

## *Developing the Foundation Phase for 3–7-year-olds in Wales*

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### ABSTRACT

The Foundation Phase is a national reform programme of the Welsh Assembly Government that has been developed to improve the quality and continuity of provision for children aged 3–7 years. It is based on a more experiential and play-based pedagogy and seven areas of learning. This paper reports on the final evaluation of the Foundation Phase pilot for 3–5 year olds which ran from 2004–2006 in 41 settings across the 22 local authorities in Wales (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). Most stakeholders have received the Foundation Phase Curriculum with enthusiasm and some settings made very good advances in their implementation of the Foundation Phase within the short period of the evaluation. But the evaluation also found evidence of a significant overall reduction in the quality of staff-child and child-child interaction, and in provisions for early literacy. The perceptions of

improvements in language development and oracy skills held by many practitioners and some advisors were found to contrast significantly with these findings. Practitioners' understandings of key concepts such as experiential learning and play varied greatly and the proportion of trained teachers was found to be directly related to quality in all of the pilot settings and classes. The overall quality of provision was also found to be significantly higher in maintained settings compared to non-maintained settings.

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### *Introduction*

The Foundation Phase is a national reform programme of the Welsh Assembly Government that has been developed to improve the quality and continuity of provision for children aged 3–7 years. Two policy documents published by the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) have been particularly influential in the development of this new initiative for children: *The Learning Country* (NAfW, 2001a) sets out the agenda for education in Wales up to 2010, and *Iaith Pawb (Everyone's Language)* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002a) aims for Wales to become a more fully bilingual country by 2011. The curriculum for 3–5-year-olds in Wales is currently provided under the six areas of learning outlined in the *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning before Compulsory School Age* (ACCAC, 2nd edn, 2000). The national curriculum for Wales currently applies to children between 5 and 7 years of age.

The main feature of the provision for 3–5-year-olds is the variety and range that exists: from Nursery Schools and Integrated Centres to early years classes in schools (mainly nursery and reception classes), through private day nursery provision to pre-school playgroups and child minders. Equally varied and complex is the take-up of the provision by parents and carers. Indeed, for one child several different providers may be used. For example, a 3-year-old child might begin and end the day with a child minder who would take him/her to nursery school or class for part of the week and perhaps to a playgroup on one or two other occasions. According to the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) statistics for 2003/4, 75 per cent of 3-year-olds and 80.6 per cent of 3- and four-year-olds attend some form of nursery education (NAfW, 2005). In that year there were 34 LEA maintained nursery schools and 1,588 maintained primary schools in Wales (NAfW, 2005).

Provision for 3–5-year-olds is offered in both Welsh and English. The Welsh nursery association, Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin (MYM), offers

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playgroups and nurseries through the medium of Welsh; 82.6 per cent of those children transfer to Welsh-medium or bilingual primary school (Wyn Siencyn, 2004). In some areas, usually cities, other bilingual language provision is offered, especially in school settings where bilingual assistants speak the children's community language, through the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS).

*Evolution and development of the Foundation Phase*

The first step towards a new curriculum for Early Years Education in Wales was the establishment of an entitlement for young children's learning through the *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning before Compulsory School Age* (ACCAC, 2nd edn, 2000). This created a curriculum around six areas of learning for the Under-5s.

In 1999 Estyn, the organization responsible for inspecting provision, reported on standards and quality in the Early Years, which they found to be satisfactory or better in 85 per cent of settings in the maintained but only 55 per cent of the non-maintained sector. They noted aspects for improvement which were subsequently to form the bedrock of the new Foundation Phase 3–7:

- Formal skills of reading and writing were being introduced too soon.
- An unduly narrow range of opportunities for children to show initiative and be independent learners.
- Insufficient opportunity for outdoor play.
- Limited opportunity for creative play in music and dance.
- Insufficient involvement of parents.
- Staff insufficiently qualified in child development and its impact on planning and assessment.

Since 2000 the development of the Foundation Phase has become a sustained curriculum initiative. In 2000 NAFW published its Interim Report, *Early Years Provision for Three Year Olds* and in 2001 its Final Report, *Laying the Foundation: Early Years Provision for Three Year Olds*. These two documents focused on the principles of excellence for Early Years Education, using evidence from several European countries which had innovative and successful practice in the 0–7 years continuum. In 2001, *The Learning Country* was published (NAFW, 2001a). The Foundation Phase was a central feature

of this document, which set down the framework for the development of education across all age phases in Wales over a ten-year period.

The evolution of the Foundation Phase can be illustrated by the following table showing policy documents and reports between 2000 and early 2007. These culminated in the publication of *Building the Foundation Phase – Action Plan*. This is a key document which sets out how implementation of the Foundation Phase will be supported until its projected full implementation for 3–5-year-olds throughout Wales in September 2008 and for 3–7-year-olds by 2010.

