Early Years/Foundation Phase and FE Training: Stakeholders Perceptions
Dr Janet Oti, University of Wales Newport

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Email: janet.oti@newport.ac.uk Telephone: 01633 432122

Abstract

This paper reports on the perceptions of stakeholders in two Further Education (FE) establishments in South Wales, concerning the change in policy regarding early years training and education. The curriculum was previously designed into two different pathways, with reception and nursery (under 5 year olds) and then Key Stage 1 (5 -7 year olds). Now all will be combined together to form the ‘Foundation Phase 3-7’. The implementation of this framework will be phased and begins with a pilot which ends in July 2008. It will then be rolled out and full embedment is anticipated by September 2010.

This study investigates whether particular stakeholders in FE (staff and students) understand the changes about to be implemented and the effects this will have on their training and professional career development. Also how the establishment/college is addressing the changing needs and philosophy of the new policy/initiative.

The research instruments used for this report are questionnaires and interviews. Questions concerning course content, training and placement settings, assessments used with young children and overall perceptions of pending and evident problems are the main emphasis in both research instruments used to collect data. The research methods employed for this study are mainly qualitative although some quantitative data is produced. Overall the data is presented as two case studies so that comparisons can initially be made. Patterns and themes originating from the data are analysed and evaluated.

It was anticipated that students in particular would be less knowledgeable about the early year changes and that some would be a little confused. Expectations were that staff would be fairly negative anticipating a number of potential problems. Preliminary results indicate that this is indeed true but most FE students agree that children learn best through play. However, staff development and training is seen as vital elements which also contribute to staffs professional development. The new framework is also seen by FE staff as providing greater career opportunities for students but that obtaining relevant placements may become harder; with course content and delivery methods likely to change substantially.

Further studies from the placements point of view (early year training establishments), would be revealing and aid the holistic vision of activities and perceptions to date. It is hoped that further work will enable these aspects of research to be covered at a later date. Hence this is a ‘work-in-progress’ project and further development is anticipated.

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in the future: adding to the debate and evaluation of this initiative/policy and promoting cross-fertilisation between educational sectors (early years and FE).

**Key Words:** Further Education (FE), Stakeholders Perceptions, Early Years Training, Foundation Phase, Welsh Policy, Welsh Initiative.

**Introduction**

This study is a snapshot (early 2008), into the Early Years training and education in two Further Education (FE) colleges in South Wales and the perceptions of staff and students to the pending policy change with the introduction of the ‘Foundation Phase’. This is one of the reforms introduced by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) ‘in the One Wales Programme’ (Williams, 2008, p.1 – notes/report from the finance committee). Its aim is to change the approach of education for 3 – 7 year olds by providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum, which is in harmony with the individual child’s particular needs and interest. It will bring more consistency and continuity to children’s education at such an all-important period in their development, placing a child’s personal and social development at the heart of the curriculum. ‘It gives young children opportunities to gain first hand experiences through play and active involvement rather than by completing exercises in books’ (*ibid*, p.1).

Children will have time to develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills; and mathematics will be more practical based allowing children to see how problems can be solved. There will be greater emphasis on children’s understanding of how things work and finding different ways to solve problems under seven areas of learning in the new curriculum (WAG, 2008).

The curriculum was previously designed into two different pathways, with reception and nursery (under 5 year olds) and then Key Stage 1 (5-7 year olds). Now all will be combined together to form the ‘Foundation Phase 3-7’. The implementation of this framework will be phased and begins with a pilot which ends in July 2008. The National Assembly for Wales in the Learning Country Policy document explains why the need for change arose:

> ‘In Wales, the introduction to the statutory curriculum happens when children are five years of age. However, there is increasing evidence that it is being introduced earlier for many children before they are ready’ (National Assembly for Wales, 2003, p.18).

The initiative arose through the Education Act 2002 which extended the National Curriculum to include the ‘Foundation’ policy for early year’s education for the United Kingdom (UK). Although this new policy is initially seen to influence nursery and primary schools it will have a rippling affect through all sections of education eventually. However, there is an immediate effect in FE (and in Higher Education...
(HE) for teacher training) where teaching assistants and childcare worker programmes need to change and adapt to this new initiative.

