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Evaluating the Foundation Phase

Key Findings on Management And Leadership

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 four papers focused on **implementation**. It draws on 604 school and setting survey responses, 37 Local Authority interviews, four non-maintained organisation interviews, 357 practitioner interviews, and 41 case study school observations.

Key Findings

- The majority of practitioners/key stakeholders interviewed and surveyed initially welcomed the Foundation Phase with a mixture of 'excitement' and 'relief' for offering **improved flexibility, freedom, autonomy and developmentally appropriate practice**.
- However, 44% of head teachers and 51% of funded non-maintained setting lead practitioners surveyed indicated they had **reservations** about the Foundation Phase when first introduced.
- The greatest level of **resistance** towards the Foundation Phase was said to be amongst **Key Stage 2 teachers**, followed by **parents/carers**.
- 54% of head teachers reported making structural changes to the management and organisation of their schools as a result of the Foundation Phase, particularly in terms of **changes to the physical environment and senior management** to reflect the importance of the Foundation Phase.
- **Positive views and attitudes of headteachers** in case study schools towards the Foundation Phase were strongly associated with the extent to which it was being **fully implemented in classrooms**.

Dadansociol ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Further Key Findings

Initial reservations of head teachers towards the Foundation Phase often differed significantly from the views of teachers **within the same school**.

Despite the three stage roll-out of the Foundation Phase¹ there is much greater ambiguity in terms of when head teachers and non-maintained managers/leads said that their schools/settings actually started implementing the Foundation Phase, perhaps reflecting that some thought they were **already delivering the Foundation Phase** or there was **some delay in making the transition to the Foundation Phase**.

It is also clear that **Pilot schools, were generally more enthusiastic** about its introduction than the vast majority of other schools (the Early Start and Final Roll-out schools).

Head teachers of **Welsh-medium schools were more concerned about the introduction of the Foundation Phase** than their English-medium counterparts -

52% said they had reservations or were not looking forward to it compared to just 40% of English-medium head teachers.

Numerous concerns were raised by head teachers **about the implementation of the Foundation Phase at the national level**, including: the need to amend, adapt and update national training packs to meet local needs; the perception that the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Framework would 'damage' the Foundation Phase; and that Welsh Government guidance material was either too vague or lacked clarity.

Through interviews with local authority advisors and from case study observations it would appear that **older year groups (e.g. Year 2) have experienced the least educational 'change'** following the introduction of the Foundation Phase. However, this is **in stark contrast to the perception amongst most Foundation Phase practitioners** that the Foundation Phase was likely to have the least change in Nursery classes (46% said there would have been very little differences in these) and most change to Year 2 classes (65%

¹ Pilot Stage (2004/05); Early Start Stage (2006/07); Full Roll-out Stage (2009/10).

said they would be considerably different).

Again in contrast, **funded non-maintained settings expected to see more differences in their settings** (for three- and four-year-olds) than there was reported for Nursery classes in schools (31% and 9% respectively reported there were considerable differences to what was previously provided).

It is also worth noting that we found no discernible patterns or relationships between the amount of change reported and other school or teacher characteristics.

Over two-thirds of lead Foundation Phase practitioners in schools and funded non-maintained settings thought that the **new curriculum of the Foundation Phase and associated areas of learning were an improvement** on the previous curriculum.

One of the **main curricula improvements** due to the Foundation Phase was perceived to be in the area of **'Personal and Social Development, Wellbeing and Cultural Diversity'** (51% of Foundation Phase lead

practitioners said that this had been a significant improvement).

The **least reported improvement was in 'Welsh Language Development'**, where 32% of respondents reported that the Foundation Phase had been no different or worse.

Perceived barriers to implementation varied according to who was being asked. For example, local authority advisors stressed that **levels of understanding and attitudes** towards the Foundation Phase amongst school practitioners was a major barrier. In contrast, head teachers were more likely to cite a **lack of funding and resources** (63%) and **limitations to their school's physical environment** (62%) to be key obstacles.

It is also worth noting that about one in four head teachers reported concerns about meeting the new **adult:child ratios**.

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