**Table 1 The development of the Foundation Phase in Wales**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Document Title</i>
NAfW (2001a)	<i>The Learning Country: A Paving Document, a Comprehensive Education and Lifelong Learning Programme to 2010 in Wales</i>
WAG (2003a)	<i>The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase – 3 to 7 years</i>
WAG (2003b)	<i>Summary of Consultation Responses for The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase – 3 to 7 years</i>
WAG (2004)	<i>The Learning Country: The Foundation Phase – 3 to 7 years Action Plan</i>
ACCAC (2004)	<i>The Foundation Phase in Wales: A Draft Framework for Children's Learning</i>
Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2006)	<i>Foundation Phase Pilot: Final Evaluation Report</i>
DELLS (2006)	<i>Building the Foundation Phase – Action Plan</i>

In the early stages of development a Project Board was established to oversee the roll-out of the Foundation Phase and 41 settings were chosen across the 22 local authorities in Wales as pilots for September 2004. These represented the range of settings for 3–4-year-old children in Wales. As the scale of the implementation was very large and it was to be achieved within a short time, policy sub groups were created to oversee aspects of implementation. These had responsibility for the learning framework, finance, monitoring and evaluation, and training and development.

The Assembly Government agency responsible for curriculum and assessment, ACCAC, produced guidance material in draft form in 2004: *The Foundation Phase in Wales: A Draft Framework for Children's Learning*. This, along with guidance materials on all seven areas of learning in addition to guidance on play and child development, was produced as 'A Curriculum

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Framework for Children’s Learning’. Alongside this, a ‘National Assessment Continuum’ (WAG, 2004: 7) was to be developed to track children’s performance in the seven areas of learning in the Foundation Phase, and to link with the Programmes of Study and focus statements at Key Stage 2.

The Foundation Phase advocates children learning through first-hand, experiential activities and play, and places a child’s personal and social development and well-being at the heart of the curriculum. It contains seven areas of learning (AOLs):

- Personal and Social Development and Well-being;
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills;
- Mathematical Development;
- Bilingualism and Multicultural Understanding;
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World;
- Physical Development;
- Creative Development.

The 2007 revised documents now replace multicultural understanding with cultural diversity in the personal and social development domain. Bilingualism remains, but as a separate AOL.

From the initial conception of the Foundation Phase in Wales it has been clear that four focal theories of effective learning for young children have been implicit in its construction. These have been:

- the role of play;
- the need for a well-planned environment, including outdoor space, for learning;
- the importance of the ratio of trained staff to children; and
- the development of Welsh, English and bilingualism.

The implementation of the Foundation Phase in Wales has been monitored by the Foundation Phase Pilot: Final Evaluation Report (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) which provides the primary source for this paper.

*The Evaluation of the Foundation Phase in the first two years*

The Foundation Phase pilot for 3–5-year-olds ran from 2004–2006 in 41 settings across the 22 local authorities in Wales. Year 1 of the National Curriculum was added in 2005. The Foundation Phase Pilot Evaluation

(Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) was funded by the Welsh Assembly Government for both of these two years.

The following research questions were central to the evaluation:

1. What do recent research studies tell us about effective pedagogy and curriculum for children of ages 3–7?
2. What is the quality of provision provided by the pilot settings, and is it the *kind* of quality that has been shown to promote children's learning and attainment and meet the needs of the individual?
3. How does implementation differ for the Foundation Phase in the maintained and non-maintained sectors?
4. What are the perceptions of local authority partnerships, staff, parents and governors on the impact of the Foundation Phase in the pilot settings and the issues surrounding their implementation?
5. What are the main strengths of the Foundation Phase and where are the gaps, the filling of which would make the implementation more successful e.g. in management or identifying training needs?

#### *Methodology and sample*

The Welsh Assembly Government selected 41 pilot settings from a shortlist compiled by each local education authority (LEA), based on Welsh Assembly Government-prescribed criteria. Two settings were chosen from each of the 22 LEAs in Wales with the exception of three local authorities where there were no non-maintained sector settings funded to provide education. The settings covered a wide range of early education and childcare provision in Wales, including English-medium, Welsh-medium, and bilingual schools/settings, rural and urban schools/settings, small and large schools/settings and both private and voluntary settings in the non-maintained sector. Although the sample included all types of childcare and education providers the settings were not randomly selected by LEAs and therefore cannot be considered fully representative of settings across Wales.

The evaluation had both qualitative and quantitative components. A mixed-method approach was adopted, consisting of a literature review, systematic observations, the analysis of field notes, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and both formal and informal conversations involving all of the major stakeholders.

In the course of the evaluation process one field researcher visited each of the pilot settings four times, twice during each academic year between 2004

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and 2006; observations were conducted, practitioners and parents were interviewed. In addition, in both the first and second years of the pilot, the research team devised, piloted and conducted semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with quantitative and qualitative components to obtain the perceptions and opinions of all those involved in the pilot, including: headteachers, school governing bodies, owners/ managers/ management committees of non-maintained settings, LEA Directors of Education, LEA Early Years / Primary Advisors, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP), representatives from the non-maintained sector Associations, the Early Years Education and Safeguards Team (EYEST) at the Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DELLS) and representatives from institutions delivering Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITET) and courses in Early Education and Childcare (Further Education). High response rates were achieved during the study from every stakeholder group (mostly 100 per cent, 75 per cent for some groups) which ensured strong triangulation and the provision of reliable data and findings for evidence based policy development.

