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Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Factors relating to quality: findings from the baseline study

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Introduction and background

Since 2006 the government has provided funding through the Transformation Fund (TF) to help professionalise the early years workforce and to deliver the Ten Year Strategy for Childcare. A total of £250 million was made available to private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early years settings to fulfil these aims. In August 2007 the TF was replaced by the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF), which provided a further £305 million in funding between April 2008 and March 2011.

The GLF supports all full day care PVI sector providers in employing a graduate or **Early Years Professional (EYP)** by 2015, to lead practice across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The role of these graduate leaders is to support and mentor others, as well as to model skills and good practice to secure high quality provision. From April 2011 LAs have been funding support for EYPs in PVI settings through the Early Intervention Grant.

The National Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund (2007-2011) was commissioned by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and carried out by a consortium of researchers from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the University of Oxford and the Institute of Education (University of London). The main aim of the national evaluation was to **assess the implementation of the Graduate Leader Fund and its impact on the quality of early years provision in the PVI sector**. This report presents the findings from the baseline quality assessments, carried out in 2007 and 2008.

Key Findings

Qualifications

- In line with many previous research studies (Sylva et al., 2003; Burchinal et al., 2002), **staff qualifications** were the most important predictor of provision quality for children aged 30 months to 5 years.
- For the older age range, settings with a **teacher** on the staff team offered significantly higher overall and curricular quality as measured by the ECERS-R and ECERS-E, as well as higher quality on many of the individual dimensions of quality assessed. Settings with a **graduate** offered significantly higher quality personal care routines and support for children's language and reasoning skills (ECERS-R).

- At this baseline stage, the mean level of staff **qualifications being worked towards** was more related to quality than the level of **currently held qualifications** (for the older age range).
- Staff qualifications were less strongly related to the quality of provision for **infants and toddlers** (ITERS-R).
- The effects of the mean level of qualifications being worked towards on overall quality, and on the quality of personal care routines (ECERS-R), were both stronger for **staff teams with a long 'length of service'**. This indicates that training up **existing and long-term staff members** is a positive strategy and one which may lead to benefits in terms of quality of provision.
- 'Length of service' was also a predictor of quality in its own right: staff with a longer average 'length of service' offered higher quality support for language and communication (for infants/toddlers) and provision to support individual needs and diversity (for pre-school children).
- Child-staff ratios were related to the quality of care routines for the younger children and the quality of staff-child interactions for the older children.

Study methods

- At the heart of the GLF evaluation is the impact study, designed to **identify the impact of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) on quality**, both at a single time-point and the impact of gaining a graduate leader on change in quality over time.
- Findings were based on data gathered from a sample of PVI settings visited at two time-points, with two years between visits (323 at the baseline stage; 238 at the follow-up stage). Quality was assessed using three rating scales: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years; the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged 3 to 5 years; and the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R), which assesses provision for children from birth to 30 months.
- Data were also gathered on the qualifications/status of all staff, and a number of other characteristics thought to relate to quality of provision:
 - other characteristics of childcare staff (e.g. experience; age)
 - characteristics of the settings themselves (e.g. size; sector)
 - characteristics of the rooms observed (e.g. the age of children catered for; ratio).

Baseline sample

- The sample for the baseline study was selected from a larger sample of settings that took part in a baseline telephone survey conducted by NatCen between August and December 2007. Settings were selected for the impact study on the basis that they had room to improve their qualification levels (either from graduate level to EYP or from non-graduate level to graduate) and that they appeared motivated to do so. They were therefore the most pro-active of settings and may not represent the average provider. It is for this reason that the actual quality ratings achieved by the baseline settings are not presented here.
- In all, 323 private, voluntary or independent (PVI) full day childcare settings were visited for a baseline quality assessment.