The Council for Awards in Children’s Care and Education (CACHE) are the main providers of qualifications for workers in the childcare sector and are the UK’s only internationally recognised, specialist Awarding Body to do this (CACHE, 2008). Courses range from entry level to advanced qualifications for sector professionals. They can be studied in schools, colleges and training centres throughout the UK. After the Second World War the Government recognised that professional child care was a priority, and the National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) was founded. In 1994, the NNEB merged with the Council for Early Years Awards, and CACHE was formed. In 2001, the National Association for Maternal and Child Welfare (NAMCW) merged with CACHE, and Her Majesty the Queen became their patron (CACHE, 2008).

To address the Foundation Phase policy new CACHE programmes, Level 2 and Level 3 Award/Certificate/Diploma in Childcare and Education (which is modular), has been designed and forms a pilot programme (level 3) in some FE colleges. The number of modules achieved at a particular level will determine the qualification awarded (i.e. Award, Certificate or Diploma) and is flexible enough for use in all regions of the United Kingdom (UK), where due to devolution, subtle differences in policy implementation may occur.

In England the policy is a little different in that firstly it is entitled the Foundation Stage and relates to years 5 to 7 – a somewhat shorter age range to that in Wales. However the concepts and principles behind the initiative are the same in both England and Wales. Jane Davidson, AM, Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills explains:

‘We will now prepare for full implementation of the Foundation Phase in all schools and settings in Wales from September 2008. Thereby, one of the fundamental features of our vision of Wales as a ‘Learning Country’ will be put into place’ (DELLS, 2006, p.1).

This government policy for Wales, the Foundation Phase’ indicates 1:8 adult/pupil ratios where minimum staff entry qualifications will be at NVQ level 3. Thus, this research, although quite small in scale, is somewhat unique in its original concept in that it crosses educational boundaries and incorporates both Early Years and FE.

**Study Design and Methodology**

Initial thoughts and draft research designs anticipated a two staged research project overall regarding the change in early years and the introduction of the Foundation Phase in Wales. The first phase concerned collecting the perceptions of staff and students involved in early years training in FE colleges. What were their perceptions
of the pending change and what advantages or disadvantages did they believe the implementation of the Foundation Phase would bring? The second phase would involve early year establishments themselves, gathering data from parents and staff. This paper centres around the first phase only; research has yet to be completed regarding phase two. Due to the academic one year time span proposed for this research project (stage one) it was decided that a small scale project only would be feasible. Stakeholders in FE would be restricted to just the teaching staff and students on the child care programmes.

In order to have some comparability data two FE establishments in South Wales who offered and ran child care programmes were invited to participate in this research. Both establishments when initially contacted agreed to participate and formal letters were sent to the Principals asking for permission and providing an outline of the research aims and anticipated schedule. The choice regarding participating FE establishments was made on the basis of the personal contacts known; those who were also easily available and could aid access and the collection of data (Creswell, 2005). Each individual college should form a case study – Case Study A and Case study B (Gillham, 2000) to aid comparative analysis.

It was decided that questionnaires and interviews would be used as the data gathering instruments for this research. Utilising both questionnaires and interviews would provide some quantitative data as well as important qualitative data; qualitative data being particularly relevant when considering gathering the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the pending change in child care policy. Using two methods would allow some elements of triangulation and aid the validity and reliability of the study (Cohen et al, 2007).

After considering all alternatives available, individual semi-formal interviews with staff and small semi-formal group interviews with students were deemed the most appropriate interview instruments. Individual questionnaires would also be used and distributed to staff and students. Anticipating level three courses (the Diploma in Childcare and Education) which have a two year time span, two student questionnaires – year one and year two were designed although the questions asked on each were the same with no significant differences. The student questionnaires were designed in this manner so that any differences in responses from year one and year two students could be easily identified in each establishment.

The questionnaires had a mixture of question styles and types. On the staff questionnaire there were 19 questions in total of which 6 were closed, 6 were rated questions and 7 were open. The rated questions were designed with a strongly agree response being a high value whilst a strongly disagree was the lower value. On the student questionnaire there were 20 questions in total 7 being closed, 6 rated and 7 open questions. The questionnaires were anonymous and thus this allowed for more honest and open answers from respondents (Cohen et al, 2007).

However, there are disadvantages in the questionnaire approach which need to be born in mind and often open questions are not included in the design (Gillham, 2007). Nevertheless it was deemed important that open questions were included in the questionnaire in order to gather effectively the respondent’s perceptions. As Miller (2002, p.1) points out: ‘Closed questions are appropriate only when the set of possible
answers are known and clear cut’. Indeed the Colorado State University (2008, p.1) explains that open ended questions ‘allow respondents to include more information, include feelings, attitudes and understanding of the subject’.