Four observational instruments were used to assess quality in the pre-school, Nursery, Reception and Year 1 or mixed Year 1/2 settings:

1. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer 1998) has been used extensively as a means of measuring quality of provision for 3–5-year-olds in Early Childhood Settings since its publication in the US. The scale has been adapted for use in different countries and translated into a number of languages. The basic scale has remained the same, with assessment of the quality of seven domains of provision: Space and Furnishings; Personal Care Routines; Language-Reasoning; Activities; Interaction; Program Structure; Parents and Staff.
2. In the UK, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2003; second edition 2006) was developed to supplement the ECERS-R, for use in the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004), because the ECERS-R did not examine in depth provision for developing emerging literacy, numeracy and scientific thinking. It also included a more detailed subscale to look at diversity issues such as gender, racial equality and meeting the needs of individual children.
3. The Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS) consists of 26 items focusing on the interactions between caregivers and children. The items are grouped

to produce four subscales: positive relationships, punitiveness, permissiveness and detachment. The CIS was developed by Arnett (1989).

- 'Positive relationships' is a subscale made up of ten items indicating warmth and enthusiasm and interaction with children by the caregiver.
  - 'Punitiveness' is a subscale made up of eight items indicating harsh or over-controlling behaviour in interaction with children by the caregiver.
  - 'Permissiveness' is a subscale made up of four items indicating avoidance of discipline and control of children by the caregiver.
  - 'Detachment' is a subscale made up of four items indicating lack of involvement in interaction with children by the caregiver.
4. It was also decided that an adapted version of the Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms (APEEC) (Hemmeter, Maxwell, Ault, Schuster, 2001) would be appropriate as its basic format was the same as the ECERS. However, as the scale was created in the USA there were items which were not appropriate for use in a British/Welsh classroom so these were removed and observations were made on a range of items covering the physical environment, instructional context, and social context.

In order to maintain consistency throughout the evaluation it was necessary in addition to make observations on provision for diversity within Year 1 (and mixed Year 1/2) classrooms. The decision was therefore made to include the items on this area from the ECERS-E instrument as, although aimed at 3–5-year-olds, they were not age-specific and therefore were considered appropriate in this context. Both elements were therefore combined to create an entirely new scale ECERS-EP which was used in conjunction with the CIS (Caregiver Interaction Scale) and revised versions of the new Welsh subscales amended again to be appropriate for use in Year 1 (and mixed Year 1/2) classrooms (see Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006).

It was also considered essential that we create two entirely new subscales to cater for the assessment of quality of provision for Welsh as a Second Language in English-medium schools and for Welsh as a first language in Welsh-medium schools (see Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006). Both of the new Welsh subscales were piloted in a variety of English- and Welsh-medium settings and discussed with practitioners and language specialists. Following this, some amendments were made to both scales in order to clarify certain indicators and ensure their suitability for Wales.



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All of these observational instruments were checked for reliability and validity (see Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006, Appendix D). The observers were trained in the use of systematic observations of quality for this age range and they achieved good inter-observer reliability with other teams in England and Northern Ireland.

*Summary of findings from the research**Effective pedagogy and curriculum for children of ages 3–7*

The effects of high-quality early years education, and the question of what it is that constitutes the most effective practice has been, and continues to be, researched widely both nationally and internationally. In the last decade a number of major reports have been particularly influential in informing policy, provision and practice. The most influential research was undertaken in America in the High/Scope Perry Pre-school study (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993) which has shown the long-term social and economic benefits of investing in high-quality pre-school programmes over a forty-year period. Similarly recent research studies for the American National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) have highlighted that the early childhood years are increasingly seen as a crucial period for the growth and consolidation of important cognitive, literacy and social skills necessary for successful school transition and later academic functioning (Chen, Lee and Stevenson, 1996 in NICHD, 2004: 1). Most recently, the findings from two major longitudinal studies, the UK-based 'Effective Provision of Pre-School Education' (EPPE) Project (Sylva *et al* 2004) and the New Zealand based 'Competent Children at 12' project (Wylie 2004), along with a number of NICHD studies (NICHD 2001; 2002; 2004; 2005) have provided robust evidence that high quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children. In the UK context we already know that this remains significant throughout Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 (EPPE 3–11, 2007).

The importance of play in early childhood development is widely acknowledged in early childhood literature and research (Bowman et al., 2001). The literature suggests that children actively seek challenges and are engaged in exploring, thinking and learning during play. They play with ideas, roles, knowledge and concepts as well as artefacts (Wood and Attfield, 1997; Siraj-Blatchford and McCallum, 2005). Divergent thinking is central

to both play and creativity, and play is motivating for young children; it has been seen to support problem solving (Sylva et al., 1976; Vandenberg, 1980) and the developing children's social skills (Smith and Cowie, 1991). Play is also important to the development of language, communication and literacy (Vedeler, 1997; Roskos and Christie, 2001).

