

Foundation Phase training and its impact on learning and teaching

An interim report



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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Contents	Page
Introduction	1
Main findings	3
Recommendations	5
Main content	6
How well is the Foundation Phase training programme being implemented across Wales?	6
What is the impact of the Foundation Phase training programme on learning and teaching?	9
Appendix	
Case studies of good practice	
Glossary/references	
The remit author and survey team	

Introduction

- 1 This report has been written in response to the annual Ministerial remit letter from the Welsh Assembly Government, which requested information about how well the National Training Programme for practitioners in the Foundation Phase is being implemented and what impact it is having on classroom practice and on children's learning.
- 2 The survey was undertaken in the context of the strategic direction established by the Welsh Assembly Government in 'The Learning Country: A Comprehensive Education and Lifelong Learning Programme to 2010 in Wales' and 'The Learning Country: Vision into Action 2006'. These documents set out a vision for the education and care of young children in Wales, where every child should have the best start in life and the opportunity to reach their full potential.
- 3 In September 2008, the Foundation Phase was introduced to all three to four-year-old children in Wales in schools and settings as the first step in translating this vision into practice¹. For the Foundation Phase to be successful it is acknowledged² that learning and teaching need to be based on:
 - a holistic view of learning;
 - active and experiential learning;
 - respect for children's ability to be self-motivating and self-directing; and
 - responsive interactions between children and adults.
- 4 'Building the Foundation Phase Action Plan, December 2006', sets out an agenda for a major in-service training programme for teachers and other staff working within the Foundation Phase. This training programme aims to make sure that practitioners have the right pedagogical skills to deliver the Foundation Phase. The National Training Programme is based on a series of bilingual training modules. These modules were written by local authority advisory staff, practitioners in settings and schools, and representatives from voluntary organisations, working alongside officers of the Department of Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills. The Welsh Assembly Government has provided funding to local authorities to meet the cost of providing supply cover for practitioners to attend training.
- 5 The Welsh Assembly Government has also allocated funding to each local authority for one Foundation Phase Training and Support Officer to support the training. In all local authorities, it is the Foundation Phase Training and Support Officers who have mainly delivered the module training to practitioners, although other local authority advisory staff are also involved, particularly in training practitioners from settings.

¹ The Foundation Phase is being phased in over a period of four years and currently only applies to children aged five years old or younger.

² 'The Learning Country: Vision into Action 2006'

- 6 This interim remit report identifies how well the programme is implemented across Wales and whether the training is proving beneficial. The full report will be published in 2011.
- 7 The evidence base for the report draws on:
- a survey of training practice all local authorities by questionnaire or visit;
 - visits to 15 settings and schools across Wales;
 - discussions with 20 headteachers, lead practitioners in settings and Foundation Phase co-ordinators;
 - visits to or telephone interviews with three major training organisations;
 - a survey of Foundation Phase Development officers funded by the Welsh Assembly Government to support the Foundation Phase in the voluntary sector; and
 - scrutiny of documentary evidence, including all Estyn inspections reports on settings and primary schools inspected in the 2008-2009 academic year.

Terminology

Throughout the report, the terms below are used as follows:

‘Under-fives practitioner’ is used for teaching and non-teaching staff who teach children of five years of age or younger in settings and schools.

‘Practitioners working with older children’ refers to teaching and non-teaching staff in schools who teach children of six and seven years of age.

‘Local authority advisory staff’ include all staff involved in training and supporting practitioners, such as Foundation Phase Training and Support Officers.

‘Setting’ means a non-maintained provider of education such as a playgroup.

Main findings

Who has been trained?

- 8 The Welsh Assembly Government collects information from local authorities on the number of staff attending modules of the National Training Programme. Although local authorities record attendance at training events in different ways records do give information on the overall numbers trained. However, the information does not show whether the staff are under-fives practitioners or practitioners working with older children. Nor does it show what proportion of the workforce in each local authority has been trained.
- 9 Local authority evidence indicates that most under-fives practitioners have been trained in at least one of the five core modules of the National Training Programme. Fewer practitioners working with older children have been trained and planning by local authorities to train and support these practitioners working with older children is generally at an early stage.

