Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund:

Evaluation Overview

Helen Ranns, Sandra Mathers, Alison Moody, Arjette Karemaker, Jenny Graham, Kathy Sylva and Iram Siraj-Blatchford

Department for
Education

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1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Graduate Leader Fund and policy context

Since 2006 the Government has provided funding through the Transformation Fund (TF) to help transform and professionalise the early years workforce and to deliver the Ten Year Strategy for Childcare. A total of £250 million was made available for local authorities (LAs) to develop a graduate-led workforce within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors. In April 2008 the TF was superseded by the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF), which provided a further £305 million in funding to support full day care PVI sector providers in employing a graduate or EYP by 2015. LAs were free to administer the fund as they saw appropriate for their local PVI sector. GLF funding ended in March 2011; from April 2011 LAs have been funding EYPs through the Early Intervention Grant.

Underpinning the need to professionalise the early years workforce is evidence of the relationship between qualifications and the quality of early years provision, as well as differences in quality between the maintained and the PVI sector (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006, Sylva et al., 2003, and Taggart et al., 2003). In 2006 the Childcare Act removed the distinction between care and education for young children, and in 2007 the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum for the birth to five age range was introduced (DfES, 2007) and a new professional status for the early years workforce was established: the **Early Years Professional Status (EYPS).** The role of EYPs is to lead practice across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), supporting and mentoring others as well as modelling skills and good practice to secure high quality provision.

1.2 Evaluation design

In June 2007, the (former) Department for Education and Skills (DfES)[1] commissioned a consortium of researchers from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), University of Oxford and the Institute of Education (University of London) to undertake an evaluation of the TF. The aims and design of the evaluation were revised in August 2007 to reflect the policy transition from the TF to the GLF in 2008.

The main aim of the national evaluation was to **assess the implementation of the GLF and its impact on the quality of early years provision in the PVI sector**. All components of the evaluation are summarised in Figure 1.1, along with details of where each element is reported.

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[1] Most recently Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and since May 2010 the Department for Education (DfE).

Figure 1.1   Elements of the evaluation design and reporting details

Qualitative 'early implementation' case studies (2007)
Aim: to explore the early implementation of the Transformation Fund
Reported in: internal DfES interim report

Updated April–September 2009: GLF implementation case studies
Aim: to explore the early implementation of the Graduate Leader Fund
Reported in: Ranns et al. (2011) Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: GLF Implementation Case Studies

Baseline telephone survey (August-December 2007)
Aim: to assess take-up, interest in and implementation of the TF and to select the sample for the impact study
Reported in: internal DfES report

Literature review (initial review 2007; updated 2010)
Aim: to set the context for the study, inform the study design and aid interpretation of findings
Reported in: Chapter 2 of this report [Mathers et al. (2011) Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Final Report]; full review published separately (in press)

Impact study (November 2007-2010)

Baseline visits (November 2007-July 2008)
Aim: to gather baseline data on quality and setting characteristics prior to any settings gaining an EYP
Reported in: Karemaker et al. (2011) Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Factors relating to Quality (findings from the baseline study)

Analysis of change between baseline and follow-up
Aim: to assess changes in quality between baseline and follow-up, comparing settings which gained an EYP with those which did not
Reported in: Chapter 4 of this report (Mathers et al. (2011), see above)

Follow-up visits (February October 2010)
Aim: to gather follow-up data on quality and setting characteristics, both for settings that had gained an EYP or graduate since baseline and those that had not
Reported in: Chapter 5 of this report (Mathers et al. (2011), see above)

Qualitative case studies (June-October 2010)
Aim: to explore the facilitators and barriers to EYPs making a positive impact on quality within their settings, and to assess the views of parents
Reported in: Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this report (Mathers et al. (2011), see above)

This report summarises the findings from the following three published elements of the evaluation programme (carried out between 2008 and 2010):

1.2.1 Implementation case studies (Ranns et al., 2011)

Qualitative case studies were undertaken in six LAs to explore how the GLF was viewed and administered locally and to understand experiences of the GLF from childcare providers' perspectives, particularly in relation to decisions about participation, application processes and training. Within each LA, in-depth interviews were conducted with LA staff implementing the GLF and with staff working in settings who did and did not receive GLF funding.

