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Evaluating the Foundation Phase

Key findings on the Environment (Indoor/Outdoor)

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 53/2014

The Foundation Phase (introduced in 2008) provides a developmentally appropriate experiential curriculum for children aged 3-7 in Wales. The Welsh Government commissioned independent evaluation (led by WISERD) aims to evaluate how well it is being implemented, what impact it has had, and ways in which it can be improved. The three-year evaluation utilises a range of mixed methods at a national and local scale.

This is one of five papers focused on **practice**. It draws on 239 classroom and setting observations, 341 practitioner interviews, 604 school and setting survey responses, 37 Local Authority interviews and four non-maintained organisation interviews.

Key Findings

- Case study observations revealed that the active use of numerous and **varied learning zones** led to children being more likely to engage in **participative** and **exploratory activities**.
- The **outdoor learning environment** was rarely used as an 'extension of the classroom' but more funded non-maintained settings used the outdoors compared to Years 1 and 2.
- **Common barriers** to the development of a Foundation Phase suited environment included structural changes, funding for resources, direct outdoor access, and site-specific issues (e.g. funded non-maintained pack-away settings).
- On average, **schools** spent £15,000 on developing their **indoor** environment and £18,000 on developing their **outdoor** environments, whilst **funded non-maintained settings** spent an average of £3,000 on **indoor** environments and £3,500 on **outdoor** environments. Those who stated that they had seen a large change to their environments spent the most money.

Dadansociol ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy

Further Key Findings

Responses to the national survey of head teachers, Foundation Phase leaders and funded non-maintained setting leaders indicated that **most schools saw a large change to both their indoor and outdoor environment** as a result of the introduction of the Foundation Phase, with the **majority of funded non-maintained settings stating they saw less change.**

Funding is what most schools and funded non-maintained settings would change about the Foundation Phase; many practitioners noted that **developing their outside space** was still on-going.

Although the pedagogy seems to be most similar to what funded non-maintained settings were implementing prior to the Foundation Phase, **pack-away funded non-maintained settings¹** found raising money for resources

¹ Where the FNM setting does not have permanent residence over their teaching and learning space, meaning they have to 'pack-away' their resources at the end of each session/day.

and space in impractical locations as continuous challenges.

Early years advisors and training support officers stated that overall, they had seen **more use of outdoor** space since the implementation of the Foundation Phase. Some also mentioned practitioners made better use of their space, that there has been a general environment change and better resources available.

The **most common outdoor changes** noted included access, resources, creating an all-weather environment, developing the environment and substituting a possible lack of outdoor space with community measures, for example forest schools and park visits.

The **most common indoor changes** noted included creating areas of learning, resources, furniture, and reorganisation of classrooms.

Children were more likely to be **observed outdoors** with an additional practitioner, or alone, as opposed to in the presence of a teacher.

75% of **practitioners** reported using the outdoor learning environment *at least 2/3* times a week, with 34% reporting they use it **every day** (although time of year impacts the frequency with which the outdoor learning environment is used).

A **balanced use** of Focussed, Continuous and Enhanced activities were recorded for Outdoor observations.

Year 1 classroom tours revealed that children enjoy learning independently, and were more knowledgeable about their learning environment when given more opportunities and choice in a variety of interesting and rich learning zones.

The majority of children who participated in the Year 1 classroom tours said they **rarely did any learning outside²**.

There were more **learning zones** in mixed-age Foundation Phase classrooms than any other year

group. Although the majority of classrooms had at least 4 learning zones, the case study school exemplar vignettes emphasised that **what is of most importance is the way learning zones are used, not the mere presence of them.**

Classrooms that implemented the Foundation Phase to a greater degree generally had more **visually attractive environments** where children's work was displayed.

There was a **strong relationship** between children being able to access **outdoor environments** and them being **physically active, and participating in practical and explorative activities.**

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² Although the tours were conducted in January, which might have impacted on the children's response.