It is now widely recognised that children's early learning is most effective when it engages children in first-hand experiences, and builds on their existing understandings (e.g. Ball, 1994; Bowman et al., 2001; Bruce, 1994). In addition, sustained and reciprocal adult-child interaction has been found to lead to favourable child development, including persistence in problem solving, high self-esteem, socially skilled behaviour, closer friendships and better peer relationships (Belsky and Cassidy, 1994; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). Research has contributed strongly to the development of a 'holistic ideology' (Hazareesingh et al., 1989) widely accepted within early childhood educational circles.

The EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2004; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) found that individual pre-schools varied in their 'effectiveness' for influencing a child's development, and children were found to make better all-round progress in settings where:

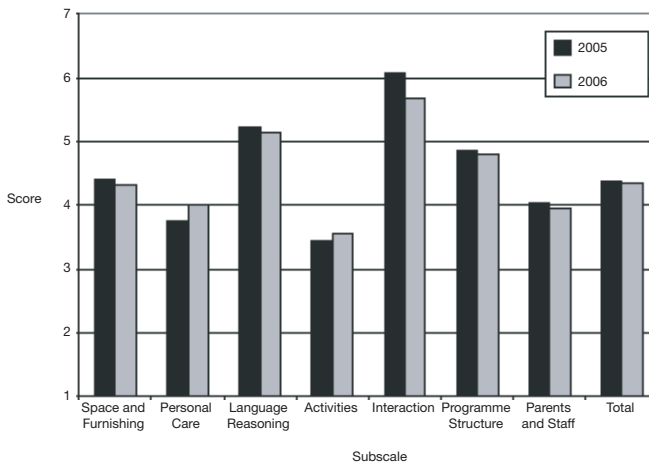
- adults formed warm interactive relationships with children;
- a trained teacher acted as manager and a good proportion of the staff were (graduate, teacher) qualified;
- settings viewed educational and social development as complementary;
- the pedagogy included interactions traditionally associated with the term 'teaching', that is, the provision of instructive play and learning environments and 'sustained shared thinking' to extend children's learning (adults guiding rather than dominating).

A number of studies have shown that parental attitudes towards an involvement in children's educational activities can have an effect on children's quality of learning, development, and attainment at all ages (Parsons and Bynner, 1998; McMillan and Leslie, 1998; Whalley, 2001). In addition, two American studies have shown that improved parental involvement can be associated with increased attendance, fewer disciplinary problems and higher aspirations even after socio-economic status and pupil ability have been taken into account (Epstein, 1987; Eagle, 1989). There is also a growing body of research evidence emphasising the importance of the home learning environment (Melhuish et al., 2001; Tizard and Hughes, 2002, Desforges, 2003; and Sammons et al., 2004a, 2004b).

*Developing the Foundation Phase for 3–7-year-olds in Wales**The quality of provision in the pilot settings*

Observations were made in 2005 and 2006 applying the pre-school rating scales for assessing quality (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and CIS). The observations were made in 51 Foundation Phase pilot settings (since some of the 41 FP pilots had more than one FP setting e.g. a nursery class as well as a reception class). In 2006 quality observations (using the early primary rating scale, ECERS-EP) were also made in the 20 Year 1 or mixed Year 1/2 settings which had joined the pilots. The proportion of trained teachers was found to be directly related to quality in all of the pilot settings and classes. The higher the proportion of trained teachers within a setting or classroom, the higher the quality.

Results on the total score on the ECERS-R (which assesses daily routines, social interactions and facilities) showed no significant differences between the two years in settings with 3–5 year old children. However, when looking at subscales individually, settings showed significantly lower quality on the 'Interaction' scale in 2006 than they had in 2005. Figure 1 below shows the comparison of ECERS-R quality scores from 2005 and 2006. The vertical axis shows the range of scores on the ECERS-R (the lowest score possible



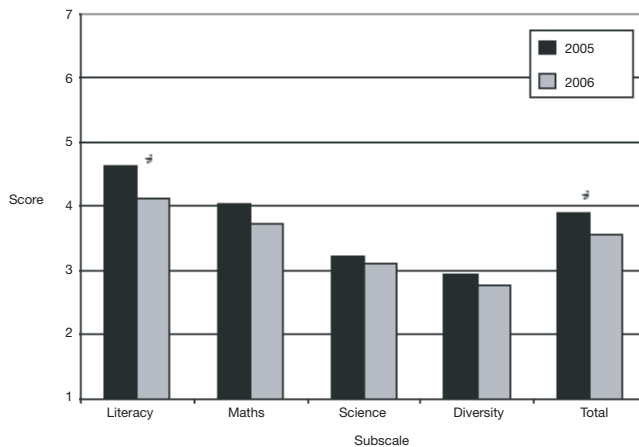
**Figure 1**  
**Comparison of quality in 2005 and 2006 in settings**  
**with 3–5-year-olds (as measured on ECERS-R)**

is 1 and the highest is 7). Note that the asterisk above the bars for interaction denote a statistically significant difference. Interaction was the only subscale to show significant decline in quality; this does suggest that the quality of staff-child and child-child interaction had lessened over the course of one year.