1.2.2 The impact study (Karemaker et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2011)

The impact study was based on data gathered from a sample of 238 PVI settings visited at two time-points two years apart. At each time-point, quality was assessed using three rating scales: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years; the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged three to five years; and the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R), which assesses provision for children from birth to 30 months. Data were also gathered on the qualifications/status of all staff (e.g. EYPS, QTS), and a number of other characteristics thought to relate to quality of provision:

- other characteristics of childcare staff (e.g. experience, age)
- characteristics of the settings (e.g. size, sector)
- characteristics of the rooms observed (e.g. the age of children catered for, ratio)

The baseline quality assessments were carried out to 'set the scene' for the later impact assessment; at this stage none of the settings had an EYP in place. By the time of the follow-up assessments, 100 settings had a member of staff with a relevant Honours degree and 32 had gained an EYP. The main evaluation questions to be answered were "**does having an EYP improve quality?" and if so "which aspects of practice (and of quality) are most closely associated with EYP status?**

1.2.3 Qualitative case studies (Ranns et al., 2011)

Qualitative case studies in 12 settings were undertaken to complement the impact assessment by describing the nature of improvements made and identifying the levers, barriers and facilitators to quality improvement. Managers, EYPs and setting staff took part. A survey was also conducted with parents in these 12 settings to elicit their views on the quality of provision and perceptions of changes over time.

2 Key Findings

2.1 Implementation of the Graduate Leader Fund

LAs developed their GLF policies to best meet the needs of their local childcare sector. Consultation was undertaken with settings already in receipt of TF funding to gather feedback about the effectiveness of the different elements of the Fund and to ascertain which elements needed adaptation. LAs also undertook needs analysis across the PVI sector in order to design the most area-appropriate policies. The policies developed as a result retained the elements of the TF seen as valuable, whilst also setting locally appropriate incentive levels. At the time of the implementation case studies, LAs reported that the majority of settings accessing funding were training existing staff members to EYPS. This is consistent with the findings from the impact study that 86% of the participating EYPs had obtained their status while working at a setting.

LAs communicated their GLF policies through written literature and articles in training newsletters along with face to face promotion either at workshops, road shows or setting visits. Settings engaged with the GLF in four ways, depending on their views of the need for a professionalised early years workforce:

- active engagement – enthusiastic about the opportunities the GLF provides for upskilling staff
- passive engagement – not enthusiastic, but "going along with it"
- passive disengagement – did not view obtaining a graduate leader as a priority
- active disengagement – opposed to the aims of the GLF and resistant to employing graduates

Settings welcomed the additional funding provided by the GLF as it enabled them to either release staff to undergo training or to supplement graduate leader salaries. The absence of this kind of financial support in the future may be a barrier to the development of graduates in the PVI early years workforce.

2.2 Gaining Early Years Professional Status

Practitioners used funding from the GLF to undertake training to gain graduate qualifications and EYPS. The training pathway chosen depended on previous training and experience as well as more practical issues such as personal and work commitments and the location of training providers. Support was provided to trainee EYPs through course tutors and mentors, colleagues within settings and local EYP networks. Practitioners in the implementation case studies expressed a preference for the long EYP pathway (15 months) as it was felt to give sufficient time to gain both experience and complete the portfolio of evidence, when compared to shorter pathways.

