



Understanding the **Foundation Stage**

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Introduction

The Foundation Stage

Years 1 & 2 in the primary school

The purpose of this guidance is to provide information related to good practice in the Foundation Stage. It outlines the approach to learning, teaching and assessment and should be used to support the review, development and improvement of existing provision and practice.

Young children come to school from a variety of different backgrounds, having had a range of diverse learning experiences at home and for most, some form of pre-school education. The Foundation Stage aims to build on these learning experiences by providing children with an appropriate learning programme to develop their dispositions to learn and to provide them with the skills and competencies they will need to succeed in school and future life. The Foundation Stage also endorses good early years practice where teachers have more flexibility in terms of what they teach. This flexibility allows teachers to follow the interests of the children, encouraging them to see links in their learning and to appreciate that the skills they learn in one area can be applied elsewhere.



The Rationale of the Foundation Stage

This section sets out:

- The Characteristics of the Foundation Stage
- The Aims of the Foundation Stage
- The Principles Underpinning the Foundation Stage
- The Curriculum in the Foundation Stage

The Characteristics of the Foundation Stage

At the outset it is important to emphasise that the Foundation Stage reflects the existing good practice already firmly established in Northern Ireland schools. The Programme of Study (1996) outlined the Characteristics of the Curriculum at Key Stage 1 and the Foundation Stage seeks to endorse these elements of sound educational practice by providing a learning environment which best meets the needs of young children.

The Programme of Study (1996) stated that Key Stage 1 teachers should:

'provide opportunities for pupils to develop the skills they will need to become confident and independent,'

Therefore:

'the learning experiences provided should reflect pupil's interests and the practical and informal ways in which pupils of this age learn. These experiences should be enjoyable and challenging, and should motivate pupils and encourage them to adopt positive attitudes to school and learning.'

The contexts for learning should:

'relate to the pupil's immediate and known environment and should reflect the fact that pupils at this age do not see knowledge and skills as belonging to specific categories and subjects.'

It goes on to state that education at Key Stage 1 should foster the intellectual, social, emotional, physical, moral and spiritual development of pupils by:

- enabling them to work and play together harmoniously;
- promoting positive attitudes to school and learning;
- providing opportunities for them to learn in a practical way;
- using to the full, opportunities provided by play for their development, both socially and academically;



- providing a wide range of opportunities for developing movement and manipulative skills;
- developing their natural curiosity and stimulating their imagination;
- providing opportunities for exploration, investigation, problem solving and decision making;
- developing the fundamental skills of literacy, numeracy and oral communication, both through direct teaching and by the opportunities provided by other subjects and activities;
- providing opportunities for them to develop knowledge, understanding and skills through a range of contexts spanning all subjects of the curriculum;
- providing rich and varied contexts for developing skills, such as observing, investigating, organising, recording, interpreting and predicting, which are essential to learning in all subjects of the curriculum.

Key Stages 1 and 2 – The Northern Ireland Curriculum Programmes of Study and Attainment Targets (DENI:1996).

This guidance should be used in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Curriculum and:
Together Towards Improvement (ETI, 2003)
Continuous Improvement through Self-evaluation (ETI, 2003)
The Reflective Teacher (ETI, 2006)



The Aims of the Foundation Stage

The Northern Ireland curriculum aims to empower young people to develop their potential and make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives. The Foundation Stage aims to provide a learning programme which will:

- promote children’s personal development;
- promote positive attitudes and dispositions to learning;
- promote children’s Thinking Skills & Personal Capabilities;
- encourage creativity and imagination;
- enable children to develop physical confidence and competence;
- develop children’s curiosity and interest in the world around them;
- enable children to communicate in a variety of ways;
- motivate children to develop literacy and numeracy skills in meaningful contexts.

The Principles Underpinning the Foundation Stage

Young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable for both children and teachers.

