

| Evaluation Summary | |
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| Age range | Secondary (Year 7) |
| Number of pupils | 390 |
| Number of schools | 10 |
| Design | School-led randomised controlled trial |
| Primary Outcome | Reading |

Protocol for evaluation of 'Fresh Start'

By The School of Education, Durham University

Introduction

The evaluation is of an intervention called Fresh Start, intended to be used with Year 6 and 7 pupils not making expected progress in reading. It is a structured approach, based on the use of synthetic phonics, training teachers in the principles, lesson plans and reading resources. It has been widely used in the UK, but has not been rigorously tested for impact. The precise way in which schools will implement the intervention can be allowed to vary – in intensity, frequency and duration for example. This is standard for a pragmatic trial of teaching resources used by professionals. The evaluation may give some clue as to which version is preferable but the overall trial is of the intervention as a template.

The evaluation will be conducted as a co-operative venture between independent evaluators and schools themselves. The project therefore has three inter-locking objectives. It is to some extent a traditional evaluation of a promising intervention, seeking evidence of whether Fresh Start works to enhance reading ability over and above standard treatments. It will enhance the understanding of the principles and practice of evaluation for schools and enhance understanding for the evaluators of the problems that schools face in generating evidence. Therefore, it is a capacity-building project. And finally, it will also provide evidence on whether schools are capable of undertaking small independent trials that can be aggregated to provide solid evidence for any intervention.

The schools

Primary schools will identify Year 6 pupils intending to move to secondary schools in each area in 2013 who are not expected to obtain secure Level 4 in KS2 English. These will sit a pre-test of NGRTA by early September 2013. They will then be individually randomised to either Fresh Start in September 2013, or to a second phase starting in the second half of Spring Term 2014. Both groups will be re-tested with NGRTB in February 2014. Exactly how Fresh Start is implemented is left to each school. Staff will be trained, where necessary, in June/July 2013.

Telford cluster

There are two secondary schools, involving 70 year 7 pupils, delivery 5 hours per week, but some difference in delivery between schools. The schools want to test again in July 2014 but this is not treated here as part of the evaluation.

Holderness cluster

There are three secondary schools, involving 80 Year 7 pupils, delivery 3 hours per week, but some difference in delivery between schools.

Harlow consortium

There are five secondary schools, with 240 Year 7 pupils, for 3 hours per week, as part of a 20 week intervention in year 7.

Capacity-building

Although the independent evaluators will shadow, check and extend the work of the schools, it is the schools themselves that will conduct much of the basic work of evaluation here. This will include randomisation to treatment, testing, collation of data, and calculation of results. This will require some development for school staff on research design, principles of rigorous evaluation, and threats to validity and how to minimise them. In order to help this, the evaluators will prepare a brief easy to follow set of ideas for use by schools for each stage of the evaluation (such as randomisation). These can be amended as needed and used to form a library of such resources for future projects. In addition, there will be a series of three half days of training for all school staff involved in these trials. The first of these was in March 2013, and covered principles of design, and why randomisation is needed.

Impact evaluation

The project involves 3 small clusters of schools, each of which will be conducting a trial independently of each other, and then the results will be pooled by the evaluators.

Design

The proposed design is for an individually randomised controlled trial. Pupils working at below Level 4 (or expected secure Level 4) will be identified by schools. They will be pre-tested and then randomised to the treatment immediately or to a delayed treatment commencing at the end of the trial. This maximises the study power for its cost. Both groups will be post-tested at the end of the trial, and the waiting list group will then receive the intervention as well.

Sample size

There are, in effect, three separate small trials being proposed here. One is in Harlow involving 240 Year 7 pupils, one in Holderness involving 80 Year 7 pupils, and one in Telford involving 70 Year 7 pupils. Total in the region of 390. Combined, these figures form a reasonable basis for an aggregated trial (see Gorard 2013, and Khan and Gorard 2012). Each school will identify pupils not attaining or expected to attain Level 4 at KS2. These will be pre-tested and then randomised to immediate or waiting list intervention groups.

Tests

The New Group Reading Tests (versions A and B) are the pre- and post-tests for this intervention. The evaluators will have oversight of delivery of all tests, and for blinding as appropriate on each occasion. The tests will be conducted on-line as far as possible to assist standard timing and marking. The pre-test will take place in July and/or September 2013. The post-test will take place in February 2013.

Analysis

The primary outcome measure will be the difference in the gain score between the two arms of the trial, expressed as an effect size, where the gain is the average difference between individual scores on tests A and B. We will add further useful or possible outcomes in negotiation with the schools and EEF. Analysis will be by cluster. Then the results will be meta-analysed for the aggregated trial, and considered also only for those pupils eligible for FSM.

Process evaluation

This fieldwork forming the light-touch process evaluation has the aim of providing some formative evidence on all aspects of the intervention from the selection and retention of schools, through the training of teachers to evaluating the outcomes. This can be used to help assess fidelity to treatment, and the perceptions of participants including any resentment or resistance, and to advise on improvements and issues for any future scaling up.

This will all necessitate the generation of some additional data from observation and interviews with staff, focus groups of pupils, plus observation of training, delivery and testing. These will all be as simple and integrated as possible. For example, immersion in one setting in one day could yield data on all of these issues from all of these stakeholders. We propose two person visits to each site. In addition, we will prepare and conduct an on-line survey of the intervention process and the schools' role in the evaluation for completion by relevant staff.

Timeline

June 2013- Schools identify pupils with likely less than secure level 4

Pre-testing of all these pupils in schools

Collect pupil background data

Observation of staff training

Oversee randomisation of classes to groups

September 2013- Observation of ongoing process evaluation

Survey of relevant staff in all schools

February 2014- Observe post-testing in schools

Update background data

Oversee analysis of outcome data by schools

Synthesise with process evaluation data

Aggregate results from 4 clusters

Schools begin intervention with second (control) group

September 2014- Complete full EEF report.