2.3 The EYP sample

The impact assessment sample comprised 238 settings, of which 32 had gained an EYP during the course of the evaluation. At the time of the follow-up assessment approximately two thirds of these EYPs had held their status for at least 12 months. Most EYPs described themselves as either senior managers (e.g. setting manager) or line managers (e.g. deputy or room leader) and on average, they spent 35 per cent of their time working hands-on with the children. The majority (two fifths) of EYPs had achieved their status via the validation pathway or the short professional extended development pathway, and so were already qualified to degree level before acquiring EYPS.

2.4 The impact of Early Years Professional Status

Settings which gained a graduate leader with EYPS made significant improvements in quality for pre-school children (aged 30 months to 5 years) as compared with settings which did not. Gains were seen in overall quality and in a number of individual dimensions of practice. In addition EYPS provided 'added value' over and above gaining a graduate in terms of overall quality and (to a lesser extent) provision to support literacy/language and planning for individual needs/diversity. This supports previous evidence showing an impact of high level qualifications and sector-specific training on overall 'process quality' as well as on individual dimensions of practice such as sensitivity, responsiveness and the quality of social interactions, support for language/communication, and beliefs in the appropriateness of child-initiated learning (most recently cited in Norris, 2010).

2.4.1 EYPs as leaders of practice and the EYFS

EYP training is based around leading the delivery of the EYFS[2] (Brooker et al., 2010), as well as on the 39 EYP Standards (CWDC, 2006 and 2008). The evidence from the impact study indicates that EYPs were successful in leading implementation of the EYFS, with measurable impacts seen particularly in relation to support for language, communication and cognitive development, positive relationships and planning/providing for individual needs and diversity. This evidence is confirmed by EYPs' own reports of where they have been active and made improvements, both from the implementation study and the qualitative case studies. Many of the improvements reported in the qualitative case studies centred on child-led learning and meeting the needs of the individual child, for example: improved systems for planning, observation and assessment; the use of key worker systems where these were not already in place; a greater emphasis on child-initiated activities; and the use of free flow to support children's choice and active learning. The more time EYPs spent in rooms with children the greater the impact they made on the quality of provision in that room.

Conversely, EYPs did not have a measurable impact on three specific elements of provision: the physical environment, personal care routines and provision for parents and for staff. This is despite EYPs' reports in the qualitative case studies that they were

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[2] The English Early Years Curriculum Guidance

spending more time mentoring and working with other staff members and perceived improvements in many of these areas. Possible reasons for this lack of observed impact include the fact that the ECERS and ITERS 'subscales' which assess these three areas tend to focus on the more 'structural' aspects of provision (i.e. those likely to be under the remit of the manager rather than the EYP); or the length of time EYPs had their status (less then two years for all EYPs in the research). Further research is recommended to determine the reasons for the 'lack of observed impact'.

2.4.2   Impact of EYPS on quality for infants and toddlers

Despite the guidance for EYPs to 'lead practice across the full age range from birth to the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage' (CWDC, 2010) there was little measurable impact of qualification level (and specifically EYPS) on quality of provision for the infant and toddler group (birth to 30 months). One possible explanation of this is that staff with the highest qualifications were less likely to work in the infant/toddler rooms. While 91 per cent of EYPs spent time working in pre-school rooms with the older children, less than half (44 per cent) spent time supporting practice in the infant/toddler rooms. On average, each EYP worked 18.4 hours a week in the pre-school room visited as part of the evaluation, but only 4.7 hours in the rooms providing for younger children. If, as previously identified, EYPs made the greatest impact on quality in the rooms in which they spent the most time, this may have affected their potential to impact on quality. However, we are not able to draw firm conclusions as to the reasons for the lack of impact of EYPS and of staff qualifications more broadly on quality for infants and toddlers.

2.4.3   Key factors for facilitating the future impact of EYPS

Within case study settings a number of drivers for improvement were identified: these included EYPs, wider staff teams and changes in management as well as factors external to a setting, such as the introduction of programmes supporting the EYFS and external sources of advice. The successful implementation of improvements in the settings was influenced by facilitators and barriers including: the EYP role, the degree of planning undertaken, other staff in the setting, external support, parents and structural features of the setting.

