



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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# Research into assessment practices in the Foundation Phase (summary)

This research explores the use of assessments in the Foundation Phase of schooling.

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# Research aims and methodology

Miller Research, in conjunction with Old Bell 3 and Meurig Roberts, was commissioned to undertake research to examine the use of assessments in the Foundation Phase of schooling.

The purpose of the research is to examine the impact of assessment, including the Foundation Phase Profile and the personalised assessments in Reading and Numeracy (Procedural), on teaching and learning during the Foundation Phase, and the extent of integration of these assessment tools into practice. By exploring the reflections of practitioners on key questions around assessment, the research is intended to provide the Welsh Government with insight from the practitioners interviewed to inform decision-making and potentially identify areas in need of more support and resources.

Twenty case study schools were engaged to carry out fieldwork. Schools were selected to cover a broad range of factors, including geographic location, language, size, and the number of learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM).

A total of 76 education practitioners and parent governors were interviewed, in addition to the 18 stakeholders interviewed as part of the scoping phase of the research.

# Main findings

## Assessment practices in the Foundation Phase

### Alignment with Foundation Phase pedagogical principles

Practitioners reflected positively on the alignment between the Foundation Phase Profile and the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase. This was principally because: the baseline and end-of-phase assessments could be carried out mostly through observation. There were, however, many instances across the majority of schools of practitioners describing having to set up specific tasks, sometimes at a desk, in order to assess particular skills that were not as easily observed through play. The key factors driving practitioners to use focused tasks were the complexity and nature of the skill being assessed, with this becoming more of an issue in older years within the Foundation Phase, and time pressures on practitioners.

### Extent of use of the Foundation Phase Profile

Beyond the statutory period of use in the first six weeks of the reception year, the Foundation Phase Profile was used by a quarter of the case study schools (five). Five schools had developed their own internal assessment systems, with the remaining ten using alternative software packages.

Despite the majority of schools not using the Profile beyond the reception year, this, it appears, is not a reflection of the quality of the Profile but is largely a consequence of the availability of alternative packages, which provide an accessible platform that can be accessed through mobile devices.

The majority of the internally developed systems used by schools were based on

the Foundation Phase Profile, with practitioners describing having made a number of changes to better suit their needs, which included:

- breaking down outcome levels into smaller incremental steps
- focusing more on disposition to learning as opposed to only skills

Overall, there was a mixed picture as to the direction of travel with take up of the Foundation Phase Profile within the schools, with two schools having recently moved away from using alternative software packages at the suggestion of a local authority and regional consortium respectively, with one having returned to using the Profile, and the other having developed their own system.

## **Quality and utility of the Foundation Phase Profile**

Practitioners overall were positive about the quality of the Foundation Phase Profile, noting that the Compact Profile provides a good account of learners' overall ability, and includes a sufficiently wide range of skills to observe and assess. It was described as being useful for setting targets and for identifying next steps.

The Compact Profile was better suited to assessing some areas than others, with more “black and white” abilities being easier to assess than more “subjective” areas, such as those within the Personal and Social Development, Well-being, and Cultural Diversity ladder.

The most common minor criticisms raised regarding the Foundation Phase Profile included it being too time consuming, too much of a tick-box process, and not being tailored enough to the individual learner.

## **Identifying learners with special or additional learning needs**

While not developed to support the identification of developmental issues in

individual children, the Foundation Phase Profile could help to identify learners with additional learning needs. It is used widely to collect evidence on potential developmental issues alongside a range of resources available to practitioners. The Profile was therefore described as a good starting point, and a useful tool for tracking issues. The limiting factor for identifying learning difficulties was that statements within the Foundation Phase Profile were in some instances too broad and vague.

## **Foundation Phase Profile and language**

Learners in Welsh medium schools from largely English-speaking homes experienced some language difficulties, with practitioners noting that baseline assessment outcomes can be lower due to unfamiliarity with the language of instruction.

There was concern from a small number of Welsh medium and bilingual schools that this might affect parents' perceptions of their decision to choose Welsh medium schooling, but others had found that parents were understanding once this issue was explained to them.

## **Communicating Foundation Phase Profile assessments to parents**

Seven schools passed on baseline outcomes to parents, usually through end-of-year reports and parents' evenings. Of the remaining schools, the majority only used baseline outcomes for internal use.

## **Assessment practices in the new Curriculum for Wales**

Practitioners overall felt positively about the new Curriculum for Wales; however, a number of concerns were raised regarding assessments. These included the

breadth of the Progression Steps, the need for more guidance material for assessment and a common assessment framework, and the potential for barriers to inter-school cooperation and collaboration.

While it is not intended that learners are assessed against progression steps under the new curriculum, a number of practitioners spoke about assessing against progression steps.

## Online personalised assessments

### Personalised assessments guidance

A key finding of the research is that the majority of schools have not necessarily embraced the guidance accompanying personalised assessments in full, with many not taking advantage of the flexibility afforded.

