
Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: GLF implementation case studies

Helen Ranns, Thomas Newmark, Nilufer Rahim, and Clarissa Penfold

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. A total of £250 million was made available to private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early years settings to fulfil these aims. 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. Local authorities (LAs) were also given greater flexibility to develop, target and publicise their own incentive systems. The GLF supported all 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 so as to deliver high quality provision.

This report provides the evidence from the GLF implementation study which was conducted in 2009 by the National Centre for Social Research.

Key findings

- The GLF set out to recruit at least one EYP in each setting or to develop a 'pool' of EYPs to provide support within a local area. The approach taken depended on a local sector needs analysis and consultation with settings.
- Settings' take up of the GLF depended on their views about professionalising the early years workforce, as well as the degree to which they were informed about the policy.
- The training pathway chosen to become a graduate or EYPS depended on previous training and experience as well as more practical issues such as personal and work commitments and the location of training providers. Support was provided to trainee EYPs through course tutors and mentors, colleagues within settings and local EYP networks.
- Practitioners preferred the long EYP pathway (15 months) as it was felt to give sufficient time to gain both experience and complete the portfolio of evidence.

- LA early years advisors identified the interim benefits (in 2009) of graduate leaders and EYPs as providing better quality childcare through improved interaction and confidence with children gained through their increased knowledge of early years theories and initiatives. Other staff were also perceived to benefit from their skills through the cascading of learning through mentoring and modelling practice.
- EYPs needed the support and buy-in of all staff within the settings, along with the ability and leadership skills to successfully lead practice. Working conditions and pay were identified as key to retaining EYPs within settings once GLF funding ended. Career aspirations and recognition of the EYP role were also factors which threatened the sustainability of EYPs in settings.

Methodology

This component of the evaluation of the GLF sought to explore the implementation and take-up of the GLF and graduate/ EYP training. Key objectives were to:

- provide early feedback on how the GLF was viewed and administered locally, including how it impacted on the LA and the local childcare workforce
- understand experiences of the GLF from childcare providers' perspectives, particularly in relation to decisions about participation, application processes, and training
- explore perceived early impacts on childcare settings.

The implementation study consisted of case studies set within eight Local Authorities (LAs). This allowed for an in-depth exploration of the implementation of the GLF across a range of LAs and early years settings. Within each LA, in-depth interviews were conducted with LA staff involved in the implementation of the GLF as well as staff working in settings who were and were not in receipt of the GLF. The aim of the interviews with LA staff was to describe how the GLF had been implemented at a local level, while the interviews with staff working in early years settings explored awareness of the GLF and use of GLF funding.

Implementing the GLF

LAs consulted settings in developing locally appropriate GLF policies, although the extent and scope of consultation varied greatly (from conversations with a few settings to full-scale audits of PVI providers). Case study LAs asked settings in receipt of the TF for feedback about which elements of this policy had worked well, and which elements needed adaptation. LAs also engaged with other local LAs about the design of their GLF policies and levels of funding.

In developing their GLF policies, LA staff retained some of the language and structure of the TF, in order to facilitate continuity of funding and because certain TF strands were well understood by settings. The three main strands of the TF which LAs used were the Home Grown Graduate Incentive (HGGI)¹, Recruitment Incentive (RI)² and the Quality Premium (QP)³.

¹ *Home Grown Graduate Incentive (HGGI)*: funding for existing staff within settings to train up to graduate or EYP level, paid in addition to course fees, for example to enable settings to pay for staff cover.

² *Recruitment Incentive (RI)*: funding to enable settings to recruit an EYP or graduate who could take up EYP training, to be used to cover recruitment and salary costs.

The levels of incentives LA's attached to each of these strands depended either on the amount of funding they had and the number of eligible settings, or it was based on a market rate review of salary levels of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and other graduate practitioners.

In order to achieve the 2015 GLF target of a graduate leader in every PVI childcare setting LAs either recruited an EYP to each setting or they built up a 'pool' of EYPs to support settings within the LA.

