Other practitioners highlighted concerns that learners' fine motor skills, communication skills and number fluency were developing more slowly.

As a result, several schools reported having re-introduced or increased short, focused teaching sessions (most commonly concentrating on phonics, guided reading and maths) while ensuring that children continue to access rich developmentally appropriate learning throughout the day. Schools described efforts to ensure that targeted literacy and numeracy inputs were meaningfully connected to the experiences available through play-based provision, enabling pupils to revisit and apply new learning in authentic contexts.

> "This week we've been working on number bonds in our class… so I'll set up areas that promote number bond work and the TAs are looking at how the children are doing, assessing the children's understanding through independent work." (Practitioner)

Practitioners emphasised that using a blend of pedagogical approaches allows them to maintain the developmental appropriateness of early years learning while strengthening learners' progression in cross-curricular skills. They described this blend of approaches as supporting all learners to develop secure early foundations in literacy and numeracy in ways that are responsive to their developmental needs.

> "Structured mornings build routine, confidence, and academic language… while afternoons retain independent, play-based learning." (Practitioner)

> "The mornings are more formal – phonics, maths, language, but the afternoons are provision-based, outdoor learning, authentic tasks." (Practitioner)

A number of senior leaders described challenges associated with learners transition from Year 2 to Year 3, revealing a perception that this move represented a shift toward what was seen as 'more formal learning' from Year 3 onwards. There were frequent references in discussions to Key Stage 2, which reflects language and curriculum-thinking associated with previous curriculum arrangements and not the Curriculum for Wales Framework.

3.1.6. Curriculum design is shaped by schools' understanding of developmentally appropriate practice, often informed by the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings

Many practitioners reported that planning for foundation learning was a 'natural' evolution of arrangements under the previous Foundation Phase. Practitioners consistently described Curriculum for Wales as complementing their previous approaches, contributing to a sense of continuity rather than significant change. These practitioners noted that the focus on promoting learner independence, authentic experiences and outdoor learning was already well-established.

> "I've always thought that Curriculum for Wales has always been quite similar to the Foundation Phase anyway… [Foundation Phase] was really similar in regards to you go with the child's interest…it's very cross-curricular. The children have more freedom to choose what kind of things they want to use to help them solve a problem and that type of thing." (Senior Leader)

Practitioners also reported a greater emphasis in curriculum planning on learner progression. Many schools outlined that they had moved from planning around topics or tasks to planning that focuses on skills and developmental progression across Areas of learning and experience. This was described by some as a 'deepening' of Foundation Phase practice rather than a departure from it.

Many schools noted that Curriculum for Wales had encouraged them to plan learning in ways that were more responsive to children's developmental needs. Some schools noted that the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings was a preferred reference point for planning the curriculum and that accompanying professional learning modules were also helpful in supporting staff development.

Evidence indicated that the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings is integrated into planning in some schools. Other schools explained that they had adopted parts of the non-maintained curriculum for nursery and reception classes, designing new cycles of learning based on the document. Some practitioners noted that the language in the non-maintained curriculum – particularly that linked to the developmental pathways - was practical and valuable in terms of explaining practice to TAs and support staff, helping to support staff development and consistency.

> "I love the way the non-maintained curriculum is written… the developmental pathways are easier to understand… easier to explain to my TAs… than the what matters statements and descriptions of learning." (Senior Leader)

3.1.7. Incorporating child development principles into planning

Many schools provided examples of ways in which child development principles were being embedded into curriculum planning. This included:

- Planning in ways that align directly with, or incorporate, the developmental pathways of belonging, communication, exploration, physical, well-being.

  > "So we plan more towards the development pathways, so a task would cover them all. We were previously just planning one, say for exploration, or writing [but] realised that if you plan that activity well, you are learning so many skills anyway. So now we plan an open task and cover so many of the areas of the development pathways." (Senior Leader)

- Planning in ways that are development-led rather than task-led, organised around children's developmental progression. A number of schools referred to the importance of designing a curriculum that is developmentally-responsive and agile.

  > "Children who are coming up into nursery… we're finding there are a lot more needs… planning has to adapt, and staff are upskilled to meet those developmental needs." (Senior Leader)

- Using observation to inform planning and to shape learning experiences, enabling practitioners to scaffold next steps and adjust provision responsively in real time.

> "We've taken a step back and are observing more… looking when to step in to be the facilitator… focusing on environment, enablers, and children's interests rather than fitting children into our agenda." (Practitioner)

3.1.8. The influence of increased learner support needs on curriculum planning

Most schools reported that increasing numbers of learners presenting with ALN and lower developmental starting points than their counterparts in previous years was impacting how they plan their foundation learning curricula. Practitioners repeatedly highlighted a perception that some learners were presenting with increasingly complex needs when starting nursery and reception classes, including delayed communication and social-emotional development.

Increasing learner needs (both among learners with ALN and across the learner population more generally) have resulted in planning becoming even more developmentally responsive, with schools adapting the curriculum to ensure learning is accessible to all. Staff described having to incorporate additional interventions such as 'Bucket Time' (a targeted intervention to help learners who have difficulties with attention and engagement), and targeted speech and language programmes to support regulation and communication. As one teacher explained, "we need to put in place specific activities… to support social skills". Evidence from a number of schools revealed that perceptions of learners' developmental readiness were shaping decisions about curriculum design. Comments referring to adapting curriculum planning because learners are "below where they should be" highlight inconsistency between some practitioners' perceptions and Curriculum for Wales statutory guidance which emphasises that approaches to supporting progression should recognise different learners' pace of progress in learning and not be driven by time-bound outcomes.

Budget and staffing pressures further influence curriculum planning. Schools reported that although learners require more intensive support, adult to learner ratios have reduced, making it harder to deliver the provision required. Some senior leaders and practitioners described how an increase in the number of learners with ALN within their schools was placing additional demand on staffing availability.

> "Although I really like the documentation, we have found massive teething issues and mainly because of the high ALN and the lack of adults…this could be amazing, but we don't have the funding to actually bring parts of it to life because we don't have the support." (Senior Leader)

3.1.9. Foundation learning as a school improvement priority

During interviews schools were asked whether there was a focus on foundation learning as a school improvement priority and whether it features as such in the school development plan. Across the sample of schools interviewed, foundation learning was typically not reported to be listed explicitly as a priority in school development plans, even though practitioners frequently referred to it being a critical part of the curriculum. When responding to questions about areas of priority, most schools noted that current school development plans focus on literacy and numeracy and learner well-being. Across the evidence base collected, practitioners consistently reported that ongoing refinement of foundation learning pedagogy, enabling environments and responding to developmental needs among the youngest learners are priorities, particularly in response to the increasing numbers of learners with ALN.

3.2. Pedagogy

3.2.1. Summary

Evidence from schools revealed that pedagogy has evolved from the previous Foundation Phase practice, although schools also recognised that many similarities and fundamentals remain in place. Under both the Foundation Phase and Curriculum for Wales, play is a central pillar of the curriculum, as is an emphasis on supporting experiential, holistic learning. As outlined in the previous section, pedagogical approaches were reported to be planned more purposefully than under the previous curriculum and guided by close practitioner observation of learners. Pedagogical approaches in foundation learning were also reported to include more carefully constructed learning environments, a stronger developmental lens, and a notable shift in how practitioners perceive their role, marked by a shift from practitioners as instructors to facilitators of learning.

This section examines four interconnected pedagogical themes: play-based and experiential learning, outdoor learning as a core pedagogy, observation-driven practice, and the changing role of adults. The section also lists changes to pedagogy referenced by smaller numbers of schools to provide examples of approaches introduced or expanded under the new curriculum arrangements.

