

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme in Wales: The Foundation Phase

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The TLRP in Wales

Research evidence for educational policy and practice in Wales

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (www.tlrp.org/), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), is the largest single programme of educational research ever commissioned in the UK. The programme consisted of 52 separate large scale projects, covering every part of the education system from early years to lifelong learning.

As the TLRP moved into its closing stages, the ESRC, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Welsh Educational Research Network (WERN), came together to commission a final project designed to explore the implications of the findings from this major research programme for Welsh educational policy and practice.

Coordinated by John Furlong of Oxford University, four teams of researchers from across Wales have reviewed the findings from the TLRP in relation to four key areas of Welsh policy identified by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The four policy issues were:

- The Foundation Phase
- Improving Teaching for the 7–14 age range
- Social Inclusion
- Improving Learning by Taking Account of Learners' Perspectives.

The outcome of the reviews is a series of posters and briefing papers aimed at bringing findings from this major research programme to policy makers and practitioners across Wales. The reports represent the findings of independent research teams; they do not therefore necessarily reflect the views of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Executive Summary

The roll-out of the Foundation Phase, a new, post-devolution learning framework for children aged three to seven years will be completed in 2011. In this review, TLRP research is considered in relation to the Foundation Phase; we also comment on the findings in the light of the School Effectiveness Framework.

The Foundation Phase Frameworkⁱ emphasises a practical, experiential and play-based approach to learning in stimulating indoor and outdoor environments. Personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity are at the heart of the curriculum.

Eleven TLRP projectsⁱⁱ appear particularly relevant to the Foundation Phase, and this report highlights three broad themes emerging from these: *The Foundation Phase practitioner*, *The implementation of the Foundation Phase* and *Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities*. There are a number of additional issues, highly significant to education policy in Wales, which were not considered within TLRP research and which are not, therefore, addressed in this review.

1.

Key finding:

The foundation phase practitioner

TLRP research indicates that high quality training, high level qualifications and progressive professional development are likely to result in the best provision and cognitive outcomes for children. The Foundation Phase is more likely to be successful when practitioners reflect on their practice and engage with the underpinning philosophy of the Foundation Phase; have a meaningful level of professional status; have a sense of ownership of their practice; and have the professional confidence to promote the Foundation Phase to external partners.

2.

Key finding:

The implementation of the Foundation Phase

Foundation Phase practitioners should be skilful in their choice and use of a 'repertoire' of pedagogic

strategies. They should ensure that assessment is closely aligned to children's learning: it should both support learning and determine whether learning has occurred. There is a strong case for hearing the voices of young children: they should be involved in day-to-day decision-making about their schools, their learning and the assessment of their learning. Foundation Phase practitioners should recognise the learning potential of ICT and support children's learning with and about ICT in school and at home through, for example, sharing children's interactions with ICT and developing partnerships with parents.

3.

Key finding:

Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities

The home learning environment is of crucial

significance for children's outcomes; what parents do – their actions and interactions – can counteract other disadvantaging influences. Foundation Phase practitioners should actively encourage the involvement of the wider 'family' in children's education although practitioners may need support if they are to see diversity as an opportunity rather than a problem.

School Effectiveness Framework:

The use of the School Effectiveness Frameworkⁱⁱⁱ extends these findings through locating schools within a broader educational system. Effective implementation of the Foundation Phase requires collaboration at and across all levels – classrooms, schools, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government.

The Research Evidence

1. The Foundation Phase practitioner

Projects consulted:

A Values-based Approach to Teacher Education
www.tlrp.org/proj/asmith.html

Effective pre-school and primary education (EPPE 3-11)
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/AssocEPPE.htm

Learning How to Learn - in Classrooms, Schools and Networks
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2f.html

Towards Evidence-Based Practice in Science Education
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1bsept.html

TLRP research findings have possible implications for three issues relating to practitioners: reflective practice; professional status; and training and professional development.