Leadership

The EYPS guidance suggests that EYPs need to be able to 'work skilfully with others' and that to do this they require a range of skills including 'emotional intelligence' and the ability to draw on a repertoire of strategies for inspiring, influencing and negotiating with others (CWDC, 2010, p.7). EYPs and staff who participated in both the implementation and impact case studies saw effective leadership skills and abilities as essential in enabling them to implement their new knowledge and skills effectively, and to act as catalysts for change. EYPs also needed the support of all other staff in the setting, along with their own managers, to successfully implement changes. EYPs need to be involved in sharing their own knowledge and skills with other staff through providing support and mentoring, and also modelling good practice with children.

Defined role and remit

EYPs identified the importance of having a clearly defined remit for the EYP which sets out what they are responsible for within the setting, and is also communicated to other staff. This was especially important to give EYPs the authority to lead practice and staff development within their setting. EYPs also identified the need to have protected time within their role for curriculum leadership and staff mentoring, free from both managerial responsibilities and from being counted in adult-child ratios.

EYPS is still a new qualification status when compared to qualified teacher status (QTS) and the status is still being embedded within the sector. Given the increase in quality associated with gaining an EYP for pre-schoolers it important for EYPS to gain wider recognition amongst sector staff as well as wider recognition within and outside the sector.

Position within the setting

EYPs reported that in order to lead practice within a setting they needed to hold a position of management, either as setting manager or room leader. This facilitated EYPs in bringing about change by giving them the necessary authority and also acknowledgment from staff working in the setting. However, involvement in management also needs to be combined with contact time with children, as EYPs had the greatest impact on the quality of rooms where they worked. Time spent in rooms was useful to identify possible areas for developing provision, and also to model practice to other staff members. On average, EYPs reported spending 35 per cent of their time working hands-on with the children (down from 48 per cent before gaining EYPS). The most effective approach was felt to encompass both clear managerial authority and contact time with children.

Planning for improvement

Settings reported that making improvements to practice was an ongoing process, which involved assessments of change undertaken either through internal or external assessments. Planning change was crucial to the successful delivery of improvement; a clear rationale for change needed to be developed with staff fully engaged in the implementation process. This involved discussing change, piloting new approaches, modelling practice, mentoring and supporting staff in understanding the reasons for change and the potential benefits. The impact study showed that major changes within a setting were associated with lower quality, however temporarily. The disruptive nature of upheaval highlights the need for change to be managed to reduce the negative impacts it can have. Ongoing and incremental change may therefore be a more useful model than periodic large scale improvements to practice. Within the implementation case studies, staff absence was felt to lead to a reduction in quality of provision, due to the additional strain and burden placed on remaining staff while trainee EYPs undertake pathways; careful planning should take place to limit this burden and any associated negative impacts on quality.

Continuing professional development

Continuing opportunities for professional development and support were identified by EYPs as important in enabling them to consolidate and extend the knowledge gained during their training. EYPs also highlighted the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) in relation to planning for change and successful self-evaluation. Local networks were seen as a valuable resource for training and for keeping up to date with new developments.

Wider staff team

EYPs reported being involved in working with the wider staff teams within their settings, to develop their skills and expertise and also to engage them with changes that they were making. This was felt to be especially important where other staff did not have higher level qualifications. Staff members found it valuable to have an EYP to be able to explain the theory behind childcare approaches and changes which they were making, enabling them to successfully deliver the improved provision.

The impact evidence also highlights the importance of the qualifications and experience of the wider staff team working alongside EYPs in delivering the EYFS. Data collected at the baseline, when no EYPs were in post showed that for children aged 30 months to 5 years having a teacher or graduate on the staff team led to higher quality of provision. Teachers were particularly associated with higher quality in the more 'curricular' or 'educational' aspects of provision[3].