Across the case-study LAs, early years leads reported that around half to two thirds of PVI settings had taken up some form of GLF funding. Take up of funding to train up existing staff members (the HGGI element) was reported as the most commonly taken up incentive. LA staff reported higher levels of initial take up of the GLF amongst staff with level three or above qualifications as they were motivated to access money for training to graduate or EYP level. However, settings with staff who have lower level qualifications or who are less motivated have proved harder to engage which led to the number of applications levelling off over time.

Engagement with the GLF

Settings' engagement with the GLF related to their views about professionalising the childcare sector. Views revolved around whether the drive for higher qualified staff was considered beneficial to individual settings and the sector more widely. Concerns were expressed about placing too much emphasis on qualifications as this could undermine the importance of *experience* in providing high quality childcare. These different perspectives, and the tensions inherent within them, led to four main types of engagement with the GLF agenda:

- active engagement – enthusiastic about the opportunities GLF provides for upskilling staff
- passive engagement – not enthusiastic, but “going along with it”
- passive disengagement – did not see getting a graduate leader as a priority.
- active disengagement – opposed to the aims of the GLF and resistant to employing graduates

The decision to apply for funding also depended on the setting's level of awareness about the GLF underpinned by the information and support available to them. Some setting managers found written literature informative and easy to understand, while others found both the information conveyed and the frequency with which it was distributed to be unhelpful. Workshops and roadshows, where attended, were generally found to be informative. Individual visits to settings were seen as the most effective way of communicating the GLF to settings. During these visits settings were informed about the funding options, given help to identify suitable staff to undertake training and to complete the application process.

The structuring of the financial incentives was a key facilitator to take up of the GLF. Incentives that enabled settings to pay for staff cover and to enhance salaries were seen positively, and as factors that encouraged take up of the GLF. These were important as the home grown route required

³ *Quality Premium (QP)*: funding to reward settings where staff achieve EYPS, used to improve the delivery of the EYFS (through staff training or purchase of resources) and to assist settings in retaining an EYP

settings to provide cover for staff absence due to training and the extra work that the staff member had to undertake as a result of the training. Concerns were also expressed about the uncertainty about when the funding would end; and whether the incentive levels in place were sufficient to cover actual costs.

Training choices and experiences

Graduate training

The two categories of provider for gaining degrees (either foundation or full honours) were the Open University (OU) or local further education (FE) or higher education (HE) institutions. LAs played varying roles in the identification of training providers, either recommending specific providers, or producing a list of providers and courses from which practitioners could choose. Those that recommended providers were more likely to be involved in quality assessments of the training provision, whereas the LAs that provided lists of all providers tended to have less formal assessment procedures.

Generally, practitioners were positive about their training, in terms of the content and applicability of the courses, and the support available. The transition from NVQ training to graduate training was seen as a challenge by practitioners, especially for those who had not received formal education for a long time. The volume of work involved in graduate training was raised as a concern, and resulted in practitioners needing to carry out a lot of study in their own time.

Support from managers and colleagues was cited as an important protective factor, as were the training bursaries that were available in some LAs which helped pay for necessary resources (books, stationery etc) or travel costs.

Early Years Professional training

Practitioners doing EYP training were engaged in one of four pathways, depending on previous experience, qualifications and also which pathways were available in their LA. The four pathways (which ranged from three to 15 months) were:

- Validation: for practitioners with relevant full degree qualification and practical experience (four months, part-time).
- Short: for practitioners with relevant full degree qualification but lacking specific practical experience (six months, part-time).
- Long: for practitioners with relevant foundation degree with any level of experience (15 months, part-time).
- Full: for practitioners with non-relevant honours degree with any level of experience (12 months, full-time).

Practitioners had a choice of working towards a full degree and then doing the validation or short pathway, or doing the foundation degree and then doing the long pathway. The idea of embarking on the full or long pathway (12 or 15 months respectively) straight away was too daunting for practitioners who preferred to gain a full degree in the interim before embarking upon and EYP pathway. This was also perceived to have the additional benefit of being a more widely recognised

and transferable qualification. The long pathway seemed an easier option, for other practitioners, compared to doing a full degree that involved demanding elements (such as a dissertation).