Context of this report

As none of the settings had an Early Years Professional at this stage, no conclusions were drawn about the impact of EYPS on quality of provision at the baseline stage. However, a large amount of valuable information was collected, both on the quality of provision offered and on a range of other characteristics of the sample settings (including qualifications). This report presents the findings from the baseline quality assessments and also explores the 'predictors' of quality. We wanted to know which centres were providing the highest quality care – and which characteristics of these sample settings (e.g. qualifications, staff experience in childcare, staff turnover) were most related to the quality of provision offered. Even at this baseline stage, these findings are interesting and relevant, both in the context of existing research and the follow up analysis (Mathers et al., 2011) and provide important messages about priorities for childcare.

Summary of main findings

Qualifications

- In line with many previous research studies (Sylva et al., 2004; Burchinal et al., 2002), **staff qualifications** were the most important predictor of provision quality for children aged 30 months to 5 years.
- For children aged 30 months to 5 years, settings with a **teacher** on the staff team offered significantly higher overall quality of provision, as measured by the ECERS-R. This effect was found for the overall childcare quality as well as for a number of individual dimensions of quality (care routines, support for children's developing language and reasoning skills, the quality and warmth of adult-child interactions and the appropriateness of the daily structure and schedule). Settings with a **graduate** on the staff team offered significantly higher quality personal care routines and provision to support children's language and reasoning skills.
- When looking more specifically at the **quality of curricular provision** (ECERS-E) for the 3 to 5 age range, having a **teacher** on the staff team was a more significant predictor of quality than having a graduate on the staff team. Settings with a qualified teacher offered higher overall curricular quality as well as higher quality in the areas of literacy, mathematics and diversity (e.g. planning for individual learning needs and celebrating diversity).

- An interesting theme was identified when considering the mean qualifications of all the staff working in the sample settings. For the older age range, the mean level of **qualifications being worked towards** was more related to quality than the level of **currently held qualifications**. The baseline settings had very particular characteristics suited to the design of the GLF evaluation (i.e. no EYP at baseline, but intending to gain a staff member with a graduate qualification and/or EYP status). It is possible that, for this particular sample, the drive to improve qualifications meant that qualifications being worked towards were more directly related to quality than existing qualifications. The follow-up analysis allowed these hypotheses to be explored in more depth.
- Qualifications were less strongly related to the quality of provision for **infants and toddlers** (ITERS-R).
- The effects of the mean level of qualifications being worked towards on overall quality, and on the quality of personal care routines (ECERS-R), were both stronger for staff teams with a long 'length of service'. This indicates that training up existing and long-term staff members is a positive strategy and one which may lead to benefits in terms of quality of provision.

Other staff characteristics

- Staff with a longer average 'length of service' offered higher quality support for language and communication (for infants/toddlers) and provision to support individual needs and diversity (for pre-school children). A well-established staff team may be better equipped to help young children communicate and to provide for children's individual needs, not only because they know the children better but also perhaps because they have had time to establish sound procedures for individual observation, assessment and planning.

Characteristics of the rooms observed

- The final important predictor of quality was staff-child ratios. Ratios were related to the quality of care routines for the younger children (birth to 30 months) and the quality of staff-child interactions for the older children (30 months to 5 years). For the rooms observed, the fewer children per staff member, the higher the quality of interactions – and conversely, more children per adult meant lower quality interactions.

Conclusions and future work

The baseline study identified a number of factors related to the quality of provision offered to children in the impact study sample. These included qualifications, staff length of service and staff-child-ratios. These findings support previous research in identifying relationships between quality and qualifications and therefore support the aims of the GLF. They add to existing literature and also provided valuable information to feed into the follow up analysis.

The follow-up quality assessments, carried out in 2010, provided the final piece of the puzzle and allowed us to explore the impact of Early Years Professional Status on quality. The follow-up analysis was informed and refined by this baseline analysis. Additional data was gathered at the follow-up stage, and changes were also made to the way some variables were created. The overall conclusions of the evaluation are reported in the Final Report (Mathers et al., 2011).

This research brief is part of a series on the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund, other research briefs include:

- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: GLF Implementation Case Studies
- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Final Report
- And a synthesis report of the whole evaluation, Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Synthesis Report.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.