Figure 2 below shows the comparison of ECERS-E quality scores in 2005 and 2006. Note that the asterisk above the literacy subscale and the total score bars denote reductions in quality which are statistically significant. The literacy subscale measures quality in settings in relation to environmental print, book and literacy areas, whether adults read with children, emergent mark making (early writing), talking and listening and whether adults draw attention to sounds in words.

Quality scores on the Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS, which assesses how responsive and sensitive the staff are as they interact with children) showed no significant differences between 2005 and 2006.

The results from the ECERS-EP (only used in Year 1/2 classes) showed the highest scores on the 'use of materials' item, with the lowest scores on the three items of the ECERS-E diversity subscale. These three items relate to the tailoring of the curriculum and pedagogy to individual interests and needs.



**Figure 2**  
**Comparison of quality in 2005 and 2006 in settings**  
**with 3–5-year-olds (as measured on ECERS-E)**

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*Implementation in the maintained and non-maintained sectors*

To explore the differences in quality scores across maintained and non-maintained settings we compared the mean ECERS-R, ECERS-E and CIS scores of the two groups (maintained or non-maintained). In both 2005 and 2006 overall quality, measured by the total score on the ECERS-R and ECERS-E, was significantly higher in the maintained settings. In particular, maintained settings scored higher on the ‘language–reasoning’, ‘activities’ and ‘parents and staff’ subscales of the ECERS-R and all four subscales of the ECERS-E. However, non-maintained settings scored higher on the ‘personal care routines’ subscale of the ECERS-R for children aged 3–5 years. For the fine-grained detail on these observations see the final report (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) and the appendices which give ample examples of ECERS subscales and rating procedures.

On the CIS, the only significant difference between maintained and non-maintained settings was that maintained settings scored lower on the ‘detached’ subscale, suggesting their staff showed greater warmth and interest in the children. However, both sectors generally scored highly on their levels of positive, responsive relationships with young children.

The non-maintained sector generally perceived bilingualism and multicultural understanding to be less difficult to introduce than the maintained sector, surprisingly given the new status of the former as a separate AOL. Less surprising is the finding that the non-maintained sector found multicultural understanding easier to introduce than the maintained sector as many non-maintained practitioners felt that this was already part of their existing practice. However, the ECERS-E ratings for 2006 on diversity show that both sectors need considerably more work in this area as their mean scores were between 2 and 3 where the maximum score is 7, and the non-maintained sector generally scored lower.

*Stakeholder perceptions**Curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and transition*

Generally, most stakeholders have received the Foundation Phase Curriculum with enthusiasm, at least 85 per cent of respondents agreeing that the seven AOLs would provide a broad and balanced basis for young children’s learning and development during the Foundation Phase. Similarly, high numbers from all stakeholder groups agreed with the emphasis on ‘active

learning and play', although the importance of maintaining balance and matching learning to meet all children's needs (which is apparent in the documentation) was raised as a challenging issue.

It was evident that there were mixed messages being conveyed seemingly as a result of a misinterpretation of the Welsh Assembly Government's Play Policy in relation to play within the Phase. It is of concern that many stakeholders feel that delivery of the outdoor curriculum represents a significant challenge.

Substantial numbers of all respondents also continued to report that bilingualism and multicultural understanding had been particularly difficult to introduce. The non-maintained sector perceived bilingualism and multicultural understanding to be less difficult to introduce than the maintained sector as they felt it was already part of their existing practice, although scores on 'diversity' in the ECERS-E observational ratings for 2006 show that both sectors need to improve significantly in this area.

The ACCAC (now Curriculum and Assessment Division 3-14 – CAD 3-14) 2004 *Draft Framework* was considered to be appropriate for planning for Foundation Phase, particularly in terms of style, approach and emphasis on skills development and active learning, but most stakeholders felt that the layout and usability needed to be improved. Similarly there was concern from practitioners about the draft guidance material which built on the Draft Framework to develop the seven AOLs, also centred around their usability and bulk, although they were generally felt to be helpful. There was a concern that the draft guidance materials were not sufficiently specific and lacked clear detailed progression, which was potentially problematic for practitioners in both sectors across the Phase. The materials are now being revised in light of these findings.

In terms of planning, a majority of practitioners from both sectors reported they felt greater flexibility and freedom. This was corroborated by CAD 3-14 and the research team's observations, which identified that generally there was *less* planning taking place, and it was looser. Consequently there was less attention paid to adult pedagogy, and in some settings staff was not always gainfully and appropriately deployed. Higher ECERS observed scores, which measure quality, were noted particularly in the small minority of settings where planning was reported to be more detailed and specific.

