
Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund Final report

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Introduction and background

Since 2006 the government has provided funding through the Transformation Fund (TF) to help professionalise the early years workforce and to deliver the Ten Year Strategy for Childcare. The aims of the TF were based on evidence highlighting the relationship between qualifications and the quality of early years provision, as well as differences in quality between the maintained and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2006; Sylva et al, 2003; Taggart et al, 2003). A total of £250 million was made available for local authorities (LAs) to develop a graduate-led workforce within the PVI sector.

In August 2007 the TF was replaced by the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF), which provided a further £305 million in funding between April 2008 and March 2011. The GLF supported full day care PVI sector providers in employing a graduate or **Early Years Professional (EYP)** by 2015, to lead practice across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The role of these graduate leaders is to support and mentor others, as well as to model skills and good practice to secure high quality provision. From April 2011 LAs have been funding support for EYPs in PVI settings through the Early Intervention Grant.

The National Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund (2007-2011) was commissioned by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES)¹ and carried out by a consortium of researchers from the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the University of Oxford and the Institute of Education (University of London). The main aim was to **assess the implementation of the Graduate Leader Fund and its impact on the quality of early years provision in the PVI sector**. This report presents the findings from:

- the literature review
- the impact study, which assessed the impact of gaining a member of staff with EYPS on the quality of early years provision in the PVI sector
- the qualitative case studies, which illustrated the nature of improvements made and identified the levers, facilitators and barriers to quality improvement.

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

Key findings

- Settings which gained a graduate leader with EYPS made significant improvements in quality for pre-school children (30 months to five years), as compared with settings which did not. The evidence also suggests that EYPS provided ‘added value’ over and above gaining a graduate. There was little evidence of an EYP impact on the quality of provision for younger children (birth to 30 months).
- Improvements related most strongly to direct work with children, such as support for learning, communication and individual needs, reflecting the role of EYPs as ‘leaders of practice’. EYPs were more influential on the quality of practice in their own rooms than on quality across the whole setting. The more time EYPs spent in rooms with children, the greater their impact on the quality of provision in that room.
- The qualification level of the whole staff team was significantly related to quality, particularly in the more ‘educational’ dimensions of provision for pre-school children. Other factors, such as staff experience and adult-child ratios, were identified as being important for the more nurturing and ‘care-based’ aspects of provision.
- The EYFS acted as a catalyst to the improvements reported by EYPs, which centred on child-led learning and meeting the needs of the individual child. Key facilitators and barriers to improvement include the degree of strategic planning undertaken, staff engagement and understanding of proposed changes, parental engagement, support from external advisors and the structural features of the setting itself.
- Findings from the qualitative case studies suggest that the success of the EYP role relies on three interrelated components: leadership and other skills gained through EYP pathways and later CPD opportunities; the EYP’s position within the setting; and the extent to which the role and remit of the EYP is defined and agreed.

Evaluation design

- At the heart of the GLF evaluation is the impact study, designed to **identify the impact of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) on quality**, both at a single time-point and the impact of gaining a graduate leader on change in quality over time.
- Findings are based on data gathered from a sample of 238 settings visited at two time-points, with two years between visits. Quality was assessed using three rating scales: Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years; the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged 3 to 5 years; and the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R), which assesses provision for children from birth to 30 months.
- Qualitative case studies in 12 settings were undertaken to complement the impact assessment by describing the nature of improvements made and identifying the levers, facilitators and

barriers to quality improvement. Managers, EYPs and setting staff took part. A survey was also conducted with parents in these 12 settings, to elicit their views on the quality of provision and changes over time.

Sample and characteristics of EYPs

- Of the 238 impact study settings, 32 gained an EYP during the course of the evaluation. Three settings employed 2 EYPS, giving a total of 35 EYPs in the sample. All EYPs had held their status for 6 months or more at the time of the follow-up. Around one third had held their status for 12 months or more, with the longest any EYP had held their status being 24 months. This evaluation therefore assesses the impact of EYPs within the first 6 to 24 months of attaining their status.
- The majority of EYPs had achieved their status via the validation pathway or the short professional extended development pathway. Almost all (94 per cent) of EYPs held a managerial position, either describing themselves as senior managers or line managers. On average, EYPs spent 35 per cent of their time working 'hands on' with the children (down from 48 per cent before gaining EYPS). After gaining their status, EYPs reported taking on greater responsibility for the support and mentoring of other staff.