The staff and student interviews had approximately 14 questions in each although due to their semi-formal structure this varied slightly due to the effects of probing various responses, an advantage the interview has over questionnaires (Bell, 1999).

Sampling and sample size were also considered with a minimum expectation regarding numbers participating identified. However opportunistic sampling, providing the main contacts in each establishment with the power to choose students and staff for involvement would provide the best results overall gaining effective access (Creswell, 2005), and was thus adopted and carried out. Individual staff interviews and student group interviews were arranged and completed a few weeks after the questionnaires were collected in both establishments.

Both case studies are geographically on the outskirts of major urban settlements in South Wales. Each case study/college services a similar cliental and local community and is approximately 35 – 40 miles apart in distance. In Case Study A 29 student questionnaires were completed and returned, 17 being year one students mainly on the ‘old’ level 2 Certificate one year programme and 12 being students on the two year new Award/ Certificate/ Diploma in Childcare and Education (ACDCE) programme being piloted at the college. In total 3 staff questionnaires were returned. Two staff were interviewed the third apologised and did not participate due to work pressures. Two groups of students were interviewed, both groups consisting of 3 students.

In Case Study B 44 student questionnaires were completed and returned, 26 being year one and 18 being year two of the existing ‘old’ two year CACHE Diploma level 3 programme. In total 5 staff questionnaires were returned completed. Three individual staff were interviewed and also two groups of students, each group consisting of 3 students (as in Case Study A).

Analysis of the data, both questionnaires and interviews, was completed manually. Although a number of computer software packages are available to aid in the analysis task, training is usually a requirement. Due to time constraints this was not completed. However, analysis by hand allows the researcher to be ‘close to the material’, which can be useful and relevant for small scale research projects (Creswell, 2005, p.234).

Tally charts were used to collate quantitative data from closed questions and responses from the rated questions, in order to find the average response. Three categories of responses for the rated questions were used for collation and analysis; strongly agree, in the middle, and strongly disagree. All open question responses were analysed to identify any significant themes or patterns (Boyatzis, 1998). It was anticipated that students in particular would be less knowledgeable about the early year changes and that some would be a little confused. Expectations were that staff would be fairly negative anticipating a number of potential problems.
Limitations

Questionnaires from both colleges (Case Study A and Case Study B) were collected in person from the main college contact that had the responsibility of collecting the data. Thus, no control was exerted over the participants regarding completing the questionnaire and whether student guidance was provided or not at each establishment. This may have introduced an element of bias in the data generated from the questionnaires from one or both colleges/case studies.

From initial analysis of the student questionnaires there appears to be some confusion in that Case Study A included the Certificate (level 2) programme which was a one year programme. Case Study B interpreted the title of the instruments differently and gave the questionnaires to the students studying on the level three programme only – year one and year two. Indeed this was what was expected - that level 3 students only would be included. However, because Case Study A had the pilot programme running and to ensure different responses the contact decided that students studying on the Certificate level 2 (one year) programme should be included.

Due to the research study being fairly small in scale, generalisations may be difficult to maintain and establish, especially where variations occur in the data between the two case studies. However, initial evaluations shows that this is not a significant problem and thus is a slight limitation only to the study.

Due to word limitations and article constraints, only the initial analysis from the questionnaires will be presented in this paper; and only those questions that have the most significance will be highlighted. Further analysis of the data however, may result in future papers.

Findings

In order to highlight some relevant numerical information from the study the following quantitative data is presented in Table A and B below. The tables present some statistical data from the closed questions posed in the questionnaires used. The questionnaire responses from students in year 1 and year 2 have been amalgamated because there is little significant difference in the closed questions posed and thus does not warrant separation at this time.
Table A – Staff Questionnaires: Comparison Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument/Issues/’Question’</th>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returned</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age ranges</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What courses do you teach on?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Have you received staff training on the new Foundation Phase?’</td>
<td>Yes = 1</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Yes = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Do you know what it means?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B – Student Questionnaires: Comparison Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Questionnaires (Year 1 and Year 2)</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returned</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range - average</td>
<td>16/17</td>
<td>17/18</td>
<td>16 - 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>29 Female</td>
<td>1 Male</td>
<td>1 Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Career Aspirations?’ highest response rates</td>
<td>Teacher/teaching assistant in primary school</td>
<td>Nursery Nurse</td>
<td>Majority expect to be with young children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Have you heard of the foundation phase for children’s learning?’</td>
<td>Yes = 21</td>
<td>Yes = 44</td>
<td>Yes = 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Do you know what it means?’</td>
<td>Yes = 4</td>
<td>Yes = 30</td>
<td>Yes = 34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Staff Questionnaire