Children learn best when they:

- have opportunities to be actively involved in practical, open-ended and challenging learning experiences that encourage creativity;
- have opportunities to initiate experiences that capitalise on their individual interests and curiosities;
- are actively involved in planning, reviewing and reflecting what they have done;
- are enabled to express themselves by creating images, sounds, movements, structures and invented stories;
- are involved in play that is challenging, takes account of their developmental stage and needs and builds on their own interests and experiences;
- work in stimulating environments and have access to a range of resources;
- develop secure relationships with peers and adults;
- have choice and exercise autonomy and independence in their learning, and are encouraged to take risks.

Learning is supported by adults when:

- early years practitioners are committed, sensitive, enthusiastic and interact effectively to challenge children's thinking and learning;
- planning is collaborative, holistic, child focused and informed by observations of learning;

- assessment is ongoing, formative and integral to learning and teaching. It is observation based, informs planning and is carried out in an unobtrusive way;
- practitioners manage the introduction and effective use of resources;
- positively affirming environments are created to support children's emotional, social and physical development;
- the importance of process-based rather than outcome driven learning is acknowledged;
- practitioners and parents/carers work in partnership to ensure children achieve their full potential;
- a multi-professional approach exists and practitioners access the expertise of other professionals;
- children are made aware of their progress by receiving positive feedback and suggestions for improvement;
- they reflect on their practice and are engaged in professional development.



The Curriculum in the Foundation Stage

The statutory curriculum in the Foundation Stage is set out under the following Areas of Learning:

- **Religious Education** – in accordance with the core syllabus drafted by the four main Christian Churches in Northern Ireland and specified by the Department of Education.
- **Language and Literacy** including Talking and Listening, Reading and Writing;
- **Mathematics and Numeracy**, including Number, Measures, Shape and Space, Sorting and Patterns and Relationships;
- **The Arts**, including Art and Design, Music and Drama;
- **The World Around Us**;
- **Personal Development and Mutual Understanding**, including Personal Understanding and Health and Mutual Understanding in the Local and Wider Community;

- **Physical Development and Movement.**

Note Although these Areas of Learning are set out separately, teachers should integrate learning to enable children to make appropriate connections.



Creating an Effective Learning Environment

This section sets out:

- The Approach to Learning and Teaching in the Foundation Stage
- Adults' Role in Promoting Learning
- Learning Partnerships
- The Physical Environment

The Approach to Learning and Teaching in the Foundation Stage

Children should have opportunities to experience much of their learning through well-planned and challenging play. Self-initiated play helps children to understand and learn about themselves and their surroundings.

“Play that is well-planned and pleasurable helps children to think, to increase their understanding and to improve their language competence. It allows children to be creative, to explore and investigate materials, to experiment and to draw and test their conclusions . . . such experience is important in catching and sustaining children’s interests and motivating their learning as individuals and in co-operation with others.”

The Rumbold Report: Starting with Quality
(HMSO:1990)

It is important that children:

- have opportunities to be actively involved in practical, challenging, play-based learning in a stimulating environment, that takes account of their developmental stage/needs (including Special Educational Needs) and their own interests/experiences;
- have opportunities to initiate play that capitalises on intrinsic motivation and natural curiosity;
- are given equal opportunities to learn in a variety of ways and different social playgroups.



Adults' Role in Promoting Learning

Principals, teachers, assistants and ancillary staff

The distinctive ethos of a setting is influenced strongly by the relationships within it. A culture of mutual respect is based on open communication and positive relationships, with each individual participating as a team member.

Meetings between teachers and classroom assistants enable effective planning, give time to reflect and provide opportunities to consult on current issues. Self-evaluation through review of practice contributes to constant improvement and focuses on quality. See **Together Towards Improvement** section 1 (ETI:2003).

Relationships with children

Relationships are strengthened through shared enjoyment and respect, where adults working with young children respond positively with warmth, genuine praise and encouragement. It is also important that adults are:

- sincere, fair and honest with children;
- patient, allowing time for children to adjust to the setting (transition);
- consistent and have a positive approach to behaviour management;

- spending time observing and listening to children and interacting with them;
- sensitive to the uniqueness of each child;
- willing to seek support from parents and other professionals where necessary;

Positive relationships with children enable the development of independence, self-assertion and positive self-image. It is important that adults have realistic expectations of children and avoid comparisons or inappropriate competitiveness.