The extent to which practitioners are integrating personalised assessments with Foundation Phase practice is mixed, with some aspects of the guidance provided to practitioners taken on board, with others followed less closely. The key points relating to adherence to the guidance were as follows:

- the vast majority of practitioners were following guidance on encouraging learners to take breaks during the assessments (all but one school)
- nearly half of the schools interviewed had used, or intended to use personalised assessments twice within the academic year to establish a baseline for the learners and understand change over time through carrying out a second assessment later in the year

## Non observance of the guidance

- There was a mixed picture with a small number of schools opting to carry out personalised assessments in circumstances resembling test conditions, appearing to be a carry-over from the delivery of paper-based tests.
- There was also a mixed picture regarding *when* schools chose to schedule personalised assessments with around half of the schools still scheduling assessments within narrow windows, usually due to the school's scheduling practices which appear to be a legacy of adhering to requirements for the paper-based tests.
- Around half of the schools still intended to use the assessments only once in the academic year, citing a lack of value of the outcome data, and impacts on the wellbeing of learners as reasoning.

## Usage of personalised assessments by practitioners

There was a correlation between schools that used the online personalised assessments in a more flexible manner and the positivity of their sentiment towards the assessments.

Some of the case study schools appeared to have effectively integrated personalised assessment with Foundation Phase practice, with these schools using the assessments as intended and as set out in the guidance, meaning:

- the assessments were used flexibly by either small groups or individuals
- learners were able to use tablets with which they were familiar
- learners were provided with regular breaks to break up the assessment period
- these schools either carried out or intended to carry out the assessments twice a year



The majority of schools however, to varying degrees, had not fully embraced the guidance and flexibility afforded by the personalised assessments.

The picture as to the use of assessment outcomes is also mixed. Most schools expressed reservations about the value of the feedback and reports, discussing inconsistencies between outcome data and their judgement of certain learners (for example, where they considered that learners could have achieved 'fluke' results by selecting answers at random).

Practitioners considered that assessment data was of most use in identifying skills gaps across classes as a whole, which practitioners then used to plan teaching for future cohorts.

Some issues were raised by practitioners regarding the practicalities of carrying out the personalised assessments, which included the following.

- There were a small number of instances where learners struggled with using IT hardware (computer mouse) (schools are encouraged to allow users to take the personalised assessments using whatever device they are most comfortable with, for example, tablets or laptops, and therefore use of a mouse is not necessarily required).
- Challenges with learners' IT competency were raised by nine practitioners across six schools, particularly in relation to the reading personalised assessments, with the requirement to move between windows to read text then answer questions. This was said to be challenging for some learners.
- The literacy skills of a number of learners were too low to enable them to understand some questions in the procedural numeracy personalised assessments. Practitioners raised the point that an option to listen to the questions would help learners.

Practitioners did however reflect positively on the reduction in marking with the move from paper-based tests to personalised assessments.

## **Barriers to implementation: cultural change**

It is clear from interviews carried out that barriers remain to embedding the guidance and ethos of personalised assessments within the majority of schools, with the cultural shift yet to be made by many schools away from the practices established previously through paper-based testing towards a more flexible and informal approach afforded by the personalised assessments.

Barriers to using the personalised assessments more flexibly were in some instances caused by scheduling practices employed by schools in order to schedule tests and assessments, with decisions over scheduling made centrally by management.

Other schools continued to hold assessments during the same period as the old paper-based tests in May out of habit.

## **Communication of personalised assessments to parents**

In order to avoid placing pressure on learners, it was commonplace for schools to not communicate the scheduling of online personalised assessments with the parents and guardians of the learners. Schools are not required to inform parents of scheduling.

Results from personalised assessments largely remained for internal use, but a small number of schools had shared outcome data with parents. Schools are required to share feedback and progress in the personalised assessments with parents and carers.

## Use of assessment feedback and data

Many practitioners interviewed were sceptical about the appropriateness of online personalised assessments as a means of accurately capturing the ability of a Foundation Phase learner.

Issues flagged by practitioners include problems with some learners' literacy impacting their ability to read questions within the procedural numeracy assessment, resulting in some outcomes and scores appearing to be out of line with teacher expectations. More than a quarter of practitioners considered the assessments superfluous to ongoing teacher assessment.

There were examples given where the data from the assessments has been used positively for both individual learners and classes as a whole, however the data was regarded as most useful in instances where outcomes highlight issues for the class as a whole in identifying elements that were most in need of development.

## Online personalised assessments and learners' wellbeing

Practitioners on the whole felt that the online personalised assessments were better for learner wellbeing than paper-based tests. A small number of practitioners also reflected positively on the fact that the assessments let learners move at their own speed.

The use of computers and tablets allowed teachers to present the assessments as a "quiz" instead of a "test." There were however a small number of learners across nine schools that struggled with the IT demands of the assessment, either due to difficulties using a mouse and keyboard, or difficulties in moving between windows on the screen during the reading personalised assessment.

While the adaptive nature of the online personalised assessments has led to a positive experience for most learners, it has resulted in a negative impact on some learners' wellbeing, with higher achieving learners more likely to become stressed due to facing challenging questions, sometimes covering topics beyond those covered in the classroom. Practitioners explained that they downplayed the assessments to learners to avoid causing stress or worry. The guidance accompanying personalised assessments encourages practitioners to explain to learners that they will face some challenging questions.

Despite most schools allowing breaks, the majority of schools reported instances of learners spending long periods carrying out the assessments. The guidance encourages practitioners to use their judgment in ending assessments for learners who are taking a long time.

The use of personalised assessments in the Foundation Phase was also viewed by most practitioners as being not necessarily aligned with the pedagogical principles of the Foundation Phase, with a small number stating that any formalised assessment was incompatible.

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