

Supply – but no demand?

Amanda Thomas

Has the introduction of the *Foundation Phase* (FP) in Wales reduced the use of supply teachers in Welsh primary schools?

In September 2008 the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), began implementing the *Foundation Phase* (FP) curriculum for 3-7 year olds in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). It was and is to be implemented over four years as follows:

- 1 September 2008 for all 3 to 4-year-olds
- 1 September 2009 for all 4 to 5-year-olds
- 1 September 2010 for all 5 to 6-year-olds
- 1 September 2011 for all 6 to 7-year-olds

The ethos of this new curriculum is that children should learn through first hand, experiential activities and that play provides the vehicle to do this. The curriculum is tailored to meet individual needs and is stage appropriate rather than age appropriate.

The *Foundation Phase* emphasises the use of the outdoors as an additional classroom and states that children should be learning outdoors everyday in all weathers (WAG, 2008). There needs to be a balance between child-initiated activities and practitioner-led activities with the holistic development of the child paramount.

In order to implement this curriculum it has been proposed that a ratio of 1:8 staff to pupils is needed in the age range 3-4 years and a ratio of staff to pupils 1:15 in the age range 5-7-years. However, the Welsh Assembly Government is keen to emphasise that this is not statutory but in reality all practitioners working in the FP agree these ratios are needed to implement the curriculum successfully. As a result, there has been a big increase in the demand for Level 3 practitioners, with that level being the legally recognised minimum level to allow support staff to work independently with children. However, with schools now having employed these 'extra' support staff for the FP there is evidence that schools are using these same staff to cover teachers' 'Preparation, Planning and Assessment' (PPA) time and as cover for illness instead of supply teachers.

According to one report by the BBC's Politics Show Wales, this is happening with Waunarlwydd Primary School in Swansea where two teaching assistants are timetabled to take whole classes: "A lot of our skill-based learning takes place in the outdoors and for that purpose we have a higher level teaching assistant who is well qualified in the use of the outdoors for promoting these specific concepts," said the head teacher, Ruth Davies (BBC News Channel, 2010).

Legally teaching assistants are allowed to supervise classes if they have the right level of qualifications but whether they should do so is open to debate.

John Bangs head of education at the NUT states, "What the regulations say is you can only do specified work, which is teaching, if you're under the supervision of a qualified teacher. What you can't do is take over on your own, plan lessons, run classes etc" (BBC News Channel, 2010). He said the employment of supply teachers – qualified teachers employed to cover absent staff – had "gone through the floor" because "they [were] being replaced by cheaper cover supervisors and support staff" (BBC News Channel, 2010). Head teachers face a "real temptation to employ cheaper, unqualified staff" in the current climate, but evidence shows putting support staff in inappropriate roles led to a drop in standards, he said (BBC News Channel, 2010).

However, Mick Brookes, who leads the head teachers' union, National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) says that their policy is to make sure the 'appropriate person' is in front of the class but there are cases where, 'a teaching assistant manages a class well' (BBC News Channel, 2010).

Of course in today's climate of reduced budgets for schools there must be a real temptation to use support staff to cover and manage classes as the cost of a supply teacher can be up to £150 a day and the cost of support staff about £50. If you work out that saving over an academic year, is it any wonder schools are going to use support staff instead?

Another concern has to be for support staff themselves: do they want the extra responsibility of teaching a whole class? Surely if they did they would have trained to become teachers rather than support staff but in today's job climate who is going to refuse

when a head teacher tells you that you are covering/teaching a class for an absent teacher?

Another point to consider is how aware are parents of the use of support staff to teach their children and do they agree with it? Margaret Morrissey of 'Parents Outloud' action group believes parents are not happy with this trend (Morrissey, 2010) and says:

Parents are becoming increasingly concerned that schools are using TAs more and more to take classes, whilst accepting this will happen in times of emergency there is increasing evidence schools are using TAs where trained teachers should be in place. We all know how vital the early years education is and excellent as many TAs are they are not trained teachers and this has to stop.

Christina McAnea, head of education at UNISON, also says she is "very concerned" that some teaching assistants might be being stretched.

"Most of our members are actually being paid incredibly low rates of pay; most of them haven't got sufficient qualifications. Part of the workforce agreement says that to do specified work, to actually be actively teaching, should be someone who is HLTA – higher level teaching assistant level – only about 25% of the people we surveyed actually had that qualification" (BBC News Channel, 2010).

Some Teaching Assistants themselves expressed concern over being expected to cover for teachers.

*I'm working as a teaching assistant through a teaching agency. I'm frequently asked to act as a 'class room assistant' (jargon for an unqualified teacher). I have to act on my own in a classroom of children, which means essentially assuming the role of a teacher. Crucially I'm paid just £10 more, still less than half the rate of a supply teacher. **Richard, UK***

*I work in a school and would say that in some weeks a teaching assistant is covering classes all day for four out of five days. **Jennifer, Essex***

(Statements from BBC News Channel, 2008).

So how is this affecting work for supply teachers?

A colleague of mine has a daughter who qualified as a primary school teacher in Wales two years ago but hasn't been able to find a job. Therefore, she has registered with a number of agencies for supply teaching but has found it increasingly difficult to get any work. In fact, she hasn't had any teaching work since Easter of this year and she says schools are just not ringing up for supply teachers.

So I contacted the Welsh Assembly Government to ask what its opinion is on the increased use of support staff instead of supply teachers to cover classes. This is their response:

A National Agreement clearly states that support staff at any level and teachers are not interchangeable and, ultimately, it is the duty of individual head teachers, working with their governing bodies and wider school teams, to determine the best way to deploy staff in their schools ... Each school will adopt strategies that suit its individual character and circumstances ... The agreement encourages schools to deploy support staff more flexibly, but accountability for the overall learning outcome of pupils will always rest with qualified teachers (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010).

Back to my original question then: has the introduction of the *Foundation Phase* in Wales led to a reduction of supply work for teachers? Based on all the evidence I have found then I would have to say, in my opinion, yes it has. There is no doubt that the continuing aims of the *Foundation Phase* is to raise standards for our youngest learners and that the increased employment of Level 3 support staff should support this – but at what cost?

Are schools now using the excuse that the *Foundation Phase* has required them to employ more support staff at an additional cost, so to save money elsewhere, they no longer use supply teachers?

I think they are and this is a real problem that needs addressing and quickly. After all, if my child needed an operation I would expect a fully qualified doctor to carry it out and not

a nurse, so why are we allowing support staff to 'teach' our children instead of fully qualified teachers?

The answer, to my mind, is that we shouldn't and if we are not careful the very aims that the *Foundation Phase* is trying to promote will be lost – and that's a situation no practitioner wants whatever their role.

References

BBC News Channel (2010) *Schools 'break law' on teaching assistants*. Available online at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education (accessed 20th August, 2010).

BBC News Channel (2008) *Teaching assistants controls urged*. Available online at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education (accessed 20th August, 2010).

Morrissey, M. (2010) *Parents Outloud Action Group*. Available online at: www.parentsoutloud.com (accessed 20th August, 2010).

Welsh Assembly Government (2010) *Foundation Phase*. Available online at: www.wales.gov.uk/foundationphase (accessed 20th August, 2010).

Welsh Assembly Government (2008) *Framework for Children's Learning for 3 to 7 Year-Olds in Wales* Cardiff: Crown.