Delivery and access

- 10 Overall, training has been well organised by local authorities, so that most practitioners from settings and schools can choose when to attend training. The model of training that is most often used is a single day or half-day of training for individual practitioners from schools and settings. This pattern of provision can be disruptive and not cost effective. This is because practitioners may regularly be absent at training and supply cover is needed. Although most local authorities offer additional training sessions for settings, practitioners still find it difficult to access training.
- 11 Where training sessions are grouped together over a period of about a month, practitioners have good opportunities to build successfully on their prior learning. Where training sessions are spread over a few months or longer, practitioners feel that they need more time to consolidate their learning.
- 12 Almost all local authorities provide additional guidance and training over and above the modules of the National Training Programme. Usually, this additional guidance and training is linked to authority-wide initiatives on teaching thinking skills or other skills development.
- 13 Many local authorities make good use of well-qualified practitioners on training. This is an effective way to share best practice. However, these practitioners are usually from the school sector and not enough is done to share good practice in this way between settings. Also, too little use has been made of the Foundation Phase pilot schools and settings to share good practice on training.

Training leaders and managers

- 14 Only a few local authorities offer specific training for headteachers and leaders in the Foundation Phase. This is an important gap in the Foundation Phase training

programme. Leaders do not get enough training on how to evaluate the effectiveness of new teaching approaches in developing children's learning.

Views of practitioners and local authorities

- 15 Practitioners generally believe that children's learning skills are improving due to the Foundation Phase, although it is not possible to attribute this improvement solely to the National Training Programme.
- 16 Local authorities also report that the National Training Programme is impacting positively upon practice and the learning environment within their schools and settings. In particular, practitioners are using indoors and outdoors environments more creatively to provide a more experiential curriculum.
- 17 The majority of local authorities believe that although advice and training are improving practitioners' confidence and understanding of planning and assessment, these areas still require more attention, particularly for less experienced or less confident practitioners. DCELLS has responded to this concern and recently produced additional guidance on planning.

Monitoring and evaluation

- 18 Many local authorities have audited provision for the Foundation Phase in their schools either through questionnaires or visits. When local authorities use this information well, targeted support is provided to schools based on identified needs. In contrast, in the majority of local authorities, practitioners ask for help when they feel that it is required and these practitioners are not always the most in need.
- 19 Only a few local authorities have formally audited provision in settings, although regular contact from advisory teachers means there is generally good knowledge of practice.
- 20 All local authorities monitor the quality of the Foundation Phase training by asking delegates to complete course evaluation questionnaires. Only a few local authorities, however, formally monitor the impact of the training on teaching and children's learning, through follow-up visits to schools and settings to observe practice.
- 21 While local authorities record the attendance of practitioners at training, the resulting information is not usually used well enough. Where training records are used effectively, the local authority has an overview of the training that practitioners and providers have accessed and are therefore better placed to meet individual needs.

Recommendations

Schools and settings should:

- R1 continue to share good practice with other schools and settings, within the local authority and across consortia; and
- R2 evaluate the impact of training on teaching and children's learning.

Local authorities should:

- R3 plan to introduce the National Training Programme to practitioners working with older children, while continuing to support under-fives practitioners;
- R4 revise how training modules are delivered, in order to minimise costs and disruption to schools and settings;
- R5 provide training in evaluating standards and provision for headteachers, Foundation Phase leaders and lead practitioners;
- R6 provide more accessible training to practitioners from settings;
- R7 make better use of information, including training information, to target support where it is most needed and to share good practice; and
- R8 monitor the impact of training, with a particular focus on children's learning.

The Welsh Assembly Government should:

- R9 require local authorities to provide more coherent data on the training accessed by practitioners; and
- R10 make sure that there is enough guidance for practitioners working with older children when revising the National Training modules.

How well is the Foundation Phase training programme being implemented across Wales?

Who has been trained?

- 22 Data returns from local authorities to the Welsh Assembly Government do not provide enough information about the proportion of practitioners who have been trained or whether they work with under fives or older children. Local authorities record practitioners' attendance at training in different ways which makes it difficult to have a clear national picture of how much training may still be required in each local authority to meet the needs of the Foundation Phase workforce.
- 23 Data returns nevertheless indicate that local authorities have provided at least some training for practitioners in schools and settings in at least some, if not all, of the five core modules since the National Training Programme began in September 2007. Most local authorities report that they have prioritised training for practitioners working with the under-fives in line with the phased introduction of the Foundation Phase.
- 24 All local authorities provide 'mop-up' training for practitioners who may have missed the original training. A minority of local authorities also offer training to practitioners in schools who work with older children of six or seven years of age. The training of these practitioners will be a priority for local authorities in the coming year, as the curriculum becomes statutory for six-year-olds in September 2010. However, not all local authorities have planned well enough to manage this extra training, alongside providing training on new modules such as transition, as well as supporting current under-fives Foundation Phase practitioners.