Both the baseline and follow-up quality assessments also identified the importance of having a well qualified staff team overall, particularly for the 30 months to 5 year age range. At the baseline stage, the qualifications being worked towards by the whole staff team were an important predictor of quality. Analysis of the follow-up data showed that rooms with better qualified staff teams offered higher quality overall provision for pre-school children, which supports previous evidence (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). However, as noted previously, no significant impact of qualifications on quality in infant and toddler rooms was identified.

Experienced staff teams offered higher quality of provision across the birth to five age range, particularly for the more 'care-based elements' of provision and aspects of the physical environment. The impact assessments found that for the infant and toddler groups, experience (measured as 'length of service') mattered more than qualifications, adding further evidence to the well-rehearsed debate about the relative importance of qualifications and experience. As it is clear that experience and qualifications are multi-faceted constructs, we recommend further research to identify precisely which features of each are beneficial for quality, particularly for the under threes.

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[3] During the course of the evaluation there were not sufficient numbers of settings gaining a teacher to draw conclusions on the relative impact of EYPS and qualified teacher status (QTS). The reader should therefore view the findings of this evaluation in the context of other research within the field.

Links with parents and other professionals

The recent review of the EYFS (Tickell, 2011) recommends that 'greater emphasis is given in the EYFS to the role of parents and carers as partners in their children's learning', and is a particularly core area for EYPs in comparison to early years teachers. EYPs reported making changes to increase parents' involvement in their child's development, improving practitioner-parent relationships, involving parents in activities and social events and improving communication with parents. Parents reported feeling involved in settings in a number of different ways, through either providing feedback or attending parents boards, and also being actively involved in their child's development. These changes did not translate into measurable change in the impact study; however this aspect of practice is only measured very lightly by the ECERS and ITERS.

EYPs also reported receiving valuable support from LA early years advisors when planning and implementing changes in settings. Advisors offered specialist knowledge of EYFS delivery and were regarded as experts by setting managers and owners, lending credence to proposed changes. EYP networks were also utilised by EYPs as an opportunity to share best practice with other EYPs and also receive additional training.

Other structural features of the setting

Two other structural features of settings had a bearing on quality; the staff-child ratio and the size of the setting and group. Findings from both the baseline quality and impact study support previous research (Phillips et al., 1992; Howes et al., 1992; NICHD ERCCRN, 1996, 2000) in suggesting that lower staff-child ratios lead to higher quality provision across the birth to five age range, being associated with higher quality interactions for pre-school children, as well as higher quality care routines and a more appropriate and individualised schedule for younger children. The follow-up analysis found that larger settings offered higher quality physical environments and higher quality practice in some areas, perhaps benefiting from greater diversity in resources and staff knowledge/experience as well as more general economies of scale. Larger settings also offered higher quality provision for parents and for staff, possibly because they had larger staff teams with more formal and identifiable structures for staff support and development, and can sustain more extensive facilities for staff and parents. However, achieving change within larger settings was identified in the case studies as requiring additional strategies to be effectively achieved. Prior research on group and setting size is inconclusive and indeed analysis of the baseline quality data did not identify any associations between size and quality. This is an area which would benefit from further research in the UK context if policy conclusions are to be drawn.

Private settings offered lower quality in a number of areas when compared with not-for-profit settings. This is supported by previous research from other countries such as the US and Canada (Cleveland, 2008; Sosinky et al., 2007; Phillipsen et al., 1997; Friesen, 1995; Phillips, Howes & Whitebook, 1992; Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1990). However within

the UK where the maintained sector has consistently been identified as offering higher quality provision than the PVI sector, differences between the private and voluntary sector are less clear cut (Sylva et al., 2010). In a mixed economy of childcare the sector or 'aegis' of settings is clearly an issue of interest and relevance in the quality debate.

Finally, EYPs interviewed for the research identified a supportive physical environment as smoothing the path to improvement. For example, having access to the outdoor environment was seen as important in being able to offer high quality, as were features of the building that supported the provision of free flow and planning for children's choice.