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*Current quality and standards*

Stakeholders showed throughout the evaluation overwhelming support for the philosophy and aims of the Foundation Phase. All stakeholders were asked whether they felt there had been any changes in the standards of children's learning and achievement and well-being, confidence, independence and maturity. Interestingly perceptions were mixed but very similar across all stakeholder groups. Although a majority felt that there had been improvements, a notable percentage of all stakeholder groups felt that it was too early in the pilot to make judgements on standards and at this stage it was impossible to draw firm conclusions. Across the majority of setting-based stakeholders, the most positive improvements cited in terms of children's development were: independence, confidence and positive attitudes to learning. In addition a third of these stakeholders also reported improved language development and speaking and listening skills but only a small number, around 10 per cent, were able to provide evidence for this improvement in language skills.

*Qualifications, training and ratios*

Although there was overwhelming support from the maintained sector for the proposed ratios of one adult to eight children for Nursery and Reception classes, with respondents feeling that it had made a difference to the experience of the children they teach, many respondents found it difficult to give specific examples of these benefits and invariably gave examples about how classroom management and organization had improved. This was reflected by the research observations where the biggest change identified was that some aspects of teacher workload (e.g. planning, assessment and teaching for a set number of children) were being redistributed to the additional adults rather than having those adults provide higher-quality learning experiences and interactions with the children. As previously noted, the quality observations showed a decline in the quality of provisions for literacy and interactions. While an increased number of settings were using observations as an assessment tool and were using all staff in assessment procedures, settings in both sectors identified the need for further guidance and support with assessment for the FP.

Many setting-based stakeholders (headteachers and practitioners) felt that the proposed 1:15 ratio for Year 1 and 2 was too high although at LEA level the majority of Early Years/Primary Advisors and Directors of Education felt that, while 1:15 was not ideal, it was appropriate and certainly a big

improvement on the current statutory ratio of one teacher to thirty children. A stronger view among Practitioners, EY/Primary Advisors and Directors of Education was that the provision of higher-trained staff would have more impact on children's learning. Typical arguments centred on the ability of trained staff to be able to support and extend children more appropriately. These responses corroborate the findings from our quality observations which demonstrate that settings with a higher proportion of trained teachers have higher quality of provision.

Directors of Education reported that LEAs should have a central role to play in relation to training for the Foundation Phase. However, many identified that there was a need for leadership and a clear steer from the Assembly Government (DELLS) in order to ensure consistency and quality across the country. The Early Years Education and Safeguards Team has met with the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW), and acknowledges that further communication is necessary to ensure there is consistency in training quality, coverage and audience across the 22 LEAs in Wales. Between a half and two-thirds of EY practitioners from both sectors agreed or strongly agreed that they had received good support from their LEA with this number dropping to only a fifth of Year 1 (and mixed Year 1/2) practitioners. Headteacher and owner-manager responses also reflect these patterns. Three local authorities were consistently praised for their support by the maintained and non-maintained pilots for their effective training and regular support and involvement with the pilots.

Six institutions training teachers were asked what should happen to assist them to develop Foundation Phase in their courses. The majority felt that the training of their own staff was a priority. Additionally half the institutions approached felt that stronger central leadership from both the Early Years Education and Safeguards Team and the Curriculum and Assessment Division 3–14 in DELLS and better contact and dialogue between LEAs and training providers would help. Institutions expressed the desire for greater communication between Early Years partners and that they be included more in future discussions and developments to enable them to fulfil their role in training the future workforce. It could be argued that as training providers they should also be more proactive in using the current resources from CAD 3–14 and DELLS.

#### *Funding and resources*

Generally, there are high levels of satisfaction with the funding allocation for staffing in the maintained sector. However, stakeholders in both sectors feel



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that the allocations for settings £3,000 (maintained sector) and £800 (non-maintained sector) to cover resources, management and training are inadequate, especially because of the inequity between the two sectors and as the allocation is not linked to setting size, number of children or classes or number of staff. In the majority of LEAs there have been some improvements in the second year in providing clear channels for accessing funding, although there is still considerable improvement required to facilitate this for the non-maintained sector. In respect of space and accommodation it is clear that further work needs to be done, as changes that schools are making are being self-financed because there is no ring-fenced funding stream available for developments to existing accommodation (both indoors and outdoors). It is also clear from Directors of Education that more detailed information is needed regarding existing indoor and outdoor accommodation facilities in all settings in order to get a real sense of the national picture and its implications for providing the most appropriate environment for learning in this Phase; they should then be encouraged to apply for funding through the capital funding from DELLS. The EYEST reports that an audit of existing indoor and outdoor accommodation is currently in draft form and being discussed with ADEW.

*Organization and management*

Around 50 per cent of the practitioners felt that their role continued to change in the second year of the pilot. In the non-maintained sector this was reported to be due to increased levels of paperwork. However, in schools practitioners felt it was as a result of needing to lead and manage additional numbers of support staff. Practitioners also reported that the roles of support staff had changed and they were now more responsible for teaching and assessment of small groups of children. Although this was seen to be empowering there were high levels of concern about the implications of this without appropriate remuneration. Almost all headteachers agreed that to implement the Foundation Phase changes in roles were necessary, with limited trained staff they would struggle to fulfil these roles.