Learning Partnerships

Parents/carers

Parents/carers are children's first educators and learning at home happens in a natural and informal way. It is essential that there is open communication between school and home which is based on shared understanding and mutual respect.

Home/school learning packs can help parents/carers support children's learning development within the home. Any activities which are to be shared at home should be practical, enjoyable

and fun. Parents/carers can also be encouraged to spend time talking with their children and involving them in everyday experiences.

Working in Partnership with other Professionals

To allow for the exchange of information, it is important that good relationships are established with members of the community and other agencies that contribute to the child's all round development for example, health visitor, speech therapist and educational psychologist.

The Physical Environment

Learning environments should be secure, interesting and challenging. The structure and presentation of the classroom and outdoor environment should be considered. By adding to and changing these environments, children may be stimulated to pursue new interests, solve problems and generate ideas.

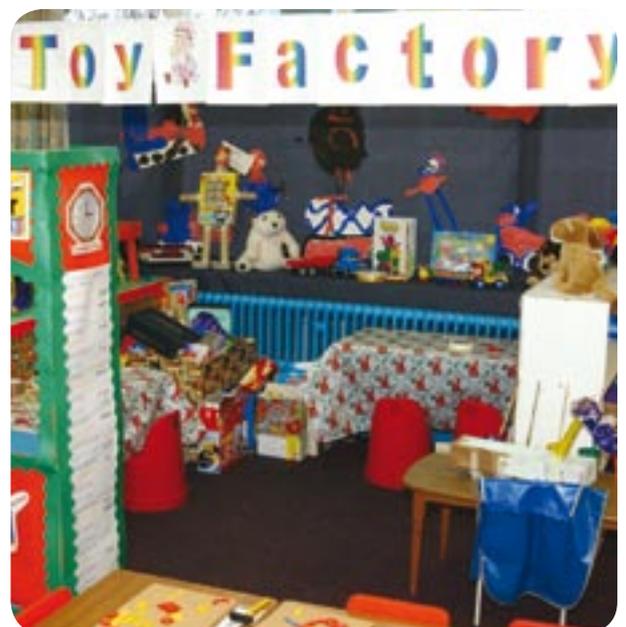
Positive learning environments should:

- Be attractive, welcoming and comfortable:
 - a variety of areas including carpeted areas, cosy corners/quiet places;
 - authentic and familiar items should be included from the home, for example household items, real vegetables, plants and cushions;
 - children's work is celebrated and displayed in classrooms and throughout the school;
 - areas are created to provide opportunities for learning and discovery.
- Be organised:
 - time is allocated flexibly;
 - effective and imaginative use is made of all available space, both indoors and outdoors;
 - resources and equipment are clearly labelled and accessible to both adults and children;
 - areas of interest are established with objects arranged at an accessible height for children to observe, touch and explore.
- Follow Health and Safety requirements:
 - statutory health and safety requirements are met;
 - the health and safety policy of the setting is implemented;

- children are adequately supervised;
- rules are agreed with the children as necessary;
- children are supported in the use of tools and equipment, appropriately and safely.

Resources may include:

- a wide range of natural, man-made and recycled materials which reflects the needs, interests and abilities of the children;
- a carefully selected and wide range of books and other texts;
- resources and equipment should be:
 - ~ appropriately managed, planned for and changed as appropriate;
 - ~ high-quality, durable, varied and accessible;
 - ~ suitable for the developmental stage of the children;
 - ~ attractive, interesting and challenging;
 - ~ versatile enough to allow for a wide range of learning opportunities and progression.



Learning, Teaching and Assessment

This section sets out:

- The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Cycle in the Foundation Stage
- Planning in the Foundation Stage
- Assessment for Learning in the Foundation Stage
- Observations and Assessment in the Foundation Stage
- The Pupil Profile in the Foundation Stage

The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Cycle in the Foundation Stage

Planning for coherence and progression in the Foundation Stage

Children learn best when learning is connected and although the curriculum has been set out in Areas of Learning, further integration is encouraged to help children to transfer skills and make links in their learning.