3.2.2. Play-based and experiential learning

All schools emphasised that play remains the foundation of early learning, however evidence from practitioners indicated that the way play is designed, supported, and interpreted has developed under the new curriculum arrangements. There was evidence of changes in how practitioners perceived play and the opportunities it presents: practitioners referred to play as a primary method for developing conceptual understanding, skills in literacy, numeracy, communication, social interaction and physical development.

Practitioners in many schools provided examples of how they embed language learning and mathematics into play. One teacher described turning a phonics and rhythm activity into an immersive game, with a police theme to reflect the group's interest.

> "Everything is through play all the time and we take the learning to them. I've been doing phonics this week and [the children] have been really interested in the police. So, linking to learning about word rhythms and patterns… I told them they were the police and I had taken loads of things and they needed to catch me. They were standing on one side of the classroom and they had to step or jump to the beat of the words. So one of the things I'd stolen was a jacket, and they take two steps towards me 'jack-et', and so on." (Practitioner)

Interviews highlighted the ways in which play is not viewed uniformly and therefore different types of play are provided for different skills and ages. Practitioners reported that play progresses across age groups, and they recognised the importance of ensuring that children engage in meaningful experiences that promote skills, understanding and progress

in learning. One practitioner summarised the progression from learner-led exploration among the youngest learners towards more structured opportunities for older learners in foundation learning.

> "In nursery, it is almost all free play and adults stepping in… and then as you move through the classes, there's slightly less play and more adult-guided, more planned play activities." (Practitioner)

Practitioners underlined the importance of providing authentic, real-world experiences as part of play-based pedagogy. Teachers described following the children's interests into extended experiential activities and using familiar experiences or situations to deepen engagement. One example provided was initiated by the class observing a delivery by the postman to the school, which led to staff identifying an opportunity to build an authentic learning sequence based around the children's interest.

> "The children were really interested when the postman drove up, this was last year, and the van was right outside the school and they were 'what's going on here? what's he delivering?' and then they started picking up the large Lego blocks that were outdoors to be their parcels that they were delivering outdoors. Bam, right, we've got writing opportunities here now. We'd been talking about appreciation for people who help us so we made thank you cards for our lollipop lady, so we're putting cards in envelopes and wrapping paper and string. So, we seize those opportunities for authentic learning." (Practitioner)

Other practitioners also referred to seeing learning opportunities in children's curiosity and connecting everyday events with literacy, numeracy and expressive arts.

3.2.3. Outdoor learning as a key feature in pedagogy

Many practitioners referred to outdoor learning as an essential aspect of foundation learning pedagogy. Schools noted the opportunities outdoor learning presents for developing physical literacy, fostering curiosity, and supporting well-being, emphasising its importance to children's progress, development and engagement in learning.

> "Outdoor provision is very important to us in foundation learning… all children should be accessing the forest school site for the physical development, but also the well-being aspect of it as well…. All classes from nursery to Year 2 have an outdoor area with a door in the classroom, which can be open for free flow." (Senior Leader)

There were repeated references to free flow between indoor and outdoor spaces throughout interviews, indicating that schools are keen to ensure continuity between the two and to allow children to choose environments that best support their play and exploration. Many practitioners also underlined the importance of access to outdoor areas, noting the benefits to well-being, especially for children who may have limited access to safe outdoor spaces in their communities.

"A lot of children… don't go outdoors… so for us, outdoor access is very important." (Practitioner)

Several practitioners explained that outdoor learning is not simply about transferring indoor activities outside. Instead, it is about 'taking advantage' of a learning environment that invites different forms of inquiry, risk and experience, developing physical literacy through among other things, mud kitchens, trikes, stepping stones and natural play.

Practitioners referred to the wider benefits of outdoor learning in supporting learner progress, particularly through imaginative play and sensory experiences. Practitioners described outdoor learning as a critical part of foundation learning pedagogy that led to observed developmental improvements. Senior leaders and teachers provided examples linking outdoor learning to learner progress in gross and fine motor skills, social skills, language skills and cognitive development.

"The children are developing their physical literacy outdoors as well as their learning through literacy, numeracy… [through] those experiences." (Practitioner)

Practitioners also noted that outdoor environments provide opportunities to support meaningful and authentic learning which can boost engagement and interest, creating the conditions in which learning 'sticks'.

"If it's real life, then it really does help get them interested in things." (Senior leader)

"[Outdoor and play-based learning] is more meaningful and purposeful to them… it sticks more… they really enjoy how they are learning." (Practitioner)

Some practitioners referred to their forest school as an embedded part of the curriculum in foundation learning. These practitioners spoke about the importance of providing outdoor learning and forest school experiences as a regular part of early education, providing opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, and promoting environmental awareness.

3.2.4. Observation-informed practice

Evidence demonstrates that schools view observation as a central feature of foundation learning practice that determines how learning environments, resources, experiences and adult interactions with learners are shaped. Schools provided various examples of ways in which observation is used to support teaching and learning.

One example was the use of observation to adapt provision to needs, occasionally focused on specific children each week, to enhance or tailor support in response to particular issues or development needs.

"Each week there are key children… staff observe and… then enhance the classroom to support where that child is at." (Senior Leader)

Comments from other schools indicated that they felt observation-informed practice was benefitting learners more generally, supporting a more inclusive curriculum experience.

Practitioners referred to using observation to ensure no 'quieter children go under the radar' and making changes to classroom areas to 'engage all children'. Evidence clearly indicates that practitioners are consciously aiming to move the curriculum and pedagogy to suit learners' needs.

Practitioners noted that observation was used to guide targeted support and intervention. Practitioners reported that they discuss identifying specific developmental needs and adapting provision to support learner progression accordingly.

> "If in observation we notice they are not able to sort, we need to put enhancements… guided play opportunities to support that child's development." (Senior Leader)

Other practitioners noted that observation is used collaboratively. They noted that staff regularly conferred to reflect on observations and adjust their practice, demonstrating a reflective, iterative approach to curriculum realisation.

Practitioners also discussed the importance of understanding when not to intervene after observing learning activity.

> "We are trying to do a lot of work on when to step in when you're observing… sometimes you can step in and ruin what is going on." (Practitioner)

This highlights the importance of professional judgement, teacher understanding and sensitivity as part of practitioner observation.

Finally, evidence indicated that practitioner observation can be an important tool in supporting equity and inclusion. As noted in other sections of this report, the increasing numbers of learners with ALN and communication needs means that observation can help identify barriers to learning early and supports staff in ensuring inclusive provision or referring for further support. This was reported to be particularly important in contexts where children arrive at school with developmental delays or limited prior social experience.

3.2.5. Practitioners as enabling adults

There was evidence of a shift in the role of adults, characterised by many practitioners as a move from 'delivering' curriculum content to enabling, facilitating, and scaffolding learning in ways that aim to reflect children's agency and foster positive learning experiences. Practitioners repeatedly referred to 'stepping back' to observe learning as it happens, intervening only when appropriate to guide and extend learning when necessary.

> "We've taken even more of a step back… looking when to step in to be the facilitator in the learning." (Senior Leader)

This reflects a pedagogical shift towards seeing children as initiators of learning, with adults responding to observed need.

The changing role of adults is also connected to the idea of the 'effective environment', which forms part of the Enabling Learning guidance. Some practitioners interviewed

described focusing on the three enablers set out in the guidance: enabling adults, effective environments, and engaging experiences. These practitioners reported that they are now more intentional in constructing learning environments that promote independence, shaping the conditions for learning rather than rigidly delivering content.

> "We are putting a big focus on our environment and the resources and enablers… enabling adults, the effective environment, the engaging experiences." (Senior Leader)

In many cases, practitioners referred to the important joint-working that takes place between teachers and support staff, referring to shared approaches to fulfilling roles of enabling adults. Staff described collaborating on observations, assessments, changes to the learning environment, parental communication and planning cycles. In a few cases, comments suggested that this shared professional approach signals a move toward distributed leadership within early years pedagogy. While many schools referred to the active roles of Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) and TAs in planning and delivering learning alongside teachers, a smaller number of schools noted that nursery classes are being 'run by' a HLTA or that the HLTA leads nursery practice.