Quality for specific groups

Settings which catered for a greater proportion of children with SEN offered more developmentally appropriate schedules for children from birth to five, and higher quality interactions for the younger age range. These are positive findings, suggesting that settings which cater for these potentially vulnerable children are doing a good job of meeting their needs.

The findings of this evaluation identify a worrying link between disadvantage and the quality of provision offered to children, with settings catering for higher proportions of minority groups and children speaking EAL being rated as lower quality, in comparison to settings catering for lower proportions of these groups. Settings in more income deprived areas also offered lower quality than settings in more affluent areas. It is likely that these factors form a set of inter-related characteristics, also correlated with other 'risk' markers such as lone parent status, low maternal education and unemployment. These findings are supported by previous research in the US (LoCasale et al., 2007; Pianta et al., 2002; Loeb et al., 2004; Phillips et al., 1994). Possible explanations for this finding (based on previous research) include the more complex needs amongst the children or families themselves; making it more challenging to provide high quality. The association may also be related to demand or supply issues (e.g. settings in income deprived areas are providing lower quality due to difficulties with sustainability and cash-flow).

3 Issues for consideration

The recent review of the Early Years Foundation Stage suggests that 'without continued investment in the early years workforce, the Government will continue to struggle to raise attainment, and in particular to narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers' (Tickell, 2011). On the basis of this evaluation, our recommendations include:

- Continued support and financial assistance for the development of a high level graduate-led workforce, on the basis that effective leaders are central to implementing government policy in improving the quality of early years provision. Alongside this, the further development of a long term workforce and qualifications strategy for all levels of staff, to ensure better early years provision for future generations.

- LAs should work alongside local settings to support the future development of EYPs in PVI settings through the Early Intervention Grant. Settings as far as possible should be consulted in the design and communication of future approaches to increase engagement with raising qualification levels within the PVI sector.

- Based on evidence that EYPs are not being deployed to work with the youngest children, settings should be encouraged to consider whether their graduate leaders are leading practice across the birth to five age range. Coupled with this, research is required to establish the most effective ways of raising quality for our youngest children through workforce development.

- Ensuring that training for EYPs is of the highest quality, and contains effective support to help them achieve their full potential in leading quality across the EYFS and across settings, and to overcome barriers to improvement. This should include training in effective leadership skills, change management and reflective self-evaluation, and effective strategies for working in partnership with parents.

- Ensuring that opportunities are provided for EYPs and other staff to develop 'purposeful' hands-on experience alongside their development of specialised knowledge.

- Ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) for EYPs once they have achieved their status, to enable them to embed and further develop their skills as change agents and leaders of learning.

- Ensuring that EYPs and other staff are supported by the structural characteristics of settings which provide the bedrock for high quality, such as supportive adult-child ratios and physical environments.

- A defined role and remit for EYPs, as well as clear guidance for settings on how to develop these and communicate them to staff. An effective remit should provide EYPs with the authority needed to act as a catalyst for change, while also reflecting the importance of time spent working hands-on with children.

- Continued movement towards the recognition of EYPS as a specific leadership profession.

The evaluation also makes a number of recommendations for future research, which are outlined in full in Chapter 9 of the Final Report. Key recommendations include:

- Further research to systematically evaluate the impact of the different pathways on quality and children's outcomes, and to explore exactly which aspects of training and staff experience lead to positive benefits.

- Ongoing research to assess the longer-term impacts of EYPS in ensuring high quality provision for children, to establish whether early impacts are sustained, and to capture the impact of EYPS at setting-level.

- Research to establish the most effective ways of raising quality for our youngest children (i.e. under threes) through workforce development.

- Future research should also pay regard to the inter-relatedness of different high level qualifications/statuses, including EYPS and QTS, to further inform the cohesive development of a graduate led workforce and a clear career path for early years practitioners.

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