In the Foundation Stage teachers have flexibility to interpret the programmes to suit the needs, interests and abilities of the children. Throughout the Foundation Stage children need to be observed closely so that:

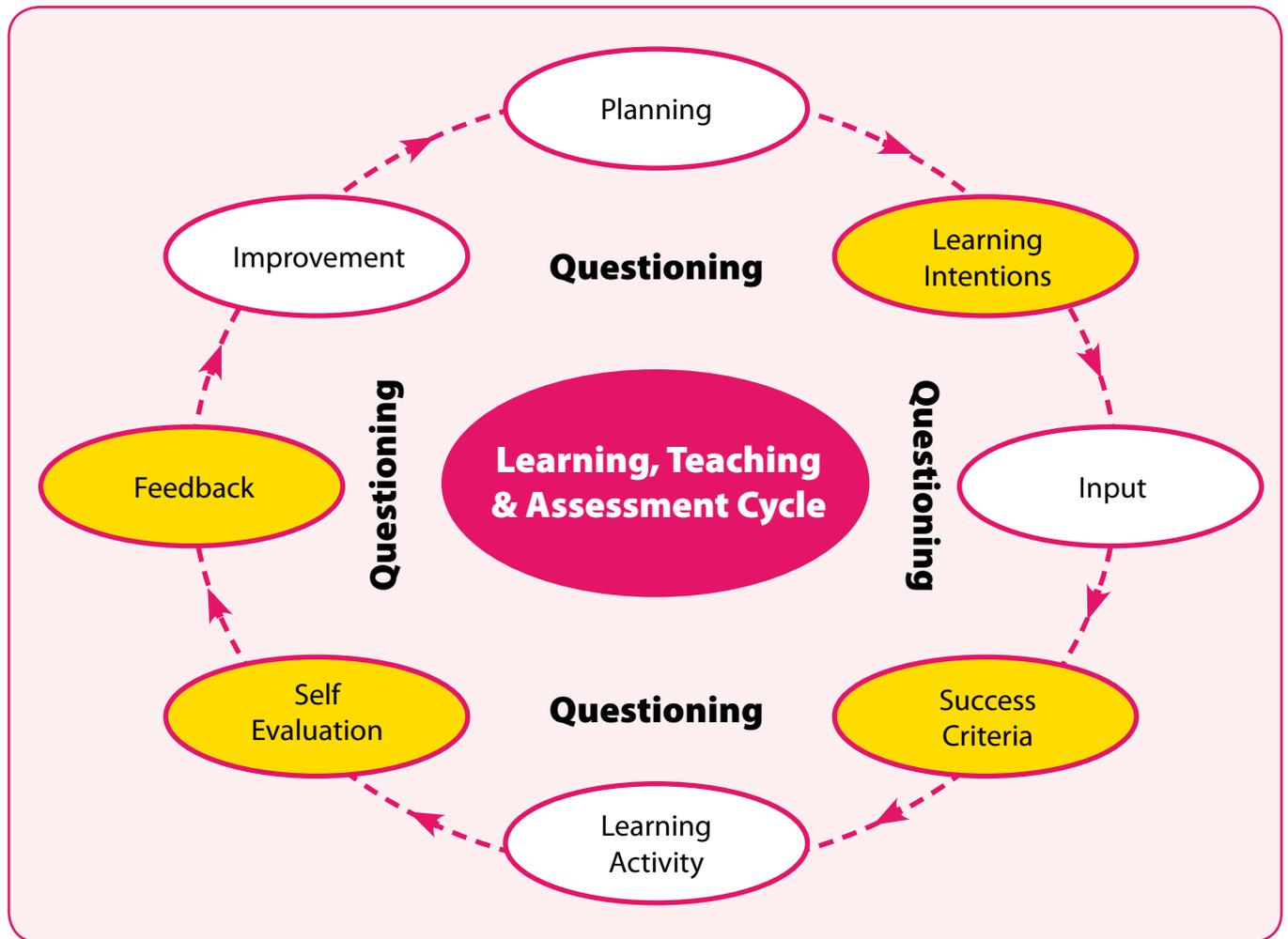
- teaching builds from the children's current stage of development;
- children's needs and interests lead the learning;
- appropriate support can be given to those children who require it;
- children are motivated and their learning challenged;
- children have high expectations of themselves; and
- information can be shared with parents.

