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Evaluating the Foundation Phase

Key Findings on Pedagogy and Understanding

Research Summary

Social research

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The Foundation Phase (introduced in 2008) provides a developmentally appropriate experiential curriculum for children aged 3-7 in Wales. The Welsh Government commissioned independent evaluation (led by WISERD) aims to evaluate how well it is being implemented, what impact it has had, and ways in which it can be improved. The three-year evaluation utilises a range of mixed methods at a national and local scale.

This is one of five papers focused on **practice**. It draws on 239 classroom and setting observations, 341 practitioner interviews, 604 school and setting survey responses, 37 Local Authority interviews and four non-maintained organisation interviews.

Key Findings

- Case study observations revealed that Foundation Phase practice varied considerably across classes, year groups, schools and areas of learning.
- Generally, **first-hand, practical pedagogies** were observed frequently, but the older the year group, the less often other Foundation Phase pedagogies were seen (e.g. child choice, physical activity, outdoor learning, continuous provision).
- Overall, **child choice, continuous/enhanced provision** and **outdoor learning** were observed least often, and only moderate **physical activity, exploration** and **learning zone** variety was seen.
- Variation in practice can be partly explained by **staff attitudes** towards the Foundation Phase and **adult:child ratios**.
- Many schools said their approach to the Foundation Phase was '**evolving**', often by (re)introducing formal literacy and numeracy sessions in the morning to ensure children are able to perform well in the recently introduced Year 2 reading and numeracy tests.

Dadansodi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Further Key Findings

Most practitioners and key stakeholders understood the Foundation Phase to be **child-centred, child-led, practical, experiential** and **skills-based**.

Many also understood the Foundation Phase as 'learning through play'. Some practitioners made reference to outdoor learning, continuous and enhanced provision or developmental appropriateness, but few cited the role of observation.

Practitioners were not often seen to be **observing children** (as a means to find out about their interests and monitor progress). When they did, it was seen more often during focussed than continuous or enhanced provision. This did not vary meaningfully across school Foundation Phase year groups.

Staff in **funded non-maintained settings** were found to be observing children less frequently than staff in schools.

Additional practitioners were often described by teachers as integral to the delivery of the Foundation Phase (especially for small group work), and were observed using Foundation Phase pedagogies more often than teachers.

The recommended **adult:child ratios**¹ are generally being met, and are often exceeded in Year 1 and Year 2 classrooms.

Classrooms with fewer children per adult were generally **implementing** the Foundation Phase to a greater degree.

Teacher, head teacher and senior management **attitudes** towards the Foundation Phase explain some of the variation in practice from class-to-class and school-to-school.

In some of our case study schools, the Foundation Phase was being delivered consistently across all relevant classes, whereas in other case study schools considerable **variation** was observed class-to-class.

¹ Recommended ratios are 1:8 for children aged 3-5 and 1:15 for children aged 5-7.

Of all the elements of the Foundation Phase, the use of **outdoor learning** varied the most across classrooms and schools.

In line with the reduced use of most Foundation Phase pedagogies across the year groups, the use of **traditional desk-based whole-class teaching** and focused adult-initiated provision rose dramatically across the year groups.

Overall, **adult-led focused provision** was observed far more frequently than child-led continuous and enhanced provision.

The only area of Foundation Phase pedagogy to increase across the year groups was **reflection**, perhaps because teachers assume older children are better able to review their learning experiences.

Peer collaboration was most often observed during continuous and enhanced provision, and adult-child **sustained interaction** and **co-construction** was most often observed during enhanced provision.

Overall, 57% of teachers reported making considerable effort to **involve children in their planning** process. A further one fifth made some effort, and the rest made little or no effort.

The implementation of the Foundation Phase across our case study schools did not differ according to **region** of Wales, **language** of instruction (English/Welsh), **size** of school (numbers of roll), rural or urban **locality** or **socio-economic status** (eligibility for Free School Meal status).

Discussions with practitioners suggest that some **teachers are 'afraid' to let go of traditional formal pedagogies**. This is compounded by the perceived need to ensure children perform well in the recently introduced Year 2 reading and numeracy tests.

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