Delivery and access

- 25 Local authorities use a variety of methods to deliver training. Most training sessions are 'one-off' training days or half-days for individual practitioners from schools and settings. In some instances, practitioners are able to choose one of several dates to attend training. This provides flexibility, but does not always foster networking between practitioners to share good practice and concerns as different practitioners may attend different sessions. Some local authorities fund supply cover for any practitioner who wishes to attend training. This model ensures as many practitioners as possible are trained, but the number of days spent out on training, as well as the cost of supply cover, can be considerable for schools with a large number of eligible staff.
- 26 Alternatively, a few local authorities train only one or two practitioners from each school or setting, irrespective of the size of providers. This pattern of training has the benefit of reducing supply cover costs and the total number of days that practitioners are absent from their place of work. However, the model relies on knowledgeable practitioners disseminating the training in schools and settings.
- 27 In the best practice, one day or half-day training sessions are clustered together over about a month. This provides continuity in practitioners' learning and good opportunities to build on what has been learned previously. Where modules are not

clustered in this way, it may be several months before practitioners access all of the modules. This means that much that has been learned may have been forgotten.

- 28 A few authorities deliver training to clusters of schools and settings. In this model, one or two practitioners from each school or setting in an area would attend training together. This has been beneficial in developing a support mechanism for practitioners and in sharing good practice.
- 29 Whole-school or cluster training on school closure days is also offered in some local authorities largely on request. This model, whether at individual school or cluster level, allows significant numbers of practitioners to be trained together at one time with a minimum of disruption.
- 30 Many local authorities have adapted training material to offer 'taster sessions' to a wide range of partners such as governors, parents and local authority elected members. These sessions are useful in raising general awareness of the Foundation Phase. More specific training is also offered to support-service staff working directly in schools and settings and for teachers supporting planning, preparation and assessment time in schools.
- 31 In many local authorities, good provision is made for Welsh-speaking practitioners. In these local authorities, practitioners can choose the medium of their training. In local authorities where training through the medium of Welsh is not available, presentation slides and materials are generally bilingual. However, practitioners in these authorities do not always feel that their needs are fully understood or met.
- 32 Almost all local authorities supplement the National Training Programme with additional training such as training on specific areas of learning. Many local authorities have produced high-quality further guidance to support practitioners on, for example, planning and assessment, children's skills, use of role play, outdoor learning and play. Most local authorities provide additional support and guidance through regular newsletters, interactive websites, CD-ROMs, drop-in sessions or surgeries for practitioners. Practitioners in non-maintained settings are, however, not usually able to access this additional support.
- 33 Not all practitioners in settings are attending the training that they should. This is because these practitioners cannot find supply cover to attend training during the day and are unable to attend training at weekends and evenings. Further, training venues are not always easily accessible by public transport or easy to find. A few local authorities have been proactive in encouraging attendance at training by making attendance a requirement of registration as a provider of education. While this does ensure attendance at training, it can also foster resentment.
- 34 In over half of all local authorities, training is provided for settings by link advisory teachers who have attended the same training in the past. This is seen as important in these authorities, as link advisory teachers know the training needs of these practitioners. In a few authorities, link advisory teachers will occasionally cover the absence of the setting leader to allow for extra in-house support on issues such as planning.

- 35 Currently, the Welsh Assembly Government funds Foundation Phase Development officers in the voluntary sector³. Generally, these officers have appropriate links with local authority advisory staff through representation on Foundation Phase fora and working parties. They also support and train staff within their own organisations about Foundation Phase issues. However, their role in supporting settings in implementing the Foundation Phase is not always clear.

Training leaders

- 36 Although local authorities try to keep headteachers and Foundation Phase leaders or lead practitioners well informed about the Foundation Phase, only a few offer specific training for leading and managing the Foundation Phase. This is an important gap in the Foundation Phase training programme as research evidence suggests that the engagement of headteachers and senior managers in leading and managing this initiative is an important factor in its success⁴. In particular, leaders do not get enough training on how to evaluate the effectiveness of new teaching approaches on children's learning.