The Learning Teaching and Assessment Cycle

It is important to view learning, teaching and assessment as a continuous cycle, where assessment is not an end point but should feed back into the process to help improve learning.



The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Cycle



Planning in the Foundation Stage

Good planning and effective assessment are closely related. Since the purpose of teaching and the main purpose of assessment are to help children to learn, teaching and assessment need to be planned together as complementary aspects of the one activity. In turn, the information obtained from assessment should be used to inform the planning process.

Plans are not an end in themselves, rather it is the process of planning that is important. This process allows teachers and classroom assistants to think and talk about **what** and **how** children should learn and also how they can create a successful learning environment to promote this.

It also ensures that teachers and classroom assistants have a clear idea of how they might support this learning through their participation in activities which are interesting, varied and show **progression**.

As teachers develop long, medium and short-term plans they should ensure that everyone involved is kept informed. **Planning documents should be regarded as flexible; teachers should alter or add to them as they observe the children's responses and the outcomes**



of play. They should also take account of the developmental stage of the children and their previous experiences.

Long-term plans

Long-term plans set out, in broad terms, the learning for a whole group of children, usually over a period of a year. These plans are likely to:

- ensure that children experience a broad and balanced curriculum with all areas of learning being given appropriate emphasis;
- outline the knowledge, skills and concepts and the progression expected, within each area of learning;
- include seasonal and festive and other planned events that occur during the year; and
- inform medium-term planning.

Medium-term plans

Medium-term plans bridge the gap between the broad outline of the long-term plan and the day-to-day detail of the short-term plan. Medium-term plans may refer to half-termly or monthly periods and are likely to:

- relate to the long-term plan;
- outline the planned activities and the resources required;
- identify the learning potential that the staff intend to promote in each area; and
- be evaluated to inform future planning.

Short-term plans

Short-term plans should take account of the children's individual needs and be responsive to their ideas and spontaneous play. There should be enough detail to inform teachers and classroom assistants on a daily basis to ensure that the best use is being made of time, space and resources. An evaluation of the planning for

each period of time and the children's responses to the activities and experiences, should inform the drawing up of the next set of plans. These plans are likely to:

- take account of recent observations and assessments of children;
- transfer medium-term planning into manageable steps, by including sequences of experiences and activities, and the introduction of specific resources, which have the potential to promote new learning or reinforce previous learning;
- clarify the role of the adults in the play and other activities;
- provide for the needs of individual children;
- be flexible to allow for spontaneous responses and activities from the children;
- ensure challenge within play activities, altering these in the light of the children's responses, so that all children have opportunities to make progress; and
- be evaluated on a daily/weekly basis to inform future planning.



Assessment for Learning in the Foundation Stage

Assessment is an integral part of the learning and teaching process. By gathering information about a child's progress over a period of time, teachers build a comprehensive picture of the learning in order to plan future work. In developing Assessment for Learning practices in the Foundation Stage adults should, when appropriate, engage in dialogue with children about their learning;

Effective questioning is also an integral part of observation and assessment practice in the Foundation Stage. Adults should use questioning to:

- clarify or extend children's thinking;
- interact sensitively with children to support their learning on topics of mutual interest;
- engage children in reflective discussion about their learning;

- make judgements on what children understand and can do;
- model the effective use of questioning.

Feedback in the Foundation stage should primarily be oral and should take place throughout the learning process. When giving feedback to children, adults should remember:

- young children need a nurturing climate;
- verbal and non-verbal language from the adult gives powerful messages to the child about his/her ability;
- to focus feedback on individual progress;
- to give feedback that focuses on success and improvement; and
- to give children time to make improvements.

Observation and Assessment in the Foundation Stage

Why observe?

Observations are a natural and essential part of good practice for teachers and classroom assistants. Without the use of regular observations and written records on each child's development, the teacher is left with an incomplete picture of the child. This may lead to the loss of significant information that could help shape planning and take more account of each child's needs.

