

Supporting staff through curriculum change: A leaders perspective



Rebecca Mottram is owner and director of Active Childcare Ltd, a multi-setting organisation with an extensive reputation for providing children with high standards of care and education. Rebecca has been working in childcare for close to 30 years and is a passionate advocate for the nursery sector. Active Childcare Ltd operate Little Scholars' Day Nursery in Wrexham and Rossett House Nursery situated between Wrexham and Chester.

Both nurseries provide full daycare for children, from 6 weeks at Rossett House, and from 3 months at Little Scholars', up until a child attends school full time. Active Childcare receive nursery education funding. Active Childcare also operate a holiday club from Little Scholars during all school holidays for children up to the age of 13.

Active Childcare pride themselves on delivering high quality care through a child-centred approach. With an experienced and qualified team, they aim to ensure all children's care and developmental needs are met in fun, stimulating and nurturing environments.

What has your personal curriculum journey been like?

I have been lucky, as I have been involved in the in the co-construction process as well as the discussions prior to (and in parallel to) that, before the groups started putting pen to paper. I do feel that I've been one of the lucky ones in that respect, but I have also invested a lot of my time in the curriculum and quality practice in the early years- what it looks like and really getting to grips with the different aspects myself, before introducing them to my team. Whilst I've taken everything as it comes; sometimes having to do more research if it's something that I've been unsure about, I have tried to slowly drip feed information to my staff. As a leader, I believe that it's integral for me to have a good knowledge and understanding of something before I expect my staff to pick up and run with it.

What did you learn from being involved in curriculum development workshops?

Being a part of the curriculum working group reassured me that the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings actually does mean something to our sector, as it's been written by practitioners who are experienced in what we do and have produced something that celebrates the importance of those all-important early years- not just an 'add on' to school provision. The curriculum really highlights and further supports high-quality early childhood, play learning and care provision.

Wales has really led the way in terms of introducing a curriculum that has been co-constructed by the practitioners themselves and it would be really nice to see that approach used again in the future for guidance documents produced for the sector. As a practitioner taking part, it does require a lot in regards to time, but I believe that if we don't put the time in now, then change is not going to happen and we definitely wouldn't see the benefits of it in later years for our children. It has felt so empowering to be involved, to have a voice and have my concerns listened to and addressed. For example, paperwork overload within our sector was discussed a lot within the working groups and therefore this was carefully considered when discussing the topic within the documents and an emphasis has been placed on paperwork being manageable. That felt like a great little win for our amazing practitioners!

Joining the working group was a little daunting, however the working group meetings took place through online platforms and this supported the development work in terms of engagement and participation, as well as ensuring more of a representation from across Wales could take part without being disadvantaged by distance or travel. Online meetings have also helped with my personal confidence. I felt able to observe initially, and then, when I was ready, input into conversations - it was not as daunting as I first anticipated. The online meetings also used smaller groups to host discussions and complete tasks and these smaller groups supported the formation of friendships over time. The initial meetings are one of those deep breath moments but if you are going to commit to something, you need to get involved, otherwise, there's no point in taking part.

Your staff were not involved in the workshops- how did you support your staff to develop their confidence, knowledge and understanding of the curriculum?

As I mentioned earlier, the most important part for me was not to overwhelm my staff. I believe that a slow 'drip feed' approach worked much better for us and ensured that staff could have the time, space and support to fully get to grips with something before moving onto the next.

Initially, staff might not feel confident at the thought of curriculum changes because they think that they don't know what they should be doing, when actually, effective practice is still very much the same. Quality practice has not changed with the curriculum but there is more of an emphasis on understanding why you're doing something.

That is where I felt I needed to start with my staff. We reviewed our setting ethos and discussed as a group; what is our ethos? Do we all understand what our ethos is? What does it mean?. It was really important to have everyone involved in this process, to support staff to feel valued, included and a sense of ownership over the setting- it's not just my setting and my ideas. It's no good me sitting in my office, writing something and then presenting it to the staff and expecting them to deliver it day-to-day in their room. They should be involved in the conversations and the design and then they will have a better understanding of what we're aiming for, both individually, and as a collective. It also helps to reignite passion within the staff. So that is where we started. Taking the

time to actually sit down as a team and do this was the most valuable part for us, discussing; what does it mean for us? Can we see all of our children within our ethos? Does it capture every single child we've got? Happily we felt that it did.

