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Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales

Literacy and the Foundation Phase

An evaluation of the implementation of the Foundation Phase for five to six-year-olds in primary schools, with special reference to literacy

September 2011

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Summary

The impact of the Foundation Phase on the wellbeing of children has been positive and, in a majority of schools, five to six-year-olds achieve well. In a minority of schools, this is not the case, often because leaders and practitioners do not understand the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase. Leaders and practitioners generally have not evaluated the Foundation Phase robustly enough to identify where it is working well and what needs to be improved. In a few schools, staff are not convinced about the educational value of the Foundation Phase or do not know enough about it to ensure that it is implemented effectively.

In the majority of schools where leaders and practitioners have implemented the Foundation Phase well, there is a focus on raising standards particularly in literacy. However, in a significant minority of schools, there is not enough direct teaching of reading and appropriate opportunities for children to practise and use their reading skills are not always provided. While the Foundation Phase in nearly all schools provides rich contexts and motivating opportunities for writing, the range and quality of children's written work in many schools is often limited because writing tasks are formulaic and undemanding.

The wellbeing of many children benefits from the implementation of the Foundation Phase. Generally, the benefits are in children's increased motivation and enjoyment of learning. Active learning approaches* and the use of the outdoor learning* environment are helping boys to be more engaged in their learning.

The development of the outdoor learning environment is progressing well in the majority of schools. However, there is often not enough support from practitioners to maximise children's learning, particularly in reading and writing. In a minority of schools, there is limited or no outdoor provision.

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Main findings

1 The impact of the Foundation Phase on the wellbeing of children has been positive and, in a majority of schools, five to six-year-olds achieve well although there is not yet any data on assessed outcomes to help to judge impact. In many schools, the approaches used in the Foundation Phase are helping to improve children's motivation and their attitudes to learning. Boys in particular, are benefiting from active learning approaches* that engage them more directly.

2 In a significant minority of schools, children are not learning enough in the Foundation Phase. Children do not make enough progress in their learning because the activities being planned are not challenging enough and there isn't an appropriate balance between child-initiated* and practitioner-led activities. The lack of balance and good planning limits the development of children's independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

3 Although many schools continue to provide opportunities for children to develop their literacy skills, in a significant minority of schools, children do not practise and develop their reading and writing skills enough. Practitioners do not plan enough opportunities for children to use these skills across the seven areas of learning (or six areas of learning where Welsh is the main language of communication). In a minority of schools, there are often not enough shared*, group* or guided* reading sessions or enough regular teaching of phonics. Although the Foundation Phase provides rich contexts and motivating opportunities for writing, the range and quality of children's work in many schools is often limited. In a significant minority of schools, writing tasks are formulaic, repetitive and undemanding.

4 In the majority of schools, practitioners have adapted their classroom practice well to reflect the learning and teaching approaches of the Foundation Phase. Implementation has been at its most successful where practitioners and leaders have a sound understanding of its principles and pedagogy and high expectations of what children can do. The best schools maintain a strong focus on raising standards of literacy and use the Foundation Phase to provide exciting new learning opportunities to help children improve their reading and writing skills.

5 Assessment practices are developing steadily in schools. Observations and interaction with children on a regular basis are helping practitioners to focus on children's achievements and development. Increasingly, schools involve children more by using approaches such as assessment for learning,* but this approach is not fully developed in many schools and there is scope for improvement.

6 In a minority of schools, there are weaknesses in the implementation of the Foundation Phase. In these schools, there is usually a lack of understanding of the principles and practice promoted by the Foundation Phase, which leads to weaknesses in learning and teaching, and in planning. In a few schools, practitioners and leaders do not know enough about the Foundation Phase to ensure that its implementation is effective or they are unconvinced about its educational value.

* Starred terms are explained in the glossary.

7 Many schools have been successful in adapting the content of their curriculum from the National Curriculum to the Foundation Phase. They have been more successful in adapting the 'what' of the content than they have in adapting the 'how' of delivery. A significant minority of schools are not successful in balancing child-initiated and practitioner-led learning. In a majority of schools, practitioners still do not focus enough on developing children's thinking, communication, numeracy and ICT skills across all areas of learning.

8 There is more outdoor learning in the majority of schools. In a minority of schools, where practitioners make purposeful use of the outdoor environment, it contributes well to children's learning. In a minority of schools, where there is limited or no outdoor provision, children's choices for learning are limited. Often, even when there is good outdoor provision, there is not enough support from practitioners to maximise children's learning, particularly in reading and writing.

9 In the majority of schools, leaders have addressed the challenges of the Foundation Phase well. Where schools have been most successful, senior leaders have a clear understanding of Foundation Phase principles, a middle manager effectively leads practice and there is good teamwork among knowledgeable practitioners. In a few schools, leaders are preparing well for the roll-out to six and seven-year-olds and the transition of children to key stage 2. A well-established ethos of improvement, based on effective self-evaluation and planning for improvement, has contributed to the success of these schools.

10 In a minority of schools, where self-evaluation is not well established, the evaluation of the implementation of the Foundation Phase has not been robust enough to identify where it is working well and what needs to be improved. This means that practitioners cannot improve their planning or measure the impact of the Foundation Phase on standards.

Recommendations

11 Schools should:

R1 evaluate their practice better (see Appendix 2 for prompts);

R2 ensure that there are regular, well-planned opportunities for children to improve their reading and writing skills;

R3 develop a better balance between child-initiated and practitioner-led learning;

R4 plan more challenging activities to develop thinking, communication, numeracy and ICT skills across the areas of learning;

R5 make sure that all leaders and practitioners understand the principles of the Foundation Phase and translate these into effective practice; and

R6 develop outdoor provision so that it contributes fully to children's learning.

12 Local authorities should:

R7 support all schools to develop a sound knowledge of the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase; and

R8 work with schools to improve the range and quality of quantitative and qualitative evidence available to evaluate the effectiveness of the Foundation Phase.