> "Our nursery is currently part-time and is run by a HLTA… the nursery HLTA has done an enormous amount of work on the new non-maintained curriculum and we have implemented that this year… she came up with a long-term plan for nursery…broken down into suggested topics… key vocabulary… key experiences that she wanted the children to have each half-term." (Senior Leader)

One HLTA who runs the nursery in their school described their leadership of teaching and learning, valuing the role of being an enabling adult.

> "We do a planned play task every day… we set up all the different areas… most of our time now is spent playing with the children and observing the children." (Practitioner)

3.2.6. Examples of changes to pedagogy raised across the sample of schools

Across the evidence base, schools provided numerous examples of shifts in foundation learning pedagogy. These changes were often unique to their particular context and, as such, it is not clear that these are generalisable patterns across the wider system. Nonetheless, they are listed here to illustrate changes in teaching practice that were considered to be positive developments in supporting foundation learning:

- a movement towards responsive planning and more fluid learning
- a greater emphasis on enquiry-based approaches, linking skills to activities and play and deepening learners' understanding
  > "For us, I think it's having the ability to be able to… get into a deeper level and get the children to really understand what they're doing." (Practitioner)

- providing opportunities for uninterrupted play, ensuring learners are able to experience the learning environment more 'freely' and in more flexible ways (a small number of schools referred to having discontinued formal 'break times' to support continuity)
- removal of learner exercise books in Reception and Year 1 classes to focus instead on 'meaningful' and appropriate recording of learners' work
- increased emphasis on learner participation in decisions about their own learning experiences
- particular focus on strengthening phonics in foundation learning, with schools introducing targeted programmes to support reading

3.3.   Progression and assessment

This section focuses on assessment arrangements within schools to ensure learner progression in addressing Research Question 1 'How are schools designing and realising a pedagogically and developmentally appropriate curriculum for foundation learning that supports learners in ways that reflect the Curriculum for Wales Framework?'. A summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.

3.3.1.   Summary

Some schools detailed changes to assessment to ensure coherence with assessment in foundation learning under Curriculum for Wales. Some had used the published guidance on assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings and there were also examples of external assessment tools used.

On-entry assessments were routinely carried out within the first few weeks of a learner starting at the school to provide an understanding of learners' needs and their development, in line with statutory requirements. A few senior leaders and practitioners referred to on-entry assessments as 'baseline' assessments and some had developed their on-entry assessments based on the previous statutory baseline assessment under the Foundation Phase.

Observations were a central method of assessment with interactions and floor books [footnote 3] as methods for recording learner progression. There were some examples of a shift towards more formalised assessments including moving away from observations in Year 1 and 2 and learners using workbooks.

Some senior leaders and practitioners described how assessments were used to tailor the curriculum for individual learners. Assessments were also used to recognise and support learner progression at regular intervals in the academic year and throughout their school journey from nursery to Year 6.

Senior leaders and practitioners in some schools described a holistic approach to assessment taking into consideration the 'whole child' and the developmental pathways set out in the Enabling Learning guidance.

In several schools, practitioners raised concerns about how to conduct assessment in foundation learning in ways that enable them to "measure" learner progression. They described uncertainty about "what progress should look like," noting a perceived lack of defined "standards" or "benchmarks" to guide judgments about progression. This led to a reported tension between relying on rich, qualitative observational evidence - which many valued – and a desire for more structured data to support or validate their assessments.

Footnote:
[3] Floor books are large blank books placed on the floor for easy access and are used to capture learning experiences during learner-led, play-based activities. They allow learners to engage collaboratively and evolve with learners' interests (Structural Learning, 2026).

3.3.2.　Approaches to assessment

The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 requires schools to carry out an on-entry assessment when a learner enters a school/setting. These assessments can provide an understanding of where they are in their learning and inform planning and teaching and learning. A few senior leaders and practitioners detailed that the on-entry assessments were carried out within the first few weeks of a learner starting at the school; while some specified this was within the first six weeks. Some of these schools described that developmental pathways were reflected in some of the school's on-entry assessments

> "So we do a six weeks observation and assessment on the children as they come in…we assess on the [developmental] areas from the [non-maintained curriculum] assessment document and we watch them and how they play, if they're using maths, how their physical development is, and then I write up a report that is shared with the parents and the parents come in to talk about it." (Practitioner)

While discussing on-entry assessments, some practitioners referred to these as 'baseline' assessments. Two schools had utilised the previous Foundation Phase baseline assessment to develop their on-entry assessment; in one of these schools the on-entry assessment was based on the baseline assessment but as they had become aware of the assessment guidance for non-maintained settings more recently, they were planning to utilise this soon. The senior leader further explained that the schools' procedures for on-entry assessment aligned with the non-maintained settings guidance, but they were not using the terminology and headings within the guidance document.

Some senior leaders and practitioners provided examples of how assessment is carried out in daily practice and how it is built into curriculum design and teaching and learning, in line with the Curriculum for Wales Framework. Having an ongoing understanding of learner's progress as well as "their interests and abilities" fed into the "next steps" (Senior Leader) for learners. An example of this was detailed in one school where the learners were making Christmas wrapping paper and practitioners observed that learners were struggling with patterns so in response to this, they designed further opportunities to explore and identify patterns in other areas of the curriculum, supporting their progression.

A senior leader from the special school in the sample explained that although their learners were not formally assessed on entry to the school, staff instead focused on building a relationship with each learner so they could understand their needs and tailor the curriculum to them.

Observations were highlighted by some schools as a key method of assessment and fed into planning and producing reports on learner progress. These were mainly used with nursery and reception learners, whereas for Year 1 and 2 learners some schools reported that there was a shift towards more structured and formalised assessment (this is discussed further below).

> "Much of our assessment is taken in terms of observation of children, so we're really hot on our observations. And those things were not in place before [Curriculum for Wales], so that has changed." (Senior Leader/Practitioner)

There were also a few examples of interactions and floor books used to support assessment and to document learning. In one school observation sheets completed by staff were included in learner's floor books along with pictures which encouraged learners to reflect on what they had been learning.

> "I prefer floor pictures and floor books and children can see it as well, they can look back on their learning." (Senior Leader)

Some schools, however, had adopted more structured and formalised approaches to assessment utilising, for example, workbooks to evidence work. One school reported using: "All Wales tests [for Year 2], we still use that data…we still use that, things like SPAG[footnote 4] assessments…we still use the old traditional methods[footnote 5]" (Senior Leader/Practitioner). The use of more formalised assessments were mainly discussed in the context of Year 1 and Year 2. For a few schools this was talked about as part of preparing learners for Year 3, which as noted above in 3.1.5, suggests that some schools continue to see Year 3 as a transition into a different stage or phase of the curriculum, a perception that is arguably rooted in the previous curriculum.

Practitioners in two schools had developed their own assessment approaches to support progression in phonics and numeracy. One practitioner used the outcomes for their "own knowledge to see where children are at" and reviewed the outcomes after a few weeks to see what progress had been made. The other practitioner, who was a nursery teacher, reported that they taught the foundations of phonics and the assessment was used to "see if they [learners] have picked all that up, ready to start phase two in reception phonics" (Practitioner). The use of assessment programmes tools such as WellComm[footnote 6], Tric a Chlic[footnote 7], Twinkl[footnote 8] and the Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test [footnote 9] were also reported in some schools.