It has been a couple of years of 'drip feeding' that information. Following a review of our ethos, we looked at our provision and audited our environments. We looked at completing risk assessments alongside risk benefits to further develop the environment and experiences children could access. We then made a plan of what we would like to do and how we were going to do it.

As a setting without an endless pot of money, you can't just go out and spend loads of money overnight to transform your environments, that takes time. But we had agreed that loose parts play was important to us, so we decided to implement its use across the setting and then we look at other aspects of the environment gradually over time. Focusing on loose parts play, we asked ourselves; what are they? How do we use them? How can we further develop their use in the setting? How will it benefit the children? And this supported us with our next steps.

What changes did you make with regards to your planning?

We decided as a team to change our planning from the start. However, we still needed to ensure our planning was fit for purpose and met the needs of the children.

Again, this was something that I didn't want to produce solely and then hand over to the staff. I wanted it to be a whole team approach. I got staff from both of my settings together to work on this- again, including everybody. There was even a member of staff had only been with us for a week! It was a great learning experience for them and their work subsequently meant so much more to them and their understood that 'why'.

Early on we had a staff training day that included a presentation on the background and co-construction of the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. I felt it was important that the team needed to understand that background before we could then move on to looking at the developmental pathways and how we were going to use them to inform our planning and how we're going to document everything. When it came to implementing the new planning, everyone had that secure understanding and felt comfortable and confident to reflect on it as time progressed and suggest changes that we may wish to consider. This naturally led us to review how we observe children and how we record their progress. And that was another opportunity for everyone to collaborate to develop something bespoke to our setting, our staff and our children. It's a continuous learning journey.

What have been the most challenging aspects of supporting staff through these changes?

I think the most challenging thing is always time and funding. There can be a lot of responsibility on a setting leader to ensure personal secure knowledge and understanding of new things in order to support staff through the changes. You need to invest time into that process of understanding

initially before you can do anything else and that takes time. Then you may often know what you need to do, but finding the time to meet with all of your staff, when you run a full day care setting, can be really challenging. Often you have to do these conversations outside of work hours without added pay. But luckily, for me, everybody was really positive and really motivated following the conversations. Staff felt the changes were right for us and something that we wanted to do as well as needed to do. That attitude and response supported with the requirement of staff time.

After time and funding, the biggest challenge was the move away from such a structured curriculum framework that was outcome driven. Staff were very apprehensive and unsure of their role if they were not working towards outcomes. This type of working provided a comfort blanket for most staff- there were set outcomes that staff were expected to try and get children to achieve. Whereas with the curriculum, it is completely different. It is getting to know the children individually, understanding where they are now and how to support them to make progress. It is also understanding that each child is different. For example, supporting progress with one child could be looking at their concept of number and supporting them to apply it in different contexts. Whereas for another child, progress could be that they're coming into the setting each morning being less and less upset. And maybe next, that child interacts with other children. This curriculum allows time to support that holistic development of children, not just academic development. The progress is just as important for both children in their learning journey. I know that my staff have the skills and knowledge to support children's progress- it's just helping them with their confidence to do so.

What have been the success stories of this change/journey?

The big success of these changes is that my staff have more time to spend with the children and they are not feeling overwhelmed with paperwork. This has also subsequently improved their own well-being and enjoyment of their role. It feels as though they are able to actually be with the children- have more time to observe, be involved in the play and then use that valuable information to feed into their planning without having the pressure of the outcome constraints and multiple forms/templates to complete. Spending time with the children is what they love doing and why they got into the profession in the first place.

One morning, I went to find a member of staff who was working in the pre-school room. I opened the door and I would have been possibly panicked thinking there's no staff in here, there's no adults. But actually, what was happening was that they were so well integrated into the environment and the play with the children that they were not standing out and not sat at a table with children around doing focussed tasks. And I think that is what this curriculum is all about, being that enabling adult that is supporting play. We have worked on changing our mindset from pulling children out of the environment to sit and work with adults, to the adults going to get involved (where suitable) and support existing play and learning that is taking place.