Regular observations will allow teachers and classroom assistants to assess:

- the child's level of concentration and involvement;
- how skills and concepts are developing;
- levels of concentration and communication;
- the individual character of each child by finding out his/her interests/passions;

Observations will also allow adults to evaluate practice as they:



- reflect on any aspects of provision where children have experienced difficulties, or where they need more time or additional resources/opportunities; and
- respond appropriately by deciding what needs to be planned next for children to make progress and build on their previous experiences.

Well-planned, regular and skillful observations help teachers gain a more accurate picture of the progress each child is making across the whole curriculum. This in turn allows the teacher to plan a more relevant programme which will ensure that all children's needs are being met.

What to observe

There are two aspects to consider during any observation.

1. What the children say when they:
 - access the activities planned for the various Areas of Learning;
 - spontaneously interact with their peers;
 - are involved in dialogue and discussion with adults and peers (including asking and answering questions); and
 - interact with each other during all aspects of play (indoors and outdoors), story time, 'show and tell' and other activities.
2. What the children choose to do when they are:
 - working alone or working in groups;
 - using the resources available;
 - responding to other adults/parents visiting the school or on school outings; and
 - challenged by situations which require problem-solving and thinking skills.

It is obviously not possible to record everything a child says or does, even in a very short period, however it is desirable to record the important aspects of the situation observed. The significance of any situation will be determined by the adult's previous knowledge of the child.

Observations **may** include evidence of the child's:

- use of language in a range of situations;
- ability to problem-solve and make decisions or demonstrate thinking skills;
- level of involvement and concentration during activities;
- willingness to investigate and be creative;
- use of resources in an imaginative way;
- desire to plan his/her activities;
- level of self-awareness and self-confidence;
- ability to manage emotions and feelings; and
- ability to work with others.

How to plan for observations

Observations are the key to effective planning and Assessment for Learning and it is essential to take time to plan for them. Adults need to adopt a flexible approach to observations which allows for the unpredictable reactions of the children to the activities offered and which provide some of the most detailed insights into the child as an individual. So, the most effective methods of observation provide opportunities for the adult to record both **planned** and **spontaneous** observations.



Adults may decide to observe specific children on particular days, ensuring that observations include all children over a period of time. The curricular areas or the activities offered may be the starting-point for planning observations. It is widely accepted that children perform best while engaged in self-chosen activities, so it is important to avoid the overuse of checklists.

How does observation lead to assessment and future planning?

Observations provide the adult with the *evidence* about the child's progress in learning. These observations enable the adult to assess the child's learning and development which then leads to the appropriate planning and provision for the next stages in learning.

In order to decide what any child needs to learn next, the context and the area for development must be considered. The following example shows how the important principles of observing, reflecting and responding led to appropriate planning.

Reluctant to visit the reading corner...

An observation raised the issue that one of the children seemed to be reluctant to visit the reading corner, and showed little interest in books. The adults wanted to consider how to attract the child to this area. This included reflecting on his natural interests, hobbies or passions as displayed in the classroom, and asking the boy's parents. It became apparent that the child was passionate about animals and dinosaurs in particular. The adults responded by providing a range of dinosaurs, large stones and leaves in the dry sand, and placing non-fiction dinosaur books nearby. The following day when the child was playing with these figures, the teacher joined the child and engaged him in conversation about them. When the child asked about the names of some of them, the teacher suggested using the books as a source of information and shared the books with him.

After a few days it was observed that the boy was absorbed in turning the pages, looking through the images and talking to himself about the contents. These books were subsequently moved to the reading area, and the teacher was delighted to observe the boy going there to read them, and then starting to browse through other books.

The Pupil Profile in the Foundation Stage

The Pupil Profile at the Foundation Stage is the statutory means of reporting to parents. The format of the Profile will address and reflect the curriculum in Northern Ireland. It will also provide a record of the child's learning and attainment together with any learning issues. The Pupil Profile will inform parents how their child is progressing at school and will help form the basis for planning future learning.





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