Findings: impact of gaining EYPS

- Settings which gained a graduate leader with EYPS made significant improvements in quality for pre-school children (aged 30 months to 5 years), as compared with settings which did not. Gains were seen in overall quality and in a number of individual dimensions of practice, including: positive staff-child interactions; support for communication, language and literacy; reasoning/thinking skills and scientific understanding; provision of a developmentally appropriate schedule; and providing for individual needs and diversity.
- EYPS provided 'added value' over and above gaining a graduate in terms of overall quality and (to a lesser extent) provision to support literacy/language and planning for individual needs/diversity.
- Improvements related most strongly to direct work with children, such as support for learning, communication and individual needs, reflecting the role of EYPs as 'leaders of practice'. Fewer measurable improvements were seen in the quality of the physical environment, personal care routines and provision for parents and staff members.
- EYPs were more influential on the quality of practice in their own rooms than on quality across the whole setting. The more time EYPs spent in rooms with children, the greater the impact they made on the quality of provision in that room.
- EYPs are tasked with 'leading practice across the full age range from birth to the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage'. However in contrast to the positive findings in relation to quality for pre-school children, there was little evidence that EYPs improved the quality of provision for younger children (birth to 30 months). The low number of EYPs working in these rooms means that we cannot draw firm conclusions on the potential impact of EYPS on provision for infants

and toddlers. Further research is needed to establish the most effective ways of raising quality for under 3s through workforce development.

Findings: other predictors of quality

- The overall qualification level of staff working with the older children (30 months to five years) was a predictor of quality in more 'educational' dimensions of provision. Better qualified staff teams offered higher quality support for children's developing communication, language and literacy skills and their reasoning, thinking and mathematical skills, as well as higher overall curricular quality. As with the EYP findings, qualifications and quality were less related for the infant/toddler age range.
- Other factors, such as staff experience and adult-child ratios, were identified as being important for the more nurturing and 'care-based' aspects of provision (e.g. staff-child interactions and personal care routines) across the birth to five age range.
- Settings which catered for a greater proportion of children with SEN offered more developmentally appropriate schedules for children from birth to five, and higher quality interactions for the younger age range.
- The evaluation identified a link between disadvantage and the quality of provision offered to children. Settings catering for higher proportions of minority groups and children speaking English as an Additional Language (EAL), and settings in more income deprived areas, were rated as lower quality.
- A number of other setting characteristics were identified as predictors of quality, including the sector or 'aegis' of settings, the number of recent changes experienced (e.g. in staffing, management or organisation), setting size and group size.

Findings: improving practice in settings

- The case studies found that improvements made within settings were largely in response to the implementation of the EYFS, which was considered to be an important catalyst for change. Many of the reported improvements centred on child-led learning and meeting the needs of the individual child. Improvements were driven by EYPs, other staff, sources of advice external to the setting, changes in management and other programmes and schemes supporting the EYFS.
- EYPs, managers and staff reported improvements in: planning and observation procedures; the use of key worker systems; a greater emphasis on child-initiated activities; the use of free flow to support children's choice; parent-practitioner relationships and parental involvement with the setting; staff support and evaluation; the physical environment of the setting; and health and safety practices/procedures.
- The scale of improvements ranged from settings undertaking large-scale change to those making small improvements. Those undertaking large-scale change did so in order to improve

provision. Where smaller changes were made, this was more likely to be part of a continuous process of development in a setting already felt to deliver high quality provision.

Findings: factors affecting improvements

A range of factors affected settings' abilities to successfully implement improvements to practice. These were:

- The degree of strategic planning undertaken ahead of improvements and the extent to which planned changes were related.
- The role of the EYP as defined by three interrelated factors: leadership and skills gained through EYP pathways and later CPD opportunities; the EYP's position within the setting; and the extent to which the role and remit of the EYP is defined and agreed.
- Other staff's engagement and understanding of proposed improvements, including their understanding of how improvements would be delivered in practice and of why these changes would improve quality.
- Parental willingness for the proposed improvements to take place, alongside parental engagement in their child's development.
- External advice and support from early years advisors, who were seen as experts in the delivery of high quality provision, and from EYP networks.
- Setting features such as the outdoor space available and setting size. Planning and implementing improvement was considered to be more straightforward in smaller settings.

Findings: parents' views on improvements, qualifications and their involvement in their child's learning

- Parents' assessments of change in quality did not reflect the changes in quality measured in the impact assessment. Only 27 per cent of parents with children in 'improved' settings recognised that the quality of provision had improved; 29 per cent of parents with children in settings that remained stable thought that their provision had improved.
- Staff qualifications were not cited amongst the primary reasons for selecting a setting, with only 26 per cent of parents citing this as one of their top three factors.
- Parents exhibited a limited awareness of the presence of an EYP, and of qualifications more generally within their child's setting: only 25 per cent of parents in EYP settings knew that their setting had an EYP in place. Forty per cent of parents did not know what the highest qualification held by staff in their setting was and parents saw staff experience as more important than qualifications.

- Parents reported high levels of involvement in their child's learning and development, with 83 per cent reporting that they were actively encouraged to input into their child's learning and development records.

Conclusions

This evaluation provides positive evidence that the use of specialised early years graduate training pathways can lead to improvements in quality within the PVI sector. The impact study findings show that EYPs were effective in leading change for pre-school children (30 months to five years); settings which gained an EYP made significant improvements in quality over those that did not.