13 The Welsh Government should:

R9 issue guidance on good practice in:

- the teaching of reading and writing in the Foundation Phase to complement what is available for key stage 2;
- balancing child-initiated and practitioner-led learning; and
- using the outdoor environment.

Context

The purpose of the report

14 This report is written in response to its annual Ministerial remit to Estyn from the Welsh Government.

The evaluation was undertaken to:

- report on the implementation of the Foundation Phase for five and six-year-olds, focusing particularly on literacy;
- highlight examples of best practice; and
- provide information to support the full roll out of the Foundation Phase to six and seven-year-olds in schools in September 2011.

15 The report is intended for the Welsh Government, headteachers and practitioners in schools and local education authority officers and advisers. The report may also be of interest to institutions that train teachers and to church diocesan authorities.

Background

16 The Foundation Phase is designed to meet the developmental needs of all children. It is based on the principle that a developmentally appropriate curriculum should offer sound foundations for children's learning. It was introduced by the Welsh Government as research evidence shows that children do not begin to benefit from extensive formal teaching until about the age of six or seven. It combines what was called Early Years Education (for 3 to 5 year-olds) and Key Stage 1 (5 to 7 year-olds) of the National Curriculum.

17 A key aim of the Foundation Phase is to contribute more effectively to preventing underachievement and raise standards overall. For the past ten years, the standards achieved by the majority of seven year-olds in English or Welsh, mathematics and science have shown little improvement. In particular, in English and Welsh as a first language, there has been little progress in the percentage of seven year-olds achieving at least level 2 (the level expected of the majority of pupils). There is also a significant difference between the performance of girls and boys, which is evident at this stage. While in 2010, standards were a little higher in Welsh, in English they remained at a similar level to six years ago. Just over one in every six pupils failed to reach at least level 2 in English in 2010.

18 The Foundation Phase was introduced for children aged three to four years-of-age in September 2008 and in September 2010 for children aged five to six years-of-age. The final stage of the Foundation Phase, for children aged six to seven years-of-age, will be introduced in September 2011. The 2011-2012 academic year will provide the first national dataset of foundation phase outcomes.

Standards and children's wellbeing

19 It is still early in the implementation of the Foundation Phase to be able to judge fully its impact on the standards being achieved by five to six-year-olds. There is no quantifiable assessment outcomes available to identify its effects. Schools are also implementing a range of other initiatives and strategies designed to improve standards and teaching at the same time.

Standards

20 There are early indications of positive benefits for children's learning where the Foundation Phase is well understood and fully implemented. Generally, however, these benefits are more evident in areas of children's wellbeing rather than standards. However, in the majority of schools that promote the Foundation Phase well:

- children have more opportunities to develop and use their oracy skills, which is benefitting the development of their literacy and learning skills;
- children are more independent because they have more opportunities to think for themselves and use problem-solving skills;
- boys are benefitting from active learning approaches and the use of outdoor learning and are often more engaged in their learning, which is helping them to achieve more; and
- many children are better motivated and show greater commitment to their learning, which helps them to attain higher standards.

21 Apart from achieving higher levels of engagement in their learning, children also benefit from the use of the outdoor learning environment to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world and their physical development.

22 In a significant minority of schools, there are weaknesses in standards. Children do not benefit as much as they should because the activities planned are not challenging enough and the balance between play-based and active-learning approaches is inappropriate. Where there are not enough child-initiated activities, children do not develop independent thinking and decision-making skills well enough. In some other schools, where there is not enough practitioner-led learning, children do not gain the skills they need to be taught in order to develop skills progressively, particularly in reading and writing. Such failure adversely affects their progress. The active-learning approaches promoted by the Foundation Phase, including developing children's critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are not well developed in a significant minority of schools.

23 In a few schools, children's learning is hindered by a lack of understanding and effective implementation of the Foundation Phase by staff. In these schools, children's standards of literacy are significantly lower than they should be. There is a lack of progression in children's learning and practitioners do not teach directly enough a full range of reading strategies or offer suitable opportunities for children to develop their independent writing skills.

24 At five years old, many children achieve higher standards in oracy in English and Welsh than in reading or writing. This is because learning to read and write follows the acquisition of spoken language skills. Usually, children develop reading skills sooner and faster than writing skills. Good writing often results from a powerful stimulus that is relevant to children's needs and interests but also depends upon good teaching. While the Foundation Phase provides rich contexts and opportunities for writing, the range and quality of children's writing in many schools are often too limited. Research and inspection evidence shows that when children are given writing tasks that have a real purpose and a real audience, including for their peers, themselves and others, then children are much more likely to be engaged and produce good work. Improving children's writing needs to be a higher priority in many schools.

Children's wellbeing

25 In many schools, the Foundation Phase has a positive impact on children's wellbeing. In these schools, children's participation, enjoyment and attitudes to learning are enhanced, particularly through the increased opportunities available for child-initiated and outdoor learning. In a few schools, practitioners report that children's behaviour and attendance have also benefited. Because children have been more engaged they are keen to attend regularly in order to gain more enjoyment from their learning.

26 Where practitioners provide opportunities for children to be involved in choosing activities and developing decision-making skills, children become more self-reliant and take responsibility for their learning. They are much more likely to put their own ideas into practice when undertaking a task or choose how they will undertake an activity, who they will work with and where they will complete the work. In these instances, children become more confident, often because more of the activities offered are play-based where children can 'have a go' and try things out without feeling pressured to get things right the first time. These children benefit from having more choice. The use of the outdoor environment suits boys in particular, who usually enjoy and benefit more from physically active outdoor activities. There are also more opportunities for children to be involved in collaborative learning where they learn from each other in pairs and small groups.

27 In a significant minority of schools, where the principles of experiential learning indoors and outdoors that underpin the Foundation Phase are not well understood or fully implemented, children's wellbeing does not benefit as much as it could. In these schools, children do not receive enough support or opportunities to become confident, competent and independent learners.

The quality of teaching and assessment

28 In the Foundation Phase, the focus of teaching is on developing learning actively rather than by merely transferring facts. It involves using active, play-based learning approaches to develop children's thinking, especially their questioning, planning, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Careful observation and assessment of children's progress in all areas of learning are required to enable practitioners to judge the stage children have reached in order to plan the next steps for their learning.

