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Evaluating the Foundation Phase

Key Findings on Staffing

Research Summary

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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 239 classroom and setting observations, 341 practitioner interviews, 604 school and setting survey responses, and analysis of national administrative data.

Key Findings

- The vast majority of teachers, head teachers and Foundation Phase Leaders interviewed said they believed that the improved adult:child ratios were **essential to implementing the Foundation Phase**.
- There is some evidence (from case study schools) that the **levels of qualifications of additional practitioners is generally favourable** – with 81% of observed additional practitioners having a qualification at Level 3 or above.
- The introduction of the Foundation Phase has led to the general reduction in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 from about 19 children per adult on average across all schools in 2004/05, to about 10 children per adult in 2011/12 – nearly a **doubling in the number of adults** working in these year groups.
- We estimate that in 2011/12 approximately 50% of schools met the **recommended adult-to-child ratios** of 1:8 for Reception and Nursery pupils, and 90% of schools met the recommended ratios of 1:15 for Year 1 and Year 2 pupils.
- 72% schools and 79% of funded non-maintained settings **did not identify any obstacles in meeting the recommended adult-to-child ratios**.

Further Key Findings

One of the major changes resulting from the introduction of the Foundation Phase was in staffing. This includes the **involvement of Foundation Phase staff in the senior management** of primary schools and in meeting **new (higher) adult:child ratios** (1:8 for 3-5 year-olds; 1:15 for 5-7 year-olds).

We have previously noted (in *Key Findings on Pedagogy and Understanding*) that **there is a small but significant relationship between the extent to which the Foundation Phase is being implemented in classrooms and schools (as observed and measured by the evaluation team) and the presence of additional practitioners in the classrooms** (i.e. higher adult:child ratios).

The **main positive impacts** of having more adults in the classroom are **those reported by teachers themselves and other indirect effects on teaching**, such as providing greater flexibility in allowing staff to undertake further training or professional development. Research from England has shown that the presence of additional practitioners in classrooms maximises pupils' and teachers' attention to work¹. But these kinds of outcomes are difficult to

measure and do not appear to make much discernible difference to large-scale analyses of pupil achievement.

A recent review of qualifications amongst additional practitioners in England (the Nutbrown Review) recommended a minimum of Level 3 qualifications for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and set a target of 70% by September 2015. We found **81% of additional practitioners in case study schools had Level 3 or above qualifications**, exceeding the target set for England.

The **qualifications of staff in funded non-maintained settings is generally lower** than that of staff in schools – with 68% of additional practitioners there having at least an NVQ Level 3 qualification (although this is based on a very small sample).

According to official Welsh Government data there were up to **15,923 practitioners** working with children of Foundation Phase age in schools in 2012. However, 19% of these practitioners were in mixed-age classrooms that also included Key Stage 2 children.

According to national administrative data² the recommended adult:child ratios are, on average, **being met for Years 1 and 2 but**

¹ Blatchford *et al.* (2004) *Research Report RR60*, London: Department for Education and Skills.

² The National Pupil Database (NPD)

not in Reception and Nursery classes.

Nationally, the average adult:child ratios are: 1:9 for Nursery pupils; 1:10 for Reception pupils; 1:13 for Year 1 pupils; and 1:13 for Year 2 pupils. The average adult:child ratio for mixed aged classes in the Foundation Phase is 1:10.

However, we find that administrative data tends to significantly **underestimate** the adult:child ratios in a small proportion of schools compared to what was reported by head teachers and observed in case study schools.

Mapping adult:child ratios is very difficult in Wales given the very large proportion of children in **mixed age classes**, including mixed Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2 classes).

Despite variations in adult:child ratios between schools **we find no evidence that these variations are associated with differences in the educational achievement of pupils at the end of the Foundation Phase** after controlling for key individual pupil and other school-level characteristics.

However, **this kind of analysis is very limited** due to the accuracy of staffing information, variation in adult:child ratios between year groups and classrooms, and due to there being a strong association

between higher adult:child ratios and greater numbers of children with additional learning needs in classrooms. Furthermore, only as more data become available can future analysis consider whether improved adult:child ratios in the Foundation Phase are associated with improved outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2.

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