Monitoring and evaluation

- 37 All local authorities track the attendance of practitioners at National Training modules and at Foundation Phase training offered through the Better School Fund or early entitlement funding. However, this information is not always collated well enough to offer an overview of the amount of training individual practitioners are receiving or to identify whether additional training is needed. This means that practitioners may be repeating training needlessly. For example, in one very good school visited, practitioners were successfully implementing the Foundation Phase. The headteacher had been proactive in making sure that staff had accessed a variety of training courses before the National Training Programme began. Nevertheless, both teaching and non-teaching staff, attended most of the five core modules of the national training programme, even though the training often repeated information they already knew.
- 38 All local authorities evaluate training sessions in a variety of ways. Evaluations of training sessions by delegates show generally high levels of satisfaction with course content and delivery. In almost all instances, the local authorities report that course evaluations have helped to inform the planning of future training courses. For instance, one training organisation in south-east Wales has identified the need for more training on leadership issues, while a local authority in north Wales has identified the need for more training on planning.
- 39 All local authorities, have monitored and evaluated the impact of training on classroom organisation and pedagogy formally or informally. In a few authorities, advisory staff systematically follow up training in classes to make sure that practitioners are trying out ideas and exploring new ways of working. However, there has been no formal monitoring and evaluation by local authorities of the impact of changes in practice on children's learning.

³ MYM, Wales PPA, NCMA, NDNA

⁴ Monitoring and Evaluation of the Effective Implementation of the Foundation Phase (MEEIFP) Project Across Wales December 2006

What is the impact of the Foundation Phase training programme on learning and teaching?

- 40 A review of a representative sample of inspection reports across schools and settings in the 2008-2009 academic year shows that:
- children's standards in personal and social development, wellbeing and cultural development are particularly high in schools and settings;
 - teaching for under-five children in schools and settings has improved. The improvement is particularly strong in settings, so that the gap between the quality of teaching in schools and in settings is narrowing; and
 - most practitioners show a willingness to try out new ideas and adapt classroom practices to suit the requirements of the Foundation Phase.
- 41 While the indications above are a positive sign, they should be treated with caution. It is too early in the implementation of the Foundation Phase to be able to judge whether this improvement will become a long-term trend. Also, practitioners in schools are also implementing a range of other initiatives and strategies that are designed to improve standards and teaching. As a result of the existence of these initiatives, it is difficult to attribute improvements in the Foundation Phase solely to the National Training Programme.

Views of practitioners and local authorities

Learning

- 42 Local authorities and practitioners report that there have been discernible improvements in children's learning as a result of changes in teaching approaches. They say that children:
- are showing greater independence. Most practitioners in schools and settings have organised the learning environment in such a way that children are able to access resources easily. Children can get what they need without always asking for help, making them less reliant on adults;
 - are demonstrating improved problem solving and thinking skills through planned and unplanned activities that encourage them to think for themselves;
 - are more engaged in their learning, particularly boys. Practitioners report that the greater freedom of choice of activities, many of which are outside the school building, is particularly suiting boys;
 - have increased in confidence because many of the activities offered are play-based where children are more inclined to 'have a go' and try things out without feeling pressure to get things right the first time;

- have an improved sense of wellbeing as shown by the higher levels of enjoyment in the activities they undertake; and
- are improving their speaking and listening skills with better opportunities for co-operative play and more time set aside for children to 'talk'.

Teaching

- 43 Many practitioners say that they are making better use of the outdoors as an exciting and stimulating additional learning environment where children can develop their skills across all Areas of Learning. Children, for instance, go on 'Wellie Walks' or learn to make loud music or paint large pictures in 'Big Music' and 'Big Art' areas outdoors.
- 44 Many practitioners are also spending more time talking to and interacting with their children. Children are encouraged to say what they want to find out about topics and themes and will often direct how their learning develops.
- 45 Practitioners have worked hard to create learning areas or zones within their classes or settings. In the best practice, learning areas provide choices for children and encourage their independence.
- 46 Planning for the Foundation Phase is developing appropriately in many schools and the majority of settings. Overall, planning is weaker in settings because practitioners do not generally have the experience that practitioners in schools have to ensure appropriate progression in children's learning. However, even when practitioners are planning well for the Foundation Phase they are sometimes concerned whether what they are doing is 'correct'. Where practitioners have difficulty in planning a suitable curriculum they are uncertain about how to plan for:
- enhanced and focused activities;
 - an appropriate balance of activities between child-led and practitioner-led activities; and
 - challenge and support for the more-able children.
- 47 Overall, observation of children during child-led and adult-directed activities by practitioners is continuing to develop appropriately. Where practitioners are doing this well, they make good use of the information to plan suitable activities that consolidate or extend children's learning.

Delivery and access

- 48 Practitioners' networks, both formal and informal, are particularly valued for the opportunities they provide for sharing ideas and for discussing what works well and what does not. In small schools and settings, the chance to meet with other colleagues to share experiences is particularly important.