There is a big relief from the pressure of an outcome driven curriculum. No longer having to shoehorn children into 'best fit' boxes not only improves the children's experiences but also the staff experiences too. Before staff may have felt the pressure to meet certain outcomes and then contrive situations and activities for children to 'meet' those outcomes. Experiences and learning opportunities for children have become much more authentic and rooted in real life contexts.

A big success for us has been using a whole team approach, involving staff in conversations about the changes and ensuring people feel on the journey together. It has made the whole team feel valued. Staff feel their opinions matter and that as a collective, we're working together to achieve something amazing and staff feel a sense of ownership over it. Involving staff in these conversations also further supports their understanding of 'why' we're doing something. For example, when we have been looking at the environment and what changes we need to make- the whole team were involved to decide what happened, why, when and how.



Have there been any opportunities to work closely with schools to support better communication and transition arrangements moving forwards in light of the curriculum?

As a setting, we invite schools into the setting to discuss partnership working and transitions, unfortunately not all schools accept this offer. Our setting based on a university site is in a different situation to most settings, in that a lot of parents/families that use our service come from a wide ranging area which means that we often have many schools that we feed into. The amount of schools is often in the double figures which can pose additional challenges with partnership working and transitions, in comparison to other settings who may have 1 or 2 schools that they feed into within their town.

With the schools that do accept our offer, we try to work cohesively to support better transitions for children, although it can be quite daunting for staff to approach schools. This works most successfully within a school where I sit on the board of governors as this offers me an informal way to share effective practice. I am hopeful that with the assessment arrangements to support the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, schools will be reignited to engage with the

non-maintained sector in a more purposeful and equitable way. However, this is something that can be impacted by capacity and availability as well as funding.

Have you collaborated with other settings to share good practice and setting-to-setting support?

We try to share effective practice with others wherever we can through social media, attending training and networks. We are active members of our NDNA Network which provides us with a great opportunity to share practice, successes and challenges with other settings within the sector. A positive following on from the pandemic is the move towards better partnership working and sharing across the sector. Whereas before everyone was almost viewed as competition, now working with others from the sector has been highlighted as strengthening the good work that we do and all improving together. Everyone is in the same mindset that we are here for the children and they are what matter at the end of the day. Every setting is different, some things will work in one setting that won't in another and vice versa, so sharing enables you to reflect on your own practice and develop it.

How do you feel the changes in relation to the curriculum have impacted children within the setting? Has it been positive?

Definitely positive. When you step back and observe in the rooms, you can see that the children are much more engaged in their play. Seeing the learning that is taking place and the progress that is being made is incredible. Not only have the children developed individually, but they have also developed their interactions with each other. It is really rewarding to see as a practitioner and it also validates the reasons behind the change and the time and effort that staff have put into it. The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings is also exceptionally inclusive and therefore children that may have additional learning needs (ALN) are supported to thrive within the provision alongside their peers. ALN children are not singled out. They access the same provision that everybody else accesses.



We have also noticed a big difference in the noise levels within the room. It is less noisy because the children are actually spending more time engaging in the environment, interacting with each other and sustaining their attention and concentration for longer periods. The children's confidence and self-esteem is growing just as much as the staff and it definitely having a positive impact on their wellbeing.

How do you feel the curriculum supports the development of children with ALN?

The curriculum is incredibly inclusive, particularly with the focus on enabling adults and effective environments and the role they play in supporting learning. It links extremely closely to the ALN code and considerations given to universal provision. Inclusion is imperative and the curriculum allows for support of children with ALN without it being obvious that you're doing something for an individual child and they don't feel like they're taken away from their play to work on something elsewhere.

The Early Childhood, Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) 0-3 years developmental pathways will further assist practitioners in supporting children with ALN that may have a developmental delay in comparison to their peers. I'm really excited for the 0-3 years developmental pathways. There has never been anything like it Wales and it will really support a cohesive approach within settings.

Are there any final thoughts you would like to share?

- Like the co-construction of the curriculum, it is important to remember that a collaborative approach with your team and other settings, through networking, is essential in ensuring the curriculum is implemented in a way that allows a child-centred and holistic approach
- The move towards the delivery of the curriculum is a journey and no-one is expected to make the change overnight, like with the experiences we plan for the children – the value is in the process and not just in the end product – this applies to implementing the curriculum – each step of the journey needs to be well planned and not rushed, with time taken to fully understand that stage before moving on to the next.
- Have faith in the process!