Experiences of these pathways varied. The short pathway (six months) was felt to allow insufficient time for those with little previous experience to gain the relevant experience needed and also complete the portfolio of evidence. This led to practitioners deferring completion dates to accommodate the required experience and portfolio. The long pathway was less criticised, and was viewed as giving sufficient time for all the necessary practical experience to be obtained along with completing the portfolio of evidence.

Amongst practitioners there was a view that providers needed to be more consistent in terms of their pathway eligibility criteria, with respect to both qualifications and experience. Having a more consistent approach to eligibility criteria, it was felt, would improve the universal recognition of the EYPS compared to other professional status such as qualified teacher status (QTS) which has national eligibility criteria.

Early Years Professional networks

EYP networks were active in each of the LA case study areas. They ranged from virtual forums in LAs with only small numbers of EYPS, to actual meetings held either termly or monthly within the LA. EYP networks were viewed positively by those involved as a forum for professional development, training, and information-sharing, and also as a vehicle to share and, in some cases, observe practice.

Perceived early impacts (2009)

The impact of the GLF was viewed positively by both LA staff and practitioners. Practitioners working towards higher qualifications felt that this had a positive impact on the way they interacted with children, gave them more confidence, and allowed a better understanding of the theory underpinning government initiatives such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). LA early years teams observed that staff with higher qualifications delivered better quality childcare, and were more enthused about their work. The ability of an EYP to exhibit high quality practice could be limited by the practitioner lacking the necessary attributes to effectively lead practice and implement change within their setting;

The GLF was viewed as having a positive impact on the graduate leader role, in terms of raising awareness and helping to define the nature of the role. Where managers had taken on the EYP role, they had had to move from a largely office based role to one that was more closely involved in the delivery of childcare. This led to sharing of administrative responsibilities with other staff, and demonstrated the possibility of balancing a managerial and EYP role.

At a setting level, practitioners who had or were working towards degrees or EYPS, felt that other staff benefited from them cascading their learning, and resulted in staff considering new and different childcare methods and sometimes even undertaking further training themselves). The success of this was dependent on the willingness of staff within the setting to change their practice and the abilities of the practitioner who had undergone the training to successfully impart their

knowledge and affect change. Graduate leaders also needed to be in a position where they could successfully lead practice and other staff.

Despite these positive initial impacts of the GLF, concerns were voiced about the quality of provision within settings taking a dip whilst staff were absent, and negative feelings towards staff eligible for study leave under the GLF. Also, those managers who were less engaged in the GLF did not see any benefit to having staff members with graduate qualifications or EYPS, and felt that increased experience would have done as much or more than gaining a qualification.

The future of EYPs in settings

Pay and conditions were seen as key in retaining graduates and EYPs within childcare settings. At the time of the research, future funding for professionalising the early years workforce was unclear and concerns were raised by both LA staff and setting managers about retaining staff within the childcare sector after the GLF funding ends. Managers were concerned that without the additional money to enhance salaries they would be unable to retain staff without having to raise fees for parents to cover the salaries. As a consequence, managers sometimes anticipated their graduates would leave the setting and move into either the teaching profession or to LA Early Years Teams where both pay and working conditions were perceived as being better. Some settings envisaged their manager becoming their EYP as they already had enhanced salaries which could be sustained.

Practitioners were concerned that the profile of the role should be raised post-GLF, not only financially, but also as a 'leadership role' within a setting. Some practitioners suggested they would move to other settings or schools if their salary increases were not sustained. For practitioners undertaking EYP training, having the opportunity to fulfil this role was important and were they not able to take on this role within their current setting they would consider moving to a new setting to take up the role.

Movement within the childcare sector was not seen as a problem by LAs and some setting managers, as it was felt that it would be useful to create a "pool" of graduate leaders and EYPs who moved freely within the sector. However, career aspirations were not solely directed towards the early years sector; and some practitioners intended to utilise their EYPS as a route into teaching.

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: Factors relating to Quality: findings from the baseline study
- Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Final Report
- And a synthesis report of the whole evaluation, Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund: Evaluation overview.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
Further information about this research can be obtained from
Lorna Serieux, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BT
[Lorna SERIEUX@education.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Lorna.SERIEUX@education.gsi.gov.uk)

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.