The quality of teaching

29 In the majority of schools, practitioners have adapted their classroom practice well to reflect the learning and teaching approaches of the Foundation Phase. Where practitioners fully understand their role in supporting and challenging children's learning and have high expectations, children achieve well. In these schools, practitioners actively promote children's abilities to make choices and decisions for themselves. They use their knowledge of the areas of learning linked to an understanding of what children are ready to learn. These practitioners recognise the need to maintain a strong focus on literacy so that children can gain reading and writing skills that give them access to all areas of learning.

30 In the best practice, practitioners demonstrate a sound knowledge of child development and use this knowledge well to consolidate and extend children's learning. Across the school, practitioners understand what is involved in providing high-quality education for children in the Foundation Phase. They maintain a strong focus on developing children's literacy skills and use the Foundation Phase to provide exciting new contexts for children's learning. For example, they make very good use of role-play and the outdoor environment to provide children with rich, practical first-hand learning experiences. First-hand experiences are particularly important in developing children's learning. Talking about real things that have happened helps to build an extensive vocabulary and develop oracy skills, which scaffolds and supports the development of reading and writing in a range of contexts. In these schools, practitioners are also spending more time talking to and interacting with their children, which is important to children's development.

31 In a minority of schools, practitioners have been less successful in encouraging active learning. Sometimes this is because practitioners have not understood how best to use play-based and active-learning approaches to develop and extend children's learning. In other schools, this is because practitioners have not adapted their practice enough to these approaches. In a few schools, where practitioners have been unclear about promoting active and child-initiated learning, this has adversely affected the standards children achieve, particularly in literacy.

32 Teaching literacy well is crucial to children's success. Early gains in literacy have the effect of raising standards overall and preventing underachievement. A majority of schools continue to provide good opportunities and support for children to develop their literacy skills. They ensure that children are able to use a range of reading strategies, including phonics, 'look and say' and reading for meaning so that children read with increasing fluency, accuracy and understanding.

33 In the best practice, practitioners agree how to teach phonics and ensure that there is a systematic programme across the Phase to enable children to acquire phonic skills at a fast pace. In particular, they balance the need for the frequent teaching of phonics with opportunities for child-initiated and active learning across a range of literacy activities. This work ensures that children gain good literacy skills and flourish as independent learners at the same time.

34 The following case study provides an example of how one school has focused on the important elements of continuity and progression in their phonic programme.

Planning for continuity and progression in a phonics programme

Coed Eva Primary School is a very large English-medium primary school in Cwmbran in the Unitary Authority of Torfaen. Around 18% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. While implementing the Foundation Phase, practitioners make certain that they are maintaining a focus on the teaching of literacy. The school has developed a systematic approach to the learning and teaching of phonics as part of their drive to raise standards of literacy following inspection in 2010.

Strategy

While the school uses a commercial phonics scheme as the basis for teaching reading, practitioners have produced their own plan to ensure that there is continuity and progression in the teaching of phonics in the Foundation Phase. The plan identifies expectations at key points of children's development. It highlights aspects of phonics, including letter sounds and formation, blending and identifying sounds in words and learning tricky words. Each of these key aspects has specific learning objectives and the plan gives guidance on activities to promote children's learning.

The very regular practice of phonics, consistently undertaken across the school, reinforces and builds on children's previous learning. The good pace of the programme ensures that children gain the skills they need to develop their reading and writing skills quickly. The effective characteristics of the school's phonic programme include:

- a clear, systematic and progressive programme of phonics throughout the Foundation Phase;
- frequent and regular phonic sessions;
- a brisk pace to the coverage of the programme; and
- teaching approaches that use motivating and interesting approaches, such as using the outdoor environment to search for words that begin with the same sound.

Outcome

Through a systematic approach, practitioners build the phonic knowledge, understanding and skills that children need at the right stage. The work is successful in raising standards of literacy.

35 In a few schools, the teaching of phonics lacks a clear and systematic structure. Practitioners have not agreed which aspects to cover at each stage and sometimes use different schemes. This leads to confusion and discontinuities in children's learning. They also fail to provide children with opportunities for regular practice.

36 Over the past twenty years, there has been a major shift in practice in the organisation of the teaching of reading in schools. Previously, many children read individually on a daily basis to an adult. Now, approaches such as shared, group and guided reading are commonly used in schools. Generally, schools use individual reading approaches only for children whose reading skills are below the expected level. In most schools, these children benefit from very frequent individual reading sessions with an adult.

37 Shared, group and guided reading approaches are effective ways to model and teach reading for the majority of children. However, in a minority of schools, the frequency of these sessions is limited. Also, in a few schools there is not enough emphasis on helping children gain a wide enough range of decoding strategies, such as using their knowledge of grammar, reading on and checking the overall sense of the passage.

38 In the best practice, practitioners:

- have a very good understanding of the ways to teach reading and ensure that there is an effective balance between providing reading instruction and reading practice for children;
- provide short, daily phonic sessions that involve children actively;
- use shared reading approaches for groups and the whole class regularly, such as in demonstrating the way effective readers think as they read a text;
- use guided group reading at least twice-weekly where children of similar ability are guided through the text and taught reading skills, for example, showing how to respond in different ways for different purposes;
- use group reading frequently to give children opportunities to practise their reading skills;
- link oracy, reading and writing so that children understand that these language modes are interdependent; and
- use the indoor and outdoor environment very well to provide motivating contexts for literacy work.

Assessment

39 Accurate and reliable assessment helps practitioners to plan to meet children's needs, which is central to their effective learning. Although assessment has traditionally been the one of the weakest areas of schools' work, practice has steadily improved over recent years. In HMCI's most recent Annual Report, we reported that

"…three-quarters of schools were good or better …teachers regularly assessed the progress that pupils made towards their learning targets. Teachers used assessment outcomes to plan work at the right level for pupils of all abilities…"

40 In day-to-day practice, most practitioners use a good range of approaches to assess children's learning. They use their observations and interaction with children to help them focus on how individuals are developing on the learning continuum. Generally, the assessment of children's learning in the outdoor environment is less purposeful and frequent than in indoor activities.