Reflective practice

TLRP projects suggest that the role of the practitioner is vital to the success of the Foundation Phase. The ability of practitioners to reflect systematically on their pedagogic practice is directly connected to the successful implementation of new approaches to teaching and learning. Practitioners need to distinguish between the 'spirit and the letter' of approaches, particularly with regard to assessment^{iv}. Reflection, including reflection on their own personal and professional values may enable practitioners constructively to engage with the philosophy underpinning the Foundation Phase.

Professional status

Reflective practice should result in the identification of issues that the practitioner wishes to explore, and in order to do this, practitioners need to have a distinct and meaningful level of professional status. For change to be successful, practitioners need a sense of ownership that is rooted in their own experience. There is a need for management to engage with classroom practitioners and to recognise

the limitations and implications of the current ‘tick box culture’^v. Practitioners need professional confidence to tackle and embrace the challenges presented by the Foundation Phase and to promote the new ways of working to those outside the field of education^{vi}.

Key questions:

How effective are the current links between policy makers and practitioners? How can you strengthen these links to develop a strong and effective community of practice?

Training and professional development

Quality training and high level qualifications are paramount in achieving the best provision and cognitive outcomes for children. The Foundation Phase requires practitioners to use a wide range of pedagogic strategies within the context of

their particular setting. Training and professional development need to be multi-levelled and multi-focused, building on previous explorations of issues; practitioners need to have the confidence and ability to evaluate all the potential strategies available to them and make decisions that are appropriate to their own setting and practice. It is also important for policy makers, managers and others to recognise the limits and challenges associated with exporting successful approaches from individual settings and developing them into larger, national initiatives. The ‘home-grown’ methods that practitioners find effective should be valued within the education and training systems that support Foundation Phase practitioners^{vii}.

Key questions:

What constitutes effective ‘training’? How can you contribute to the establishment of training ‘systems’ which support and develop all adults involved in the Foundation Phase?

Case study

Theme:

Reflective practice

Project title:

Learning how to Learn – in Classrooms, Schools and Networks

This was a four-year project based in primary and secondary schools that developed out of classroom research into Assessment for Learning (AfL). It focused on a set of key questions, one of which was: ‘what were the connections between teachers’ own learning and their classroom practice?’ In order to answer the questions the research team used large scale questionnaires, classroom observations and practitioner tasks such as asking teachers to draw maps representing the networks they were in and identify their role within these. A key finding was that although many practitioners were ‘doing’ the AfL techniques, a lack of engagement with the ideas and philosophies underpinning the approach meant that the process was not encouraging children to become more independent in their learning. The practitioners who were most successful in implementing the approach were the ones who identified that their role

in the process was an important factor. The project concluded that the most effective improvements for children are underpinned by systems created and owned by practitioners, not imposed by external bodies.

Comment:

This research project highlights the interconnectivity of the issues that underpin effective practice. These include the need for professional engagement with new approaches, the significance of reflection and the limited effectiveness of ‘top-down’ systems. Many practitioners saw AfL as separate from other aspects of their practice and did not engage with the underlying philosophy of the approach. This tendency to compartmentalise different parts of practice results in less effective experiences for children.

Key questions:

How would you define reflection? What role does it play in your current work and how can it be embedded within Foundation Phase practice?

2. The implementation of the Foundation Phase

Projects consulted:

ACTS II: Sustainable Thinking Classrooms

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2g.html

Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1dsept.html

Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning (CPAL)

www.tlrp.org/proj/leitch.html

Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE 3–11)

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/AssocEPPE.htm

Interplay: Play, Learning and ICT in Pre-school Education

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/Scot_extc.html

Learning How to Learn – In Classrooms, Schools and Networks

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2f.html

The Role of Awareness in the Teaching and Learning of Literacy and Numeracy at KS2

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2h.html

Towards Evidence-based Practice in Science Education

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1bsept.html

TLRP research findings have implications for four specific issues relating to the implementation of the Foundation Phase: adult–child interactions; Assessment for Learning; children’s participation; and ICT and the development of effective learning environments.