Assessments were also used in some schools for reviewing learner progression in the short term and, in some cases, over a longer period; in one school progress was reviewed throughout the learners' school journey from nursery to Year 6. Another school used a RAG

Footnotes:
[4] Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar assessments.
[5] Whilst this participant did not make this explicit, it is likely they were referring to assessment methods under the previous curriculum as they had worked in the education system in Wales prior to the introduction of Curriculum for Wales.
[6] WellComm is a speech and language toolkit that can identify learners with potential communication difficulties and can be used to monitor progress and provide targeted support (GL Assessment, 2026).
[7] Tric a Chlic is a Welsh language synthetic phonics programme design for children aged 3-7 (Tric a Chlic, 2026).
[8] Twinkl is an online educational publisher which produces planning and assessment resources (Twinkl, 2026).
[9] The Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test is a verbal ready and comprehension test for learners aged 5 to 16 years (Hachette Learning, 2026).

(red, amber, green) rating system from Year 1 to Year 6 to assess if a learner had demonstrated skills within progression steps.

3.3.3. Child development

Curriculum for Wales articulates the core areas of child development through the developmental pathways. Schools varied in how explicitly they referred to the developmental pathways when commenting on ways in which the principles of child development were reflected in assessment arrangements. Some schools noted that the pathways were the basis for practitioners' thinking about assessment. In these schools, senior leaders also noted that the developmental pathways enabled a better understanding among teachers and support staff of child development.

One senior leader explained that their school assessment had a developmental focus and that assessment connected closely with planning to ensure targeted learning experiences. This school was described as having a high number of learners with ALN and assessment was framed around understanding what learners were "developmentally ready for". The inclusion of areas of child development, framed through the five developmental pathways, contributed to gaining a holistic understanding of learner's progress, "looking at all aspects of the child's learning and development" (Senior Leader).

> "At the end of every term, I'll do a mini report on each of those developmental pathways based on the observations and teaching we've done. So then by the end of the year, you've got a really beautiful, holistic picture of the child, which is fantastic because you've got clear things that the child has said and how they've developed. I think that's the way forward really." (Senior Leader/Practitioner)

As illustrated in section 3.1.6, some schools had used the curriculum for non-maintained settings to inform their curriculum planning. Some schools had also utilised the assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings to develop their approaches to assessment. The use of this guidance was seen to complement and support how these schools approached assessment to ensure child development was understood through the developmental pathways.

> "Our initial assessment now lines up with the non-maintained curriculum, so you get that seamless understanding of development from pre-nursery settings through to progression step one and then we have initial [on-entry] assessments and final assessments. So, there's the continuity of what we're looking at." (Senior Leader/Practitioner)

In other cases, schools referred to child development principles more generically, describing learners' developmental starting points, 'readiness' or 'where they are' in their learning without explicitly talking about the development pathways.

3.3.4. Perspectives on assessment

The discussions with senior leaders and practitioners highlighted a mixed perspective on the value of different assessment approaches for foundation learning. Some senior leaders and practitioners noted that changes made to assessment introduced via Curriculum for Wales enabled them to gain an understanding of the child 'as a whole', taking into account aspects of child development and learner need. Staff from the special school had developed their own "progression language" based on their understanding of progression for learners within their school, creating more "meaningful assessment".

> "I really love the assessment side…the more that we're observing the children. I have got to know the children way more since doing the non-maintained curriculum and I've got to see how they're playing and how they are learning and we're all meeting their needs." (Practitioner)

A few schools nonetheless noted concerns around a lack of clarity on how to "measure" learner progression. A lack of "standards" and "benchmarks" within Curriculum for Wales were highlighted, creating uncertainty around how to assess progress. Senior leaders from three schools expressed that assessment was ambiguous and therefore different "interpretations" were happening; one of these emphasised that although observations were a key aspect of assessment in foundation learning they were concerned that they could be subjective and could not "guarantee that [practitioner] bias isn't influencing" assessment; they explained that learners' behaviour could impact how they are perceived and therefore assessed by practitioners.

> "People will say '[learners are] more robust, they're able to think about problems and deal with it'. That's really hard to measure and it can change daily, it can change hourly depending on if the child is tired, if the child is engaged in that one activity or not. So, it's quite hard to quantify." (Senior Leader)

Practitioner experience was raised as an important enabler of appropriate and effective assessment of learner progression in foundation learning by a few senior leaders; those who were experienced in teaching "knew the outcomes inside out" but those newer to teaching sometimes struggled to judge learner progression, feeling they "haven't got an idea where to pitch things because [assessment] is so vague" (Senior Leader/Practitioner).

3.4. Guidance and support

This section focuses on support for schools to address Research Question 2 'What are the main sources of support your school has drawn on to inform the design and realisation of the curriculum for your youngest learners?' A summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.

3.4.1. Summary

Local authorities and regional consortia were reported to be a valuable source of support for around half of the schools. Examples of support included guidance documents linking developmental pathways to statements of what matters and descriptions of learning, cluster-wide training, twilight sessions and encouraging sharing of good practice. In addition, some schools reported highly valuing the Enabling Learning guidance produced by Welsh Government. Some schools used this in tandem with resources on Hwb although a few schools outlined concerns about the lack of specific resources for foundation learning.

Some schools use the non-maintained curriculum for planning, design and assessment. However, there were varying views on the effectiveness and relevance of this curriculum to support their practice. Some schools reported school-to-school collaboration, and the sharing of resources and ideas, which supported practitioners' confidence. Examples of additional support required by practitioners included more specific guidance and professional learning resources for foundation learning practice and assessment, including on-entry assessment.

3.4.2. Support at a regional and local level

Around half of schools in the sample highlighted the guidance and support they had received from local authorities and/or regional consortia, for example foundation learning leads and school improvement teams. While some regional consortia are no longer operational, resources (such as videos, podcasts, and guidance) have been retained on websites and made available through Hwb. Some schools noted that local authorities have now taken on the previous consortia's provision of curriculum support and resources. A few schools noted support from other organisations, for example a local children's centre, an Early Help Hub, the Froebel Trust, and an external consultant , on aspects such as child development and the Froebelian approach[10].

One area of support has been guidance documents, with one school providing an example of a document produced by their regional consortium which they found helpful in planning a developmentally appropriate curriculum. The guidance document in question set out the

Footnote:
[10] The Froebel approach is an early years philosophy which centres on the belief that children learn best through play, exploration and connection with nature and treats learners as active rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Froebel Trust, 2026)

connections between the developmental pathways and the statements of what matters and descriptions of learning for each Area of the curriculum.

> "So with regards to Progression Step 1, we are currently working with a document [name of regional consortium] have produced, which correlates your child development steps to your 'I can' statements. That is what we are currently using in Progression Step 1 to make sure that our curriculum is becoming developmentally appropriate. So that's been fantastic." (Senior Leader)

Another school highlighted a 'playlist' of foundation learning pedagogical approaches taken from a consortium website, while a third noted guidance documents for Welsh in English-medium education and teaching phonics, also from a regional consortium.

In some cases, this guidance was supplemented by resources from Hwb alongside staff meetings and twilight sessions arranged by local early years networks. For a few schools these networks provided an opportunity for foundation learning leads to meet regularly and share ideas, good practice and communicate changes and discuss developments in assessment. This included sharing observational insights to support a shared understanding of learner progression in line with Curriculum for Wales.

> "Working with [our consortium] helped with feeling like we were going in the right direction. We found Welsh Government guidance overwhelming at first, but we had lots of guidance and cluster training which was helpful and took away stress of doing it alone." (Practitioner)

3.4.3. Use of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings

Some schools reported using the curriculum and assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings as part of designing and delivering their provision. Practitioners who provided positive views on the assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings referred to its clear language and the benefits relating to on-entry assessment, supporting communication, belonging and the philosophy of enabling adults. A small number of schools reported that their use of the curriculum and assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings supported a better understanding of learners' needs, contributing to improved behaviour and engagement.