41 In the best practice, practitioners:

- gather a range of assessment information and use this skilfully to help them to prepare activities that are at the right level for the stage of development of the children they work with;
- observe children carefully in the indoor and outdoor environment in order to monitor their learning and stage of development;
- intervene sensitively when necessary to challenge and move learning on, which is particularly important during children's play and child-initiated learning;
- avoid recording everything children do but maintain a system that is relevant, purposeful and not overly burdensome on staff; and
- share and examine assessment information together in order to ensure consistency and a secure understanding of outcomes.

42 The following case study provides an example of how systematic assessment procedures are important in monitoring the development of children's literacy skills.

Assessing literacy systematically

Background

Ysgol Ffridd Y Llyn is a small Welsh-medium primary school just outside Bala in Gwynedd. Welsh is the main medium of life and work in the school and about three-quarters of pupils speak Welsh as a first language or to a corresponding level. Around 4% are eligible for free school meals. The Foundation Phase class includes children aged four to seven years-of-age. There are three practitioners including one teacher and one full-time and one part-time classroom support assistant.

Strategy

Assessment is central to children's learning in this school. Assessment procedures are very comprehensive and used consistently by all practitioners. The class teacher (who is also the head teacher) has developed a very systematic approach to assessing pupils' achievements in literacy. This is particularly important as children in this class span a wide range of ages, abilities and stage of development.

Each week, she organises a focused reading session with children, which provides her with information about how well children are developing in specific aspects of literacy. She identifies the specific areas that each child needs to improve in terms of phonics, letter sounds and blends and key words etc. This information is scribbled onto post-it notes and the notes are placed on one of three boards according to the level of children's needs.

The notes inform the planning of follow up activities, such as a one-to-one session on

phonic blends with a practitioner. Children's progress is monitored carefully. When difficulties persist, the post-it notes move onto the next board. This alerts all practitioners to issues and the need to ensure that they provide support for children. If an issue remains, the post-it note moves to the third board and further more formal action is taken. The post-it notes are filed in children's individual folders when targets have been met. The careful monitoring of children's literacy skills ensures that no child falls through the net.

The practitioner is able to use her time very well because she ensures children know how to work independently and become responsible for their own learning. Older pupils in the class act as good role-models for their younger peers enabling the practitioner to use her time effectively to concentrate on the needs of children.

Outcome

Over the past four years, all pupils have reached at least the expected level in Welsh for pupils aged seven years-of-age and over 50% have gained the higher level 3.

43 Helping children understand their own potential and capabilities is an important principle of the Foundation Phase. Increasingly, many schools involve children more by using techniques such as assessment for learning. A key principle of this technique is that children should know where they are, where they need to go and how best to get there. This type of formative assessment focuses on the learner's achievements and ways in which he or she can move forward. Assessment for learning is a key tool for practitioners in supporting children's development and involving them in setting targets to improve their performance, such as 'I am learning to use a full stop at the end of a sentence'. While the use of assessment for learning is developing in many schools, there is scope for improvement.

Curriculum planning and the learning environment

44 The Foundation Phase curriculum is designed to provide a holistic* practical and integrated curriculum with the child at the centre. Besides the areas of learning, the provision also includes communication, ICT, number and thinking skills that must complement each other and work together to support the development of children and their skills. In the Foundation Phase, there should be an appropriate balance between child-initiated activities and those that are practitioner-led. Research and inspection evidence show that play and active learning can be successful in motivating children to learn and achieve more but teachers must also plan specifically for literacy and numeracy skills-development too. The use of the outdoor environment for learning is an integral part of the Foundation Phase and play and active learning approaches. A play-based, experiential curriculum needs to be well planned and well organised. Activities must be purposeful if children are truly to gain skills and knowledge from these experiences and make good progress in their learning.

Curriculum planning

45 Most schools are amending their curriculum planning to meet the requirements of the Foundation Phase for five to six-year-olds. Where there were good plans in place for the subjects of the National Curriculum, many schools have adapted these effectively to the requirements of the areas of learning. However, the majority of schools have been more successful in adapting the content of curriculum planning, the 'what' of delivery than the 'how' of delivery. Consequently, practitioners have not always:

- achieved a balance between practitioner-led and child-initiated learning;
- planned a progressively challenging play-based curriculum; and
- made best use of the outdoors to enhance children's learning.

46 Children achieve higher standards when plans set out clear intentions for both child-initiated and practitioner-led activities and these are successfully delivered. Children gain more knowledge, understanding and skills when they build on what they already know and can do and are fully engaged and interested in their learning. In a few schools, these important aspects are not well understood or developed in practice. Rarely is enough attention given to the provision to challenging and stretching more-able and talented children.

47 In the best practice, schools provide a well-planned and balanced curriculum that gives children opportunities to be creatively involved in their own learning. For example, at an early stage of the planning process, a minority of schools involve children very well in determining the topics or themes of work for the next term. This input helps practitioners to understand and cater for children's interests. In these schools, there is an appropriate balance between child-initiated and practitioner-led activities. On a day-to-day basis, there is planning for continuous and enhanced provision as well as focused tasks*.

* These terms are explained in the glossary.

48 The case study that follows provides a very good example of how practitioners involve children in determining the topics and work they will undertake.

Taking account of children's interests and learning needs

Background

Ton Pentre Infant School is in the centre of the village in the Rhondda Fawr Valley. Around 26% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. While each class has its own base, there are shared areas for learning across the different year groups. In all classrooms, children have independent access to a very attractive and well developed outdoor environment that includes a Forest School area.

Strategy

At the end of each term, practitioners ask children for their ideas about the work they would like to do the following term. In the spring term, the topic chosen by children and practitioners is 'Beyond the Wardrobe' because children are very excited and interested in the story of Narnia. Together, they plan the kinds of things they want to include, such as a Narnia role-play area and a Frozen Lake writing room.