- 49 Discussions with practitioners show that the 'blanket' approach to training has not suited all practitioners. Knowledgeable and proactive practitioners have, for instance, accessed training on such things as children's involvement, wellbeing, play and active learning before the National Training Programme was implemented and have felt that aspects of the modules repeated what they already knew. Alternatively, practitioners with very little experience of the pedagogical issues associated with the Foundation Phase found that the training was insufficiently focused on these issues to meet their needs.

Appendix

Case Study 1

Flintshire local authority systematically monitors the impact of training in schools and targets support to meet the needs of individuals.

Context

Flintshire local authority developed a strategy for the delivery of the National Training Programme for the Foundation Phase that is closely linked to monitoring and support. Training days are always followed up by schools visits.

Strategy

The local authority provided training in school clusters of about 12 schools. Class teachers and support assistants attend training together. The same practitioners were encouraged to attend each training day in order to support a networking of practitioners. The five core modules were delivered over six days with schools agreeing to fund the cost of supply for the additional day.

Action

The five core modules were carefully divided up between the six days to allow time for practitioners to complete tasks back in school. The first three days training was delivered consecutively. On day three, practitioners are asked to undertake an activity back in their schools. Advisory staff then visit each school to monitor the impact of the training, discuss the outcomes of the task and provide further guidance if necessary. A gap of six weeks is allowed between day three of the training and the completion of the training modules, which are again delivered consecutively. In the six week intervening period, practitioners are expected to try out a variety of tasks. Part of day four is then spent discussing their tasks and sharing their experiences.

Outcomes

Advisory staff have good overview of how successfully training is being implemented and are well placed to provide any additional in-school support. Practitioners evaluate the model of delivery very highly as it allows them to share concerns and listen to how others have overcome problems. Informal networking between practitioners who have attended training together is developing well.

Case study 2

Wrexham local authority provides additional support for practitioners through early evening 'drop-in' sessions.

Context

Wrexham local authority has set up a Foundation Phase classroom and outdoor learning area in a training venue. The classroom and outdoor learning area are used for regular 'drop in' sessions where practitioners can meet with advisory staff, review resources and try out activities.

Strategy

The classroom and outdoor learning area are key features of the additional support provided for practitioners. The relaxed and informal atmosphere encourages practitioners to ask questions and seek guidance.

Action

Practitioners from both schools and settings regularly attend the 'drop-in sessions'. The classroom and outdoor learning area contain many practical ideas for developing continuous, enhanced and focused activities. Displays and ideas are changed regularly. Foundation Phase advisory staff are on hand to provide help and support. Practitioners' planning is frequently discussed and advice given on possible improvements.

Outcome

"Talking to the experts really helps." Practitioners feel that they are well supported and are given relevant and pertinent advice when they need it most. Advisory staff make good use of the classroom and outdoor learning area to encourage practitioners to think creatively about using resources. For instance, the outdoor area contains many interesting planters made from recyclable materials such as milk cartons and old footwear.

Case study 3

Rhondda Cynon Taff has audited provision in its schools to identify good practice and areas for development.

Context

Rhondda Cynon Taf worked with its advisory service to audit provision for the Foundation Phase in schools during summer term 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide the local authority with a comprehensive overview of how well the Foundation Phase was being implemented and to help them with forward planning.

Strategy

The audit focused on assessment, leadership and management and use of resources. All relevant schools were sent a copy of an audit based on a four point scoring system and asked to self-assess their progress against certain criteria. Approximately 98% of these schools were then visited by a link adviser.

Action

The completed copy of the audit formed the basis of discussions between the link adviser and the headteacher and occasionally Foundation Phase leaders. Joint classroom observations were also made to assess the use of resources including the use of outdoors and the deployment of staff. Agreement was then reached as to the most appropriate grade to award for assessment, leadership and management and resource. The audit outcomes from each school visit were then recorded on a data base and a summary report produced.

Outcome

The summary report provided the local authority with good information about what is working well. It identified best practice in schools and where and what additional support was needed. Practitioners' future training needs were highlighted together with improvements required to some school buildings to make them fit for purpose. This provided the local authority with appropriate and relevant information for future planning.

Glossary/references

The Foundation Phase	an experiential active learning curriculum for children three to seven years of age
Settings	non-maintained providers of education such as playgroups
MYM	Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin (a voluntary organisation that provides Welsh-medium pre-school education)
Wales PPA	Wales Pre-school Providers Association (a voluntary organisation that provides English-medium pre-school education)
NCMA	National Childminding Association
NDNA	National Day Nurseries Association

The remit author and survey team

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