> "[We have] been following the non-maintained nursery guidance and its associated assessment framework. This guidance is seen as more suitable for our cohort than the main curriculum because it aligns better with developmental stages and needs." (Senior Leader)

> "I tried to look at why were behaviours so challenging, because the provision I felt wasn't meeting the needs of the children. So, we did a lot on how we could best support their needs through the non-maintained guidance and assessment." (Senior Leader)

However, a few schools reported concerns regarding their perceptions that non-maintained settings have "different expectations and contexts for learning". They considered that its use was therefore open to different interpretations. Examples provided by these practitioners included confusion about progression steps, developmental pathways and transition. Another school suggested that the name of the document may have discouraged some schools from using it even though, in their view, the pedagogy is 'appropriate' for maintained settings.

3.4.4. Enabling Learning guidance

Around half of the schools reported that they found the Enabling Learning guidance 'useful'. A few schools highlighted its importance as part of their processes for creating effective environments alongside training programmes for practitioners to develop as enabling adults. Other examples of its use include helping practitioners to understand and use the appropriate terminology along with informing their thinking when designing purposeful outdoor spaces and to enhance their curriculum storyboards. A few schools reported using the guidance in tandem with Hwb resources and professional learning, for example on-entry assessment and embedding Enabling Learning guidance with all learners aged 3 to 8.

> "The guidance is giving some direction for us, it was beneficial. We went through all the modules and found what we needed for our school, it gave us a more open view and a larger knowledge base." (Senior Leader/Practitioner)

> "Welsh Government guidance… enabling adults and environments and getting these in line has enabled a more successful early years experience [for our school]." (Practitioner)

3.4.5. Further guidance required

Some schools identified areas where further guidance would be useful. Specific suggestions from individual schools included additional guidance on observation and "making best use of it to inform learner progress", and this was linked to professional learning requirements outlined in section 3.5.6. Other suggestions included foundation learning-specific guidance for on-entry assessment, the four purposes, and to establish relationships across regions in Wales that could be beneficial to share resources and effective practice with other early years practitioners.

3.5   Professional learning

This section focuses on support for schools to address Research Question 2 'What professional learning have you delivered in-school to support the realisation of the curriculum for your youngest learners?' A summary of key points is provided below; this is then followed by a more detailed discussion.

3.5.1 Summary

Some schools reported accessing professional learning through their consortia/local authorities, linked to the guidance and resources outlined in the previous section. Other schools highlighted professional learning opportunities delivered through Hwb and Welsh Government national network conversations.

However, the amount of professional learning was perceived to be inconsistent – some practitioners reported that early years-specific professional learning was limited or were unaware of opportunities.

In some schools there is thus a reliance on peer support and professional dialogue to support professional development. This takes place through cluster networking, internal training and observation plus sharing of effective practice and resources to address areas where further support is needed.

Perceived gaps in professional learning included provision to help practitioners support learners with ALN, enhance outdoor learning provision, developing a play-based curriculum, supporting learner-led pedagogy, and support relating to methods of observation for practitioners. Future support needs identified by schools included practical examples of what Curriculum for Wales looks like in day-to-day early years practice, for example 'real-world' case studies, videos, and examples across different contexts, especially to support staff confidence and consistency.

3.5.2   Sources of professional learning

Around half of the schools reported that they had accessed professional learning through their local authorities or regional consortia. Examples of provision delivered by local authorities and consortia included outdoor learning, Ffa-la-la[footnote 11] training for Welsh writing and speaking, linking language to the world of work, play-based learning workshops including, in one school, for TAs and HLTAs. Some schools reported working with early years advisory teams or school improvement teams to identify and access professional learning.

Footnote:
[11] Ffa-la-la is a training programme for nurseries and primary school staff focusing on teaching Welsh sentence patterns through music and creative activities (Ffa-la-la, 2026).

"Our local authority school improvement team has a child development performance specialist, there is [professional learning] provision there. They run child development courses and this has helped." (Practitioner)

Other schools highlighted the value of professional learning opportunities delivered through Hwb, Welsh Government national network conversations or, in a couple of schools, by consultants or training organisations. These included sessions on, for example, the MER (monitoring, evaluation and review) cycle, enquiry-based approaches, trauma-informed practice training to address complex learner needs, and self-evaluation.

Some schools reported using Welsh Government-supported professional learning activities. Examples included an 'enabling environment course', national support programme curriculum design and assessment training, and child development modules, which were reported by one practitioner to have been "really helpful for monitoring progress of learners". Two schools noted that these modules were supplemented by access to Hwb resources. A few other schools highlighted the national network conversations around enabling learning as a further useful source for professional learning.

"Welsh Government [national network] conversations were interesting and valuable. They had informative speakers and people from across whole of south Wales were there, so we were getting views from outside our area." (Senior Leader)

"The Welsh Government curriculum design pilot group helped pull everything together, ran planning sessions and a concept-based curriculum which was a shift from themes which allowed for transferable skills. We were able to cover more skills with a purpose and learn how to transfer skills." (Senior Leader)

3.5.3 Gaps in current professional learning provision

Almost half of schools nonetheless perceived inconsistency and gaps relating to the content and focus of professional learning for early years. Some schools reported being unable to access foundation learning-specific professional learning and considered that opportunities were generally targeted at other levels of provision. A few schools were unaware of professional learning opportunities available, while several other noted budget constraints which limited opportunities to bring in external training organisations. Other gaps identified by a few schools included relevant and appropriate training for TAs working in foundation learning, along with nursery and reception practitioners.

"I have done training that's not been relevant for early years i.e., nursery. It feels there's a gap there, I would like to know what pre-school settings have too." (Practitioner)

ALN-focused professional learning linked to early years provision was also highlighted as a gap by some schools. Practitioners in these schools reported a rise in numbers of learners with ALN, as outlined in section 3.1.8, but considered there was a lack of specific training to address these learners' needs. The special school considered that there was a lack of

resources in general for them, including relevant professional learning opportunities, with a senior leader noting, "we have to create everything for ourselves or look for specialists in England, it is very time consuming".

3.5.4 School to school collaboration

Some schools reported working in partnership with other schools to develop practitioners' skills and share resources and effective practice. These schools reported that they worked with colleagues in their clusters on topics such as developing outdoor learning and early language learning. Practitioners in these schools highlighted the benefits of this approach to support curriculum design, learning and teaching.

A few schools noted that when one member of staff attended relevant training sessions this was then disseminated to other staff although there were differing views as to how effective this approach was. For one school, this approach supported effective communication and collaboration between practitioners, however another school raised concerns about mixed messaging.

For some other schools, observation of colleagues and professional dialogue supported practitioners' skills and knowledge development, for example in child development, and early years pedagogy. A few schools reported using the expertise of practitioners and senior leaders to develop or source their own professional learning.

> "We did a lot of triads work, observing and giving feedback to each other in class, there has been an increase in this happening, Estyn picked up on in our interim inspection how far we had come with professional dialogue." (Practitioner)

> "We've had to find our own learning like with Jolly Phonics. We wanted to update our knowledge a little bit - it's things we've done as a school as opposed to it being provided externally for us." (Practitioner)

3.5.6 Future professional learning needs

Schools identified a range of further professional learning needs and resources, which they considered would further support their skills and knowledge. Some schools highlighted a need for more "practical examples of what Curriculum for Wales looks like in day-to-day early years practice". Suggestions included real-world case studies, videos, and examples across different contexts, for example play-based learning, and a map of professional learning for foundation learning practitioners. These schools considered that this could further support staff confidence and consistency.

A few schools highlighted the need for more guidance and related professional learning for practitioners – especially TAs - to assess learner progress through observation. These schools noted that this would further help to develop the professional dialogue approaches to support practitioners' skills and knowledge outlined in the previous section. A few schools

also noted a gap in professional learning and resources relating to learners with ALN and teaching language skills.