To support the teaching of the Foundation Phase, practitioners have replaced their content-led schemes of work with skills-based 'Units of Fun' for each area of learning. The 'Units of Fun' identify the core skills of each area of the Foundation Phase as well as specific skills ladders for thinking, communication, numeracy and ICT skills. This approach includes planning for continuous and enhanced provision. Plans include very specific learning intentions for children and a clear focus on the development of skills. Despite being structured, the plans are flexible enough for practitioners to be able to adapt them readily to meet children's interests and learning needs. Ensuring children have opportunities to initiate their own learning is central to the school's approach to the Foundation Phase.

Classrooms are organised into learning zones and have vibrant and attractive resources and displays, which include exciting role-play areas, such as the Ice Queen's Palace. Children move freely between these areas and have independent access to the outdoors.

Outcome

Practitioners make very good use of children's interests at the initial planning stage and cater exceptionally well for children to follow their interests as work progresses. They provide many good opportunities for children to be independent in their learning. Using their comprehensive and thorough planning system they provide a well-balanced blend of child-initiated and practitioner-led activities that are flexible in meeting children's learning needs. In a recent inspection, inspectors judged that almost all children made very good progress and achieved high standards.

49 The best curriculum plans include clear intentions for children's learning and in the short term they must be flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances in order

to capitalise on children's interests. Carefully balancing the planning of child-initiated activities and practitioner-led learning experiences is essential if children are to make good progress as they move through the Foundation Phase.

50 There are several reasons why schools find it difficult to adapt to the requirements of the Foundation Phase or have been slow to amend their plans. In some schools, it is because practitioners are not clear enough about how to balance child-initiated learning with practitioner-led activities. In a few schools, there is a lack of planning for the areas of learning and plans are not specific enough in indicating the expected outcomes for learning. Over the past ten years, curriculum planning has become very structured and detailed in most schools. Not all practitioners have the confidence to adapt these detailed plans or are convinced that they should amend their plans flexibly to meet children's interests.

51 There are also particular challenges in planning for a play-based curriculum at this stage because activities have to be challenging enough for more able and older children. There is scope in many schools, to improve planning to ensure that play-based activities are more challenging and that intentions for the learning that should happen are clear. A minority of schools do not plan well enough for progression and children repeat learning experiences unnecessarily as a result when they should be being stretched further.

52 Planning for the use of outdoor learning is often good for children's physical development and knowledge and understanding of the world, but usually less good for developing children's literacy skills and their creative development. In a few schools, there is sometimes little value to the reading and writing activities that children undertake outdoors. In these cases, practitioners have not considered carefully enough how the outdoor activity should contribute to children's learning and literacy skills.

53 Over recent years, a majority of schools have improved the way they develop children's skills. While developing literacy skills has always been a priority for primary schools, the strongest focus has been on the teaching of English and Welsh as subjects. However, literacy is not just the single subject of English or Welsh, but is a group of competencies, which children acquire in all of the curriculum. In a minority of schools where there is best practice, planning ensures that children acquire, develop, practise, apply and refine their thinking, communication, numeracy and ICT skills across all areas of learning and in a wide variety of contexts. The most effective plans identify the specific skills that children will develop and ensure that there is clear progression in their learning, which helps them to achieve high standards. However, in the majority of schools, planning for these skills is not developed enough and in a few schools, it is inadequate.

54 In a minority of schools children have weak literacy skills that affect their capacity to understand and achieve in other areas.

55 The majority of schools have built on existing plans for the development of children's literacy skills. In the best practice, schools have carefully adapted these plans to maintain the direct teaching of skills for reading and writing as well as providing a balanced programme of play-based language activities using the indoor and outdoor

environment. Effective schools see language learning as holistic: oracy, reading and writing support and enhance overall language development. Where schools do this best, they develop language in relation to the context in which it is used and engage children actively. In these schools, standards are maintained and improved upon because practitioners ensure that the provision continues to give good attention to developing children's reading and writing skills.

56 Overall, however, the range of children's writing seen during this survey did not reflect the richer contexts for writing presented by the Foundation Phase. Many schools have still not addressed the weaknesses in teaching writing that we have reported on in the past. In a significant minority of schools, writing tasks continue to be formulaic, repetitive and undemanding. There is still overuse of forms of writing such as 'news', which limits originality and creativity and there are too few opportunities for children to write in different forms and genres. Generally, in a majority of schools, not enough writing effort is demanded of children. The over-use of commercial and teacher-produced worksheets reduces opportunities for children to write independently and at length as they are often only required to write a single word or short sentence.

The learning environment

57 Many practitioners are using the indoor environment more creatively to provide a more experiential curriculum for children. Many practitioners have developed learning areas or zones within their classes to create better provision for role-play. In the majority of schools, these learning areas enable children to make independent choices. In a minority of schools, there is not a good enough match between children's needs and the outdoor activities provided to ensure that the children learn well. In a minority of schools, where there is limited or no outdoor provision, the opportunities to develop children's independence are restricted.

58 Increasingly, practitioners organise the indoor learning environment in such a way so that children can use resources more easily, even using ICT equipment to support their play. Children can get what they need without always asking for help, making them less reliant on adults. In a small minority of schools, classes often share learning areas where the accommodation is suitable or has been adapted for this purpose. Children of different ages move freely from one area to another and practitioners can group children for focused teaching sessions according to the stage of their development. This approach enables practitioners to share resources and to provide a rich and varied learning environment that meets children's learning needs.

59 Many schools also make better provision for role-play, often linked to the class theme or topic. In many schools, role-play areas are exciting, stimulating and well-resourced, often providing good opportunities for children to act out and practise new and familiar situations. Role-play in particular can make a valuable contribution to children's language and literacy skills, particularly oracy skills. For example, in one school the role-play area is set up as a newsroom equipped with tape recorder and microphone, writing materials and cameras. This provision enables children to work imaginatively and co-operatively and to improve their oracy, reading and writing skills.

