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Evaluating the Foundation Phase

Key findings on Literacy and Numeracy

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

- The majority of Foundation Phase leaders believed there had been **at least some improvement** in children's literacy and numeracy skills since the introduction of the Foundation Phase.
- Local authority key stakeholders reported that there had been a **return towards focussing on a more formal teaching of literacy and numeracy** (particularly in the mornings), which they felt was in response to the pressure to raise standards.
- Year 3 practitioners and local authority stakeholders reported **children's oracy and communication skills had improved as a result of the Foundation Phase**, which had played a part in children becoming more confident when transitioning up to KS2.
- Overall, it seems that **'Language, Literacy and Communication' is more embedded in the Foundation Phase pedagogy**, in contrast to 'Mathematical Development' which takes more of an 'explicit' form in classrooms.

Dadansodi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Further Key Findings

Over 70% of head teachers ranked literacy and numeracy as the **most pressing issues** in early years education.

The majority of Foundation Phase leaders thought **that the Foundation Phase had meant at least some improvement** in the 'Language, Literacy and Communication' and 'Mathematical Development' areas of learning compared to their predecessors¹.

Some Foundation Phase leaders thought that a **misinterpretation of Foundation Phase guidance by some practitioners** had led to a decline in Literacy and Numeracy standards because of too much child choice and not enough teaching of basic skills.

The majority of Foundation Phase leaders, head teachers and local authority stakeholders **did not agree with the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy tests**, because they felt that their formality was not an appropriate form of assessment following a play-based experiential pedagogy.

¹ KS1 in Schools and Desirable Outcomes in Funded non-maintained settings.

A minority of practitioners and head teachers were of the opinion that the introduction of the literacy and numeracy framework itself would not change the way they implemented the Foundation Phase. Some were also concerned children were being put under exam-like conditions, and that **incorporating testing practice and preparation into the daily routine as a response to the Literacy and Numeracy tests meant elements of the Foundation Phase were lost.**

In contrast, 85% of parents/carers whose children took part in the first wave of Literacy and Numeracy tests in 2013 were either 'happy' or 'very happy' with their child participating.

Of all the Year 2 children surveyed, **over half stated that they like reading, writing and number work 'a lot'**². There was no association found between children's enjoyment of these subjects and the extent to which the Foundation Phase pedagogies were being used in the Year 2 survey. However, **children in classrooms implementing the Foundation Phase to a higher degree seemed more enthusiastic** when talking about learning (which focussed on reading, writing and maths) compared to classrooms implementing the Foundation

² Reading: 54%; Writing: 57% and Number Work: 58%.

Phase to a lower degree.

Although the implementation of both 'Language, Literacy and Communication' and 'Mathematical Development' areas of learning within the Foundation Phase varied across schools and classrooms, some trends still remain. For example, there were a **higher percentage of observations where children were observed to be engaging in a literacy or numeracy activity in morning sessions**, regardless of the level of Foundation Phase implementation. (The majority of practitioners noted that children's levels of focus and concentration were at their highest in the mornings.)

Case study school analysis highlighted **that compared to other areas of learning**, 'Language, Literacy and Communication' and 'Mathematical Development' activities tended to be more structured and didactic in nature, e.g. adults were more likely to be present, initiating or directing activities, there was less child interaction and more use of worksheets.

In classrooms drawing upon a larger range of Foundation Phase pedagogies, the 'Language, Literacy and Communication' and 'Mathematical Development' areas of learning activities were **more likely to be explorative, active and practical activities**.

However classrooms where the pedagogy was less Foundation Phase and more 'traditional' in nature had a **higher percentage of desk-based, whole class activities**.

From National Pupil Database analysis we found that children are twice as likely to reach expected outcomes in 'Language, Literacy and Communication' and 'Mathematical Development' if these areas of learning are implemented with a **higher degree of child choice/participation**.

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