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# Evaluating the Foundation Phase

## Key Findings on Practitioner and Stakeholder views on the Future of the Foundation Phase

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 **impact**. It draws on 239 classroom/setting observations, 341 practitioner interviews, 604 school/setting survey responses, 1,008 parent/carers survey responses, 37 Local Authority interviews and four non-maintained organisation interviews.

### Key Findings

- The vast majority of practitioners and stakeholders would like to see the Foundation Phase **continue largely untouched**, because they are committed to it and value it.
- Despite this support, schools and Local Authority advisors in particular do have concerns about the future of the Foundation Phase (e.g. **shifting policy priorities, lack of support** and **uncertainty going forward**).
- In particular, many schools think that **funding**, the **clarity of guidance, assessment procedures** and **transition into Key Stage 2** need to be improved in the future, along with **practitioner understanding** of key Foundation Phase principles.
- Most schools see the recent introduction of the Year 2 reading and numeracy tests as a contradiction to the original concept of the Foundation Phase, and evidence of a **shift towards age-based assessment**.
- **Funded non-maintained settings** are generally less concerned about the future of the Foundation Phase than schools.

Dadansodi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

## Further Key Findings

The high levels of support for the Foundation Phase were often couched within broad support for a 'Developmentally Appropriate' curriculum for the early years. In particular, practitioners and stakeholders like the 'parity of esteem' given to Literacy/Numeracy and Personal/Social Development.

Although there are high levels of support for the Foundation Phase, the main focus of this report is on practitioner/stakeholder views on what could be improved going forward<sup>1</sup>.

### *Policy priorities*

The recent introduction of the Year 2 reading and numeracy tests has led around a fifth of practitioners and stakeholders to believe that the Foundation Phase is being 'phased out' (at least in Years 1 and 2), and has created considerable **uncertainty and tension** regarding the preferred balance between 'formal' and 'informal' teaching.

Around a fifth of practitioners also reported that '**mixed messages**' have resulted in concerns that the adult:child ratio funding will soon be cut, meaning they will no longer be able to implement the Foundation Phase as originally intended.

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<sup>1</sup> Various sources of information were collected between May 2012 and February 2014 and reflect the particular views expressed at that time.

Only 24% of the head teacher survey respondents thought that the Foundation Phase was 'still very important to the Welsh Government', whereas 65% thought that '**although the Foundation Phase was still important to the Welsh Government they had other priorities**' (7% thought that the Foundation Phase was 'no longer important to the Welsh Government').

Within this context, most practitioners and stakeholders spoke about the need for **clear leadership** from the Welsh Government.

### *General areas for improvement*

**Funding** was raised as the main thing school and funded non-maintained survey respondents would like to change about the Foundation Phase (although the Local Authority interviewees generally felt that the Welsh Government had provided sufficient funding).

A majority of Local Authority stakeholders feel that practitioners have a limited understanding of the role of **child-initiated learning, observation** and **outdoor learning**.

Some key obstacles include **building constraints, lack of parental engagement, low staff qualifications** and **high staff**

**turnover** (the last two were reported more by funded non-maintained settings).

40% of the head teacher survey respondents and many Local Authority interviewees would like to see improvements to the Foundation Phase **support materials** in order to provide more clarity (e.g. what is meant by the term 'play?').

Many practitioners and stakeholders would like to see improvements made to **assessment** within the Foundation Phase (e.g. clear progression and continuation from baseline to outcomes).

A number of practitioners and stakeholders would like to see improvements made to **transition into Key Stage 2** (e.g. further guidance on how and when to start supporting this process).

#### *Other broader issues*

Some practitioners and stakeholders were of the opinion that the Foundation Phase was not being covered sufficiently during **Initial Teacher Training**.

Some practitioners and stakeholders also noted that there needs to be an increased focus on reducing the impact of **poverty** on outcomes, raising pupil **attendance** and improving **literacy and numeracy** skills.

However, this is not unique to the Foundation Phase.

A common theme emerging from practitioner and stakeholder interviews was the **feeling that it's too soon for major changes to the Foundation Phase** as more time is needed to see what effect it might or might not be having.

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