60 The outdoor environment can double the choice of learning experiences. In a majority of schools, practitioners increasingly use the outdoor environment well and provide interesting resources that enhance the indoor provision. Where schools provide genuine and interesting reasons for using the outdoor environment for literacy activities, these contribute effectively to children's reading and writing skills and add a dimension to their learning that cannot be gained from working in the classroom. However, this practice is not consistent across all schools.

61 The case study that follows shows how practitioners in one school used the outdoor environment to develop children's language and literacy skills.

Using the outdoor environment for oracy, reading and writing activities

Pengeulan Primary School is a medium-sized primary school in the village of Miskin in the Cynon Valley. Around 55% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. There is very limited outdoor space spread over three levels. Children cannot have independent or direct access to the outdoors from their classroom. Practitioners make certain that they plan to use the outdoor environment regularly as they recognise the benefits for children's learning.

Strategy

In this school, children were enjoying the story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff. As part of their work, they devised posters, made masks and wrote a play script of the story. Practitioners used the small outdoor grassed and decked area for dramatising the story and put up the 'wanted' posters that the children had made. Wearing the masks, children took turns to act out the story. When one group was acting, the other children were the audience. They had already prepared peer assessment sheets that included success criteria, which would help them judge the quality of the drama. They evaluated how well children took on the roles of different characters, read information accurately, spoke clearly and co-operated together.

The outdoor environment provided an ideal setting for the drama and with the provision of benches became a natural theatre. The 'goats' were able to trip trap effectively on the decking area and the 'troll' hid behind a low wall.

Outcome

The work that children had undertaken over time on the story, writing the posters and preparing the script all came together in this very worthwhile activity. The use of the outdoors added a relevant, interesting and enjoyable dimension to children's learning. Children learned how to modify their talk to the requirements of an audience, project their voices and organise their writing in different forms for different purposes. The activity also helped them to understand the links between reading and writing.

62 In a minority of schools, outdoor activities do not contribute enough to children's learning or ensure they are gaining knowledge, understanding and skills progressively. This is because activities do not have enough purpose or value and

are not challenging children to make better progress. In a few schools, practitioners are not convinced about the value of outdoor learning and do not use it enough.

63 In schools where there is limited outdoor provision, practitioners often make every effort to make the best use of these and ensure that they also use a range of other outdoor facilities, such as the local park. In a few schools, children have no access to the outdoors due to the limitations of the school site. In a few schools, outdoor provision may be possible but leaders and managers have not developed its potential.

Leadership and management and improving quality

64 Good-quality leadership is critical to the performance of schools and the effective implementation of the Foundation Phase. Research and inspection evidence consistently show that school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an important influence on children's learning.

Leadership and management

65 Strong and influential leadership by the headteacher, effective management by a knowledgeable middle manager, good teamwork among knowledgeable practitioners and a relentless drive to raise standards, are key ingredients for the successful implementation of the Foundation Phase.

66 In the majority of schools, leaders understand the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase and have implemented its practice well. In particular, they focus on using the Foundation Phase to raise standards, especially in literacy. They have overcome any obstacles inherent in the layout of school accommodation for developing the outdoor provision. These leaders have also focused well on planning for the full roll-out of the Foundation Phase to six and seven-year-olds and the need for effective transition to key stage 2.

67 In the best practice, leaders have ensured that there is:

- a relentless drive on raising standards, with a high priority given to literacy;
- a keen emphasis on communicating the principles and practice of the Foundation Phase so that its benefits are understood by all members of the school community, including governors and parents;
- a knowledgeable middle manager who co-ordinates and leads work on the Foundation Phase;
- a focus on reviewing and updating teaching pedagogy, providing training for practitioners and sharing good practice within and beyond the school;
- attention given to developing the indoor and outdoor environment to support the delivery of the Foundation Phase;
- development of curriculum provision and assessment to help practitioners adapt and develop practice to best meet children's learning needs;
- preparation for the roll-out of the Foundation Phase to Year 2 as well as the transition of children from the Foundation Phase to key stage 2; and
- systematic and regular monitoring and evaluation of standards and provision to ensure that children are making the expected progress.

68 The following case study shows the impact of effective monitoring and evaluation on standards.

The impact of effective monitoring and evaluation by the subject leader for English

Baglan Primary School is in a densely populated residential area in the town of Baglan, which is part of Neath Port Talbot Unitary Authority. There are 180 pupils on roll, 27% of whom are eligible for free school meals.

Strategy

The English subject leader wanted to ensure that the introduction of the Foundation Phase would improve standards in children's literacy skills and their attitude to learning. Using Estyn's report on **'Best Practice in the reading and writing of pupils aged five to seven years'**, she agreed clear criteria for evaluating standards and provision with her colleagues.

She led whole-staff training sessions on good practice so that all practitioners, including support staff, had a clear understanding of their roles and what constituted good provision and good standards in the Foundation Phase. This English leader also demonstrated lessons and coached staff. The school's performance management arrangements identified practitioners' training needs. In-house support and external courses supported their professional development.

The school had a programme of class reviews of planning and provision. Practitioners maintained careful records of children's progress through their observations and half termly assessments. After each review, the English subject leader met with the practitioners to examine the outcomes of children's learning and achievements. After reviewing the evidence, they identified what worked well and agreed improvements. The introduction of new strategies and resources for teaching literacy became the focus for the next monitoring and evaluation of work.

Outcome

There is consistently good practice and provision throughout the Foundation Phase, which contributes well to children's language, literacy and communication skills. The gap between boys' and girls' performance is closing. Practitioners can identify improvements in children's behaviour and their engagement in learning.

69 In a minority of schools, the implementation of the Foundation Phase has been less successful. This is often because leaders and/or practitioners do not understand its principles and practice. This results in the shortcomings in learning and teaching and planning and assessment that we have explained earlier in this report. In a few schools, senior leaders do not know enough about the Foundation Phase or are unconvinced about its educational value and do not give it high priority.