The evidence also suggests that EYPs were successful in leading implementation of the EYFS, with the positive benefits relating very strongly to direct 'hands-on' work with children. The dimensions of practice in which positive impacts were identified could also be described as 'process quality', defined as 'actual experiences that occur in [early years settings]' including children's interaction with caregivers and peers, as well as their participation in different activities (Vandell & Woolfe, 2000). Process quality is important because of the widely held view that it is these interactions which impact most on children's outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2007; Pianta, 1999).

The impact study identified fewer measurable changes in the quality of the physical environment, personal care routines and provision for parents and staff. This is surprising since the EYP Standards place emphasis on these areas, and the EYPs themselves reported making changes in these aspects of provision. Working with parents and leading and supporting other staff are viewed as important aspects of an EYP's role (CWDC, 2010). The absence of measurable change may have arisen because the ECERS and ITERS quality scales focus on the more 'structural' aspects of provision in these areas (i.e. aspects within the remit of managers rather than EYPs), or because the impact that EYPs had in these areas was restricted to a specific room rather than being setting-wide. This is supported by the finding that 'EYP hours in the room observed' was a stronger predictor of quality in that room than 'EYP hours in the setting'. It is also possible that the EYPs, many of whom had gained their status relatively recently, were yet to have a measurable impact in these areas.

The role of EYPs is to lead practice from birth to five (CWDC 2010). Our evidence suggests that positive impacts were seen only for older children, with little evidence that EYPs improved the quality of provision for younger children (birth to 30 months). The low number of EYPs deployed in the infant/toddler rooms observed (less than half, as compared with 91 per cent working in the pre-school rooms observed) mean that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on the impact of EYPS on provision for this age range. If, as with pre-school findings, EYPs have a stronger influence on practice in their own rooms, their absence in the infant/toddler rooms may have limited their potential to improve quality for the under 3s.

The evaluation findings indicate that both EYP training and EYP roles are key factors for facilitating the future positive impact of EYPS. Key issues include: knowledge and skills gained via EYP pathways and later CPD opportunities; leadership skills; a clearly defined role and remit; and having both managerial authority and time spent 'hands on' with children. The quality of a setting depends

on many variables, with the quality and qualifications of their leaders being only one of them. A number of factors ‘beyond the EYP’ were identified as contributors to quality, and as potential facilitators for the future impact of EYPS. These include: the qualifications and experience of the wider staff team; positive relationships with parents and other professionals; careful planning of changes; and supportive structural characteristics such as ratios and high quality physical environments.

Issues for consideration

The recent review of the Early Years Foundation Stage suggests that ‘without continued investment in the early years workforce, the Government will continue to struggle to raise attainment, and in particular to narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers’ (Tickell, 2011). On the basis of this evaluation, we recommend that the following issues be considered:

- Continued support and financial assistance for the development of a high level graduate-led workforce, on the basis that effective leaders are central to implementing government policy in improving the quality of early years provision. Alongside this, the further development of a long term workforce and qualifications strategy for all levels of staff, to ensure high quality early years provision for future generations.
- Based on evidence that EYPs are not being deployed to work with the youngest children, settings should be encouraged to consider whether their graduate leaders are leading practice across the birth to five age range. Coupled with this, research is required to establish the most effective ways of raising quality for our youngest children through workforce development.
- Ensuring that training for EYPs contains effective and high quality support to help them achieve their full potential in leading quality across the EYFS and across settings, and to overcome barriers to improvement. This should include training in effective leadership skills, change management and reflective self-evaluation, as well as effective strategies for working in partnership with parents.
- Ensuring that opportunities are provided for EYPs and other staff to develop ‘purposeful’ hands-on experience alongside their development of specialised knowledge.
- Provision of ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) for EYPs once they have achieved their status, to enable them to embed and further develop their skills as change agents and leaders of learning.
- Ensuring that EYPs and other staff are supported by the structural characteristics of settings which provide the bedrock for high quality, such as supportive adult-child ratios and physical environments.
- A defined role and remit for EYPs, as well as clear guidance for settings on how to develop these and communicate them to staff. An effective remit should provide EYPs with the authority needed to act as a catalyst for change, whilst also reflecting the importance of time spent working hands on with children.
- Continued movement towards the recognition of EYPS as a specific leadership profession.

Research recommendations

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

- Further research to systematically evaluate the impact of the different pathways on quality and children's outcomes, and to explore exactly which aspects of training and staff experience lead to positive benefits.
- Research to establish the most effective ways of raising quality for our youngest children (i.e. under 3s) through workforce development.
- Ongoing research to assess the longer-term impacts of EYPS in ensuring high quality provision for children, to establish whether early impacts are sustained, and to capture the impact of EYPS at setting-level.
- Future research should also pay regard to the inter-relatedness of different high level qualifications/statuses, including EYPS and QTS, to further inform the cohesive development of a graduate led workforce and a clear career path for early years practitioners.

This research brief is part of a series on the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund.

Other research briefs include:

- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: GLF Implementation Case Studies
- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Factors Relating to Quality - findings from the baseline study
- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Evaluation Overview (this research brief provides a synthesis of the whole evaluation)

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.