Adult–child interactions

The Foundation Phase requires practitioners to engage with children using a range of pedagogic strategies. This, in turn, requires the development of practitioners’ awareness and skill in making effective use of these. High quality early childhood education provision and high cognitive outcomes are directly and significantly related to pedagogy that includes ‘sustained shared thinking’. Different pedagogic styles and strategies that have an impact on children’s learning include direct instruction, interactive dialogic teaching, ‘infusion’ teaching – and these may also be relevant for Foundation Phase practitioners.

Case study

Theme:

Adult–child interactions

Project title:

Effective Pre-School and Primary Education (EPPE 3–11)

Here, the adult and child sustain each other’s thinking in an episode of creative play in which a narrative is extended by both. The child is directly involved in making decisions about the direction of his play and the learning environment.

The NNEB^{viii} and a group of children are seated at a table working with play dough. It has taken boy

minutes to make a playdough cake and he is now sticking plastic cutlery into it.

NNEB “Would you like something else to use as candles on your cake?”

Turning round to boxes placed on shelf behind her. “Would you like match sticks or lolly sticks?”

Boy opts for lollipop sticks and the NNEB passes the box to him. He removes the cutlery and starts to replace it with lollipop sticks...five more minutes pass...

Boy has finished his cake and starts to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to the NNEB.

NNEB pretends to blow out the candles. “Do I have a present?”

Boy hands her a ball of playdough.

NNEB “I wonder what’s inside? I’ll unwrap it.”

NNEB quickly makes the ball into a thumb pot and holds it out to boy “It’s empty!”

Boy takes a pinch of playdough and drops it into the thumb pot. "It's an egg."
 NNEB picking it out gingerly, "It's a strange shape."
 Another child tries to take the 'egg'
 NNEB "Be very, very careful. It's an egg."
 To boy "What's it going to hatch into?"
 Boy "A lion."
 NNEB "A lion? Oh, I can see why it might hatch into a lion, it's got little hairy bits on it."
 NNEB sends boy to put the egg somewhere safe to hatch. He takes the egg and goes into the bathroom.
 After a few minutes, boy returns to the group.
 NNEB "Has the egg hatched?"
 Boy "Yes."
 NNEB "What was it?"
 Boy "A bird."
 NNEB "A bird? We'll have to take it outside at playtime and put it in a tree so it can fly away."

Comment:

The EPPE projects (1997–2003, 2003–2008) and associated REPEY project (DfES Project Report 356) identified sustained shared

thinking (SST) as an interaction style that is associated with children's achievement of higher cognitive outcomes. SST is defined as an effective pedagogic interaction, where two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative. The EPPE research found that 'the children and practitioners in excellent settings engaged in the highest proportion of SST interactions, suggesting that the excellent settings promote intellectual gains in children through conversations with children in which adult and child co-construct an idea or activity'.^{ix}

Key questions:

Foundation Phase practitioners need to develop a broad repertoire of pedagogic strategies and understand when and how best to use these. What needs to be done to ensure this happens?

Assessment for Learning (AfL)

TLRP research indicates that if teaching is to be effective, assessment needs to be closely aligned with learning: assessment should both support learning and determine whether learning has occurred^x. To improve learning through assessment, Foundation Phase practitioners should, for example, adjust their practice in the light of their observations (assessments); provide children with effective feedback; and recognise the importance of children being actively involved in their own learning and self-assessment. AfL is closely associated with the promotion of learning how to learn: this is seen as important within Foundation Phase classrooms.

Key question:

How can Foundation Phase practitioners ensure that children are involved in assessing their own learning?