When comparing the questionnaire data between the two case studies, little real difference is observed. The number of participants overall is lower in Case Study A than in B; average staff ages are higher in Case Study A which is calculated as 55 years against 46 years for Case Study B although the total overall average age is 49 years; staff in both case studies are female and teach on a variety of childcare programmes at levels 2 and 3. Staff who had no training outnumbered those who had received some training in both case studies.
Continuing with the staff questionnaire we turn to the rated questions which, for easy identification, will be in bold. However, responses will only be highlighted from each case study where a difference is clearly observed. Some of the rated questions are as follows:

**The new foundation phase for children’s learning (3-7 years) will provide greater career opportunities for my students?** The new foundation phase has (or will) change/d the existing course content and delivery? Government need to involve or listen to teachers at ‘grass roots’ level prior to policy changes? All staff except one responded as ‘strongly agree’ to all these questions, only one staff member gave a ‘middle’ response to all three questions. However, this one staff member differed in each question posed and thus no particular case study can be identified.

**Obtaining relevant student placements is becoming more difficult?** This brought a mixed response with Case Study B rating this as strongly agree in the main whilst Case study A had a mixture of responses in all three response categories – strongly agree, middle and strongly disagree.

**Relevant staff development and training are not important for professional development?** This question produced a unanimous ‘strongly disagree’ response from all participants in both case studies.

Some of the open questions put to staff via the questionnaire are as follows and again will be highlighted in bold: **What are you opinions regarding the overall experience provided by the majority of establishments for student placement?**

This produced a very positive response from all staff members. Some staff expanded their answer by explaining that ‘in many establishments staff have many years of experience and are supportive, helpful and encouraging to trainees at placement’ (staff respondent from Case Study B).

**Name the most important skills that in your opinion students should develop?**

This produced a variety of responses but after analysis the following skills were clearly identified as the most important by both case studies: use of initiative, communication, listening, patience, reliability and good interactive/personal skills.

**What qualifications or staff development (if any) would aid your own personal development in the future?** Interestingly this brought a wide variety of responses as can be seen in the following: general updates and greater details of the foundation phase via staff development or other events, teaching qualification, Welsh language, sign language, improving IT skills and providing opportunities for secondment.

**Any further comments?** This question was used by Case Study B only to explain that students in year two of the Diploma programme were being given lots of information about the Foundation Phase in order to equip them for pending job interviews.

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**Student Questionnaire**

In the student questionnaires gender is mainly female throughout, although Case Study B has one male student participant (see Table B above). Again, as seen in the staff questionnaire results, Case Study B has a higher number of participants than Case Study A. The age of the majority of students is 17 years although the age range falls between 16-18 years in the main. Overall student career aspirations tend to slant towards the younger age groups within the childcare provision, although interestingly.
in case Study A where the new pilot programme is running, student career aspirations are towards primary school rather than nursery. However, although the majority of students in both case studies had heard of the foundation phase, more than half of the total (53%) did not know what it really meant.

Continuing with the student questionnaire, the rated questions were as follows: Young children learn best through play? Images are as important as text in conveying a message to children? Children need a warm caring environment in order to learn? The majority ranked their response as ‘strongly agree’ to all three questions. Other rated questions were: Parents do not need to be involved with the education of their children? Training and relevant qualifications are not important for professional development? In both these questions participants returned a ‘strongly disagree’ response. The last rated question posed was: Young children need to learn how to mix with others and what society expects regarding behaviour? This produced a slightly mixed response but nevertheless the majority responded with ‘strongly agree’ with just one or two wavering with a ‘middle’ response.

The open questions on the student questionnaires were as follows: What problems have you encountered on your placement? Challenging behaviour from young children appeared the main problem encountered at placement, followed closely by concerns or problems centred on getting along with other staff members at placement. One or two however did mention parents and potential clashes.

In what ways do you think children learn best? All participating students stated ‘Play’. Some respondents expanded on this open question providing examples and elaborating their explanation by saying ‘make learning fun – have enjoyable activities’. However, a small number (8 in total) recorded ‘structured play’ emphasising the need for adult supervision.

