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Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
for Education and Training in Wales

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Getting the balance right in the Foundation Phase

In a report published today, Estyn reports on the progress made by schools and other educational settings chosen to pilot The Foundation Phase initiative since September 2004. The inspectorate also makes recommendations for what work needs to be done before the full-roll out of the initiative across Wales in September 2008.

The Foundation Phase is a Welsh Assembly Government development that aims to provide a broad, balanced and varied curriculum for children aged between three and seven based on play and active learning based on experience.

“Estyn inspectors have found that almost all staff in the Pilot schools and settings are enthusiastic about the Foundation Phase and show high levels of commitment to its success,” says Susan Lewis, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales.

However, the inspectorate reports some settings have found it difficult to judge how much direction adults should give to young children in directing their activities and how much the children should be allowed and encouraged to plan for themselves.

Where this balance is achieved well, children are encouraged to have an input in their learning and day-to-day activities, and are encouraged to make their own snacks, set up

their own role-play areas, 'write' and 'produce' their own plays and use digital cameras to record their learning.

Estyn found that almost all schools and settings are making more use of the outdoors since the introduction of the initiative. In a few settings, staff report that boys are much more engaged in their activities, especially if the activities are outdoors. However, in roughly a quarter of the pilots, staff are still unsure or unconvinced about the benefits of outdoor learning, and in a minority of settings, they are concerned about parents' reaction to children being out of doors in inclement weather.

In non-Welsh medium schools and settings, bilingualism is a cause for concern. Staff are unclear as to what the expectations are for this area of learning. They are unsure about whether they should be aiming to make their children competent in using two languages by the time they are seven, or whether they are merely teaching Welsh as a second language with lower expectations.

Estyn also reports that there is further work to be done on teaching about a range of cultures. In almost all schools and settings inspectors visited, the children were introduced to wider cultures through sampling foods, dance, and art from around the world, and by celebrating major festivals from other cultures during the year, such as Diwali and the Chinese New Year. However, these experiences are not always well-planned across all areas of learning and are often stand-alone activities, which make children too aware of differences that exist between cultures and people rather than understanding the similarities.

Not all schools and settings have established processes so they can effectively and consistently measure children's progress from a common starting point. This lack of common criteria for recording progress means that transition between schools and settings, and in some cases between classes, is difficult to track. Rather than building on what has already been mastered a child may re-visit what they already know because the tracking system is not adequate.

During visits to schools, inspectors were told that although schools and settings value the additional funding from the Welsh Assembly Government for the Foundation Phase, almost

all felt it was not enough to meet their needs and the expectations of the Foundation Phase. In many cases, schools have also used their own resources in addition to the funding provided to expand the programme of work for their pupils.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- Estyn's report "The Foundation Phase Pilots" was commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government and is published at www.estyn.gov.uk.
- The Foundation Phase, introduced as a pilot in September 2004, aims to provide a broad, balanced and varied curriculum for children aged between three and seven. It is a major pillar of the Welsh Assembly Government's early years programme. The Foundation Phase aims to make sure that young children develop a good range of skills and gain positive attitudes to learning which will provide the building blocks for lifelong learning.
- Currently, the Foundation Phase is being piloted in 42 settings.
- The Foundation Phase will be introduced to all schools and settings with three to five year olds from September 2008.

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