70 Local authorities have a key role in the implementation of the Foundation Phase. Generally, local authorities have supported schools well and schools have benefited

from a range of training programmes, support materials and the advisory work of authority officers. This has helped most practitioners to develop their skills and practice.

71 Many authorities have used information about schools well to target training and support to meet individual practitioner needs. Skilled practitioners often deliver training and support colleagues in schools. Many authorities have also supported schools in sharing good practice and developing professional learning communities so that practitioners can analyse and improve their work. A few authorities have already provided training for schools on the transition of children from the Foundation Phase to key stage 2. For example, in Flintshire local authority, this has resulted in a specific training programme aimed at practitioners teaching in Year 2 and Year 3, in order to maintain children's progress and ensure a smooth transition as they move from the Foundation Phase to key stage 2.

72 In a few cases, practitioners report that training or advice is contradictory or unclear and has left them uncertain about ways of delivering the Foundation Phase.

Improving quality

73 Over the past ten years, the quality of self-evaluation has improved greatly. Self-evaluation was good or better in the majority of schools we inspected in 2009-2010. A well-established ethos of self-evaluation, which draws on a range of evidence, has supported the process of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the Foundation Phase in the majority of schools. Where procedures are effective, schools use information from self-evaluation to ensure a regular cyclical process of improvement planning. The plans themselves have clearly identified priorities, targets and timescales. The plans specify clear outcomes, related to improvements in standards and quality to measure progress.

74 Best practice schools maintain a strong focus on:

- first-hand evidence about the quality of learning and teaching, such as evaluating the effect of outdoor learning on children's standards in the seven areas of learning;
- analysing available data, including information from teacher assessments of children's progress and outcomes from standardised tests, such as reading tests;
- evaluating curriculum planning and assessment in order to be confident that there is an appropriate Foundation Phase curriculum that is broad, balanced, relevant and adapted to meet the developmental needs of all children;
- analysing the effect of practitioner training on changes in practice in classroom organisation and pedagogy;
- taking account of the views of parents and children to foster and promote positive links with their home and gain feedback on their perceptions; and
- achieving progress against identified priorities.

75 In a minority of schools, evaluation is not robust enough and often relies too much on anecdotal evidence. Leaders do not evaluate the impact of practitioner training on the delivery of the Foundation Phase.

76 In a significant minority of schools, there are weaknesses in school improvement planning. The main weaknesses include a failure to prioritise the implementation of the Foundation Phase and insufficient or no use of success criteria to measure progress. Too few schools use success criteria related to standards and quality to judge whether the actions they have taken have had a positive effect and led to measurable improvements in children's learning. Improvement plans are an important tool for helping schools to develop their provision and raise standards. These plans are an important area for improvement.

Appendix 1

Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on:

- inspector visits to a representative sample of twenty-three primary schools across Wales. During visits to schools, inspectors undertook a range of activities to gather evidence, including interviewing senior leaders and practitioners, observing literacy sessions and scrutinising samples of children's written work and school documentation;
- discussions with local authority advisers in two authorities and the inspection reports of eleven local authorities;
- information from 156 schools that were inspected between September 2010 and April 2011; and
- a review of a range of relevant literature included below.

Estyn publications

Best practice in the reading and writing of pupils aged five to seven years (2008) Estyn

Foundation Phase training and its impact on learning and teaching an interim report (2010) Estyn

Improving the learning and teaching of early reading skills (2007) Estyn

Learning in the Outdoors for Children in the Foundation Phase (2011) Estyn

Raising Standards in Literacy and Numeracy (2003) Estyn/ACCAC/WAG

Raising standards of writing in Primary Schools, A Discussion Paper (2000) Estyn

Other publications and research

Framework for Children's Learning for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales (2008) Welsh Government

Improving Achievement in English Language in Primary and Secondary Schools (2003) HMIE Scotland

Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading: Final Report. (2006) London: Department for Education and Skills. Rose, J.

Learning from interactive story readings (2001) Early Years, 21**,** 97-105 Campbell R.
Literature search on improving boys' writing (2005) Caroline Daly for Ofsted

Play/Active Learning – Overview for 3 to 7-year-olds (2008) Welsh Government

Play in the Primary Curriculum (1994) edited by N Hall and L Abbott

Play – The Key to Young Children's Learning British Association for Early Childhood Education

Primary Writing (2000) Dominic Wyse Open University

Raising the Standard of Boys' Achievement in Literacy (2001) Scottish Council for Research in Education

Reading by six How the best schools do it (2010) Ofsted

Reading for purpose and pleasure: An evaluation of the teaching of reading in primary schools (2004) Ofsted

Teaching and Learning Pedagogy (2008) Welsh Government

The Excellence of Play (2007) J R Moyles

The Foundation Phase Framework for Children's Learning (2007) Welsh Government

Writing is Primary - Action research on the teaching of writing in primary schools (2009) Richard Ings

Young People's Writing: Attitudes, behaviour and the role of technology (2009) National Literacy Trust

Appendix 2: Questions for self-evaluation to promote improvement

The questions that follow have been designed to assist leaders, managers and practitioners in reviewing areas of work and promoting improvement in the Foundation Phase.

Standards

Are children able to:

- build on their previous learning successfully, broaden their knowledge and understanding and develop new skills in a range of contexts;
- be creatively involved in their own learning and put their own ideas into practice;
- experience first-hand learning, in imaginative, stimulating and challenging ways in both the indoor and outdoor environment;
- act independently, sometimes initiating and leading activities;
- acquire, develop, practise, apply and refine their thinking, communication, numeracy and ICT skills in a variety of contexts across the seven areas of learning;
- progressively develop and gain independence in their literacy skills; and
- reflect on what they have learned?