What are the six most important skills required (in your opinion) when dealing with young children? Naturally this question brought a variety of responses but after analysis it became clear that the most important skills were in the order as follows: patience, caring/nurturing, communication, listening, enthusiasm followed lastly by confidentiality and reliability in joint position.

What qualifications would aid you in the future? For the majority of student the response was ‘degree’ or going on to HE to study. Interestingly some gave other relevant qualifications such as first aid, food hygiene, sign language and the Welsh language.

Discussion and Conclusions

Expectations of the research results have indeed proved right in that students are less knowledgeable and do appear fairly confused regarding the initiative ‘the Foundation Phase’. All respondents agreed that young children learn best through play, the majority having heard of the initiative, but more than half of all students (53%) indicated that they did not really understand the new policy. Confusion is therefore
evident, although interestingly perhaps more so in Case Study A than in Case Study B.

Case Study A was actually piloting the new Childcare programme at the time of conducting the study; the advanced level (level 3), Award, Certificate and Diploma in Childcare Education (ACDCE, awarded by CACHE) which is to be rolled out to all FE establishments in the forthcoming academic year 2008/09. This new course offers greater choice for students and encompasses an age range from 0 -16 years, allowing a variety of educational and childcare careers. Case Study B was not running the pilot programme but would implement the new programme next academic year 2008/09. However plans were being made for year two students on the Diploma in Childcare programme in Case Study B to receive some training to bring their knowledge up to date and equip them for potential job and career interviews.

Relevant placements providing students with work experience is seen as providing a crucial role by staff. Problems encountered however by students were as expected in that challenging behaviour by pupils and getting along with other staff members were the main problems highlighted. The new framework is seen by FE staff as providing greater career opportunities for students although some staff members (not all) felt that obtaining relevant placements may become harder; with course content and delivery methods likely to change substantially. Interestingly similar skills were identified by staff and students alike which respondents felt were required by childcare workers, for example patience, listening and communications skills.

Although little significant difference is observed in comparing the two case studies, in Case Study A students want a primary school rather than nursery career. Perhaps this new programme (ACDCE) provides students with the confidence and ability to pursue a school based career. The majority of students suggested gaining a degree or studying in HE to aid their careers in the future whilst staff gave a mixed response highlighting a number of training and professional development opportunities. Interestingly more information on the initiative itself was mentioned as well as greater secondment opportunities by staff respondents.

Teaching staff in both case studies are mature in age but that is no surprise given the statistics regarding the aging staff in FE (Jephcote et al, 2005). Interestingly all participants in this research were female bar one – one lone male student in Case Study B who completed a questionnaire. All other students and staff were female. This surely emphasises that these child care programmes are still heavily supported and studied by one gender in the main - females. However, this aspect really deserves greater research and hopefully may be highlighted in other pending Welsh research in this area (for example the Welsh Education Research Network projects – WERN).

To conclude, initial analysis of the questionnaires suggests that confusion exists regarding the foundation phase initiative, especially for students. Some staff appear hesitant and unsure, even those involved with the pilot programmes. Staff and students alike agree that play in an important learning tool for children and applaud the change in curriculum and the concepts behind the Foundation Phase, identifying similar skills required to work as a child-carer. Interestingly, all participants bar one were female, clearly highlighting a gender issue for further consideration and research. Indeed the study has revealed some interesting issues which may warrant
further investigation; issues surrounding gender and subject studies in FE, age of FE staff, policy implementation in FE, cross fertilisation between educational sectors and its impact on the FE sector, to name but a few. Further analysis of the data is yet to be fully completed and may reveal other aspects of significance.

Today there is growing international interest in preschool education in countries where early education is seen as an entitlement. Great Britain has a traditional of nursery education as a continuous part of its state system (Swiniarski, 2007). Pressures in the workplace have changed the social dynamics of family life and child care has become a growing business and indeed a social demand in a society where single parent families and women returning to work have risen in numbers over the last few decades. Indeed early year’s education has been a government priority with £21bn invested since 1997. With the introduction of new educational policy, Great Britain is seen as pioneers of the early childhood education movement (Swiniarski, 2007).

These are early days in the implementation of this policy and other research studies, yet to be concluded, will add to the bank of knowledge regarding the Foundation Phase. It is hoped that this study is one small element that will contribute to the overall discussion and policy evaluation.

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References


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