Stakeholders from the non-maintained sector reported the difficulties which were persistent in the past and that they continue to face, in the following areas: lack of funding and inequity in its allocation; low staff wages; inadequate and inappropriately pitched training; unavailable and inaccessible supply cover; poor communication with, and a lack of recognition from, other professionals; the nature of existing premises and outdoor facilities.

Organizations representing the non-maintained sector reported having implementation strategies which related to increasing their ability to offer support and training to their member settings. However, they expressed the desire to discuss with the Early Years Education and Safeguards Team how this could be improved. It seems that there are huge disparities perceived in the work being undertaken across the 22 authorities and that, as a consequence, the experiences of settings in terms of support and involvement varies considerably. Advisors reported that they were actively involved with both sectors, but these views were strongly contradicted by a large number of practitioners. This may be explained by some authorities seeming to be reactive as opposed to proactive in terms of their support for the pilots – waiting until they are asked as opposed to initiating strategic support.

Over 50 per cent of respondents from all stakeholder groups reported that information and communication from the Early Years Education and Safeguards Team during the second year of the pilot was often unclear and arbitrary. Similarly over 50 per cent of respondents in several stakeholder groups commented that the Foundation Phase website had not been a source of useful information, mainly because it was difficult to access and was not regularly updated. All stakeholder groups were overwhelmingly supportive of the postponement of the rollout to 2008 as they felt it would allow time to prepare more fully in terms of workforce development, training needs, support structures and in raising the Foundation Phase profile with parents and practitioners.

### *Parents*

Over two-thirds of pilot settings continue to be proactive and use a range of strategies in an attempt to inform their parents. However, a large minority of parents in both sectors know little about the Foundation Phase. Responses included comments that suggested that they knew it was more play-based and would like to learn more about the initiative. All stakeholders feel strongly that a national advertising campaign, as stated in the first action plan, is needed to raise awareness amongst parents and the wider public domain. Some of the LEAs and the non-maintained sector associations felt they had a key role to play in raising awareness, although the majority felt that the responsibility for broadening awareness lay with DELLS and that the role of LEAs and non-maintained sector Associations was to support and feed into such a national campaign. The DELLS position is that a national campaign is only relevant in the lead-up to a national rollout and that at this stage it is

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the local parents that need their awareness raised; this is what the pilot settings should be doing as part of keeping their parents and prospective parents informed of what their children will experience.

Overall, parents' responses were very positive to the key components of the proposed Foundation Phase but despite their overwhelming support for active learning many parents took the opportunity to express their concerns that 'teachers' should respond to individual needs and offer a balanced approach, as specified in the guidance documents. Although a large majority of parents reported that they were satisfied with the way in which their child was being taught it was clear from their comments that many parents do remain concerned about the teaching of basic skills (especially reading and writing) and the apparent lack of structure in the provisions for older children.

Around 80 per cent of parents agreed that their children should be taught the Welsh language from the age of 3. In support of the introduction of the bilingualism AOL parents cited the general benefits of learning a second language (including advantage for further language learning) and enhanced work prospects in Wales. A few also referred to the importance of language in culture and identity. Many parents referred to the benefits to be gained from starting to learn a language at an early age and showed an awareness that young children were particularly receptive to second-language instruction in the early years. Support was also high for teaching multicultural understanding with some respondents believing that it could assist in countering racial discrimination and prejudiced attitudes.

*Major strengths and recommendations*

Some settings have made very good advances in their implementation of the Foundation Phase within the short period of the evaluation. While these only represent a minority of settings it is worth highlighting their good practice. The best settings in terms of implementing the Phase were found to have the following common characteristics:

- Detailed and focused planning.
- Lead practitioners with good leadership and management skills and the ability to allocate effective roles for other adults whilst planning together for children's learning.
- Guided and supported play activities with higher levels of adult–child interaction that support children's thinking.

- Clear and dynamic vision and leadership from setting heads who have a good grasp of effective early years practice and are able to communicate this effectively to staff.
- The best settings did not slavishly adhere to the Foundation Phase guidance, but took it seriously and built on existing good practice.
- A move away from over-formal practice in the basics towards a more experiential, child-centred and adult-guided, play-based practice.
- The leadership of the setting has a culture of investing in staff development.
- Some well-trained and qualified staff who have a good understanding of child development and pedagogy and who actively support other staff in working with children.

The evaluation found that further support was needed to develop and maintain play-based and experiential pedagogies giving sufficient emphasis to activities that involve adult-guided play and learning and interaction with appropriate challenge. There was also a need to ensure an appropriate balance between academic and social emotional aims (as currently emphasized in the documentation) in the curriculum and in day-to-day and long term planning.

Although many areas of quality as measured by the ECERS scales remained the same across the two years, the perception amongst many practitioners and some advisors of improvements in language development and oracy skills contrasted significantly with the lower quality observed in 2006, especially with respect to the ECERS-E Literacy subscale. The evaluation showed a decline in children's opportunities for learning in the areas of literacy and in interaction with adults. A greater emphasis on prioritizing these areas of learning was therefore recommended, along with caution not to return to the over-formal pedagogy that characterized some previous practice.