Children's participation

The children's rights agenda is being addressed globally (through the monitoring of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child), nationally (through Funky Dragon^{xi}: and locally (through Children and Young People local authority partnerships). In schools in Wales, there is a requirement that the voices of children aged seven years upwards should be heard in, for example, school councils; however, there is a strong ethical case to hear the voices of younger children as well^{xii}. The Foundation Phase requires that children's well-being is centrally placed; being an active participant in decision-making within schools and about their learning – and the assessment of their learning – supports this agenda. There is a range of participatory processes, detailed in TLRP research, which may be adaptable to Foundation Phase settings. The benefits of participatory practice are also identified: for example, higher pupil engagement with school and greater mutual respect within pupil–teacher relationships.

Key question:

If we are committed to fulfilling the children's rights agenda for our youngest children, how can we ensure that we hear young children's voices within the Foundation Phase and within their early learning communities?

ICT and the development of effective learning environments

'Free play' may not be effective in supporting children's learning with ICT or their development of ICT capability – even in high quality settings the early years ICT curriculum remains at a relatively early stage of development. Guided interaction and sustained, shared thinking are identified as

useful in supporting children's social and cognitive development when using ICT. Effective learning environments in which young children have opportunities to learn about and with ICT and develop their ICT capabilities are those in which: Foundation Phase practitioners carefully consider, support and share children's interactions with ICT; use ICT to provide rich opportunities for episodes of extended dialogue; and work in partnership with parents to value and promote appropriate out of school learning about and with ICT.

Key questions:

In your experience, do Foundation Phase practitioners make the most of the technology available to them to support children's early learning with and about ICT? If not, why? What support do they need?

3. Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities

Projects consulted:

Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE 3–11)

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase111/AssocEPPE.htm

Facilitating Teacher Engagement in more Inclusive Practice

www.tlrp.org/proj/smbdavies.html

Home-school Knowledge Exchange and Transformation in Primary Education

www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html

TLRP research findings have possible implications for two specific issues: the impact of the home learning environment and the development of partnerships with families and communities.

The impact of the home learning environment

A 'rich' – i.e. stimulating and supportive – early years home learning environment impacts positively

on children's academic outcomes at seven years and is still influential when children reach 11 years, while children who have a 'poor' home learning environment are already disadvantaged at age three (according to cognitive scores on entry to pre-school). It is well-established that what parents do is vitally important and can counteract other disadvantaging influences. There is, therefore, a need for Foundation Phase practitioners to support parents not only as carers but as the first and enduring educators of their children.

Key question:

How can parents be helped to understand the significance of the home learning environment and how best they may support their children's early learning?

Positive partnerships with families and communities

Foundation Phase settings need to encourage the involvement of the wider 'family' in young children's education. Families and the local community should be involved in the construction and implementation

of the curriculum, bringing to the setting a 'wealth of cultural, linguistic and economic experience'. Practitioners may need support in seeing diversity among children and families as an opportunity rather than a problem. Settings which don't promote family support and positive home learning environments are missing an important opportunity to raise achievement and enhance social and behavioural development in the long term.^{xiii}

Key questions:

Why might some practitioners see diversity among children, families and communities as a 'problem'? What support do these practitioners need in order to see diversity as an 'opportunity'? How can we ensure that all schools actively encourage the involvement of the wider 'family' in young children's education?

Case study

Theme:

Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities

Project title:

Home-School Knowledge Exchange and Transformation in Primary Education

Comment:

Children inhabit two quite different learning environments: home and school. The Home School Knowledge Exchange (HSKE) project set out to bring them closer together, leading to better relationships with parents and children and improvements in children's learning. One of the aims was to make sure the flow of information was not simply from school to home but was bi-directional. This was achieved through, for example:

- **activities which take school to home: guidance sheets, booklets and newsletters giving information about the teaching of literacy and mathematics were prepared and translated into community languages where appropriate; videos showing children learning aspects of literacy and mathematics were shown in school or sent home; an exhibition of literacy materials and children's work was mounted in the entrance hall of a local supermarket;**

- **activities which bring home to school: children used shoeboxes to bring in personal possessions and artefacts from home which were used to support literacy activities; children used disposable cameras to take photographs of aspects of their out-of-school lives that were used as the basis of literacy and mathematics activities; a group of Bengali-speaking parents who were reluctant to approach school were visited by a teacher-researcher and bilingual teacher and invited to attend a meeting at school.**

