

Evaluation Summary	
Age range	Primary and Secondary
Number of pupils	c. 100
Number of schools	c. 42
Design	Matched analysis of impact
Primary Outcome	Results on key stage tests

Challenge Partners: School-to-School Improvement Project

An outline evaluation protocol

BACKGROUND

The most convincing evidence about the power of schools working together comes from University of Manchester's recent involvement in the Greater Manchester Challenge. This three-year project, which involved over 1,100 schools in ten local authorities, had a government investment of around £50 million (see Ainscow, 2012, for a detailed account of this initiative). The decision to invest such a substantial sum reflected concerns about educational standards in the city region, particularly amongst children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, while the approach adopted was influenced by the earlier success achieved within the London Challenge. Most significantly, the school partnerships set up as part of the Greater Manchester Challenge led to striking improvements in the performance of some 160 schools facing the most challenging circumstances. It was also found that such arrangements can have a positive impact on the learning of students in all of the participating schools. This is an important finding in that it draws attention to arrangements for strengthening relatively low performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers convincing evidence that relatively strong schools within the system should be supporting less successful schools. Put simply, the evidence is that by helping others you also help yourself.

However, the evidence is less convincing about the impact school-to-school collaboration had on the most vulnerable groups of learners, including those entitled to free school meals. It is for this reason that the Challenge Partners project is so important. And in carrying out the evaluation, therefore, we need to determine in particular the extent which school-to-school collaboration can make a difference to those hard-to-reach children, and if so, what accounts for that difference.

Intervention

The Challenge Partnership is a network of schools committed to taking forward and developing successful school improvement approaches. The hypothesis is that schools themselves have the capacity and skills to raise attainment. Radical improvements can be achieved by identifying outstanding individuals within struggling schools and providing them with the coaching, support and networks with outstanding colleagues in other schools. With the right training and tools, these schools can work together to learn from each other and boost their performance.

RESEARCH PLAN

Research questions

- 1) i) Are there shifts in *school* attainment levels in lead or partner schools following the school-to-school collaboration programme?
ii) Is there an association between any differences in attainment identified and the proportion of children in the school having FSM eligibility?
- 2) i) Are there shifts in *pupil* attainment levels in lead or partner schools following the school-to-school collaboration programme?
ii) Is there an association between FSM eligibility and attainment when controlling for other socio-demographic factors (e.g. gender, ethnicity, SEN)?
- 3) What aspects of collaboration are most powerful in bringing about any improvements identified?
- 4) What are the organisational conditions that are needed in order to make use of this approach?
- 5) What are the barriers to these conditions, and how can they be overcome?

Design

The current study is designed on the basis of a two-strand approach to the evaluation, focusing on impact and process. The impact strand takes the form of a matched comparison design and pupil and (examining within class differences as a result of being targeted by CtG) and school level (focusing on examining the outcomes in performance associated with being a member of a school-to-school collaboration). The process strand investigates the nature of changes in school/classroom practices. The findings of these two strands will then be combined in order to investigate both the 'what' and the 'how' of school-to-school partnerships.

Participants

As demonstrated in the original proposal, participating schools have already been identified and classified as Lead or partner schools. There is also an existing plan for the number of schools participating during each phase of the project. Therefore, there is no longer an opportunity to apply 'randomization to condition' and participant selection is in the hands of Challenge Partners, not the evaluators.

Therefore, the current participant sample comprises of 39 schools (16 primary, 23 secondary) currently engaged in the Challenge Partnership programme. For the school level analysis, an additional 39 schools will be selected on the basis of attainment, free school meal eligibility and SEND provision in order to provide a 'matched comparison' for analysis.

Outcome Measures

School level impact will be measured by collecting the details of the Key stage two results (for primary schools) and GCSE (and other related year 11 subjects, e.g. NVQs) pass rates (for secondary schools) in all project and comparison schools. This will be obtained for the academic year starting 2011/2012 to create a baseline, and then collected every year to track progress over time.

Additional to the original bid, pupil level impact is measured by a yearly estimate of pupils' current National Curriculum (NC) scores in English and Maths, provided by the teachers involved in Challenge Partners (CP). The NC of 'targeted' pupils (directly involved in receiving additional support as a result of CP) will be compared with teacher estimates of pupils, taught by an CP teacher, but not receiving additional support.

Sample size calculations

Assuming a cluster size of 100 pupils, and ICC of 20%, the study is powered to detect an effect as low as a 0.45 change in standard deviation scores in KS4 results as a result of participating the CtG.

However, as the intervention has been targeted at a small number of pupils within in school, it is not possible to power a study in order to detect changes as a result of small group intervention. Instead, descriptive and indicative trends will be examined for the impact strand.

Analysis plan

For any school level differences, a pre-test-post-test control group design will be utilised by comparing the end of key stage 4 results of challenge partnership schools with a matched comparison group.

For the pupil level survey, 'target' CP pupils will be compared across time-points (baseline – year 1) to national expected levels of improvement in NC scores. Pupils will also be compared to the wider 'comparisson' group, to see whether improvements in NC scores have been above those experienced by the class they are in. This analysis will also be split by FSM eligibility.

PERSONNEL

Professor Mel West will direct the study and ensure that it reports on time. He has carried out extensive research in relation to networking and collaboration within and between schools, both for NCSL and for the DfE during the LIG initiative. He has a particular interest in aspects of management and leadership.

Professor Mel Ainscow will coordinate the process evaluation. He is internationally recognized for his research around the themes of inclusion and equity. He was also involved in the LIG implementation and subsequently as the Government's Chief Advisor for the Greater Manchester Challenge, where extensive use was made of school-to-school collaboration.

Dr Michael Wigelsworth will coordinate the impact evaluation. He has been involved in evaluations measuring the impact of a series of national initiatives, including Primary SEAL, Secondary SEAL and Achievement for All, all which have involved the analysis and interpretation of impact from specific interventions on national data sets.

TIMELINE

The 2012/13 school year includes familiarization and start-up activities that we would hope to begin in the summer term. Similarly, the 2013/14 school year will extend into 2015, as we will need to have the relevant GCSE and Key stage results available to complete the analysis and the reports.