Weaknesses were identified in terms of assessment and in the provision for individual needs. The transition arrangements between the maintained and non-maintained sectors were also found to be inconsistent. Considerable levels of concern over the transition of children from the Foundation Phase to Key Stage 2, due to the perceived differences in content and approach, were also noted. While some of these issues are not as a result of the implementation of the Foundation Phase, the success of the Phase will be dependent on such improvements. It was felt that a common assessment system would be useful across all sectors and would also facilitate children's

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transitions and family moves. Given the difference in the quality of provisions identified by the ECERS-E, the evaluation recommended that progress needed to be made to achieve a situation in which the non-maintained sector settings received similar levels of training, resources and support to those available in the maintained sector, to ensure future comparability in standards and quality.

There was also a need to ensure the involvement of qualified teachers in all settings within a set period of time; this has been promised but not yet achieved. This was particularly important for the learning needs of the most disadvantaged children, including those at risk and/or with special educational needs.

The evaluation confirmed findings of other studies that emphasized the importance of providing trained teachers and it identified a tension between lower ratios and highly-qualified, better-paid staff. In preschool, Nursery and Reception the evaluation recommended ratios of 1:10 maximum where the group was led by a fully qualified teacher and in the non-maintained sector a ratio of 1:8 where the leader was not a trained teacher. In Years 1 and 2 we recommended ratios of 1:15.

The evidence suggesting some reductions in the use of planning was considered particularly worrying. It was therefore felt that the training requirements for staff, especially on the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase, need to be recognized. Guidance (or, in some cases, statutory orders) is required for training providers (LEA, ITET and FE) to develop plans for meeting the needs of the Phase within a set period of time. This could be led by the CAD 3–14 team at DELLS, in collaboration with the workforce review.

The evaluation found that communication to all stakeholders was perceived as very arbitrary and poor. Structural changes were therefore recommended, led by DELLS, that would incorporate clearer roles for the local authority staff leading the Foundation Phase development. It was felt that these advisors (who could be advisors with a current responsibility for the early years) should meet regularly and be given clear guidance from both the Curriculum and Assessment Division 3–14 and the Children's Strategy Division on how to support Foundation Phase settings. If funding allowed, the employment of five regional advisors who could lead on this change was also recommended. The evaluation recommended that regional advisors (if appointed) and Foundation Phase advisors at LEA level could liaise with and support non-maintained Associations in collaboratively implementing the Phase in all their member pre-school settings.

It was also felt that there needed to be a visible action plan which outlined the strategies, training and resource allocation for effective rollout by 2008.

### *Concluding discussion*

The Foundation Phase Pilot Final Evaluation Report (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006) was published in December 2006 and the clearest initial response may be found in 'Building the Foundation Phase: Action Plan, published by DELLS in the same month (DELLS, 2006). In her foreword to the document the Minister for Education, Jane Davidson, re-emphasizes the importance of promoting pedagogic practices that involve 'responsive interactions between children and adults'. The foreword also emphasizes the commitment of the Welsh Assembly Government to evidence-based policy development. In making explicit reference to the Foundation Pilot Evaluation she argues that: 'Its recommendations, many of which are already being implemented, are incorporated into this plan.'

The Action Plan does indeed provide a framework for optimism regarding the future rollout of the Foundation Phase. The provisions for reduced adult-child ratios are not compromised, not surprisingly given the popularity of low ratios. The Action Plan provides details of a national development and training pack that is to be developed with an emphasis on 'the role of play, *including adult guided play*', curriculum planning and assessment (the new Foundation Phase profile), balance between emotional and social, and academic aims, transition and literacy. More importantly, the challenge of better and more successful leadership of the implementation is met head-on with the promised recruitment of a Foundation Phase advisor for every local authority and four regional, consortia advisors for the Phase. In addition, the Plan sets out a new and more proactive structure for ensuring delivery through the development of key Foundation Phase management committees with a specific remit to oversee the strategic development of the Phase across Wales.

However, some areas of policy remain less clear. Although the training packs and appointment of staff to support new pedagogies are welcome it is unclear how courses in initial training will directly support the development of new and existing staff in the early years. The workforce review (Dallimore, 2007) is currently grappling with some of the training issues and the role of existing courses such as the new foundation degrees, childcare courses in further education and initial teacher education in higher education.

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The key question of supplying sufficient teacher input, particularly for the 3–5 age group, is not fully resolved and although more funding has been made available it is not yet clear whether this large-scale national reform, with the challenges facing those implementing it, is funded sufficiently to provide adequate support. What is clear is that the Assembly Government is implementing a popular educational reform which most stakeholders believe will improve educational opportunities for most children. The challenge that lies ahead is to demonstrate that Wales can deliver this effectively and in a way that improves children's well-being as well as educational outcomes, especially for those children and families from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

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