Impact of the knowledge exchange:

The HSKE activities were on the whole well received by the teachers, parents and children who participated in them. Parents felt that the school-to-home activities had made them much more knowledgeable about what and how their child was learning in school. The videos, in particular, had provided a 'window' onto their children's other lives. One parent said: "It opened my eyes to how they learn". The home-to-school activities were also positively received by the teachers. One teacher reported how the shoebox activity had a dramatic effect on the writing of many children; she called these 'literacy breakthroughs'. In another school, the shoebox activity led one teacher to reflect more deeply on her own practice: "If you look at these boxes you can see all the differences in just a small group of children... all too often this diversity is closed down in schools. Do we make them conform too much?"

Further insights

It's helpful to look at the TLRP research in the context of the Welsh Assembly Government's School Effectiveness Framework, created in 2008.

The Framework (SEF) recognises that schools operate within specific and changing local contexts. It's important, however, that schools are not just seen as systems within themselves, but are recognised as part of the broader Welsh educational system. The SEF emphasises that meaningful change comes about when there is purposeful engagement and collaboration at different levels: across classrooms/schools, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government. The SEF report describes six key elements in the Welsh education system – leadership; working with others; networks of professional practice; intervention and support; improvement and accountability; and curriculum and teaching – recognising the interdependence of these and the need for change to be addressed at all levels.

The Foundation Phase practitioner

There are clear links between the 'Networks of Professional Practice' segment of the SEF and the Foundation Phase Practitioner theme identified through the review of TLRP projects. The successful implementation of the Foundation Phase will be highly dependent on the ability and confidence of practitioners to embrace and address the challenges created by educational change. The implications of an increase in adult-to-child ratios and the demands inherent in the introduction of new pedagogical approaches emphasise the significance of 'shared beliefs and understanding' and 'collective professionalism': issues highlighted within this segment of the SEF. This has implications at all levels of engagement. There is a need for practitioners to be proactive in systematically reflecting on and evaluating their work and devising ('inquiry driven') interventions to address the issues they identify. In order to support this, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government need to promote and develop systems that allow practitioners to influence and inform their own education and training needs.

The implementation of the Foundation Phase

The 'Implementation of the Foundation Phase' theme has implications for a number of elements within the SEF. Most significant are those which relate to the 'Improvement and Accountability' segment. The SEF acknowledges the centrality of high quality teaching and high expectations to effective educational performance. The ability of practitioners to set high but achievable targets for learners and choose and use effective learning, teaching and assessment strategies is key to school improvement. School improvement is also reliant on the involvement of children in day-to-day decision-making about their learning.

Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities

The Opening the school/setting gates: families and communities theme has particular implications for the 'Working with Others' section of the School Effectiveness Framework. There should be support at all levels for the development of family participation and reciprocal partnerships – particularly for schools in the most disadvantaged communities. The Foundation Phase is more likely to be successful when parents and practitioners establish partnerships that raise the quality of the home learning environment. In order to encourage this, local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government need to work with schools to identify and disseminate current 'good practice' and also to pilot and evaluate interventions that help practitioners to build strong relationships with all families and with the wider community.

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- xi. www.funkydragon.org/en/fe/page.asp?n1=2
 - xii. Bath (2009)
 - xiii. Sylva et al. (2008); see also Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2009)
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Notes

- i. DCELLS, (2008a)
- ii. www.TLRP.org.uk
- iii. DCELLS (2008b)
- iv. Mansell et al. (2009)
- v. Ibid
- vi. Ibid
- vii. Ibid
- viii. NNEB is a nursery nurse with a National Nursery Nurse Exam Board qualification
- ix. The vignette here is an example of SST taken from EPPE (1997–2003; Technical Paper 10, 2003 p.127).
- x. www.tlrp.org/themes/themes/tenprinciples.html