> "…schools are being relied on for foundational language skills and never expected to have to teach children how to speak, [we have to] come up with creative ways to teach language." (Practitioner)

> "What I think would be very beneficial for foundation phase [sic] teachers and support staff would be things like Makaton, communication, curiosity approaches, 'Bucket Time'. Because of the number of children with additional learning needs who are coming in to our schools, those are the kind of opportunities that we need to be more readily available." (Senior Leader)

4   Conclusions

The research aimed to provide exploratory answers to two overarching research questions in relation to foundation learning in schools across Wales.

1. **Research Question 1:** How are schools designing and realising a pedagogically and developmentally appropriate curriculum for foundation learning that supports learners in ways that reflect the Curriculum for Wales Framework?

2. **Research Question 2:** How are schools using guidance and professional learning to ensure the approaches they employ are pedagogically and developmentally appropriate for foundation learning - in line with the vision of the Curriculum for Wales?

4.1. Conclusions relating to Research Question 1

4.1.1. Curriculum design and planning for foundation learning

Across the sample of schools that contributed to this qualitative study, curriculum planning for foundation learning was described as being learner-centred, contextualised and responsive to developmental needs. On-entry assessments were used by schools to ensure that the design of the curriculum for the youngest learners was informed by an understanding of learners' developmental starting points. Schools also reported that teaching, learning and curriculum planning were shaped by a continuous cycle of observation and professional judgement, reflecting the expectations of the Curriculum for Wales Framework. Place-based experiences and engagement with the local community frequently formed part of curriculum planning and classroom enquiries, with many schools highlighting the value of authentic learning rooted in children's experiences and linked to the concept of 'cynefin'.

Many practitioners characterised Curriculum for Wales as an evolution of practices established under the previous Foundation Phase curriculum rather than a radical shift. A significant number reported drawing upon the curriculum and assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings, valuing in particular the clarity provided in supporting planning linked to the developmental pathways. In some schools, elements of the non-maintained curriculum were explicitly integrated into planning approaches for nursery and reception classes.

In many schools, practitioners described planning the curriculum to employ a blend of approaches to support learner development, frequently highlighting a focus on literacy and numeracy skills. Approaches that included elements of focused teaching were not viewed by practitioners as a departure from the principles of Curriculum for Wales but rather as an adaptation intended to support progression, particularly for learners in Years 1 and 2.

This may suggest that a perception exists among some senior leaders and teachers that a play-based, pedagogically and developmentally appropriate approach to learning may not

support skills development in literacy and numeracy in the ways they expect. In this context, frequent references to learners aged 3-8 not being 'where they should be' could be said to indicate a lack of understanding of a central pillar of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, which emphasises that support for progression should recognise different learners' pace of progress in learning, and should not be driven by time-bound outcomes.

Linked to this, practitioners frequently referred to issues in ensuring effective progression into Year 3, where some continued to perceive a shift toward "more formal learning". The persistence of Year 3 as a perceived "transition point" suggested that continued support was required to help schools realise of a continuum of learning through ensuring pedagogy continues to support progression in developmentally appropriate ways.

A consistent factor shaping curriculum decisions was the perceived increase in the complexity of learner needs. Practitioners reported increasing numbers of learners with ALN and broader developmental needs on entry to school, leading to adaptations in learning environments, targeted interventions and greater differentiation of provision. At the same time, schools highlighted constraints relating to staffing and budgets, which they felt limited their ability to fully realise provision that was developmentally responsive.

4.1.2. Pedagogy

Pedagogical approaches reported by schools as part of this qualitative study appeared broadly consistent with intentions of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, and the Enabling Learning guidance specifically. All schools reported that foundation learning pedagogy was anchored in play and experiential learning, with many practitioners reporting that such approaches had become increasingly planned and purposeful. Play continued to be regarded as the primary medium for developing learners' conceptual understanding and the development of cross-curricular skills. Practitioners described incorporating language, communication, numeracy and physical development through play-based approaches.

Outdoor learning was widely reported as being central to foundation learning pedagogy. Schools valued it for its contribution to physical development, curiosity and well-being, and many designed for free flow between indoor and outdoor spaces. Forest school sessions were an embedded part of the curriculum in several schools, providing opportunities for risk-taking, exploration and problem-solving.

Observation formed a core part of pedagogical practice. Practitioners used observations to adapt provision for individual children, make informed decisions about when to intervene or step back, and engage in collaborative reflection with colleagues. Observation was also considered vital for identifying barriers early and supporting inclusive approaches, particularly in contexts where children were reported to be entering school with a wider range of developmental needs.

Changes to pedagogy across the sample included increased use of uninterrupted play, responsive planning, and a reduction in the use of exercise books in Nursery and Year 1 in favour of more meaningful forms of recording.

Practitioners frequently described a shift in their role from delivering content to enabling learning. The Enabling Learning guidance provided a shared language around enabling adults, effective environments and engaging experiences, reinforcing this shift. Close collaboration between teachers, HLTAs and TAs was common, with some HLTAs taking on substantial leadership in nursery provision, although this varied by school context. Although HLTAs and TAs play an important role in supporting high-quality foundation learning provision, they are expected to work under the direction and guidance of a qualified teacher. Reports of staff independently leading nursery classes highlight practice that sits outside the intended model, and further clarity on expectations may be required.

4.1.3 Progression and assessment

Evidence from across the sample of schools in relation to assessment practices revealed a move towards child-centred, formative approaches. Approaches to assessment in some schools had been adapted to strengthen coherence with foundation learning under Curriculum for Wales. These adaptations included making use of the assessment guidance for funded non-maintained nursery settings and incorporating selected external assessment tools, with assessment information used to inform curriculum planning, pedagogical approaches and the design of learning experiences and environments.

On-entry assessment was routinely conducted within the first weeks of school entry and was used formatively to inform teaching, planning and engagement with parents/carers. In several cases, this initial assessment was also informed in many schools by guidance for non-maintained nursery settings, which supported attention to developmental pathways and helped establish a holistic understanding of each learner's development and needs. Some practitioners noted that approaches to on-entry assessment had changed little from the previous Foundation Phase curriculum, possibly explaining the continued use of the former baseline assessment in a number of schools, which Curriculum for Wales has moved away from.

Observation was the central assessment method in nursery and reception. In Years 1 and 2, however, some schools reported a shift toward more formalised assessments to evidence learning, such as workbooks or the use of assessment tools, sometimes described as "traditional" methods.

In some schools, a shift towards more formal assessment appeared to be driven by a perception that learners needed to be 'ready' for later years, with these approaches seen as providing clearer 'data' than evidence from observational, play-based or qualitative approaches. This indicates that some approaches persist that are a legacy of previous practice used to 'track' progression, which may not be aligned with the Curriculum for Wales concept of a continuum of learning that does not feature stages or phases.

Practitioners expressed mixed views on assessing progression in foundation learning. While many practitioners valued qualitative, observation-based evidence, others perceived a continued expectation for quantitative data, creating tension between the principles of developmentally appropriate assessment and data-driven practices. Some senior leaders

reported that less experienced staff were particularly uncertain when making judgements about progression without traditional benchmarks, indicating that further support may be required to strengthen confidence in their professional judgement and their understanding of child development and progression in order to ensure alignment with Curriculum for Wales expectations.

Alongside observations, schools employed targeted assessment tools (for example, for phonics or speech and language) to support specific needs. These decisions were often driven by practitioners' concerns about the rate of development in areas such as communication, fine motor skills and number fluency.

It is worth noting that throughout fieldwork practitioners referred frequently to "standards", "measures", "benchmarks" and "tracking" learning. The use of such terminology suggests that thinking around progression may not be consistent with a process-driven curriculum and the vision set out in the Curriculum for Wales Framework which is focused on purposeful and authentic learning that is relevant to the development of the learner.

4.2. Conclusions relating to Research Question 2

4.2.1. Guidance and support

Several main sources of support were identified by schools in the sample to inform their design and planning of foundation learning. Local authorities and regional consortia were reported to be an important source of guidance, while some schools valued Welsh Government's Enabling Learning guidance, which was sometimes supplemented by resources on Hwb and other organisations supporting child development.