Teaching and assessment

Do practitioners:

- have high expectations for children's achievements across the seven areas of learning;
- have a sound up-to-date knowledge of child development and a clear understanding of what is involved in providing high-quality education for children in the Foundation Phase;
- use opportunities for learning, to include play and active learning approaches, that take account of what children already know and can do, their interests and their understanding;
- work closely together to support children's learning needs, such as in planning and sharing assessment information;
- help children to use 'learning to learn' strategies and develop children's independence;
- use good questioning and discussion, which stimulates children to think of ideas for themselves;
- give reading and writing a high priority and follow the best practice approaches identified in this report;
- continue to teach literacy skills explicitly and regularly through demonstration and explanation and provide opportunities for children to practise and develop their skills in a wide range of contexts;
- scaffold children's learning through approaches such as shared and guided reading and writing; and
- closely monitor children's development and progress, use assessment

information to inform day-to-day planning and help children to understand how well they are doing and how they can improve?

Curriculum planning and the learning environment

Do practitioners make certain that:

- there is an appropriate balance between child-initiated and practitioner-led activities;
- children are regularly consulted about their learning experiences so that their ideas and interests influence the provision;
- children can be independent and make choices about their learning;
- they plan for effective use of the indoor and outdoor learning environment;
- plans build effectively on children's previous learning and ensure progression to the next stage of learning;
- plans for the development of thinking, communication, ICT and numeracy skills occur across all areas of learning and are specific enough to ensure progression in children's learning;
- work is well-matched to children's learning needs and challenges those who are more-able;
- plans for language, literacy and communication integrate the learning and teaching of oracy, reading and writing, have clear teaching objectives and the specific knowledge, understanding and skills that children should gain; and
- writing tasks and activities are interesting, varied and relevant, demand sufficient writing effort and enable children to begin to write at length?

Leadership and management

Do leaders and managers:

- understand and take responsibility for ensuring that the Foundation Phase is implemented successfully and contributes to raising standards;
- give high priority to ensuring that the learning and teaching of literacy are as good as they can be;
- have a designated practitioner who leads, advises, supports and challenges work in the Foundation Phase;
- make certain that practitioners receive training to enable them to deliver the Foundation Phase successfully;
- ensue that practitioners engage widely in sharing good practice and professional learning to strengthen and extend their capacity for improvement;
- deploy practitioners well, including support staff, so that they make a full contribution to supporting children's learning;
- work to provide an indoor and outdoor environment that supports the delivery of the Foundation Phase;
- have a well-planned programme to review and evaluate the impact of the Foundation Phase and use the findings to plan for further improvement;
- regularly audit the range of children's' work to make certain that all children have full, rich and challenging experiences of reading and writing in indoor and outdoor provision;

- plan well for improvement and identify success criteria in order to measure the success of action on children's learning; and
- in local authorities, undertake frequent monitoring and thorough evaluation to make certain that the Foundation Phase is well understood, implemented effectively and contributes to high standards?

Glossary

Active learning

This term relates to children being active and involved in their learning rather than as passive recipients of information and knowledge. It emphasises a first-hand experience that motivates, stimulates and supports children in the development of skills and concepts, including language acquisition.

Areas of learning

Seven areas of learning (or six areas of learning where Welsh* is the main language of communication) describe an appropriate curriculum for 3 to 7 year-olds in the Foundation Phase. They must complement each other and work together to provide a cross-curricular approach to form a practical relevant curriculum. The areas of learning include:

- personal and social development, wellbeing and cultural diversity
- language, literacy and communication skills;
- mathematical development;
- *Welsh language development;
- knowledge and understanding of the world;
- physical development; and
- creative development.

Assessment for learning

An important influence on children's educational achievement is their understanding of how well they are doing and what they need to do to make progress. When children are actively involved in formative assessment processes, such as setting targets, undertaking peer or self-assessment, recognising progress in their written work etc, they improve their motivation, independence, confidence and attainment. Known as Assessment for Learning, this powerful tool enables children to improve their own learning and occurs at all stages of the learning process.

Child-initiated learning

The Foundation Phase curriculum is designed to focus on children's development and learning and be flexible to follow their interests and needs.

Continuous provision

This is an approach to planning the curriculum and environment in the Foundation Phase. It usually refers to the provision of learning areas in the indoor and outdoor environment, such as sand and water.

Enhanced provision	Enhanced provision is the planned adjustment and enrichment to the provision of play areas in the indoor and outdoor environment, such as adding a challenge to water play.
Focused tasks	Focused tasks are usually practitioner-led in all of the areas of learning. For example, these are planned occasions for the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills to groups or the whole class.
Guided reading	In guided reading, the practitioner guides a small group of pupils of similar ability through the text. The practitioner will draw children's attention to a range of features in the text and model ways of reading, such as predicting and summarising etc. Usually, the practitioner will listen to pupils read individually within the context of the group.
Holistic curriculum	As a holistic curriculum, the Foundation Phase does not compartmentalise children's learning and understanding into curriculum areas. Learning and teaching support many aspects of children's development rather than focusing on one specific stage or need.
Individual reading	Individual reading usually occurs between a learner and practitioner/adult. The text is matched carefully to the reading ability of the learner. This type of approach is commonly used for pupils with special educational needs who need frequent practice in reading with the support of an adult.
Modelling writing	In modelling writing, the practitioner demonstrates the process of writing. This may include thinking of what to write, the formation and legibility of individual letters, spelling, grammar including punctuation, layout and organisation and audience. Often, the modelling takes place in a whole-class situation. Questioning and modifying the work are essential parts of learning to write and the talk generated in these problem-solving type of sessions provides crucial information for children about the writing process.
Outdoor learning	There is a strong emphasis on outdoor learning in the Foundation Phase. The outdoor learning environment should be an extension of the indoor learning environment. Generally, taking account of health and safety matters, children should be able to move freely between the indoors and outdoors.

Phonological awareness	The awareness of sounds within words, such as the ability to segment component sounds.
Practitioners	This generic term refers to the adults that work with children in the Foundation Phase. The term includes teachers and classroom assistants.
Shared reading	In shared reading, the practitioner models the process of reading by demonstrating the ways an effective reader thinks as he or she reads a text. This usually takes place in a whole-class situation where everyone can see the text from a big book, on a screen or whiteboard. Usually, children listen to the text read aloud, join in and follow the reading and learn from the practitioner's example of analysing the text.

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