Evidence from schools indicate that these resources were considered valuable and contributed to their learner-centred and contextualised approach, in line with the vision for the Curriculum for Wales. In some cases, schools appear to have used guidance from a variety of sources and linked this to collaboration with other schools, through the sharing of these resources and ideas. This is reported to have supported practitioners' confidence and skills and provides an example of effective practice in designing and realising early years provision.

While some schools use the non-maintained curriculum for planning, design and assessment there were varying views on the effectiveness and relevance of this approach. Some schools valued the clarity of language in supporting planning linked to the developmental pathways and alignment with foundation learners' needs. In a few other schools, however, some concerns were raised with regards to what was perceived by practitioners as the different contexts and expectations for learning within the non-maintained sector.

Some schools outlined concerns about a perceived lack of specific resources for foundation learning. This is in line with similar views expressed on the lack of foundation learning-specific professional learning and indicates the need for guidance (and professional

learning) to be targeted to the specific contexts, pedagogy and approaches within foundation learning.

With this in mind, common themes highlighted by practitioners and senior leaders were the need for further guidance to support consistency, continuity and confidence when designing and realising the curriculum for younger learners and supporting learner development.

4.2.2. Professional learning

Around half of the schools in the sample reported accessing professional learning through their regional consortia/local authorities, often linked to the guidance and resources noted above in section 4.2.1. Similarly, some schools used professional learning opportunities delivered through national network conversations and resources on Hwb. These findings indicate that local authorities and Welsh Government are playing a central role in the provision of professional learning. Sessions and resources linked to topics such as creating effective learning environments, assessment training, and child development modules were valued by these schools in supporting their curriculum design and planning.

However, some schools were unaware of opportunities that existed, while others raised concerns regarding a perceived lack of foundation learning-specific professional learning. With the reported rise in numbers of learners with ALN, some schools highlighted gaps in knowledge and skills and a lack of professional learning to address learners' needs. Again, there were concerns that what training opportunities did exist to support learners with ALN did not have the required specific foundation learning focus or content to support the adaptations needed in learning environments, targeted interventions and greater differentiation of provision.

Some schools used peer support and professional dialogue to either enhance professional learning delivered through the partners outlined above or to address perceived gaps in provision. This has taken place through school-to-school or cluster networking, dissemination of knowledge, internal training and observation plus sharing of effective practice and resources to address areas where further support is needed. These collaborative activities between schools illustrate their potential to act as learning organisations.

Perceived gaps in professional learning provision included ALN, outdoor learning, developing a play-based curriculum and making reception learning more learner-led. Further professional learning and guidance linked to observation was seen as a key element of supporting practitioners' skills development, for example for TAs to assess learner progress, and further developing professional dialogue approaches.

As with future guidance needs, the key themes for future professional learning support were linked to staff confidence, skills and consistency to deliver pedagogically and developmentally appropriate foundation learning. This indicates that while professional dialogue and networking can support schools' progress, high-quality foundation learning-specific professional learning should also be an important enabler of a coherent and

informed approach to curriculum realisation, in line with the vision of the Curriculum for Wales.

4.3 Areas for consideration

i. Embedding developmental pathways as part of coherent curriculum planning

Evidence demonstrates that schools frequently adapt curriculum planning to reflect learners' developmental starting points. Nonetheless, there remains variation in how schools embed and interpret developmental pathways. Further consideration could be given to how schools can be supported to plan for learner-centred, developmentally responsive learning and pedagogically appropriate learning from ages 3-16 while ensuring alignment with the Curriculum for Wales Framework.

ii. Clarifying expectations around developmentally appropriate pedagogy

As noted in this report, some schools continued to perceive a shift towards what was described as more 'formal' learning in Year 3, which was influencing practice and pedagogy, particularly in Year 2. There may be a need to support schools to develop pedagogical approaches that ensure continuity in their primary education provision, helping to move on from perceptions or expectations of learner 'readiness' for transition points that do not form part of Curriculum for Wales.

iii. Supporting assessment in foundation learning

Schools reported uncertainty about how to evidence progression in the absence of benchmarks and noted some tension between observation-led assessment and perceived expectations for quantitative data relating to progress (and 'standards'). Additional guidance and exemplification could support greater consistency in use of the five developmental pathways as part of holistic approaches to assessing learner progress.

iv. Responding to increasing numbers of learners in foundation learning in need of additional support

Many schools reported increasing numbers of learners with developmental needs and requiring additional support, alongside staffing and budgetary constraints. Further thought is needed on how national and regional support can help schools design environments, curricula and pedagogical approaches that remain inclusive and developmentally responsive.

v. Improving access to foundation learning-focused professional learning and support

Schools reported inconsistency in the availability and relevance of foundation learning focused professional learning, particularly in areas such as child development, supporting learners with ALN, observation-based assessment and play-based pedagogies. Tailored and well-publicised professional learning could help support practitioner confidence in their

practice and professional judgement and support greater consistency across Wales. This could also be a focus of school-to-school collaboration as part of collaborative school improvement strategies developed.

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Annex A: Topic guide

Questions labelled (SL) will be asked in discussions with senior leaders only. Questions labelled (P) will be asked in discussions with practitioners only. Questions labelled (SL&P) will be asked in discussions with senior leaders and practitioners.

Bold questions will be raised during initial discussions with senior leaders and explored more fully during second rounds of discussions with schools/during visits, involving further probing and more detailed supplementary questions.

Overall

- **(SL&P) We are interested in your overall views on the guidance provided to schools to support and inform foundation learning. What are your thoughts on Curriculum for Wales guidance for this area of the curriculum?**

    o Is there anything particularly helpful for foundation learning?

    o Is the guidance sufficiently prescriptive or not prescriptive enough?

    o Do you feel clear about what is expected of schools in relation to supporting foundation learning?

Planning and design (Research Question 1)

- **(SL) Can you provide an overview of how curriculum planning and design has changed in your school in recent years to support your youngest learners?**

- (SL&P) How has the approach to planning the curriculum for your youngest learners developed over time?

    o Have you refined approaches and if so, what has driven any changes you have made?

- (SL&P) Could you describe how you designed your curriculum?

    o Does the design of the curriculum get reviewed and amended, if so, how do you do this? Any examples of this happening?

    o What is the role of teachers in facilitating or mediating a learner-centred approach to curriculum planning when engaging with your youngest learners?

    o Can you provide examples of actions you have taken to ensure that the curriculum responds to the motivations, aspirations and interests of your youngest learners?

- (SL&P) How have you designed your school curriculum to ensure that the following features form part of teaching and learning for your youngest learners?

    - Play and play-based learning

    - Being outdoors

    - Observation

    - Authentic and purposeful learning?

- (SL&P) What do you feel is working well?

    - What challenges have you encountered?

    - To what extent is this influenced by your school environment/space/facilities?

    - To what extent is this influenced by your location/school community?

- **(SL) Is there a focus on foundation learning as part of school improvement activity your school is involved with? If so, please provide further details.**

- **(SL) Is foundation learning a priority in your School Development Plan? If so, please provide further details.**

- **(SL) The Curriculum for Wales Framework notes that schools should apply the principles of child development when they plan, design and implement their curriculum. How have you approached this in your school?**

- (SL&P) Are you familiar with the developmental pathways set out in the Curriculum for Wales guidance? The guidance sets out five developmental pathways, namely: belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and well-being.

    - If yes, how have you used the developmental pathways to inform curriculum planning and design? Do you feel that they are valuable/helpful in supporting curriculum planning and design? Please provide reasons or examples.

    - Has teacher understanding of developmental pathways made a difference to practice? If so, how?

- (SL) How do you ensure that practitioners across the school have appropriate knowledge and understanding of child development to inform curriculum design and enactment?

Pedagogy (Research Question 1)

- **(SL&P) Have you made any changes to the pedagogical approaches adopted in your school to support your youngest learners, including learners with additional developmental needs?**

- o **If so, what has changed and what has driven any changes to your practice? Curriculum for Wales Framework? Guidance received? Professional learning?**

- (SL&P) How would you describe the key differences between the pedagogy you employ now and approaches under the previous curriculum?

- (SL&P) Have you noticed any impacts on learner development that you feel are attributable to the pedagogical approaches you are adopting?

  - o Are there particular pedagogies or practices that are proving more effective, including for learners with additional developmental needs? Please provide reasons or examples.

  - o Are there any particular pedagogies or practices that you have moved away from since realising Curriculum for Wales?

Use of assessment (on-entry and ongoing assessment) (Research Question 1)

- **(SL&P) Could you explain how you design and undertake on-entry assessments of learners when they first arrive at the school?**

  - o **What methods or tools do you use to carry out these on-entry assessments?**

- (SL&P) How is information from on-entry assessments used to inform curriculum planning and design?

- (SL&P) How are the findings/data/observations from on-entry assessments used to inform pedagogy?

- (SL&P) How are ongoing assessment and observations used to inform curriculum planning and realisation?

- (SL&P) How are the findings/data/observations from ongoing assessments used to inform pedagogy?

Engagement with non-maintained nursery settings (Research Question 1)

- **(SL) How does the school engage with settings that have previously supported learners to plan for and ensure effective transition arrangements are in place?**

- (SL&P) What information-sharing takes place between the school and settings that have previously supported learners?

  - o What type of information is shared?

- o How is this used to inform planning and practice?

- (SL&P) How do your engagement/collaboration practices support effective transition for learners into your school?

  - o What are the barriers, if any, to this?

School-to-school and setting-to-school collaboration (Research Question1)

- **(SL&P) Has your school been involved in any school-to-school or setting-to-school working to support curriculum design and implementation for foundation learning?**

  - o **If so, please explain what the school-to-school/setting-to-school working involved?**

  - o Which aspects of the foundation learning pedagogy and practice did it focus on?

  - o Which members of staff were involved?

- (SL&P) What impact did the collaboration have?

  - o Did it lead to any changes in planning or teaching practice in the school? Please provide reasons or examples.

  - o What are the barriers, if any, to this?

Guidance (Research Question 2)

- **(SL) What are the main sources of support your school has drawn on to inform the design and realisation of the curriculum for your youngest learners?**

- (SL) Which of the following guidance and/or resources have you or staff in your school used?

  - o Enabling Learning

  - o Any other resources (including on Hwb); if useful, how were they useful?

- (SL&P) (For each that applies) In your experience, was the guidance of good quality and focused on the most relevant areas?

  - o How effective is the written guidance in supporting your planning and practice?

- (SL) Has the school utilised any principles from guidance/resources aimed at non-maintained settings?

- A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings

- Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings

Professional learning (Research Question 2)

- **(SL) What professional learning have you delivered in-school to support the realisation of the curriculum for your youngest learners?**

- (SL) How did you/the school decide which aspects of professional learning to prioritise?

  - Did the professional learning you delivered in-school lead to any changes in planning or practice?

  - What difference, if any, has it made to curriculum realisation in the school for your youngest learners?

  - Was the professional learning you accessed provided to all teachers within the school or only those responsible for foundation learning?

- (P) How relevant was the professional learning delivered in-school?

  - Did it lead to any changes in curriculum planning?

  - Did it lead to any changes in teaching practice?

  - What difference, if any, has it made to the curriculum for your youngest learners in the school? Please provide reasons or examples.

- (SL&P) What type of professional learning have you found most useful?

  - Online asynchronous learning modules?

  - In-person collaborative learning?

  - Videos?

- **(SL) Has the school accessed professional learning from external providers to support the realisation of the curriculum for your youngest learners? (for example, from Welsh Government as part of the National Programme of Support, the local authority, umbrella organisations, others)**

- (SL) Who provided the professional learning and which aspects of curriculum or pedagogy was it focused on?

- (SL&P) Did the professional learning you accessed meet your needs?

  - Was the professional learning of good quality?

  - What features of the professional learning made it good quality?

- o What sets apart effective professional learning from less effective professional learning?

- o Can you recall any examples of professional learning you have experienced that made a positive impact on your practice?

- (SL&P) Did the professional learning lead to any changes in curriculum planning?

  - o Did it lead to any changes in teaching practice?

  - o What difference, if any, has it made to the curriculum provided for your youngest learners in the school? Please provide reasons or examples.

Further guidance or professional learning required (Research Question 2)

- **(SL&P) Is there any further support that you feel is required to assist your school in planning or realising the curriculum for your youngest learners?**

- If so, what additional guidance or professional learning do you feel is a priority or is most needed?

  - o How could this benefit your school?

Other comments

- **(SL&P) Do you have any other comments in relation to how you plan, design and realise the curriculum for your youngest learners?**

Annex B: Schools sample

Primary A

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Mid and West

ALN [footnote 12]: Low

Size [footnote 13]: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1[footnote 14] "I understand what my school is required to do to design a curriculum that is pedagogically and developmentally appropriate for our youngest learners in line with the aspirations of the Curriculum for Wales Framework": Strongly agree

Response to statement 2 "How would you describe the progress you are making as a school in realising a curriculum that is pedagogically and developmentally appropriate for your youngest learners?": Unsure

Primary B

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary C

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Footnotes:
[12] ALN/SEN data are drawn from the 2024/25 Pupil-level Annual School Census (PLASC) (Welsh Government, 2026). Data was not published for schools where there are between one and four learners with some categories of ALN/SEN. For these schools, an assumed value of 2 learners was assigned to enable a total number and percentage of learners with ALN/SEN to be derived. Schools with 7% or less are considered to have a 'Low' number of ALN learners, 7.1% to 14% as 'Medium' and greater than 14% 'High'. These thresholds have been used so that around a third of schools and settings fall into each category.
[13] Based on Estyn size ranges for primary schools.
[14] Statement 1 and 2 were included in the expression of interest form.

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: N/A [footnote 15]

Response to statement 2: N/A

Primary D

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: High

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary E

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: North

ALN: Medium

Size: Large

Language medium: Welsh

Response to statement 1: Somewhat agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary F

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Mid and West

Footnote:
[15] Not all schools responded to the statements on the expression of interest form. Those who were contacted directly because they had consented to be recontacted for future evaluation activities when completing the Senior Leaders and Practitioners survey did not complete the expression of interest form.

ALN: Medium

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Somewhat agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary G

School type: Federation primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: South East

ALN: Medium/High

Size: Small/Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary H

School type: Primary: infant and junior

Region: Mid and West

ALN: Medium

Size: Medium

Language medium: Welsh

Response to statement 1: Somewhat agree

Response to statement 2: A little progress

Primary I

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

Primary J

School type: Primary: infant school with nursery

Region: North

ALN: Medium

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Primary K

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Medium

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Primary L

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: North

ALN: Medium

Size: Medium

Language medium: Welsh

Response to statement 1: N/A

Response to statement 2: N/A

Primary M

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: North

ALN: Low

Size: Medium

Language medium: Welsh

Response to statement 1: N/A

Response to statement 2: N/A

Primary N

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Primary O

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Primary P

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Medium

Size: Medium

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Primary Q

School type: Primary: nursery, infant and junior

Region: Central South

ALN: Low

Size: Large

Language medium: English

Response to statement 1: Agree

Response to statement 2: Some progress

All-through school [footnote 16]

Response to statement 1: N/A

Response to statement 2: N/A

Special school

Response to statement 1: Strongly agree

Response to statement 2: A lot of progress

Footnote:

[16] Some demographic information has not been included for the all-through school and special school to ensure anonymity.