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Does the Flexible Phonics programme lead to improved reading outcomes for children in Reception when taught in addition to existing phonics programmes/practice?

Submission date
03/09/2020

Recruitment status
No longer recruiting

Registration date
08/10/2020

Overall study status
Completed

Last Edited
04/06/2024

Condition category
Other

[_] Prospectively registered
[X] Protocol
[X] Statistical analysis plan
[X] Results
[_] Individual participant data

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

Several studies show that teaching phonics helps young children learn to read. The Flexible Phonics programme aims to support Reception teachers to optimise and complement their existing phonics teaching in order to improve reading skills among children in Reception. It does this through re-enforcing learning by reading specifically selected children's books, and through teaching strategies for independent learning and reading 'exception' words, where the spelling is different to how they are said aloud. A recent study in Canada found that the Flexible Phonics programme had positive impacts on children's reading. Children at the same level of reading as children in Reception classes in England were taught the Flexible Phonics approach in small groups (119 pupils) and made around +5 months' of progress in word reading compared with pupils who were not taught with the Flexible Phonics approach. This difference could still be seen 4 months later when children in the Flexible Phonics group showed around +3 months' additional progress in reading compared with the other group. This study aims to explore whether Flexible Phonics can have a positive impact on reading for children in England if it is taught alongside their usual phonics teaching.

Who can participate?

State-funded primary schools in the Greater London area (England, UK) are eligible to participate. Flexible Phonics will be evaluated with around 2,875 children in Reception year (4-5-year-olds). The researchers will recruit around 115 schools from the Greater London area to participate in the study and one Reception class from each school will be randomly selected to take part in the study. Schools with higher intakes of free school meals pupils will be prioritised in the recruitment.

What does the study involve?

Among schools that have been randomly assigned to the group receiving the Flexible Phonics programme, Reception teachers and teaching assistants will receive two half days of initial training and a further half-day of follow up training in teaching using the Flexible Phonics

approach. They will also receive two supportive school visits (or online/phone consultation if COVID-19 restrictions are in place) and ongoing online/telephone support. Training will enable teachers and teaching assistants to deliver the programme to whole classes as well as smaller groups as needed. The Flexible Phonics programme introduces two additional strategies: re-enforcing phonics learning through targeted reading of high-quality children's books which include phonics features that have been learnt (direct mapping), and strategies for helping children to be reflective and use independent learning strategies to read 'exception' words where the spelling is different to how they are said aloud (set-for-variability).
All children in the study will be asked to complete a short literacy assessment at the beginning and end of their reception year. These will be used to compare literacy outcomes for children at schools where Flexible Phonics is being taught and children at schools teaching their usual phonics programme only. Longer-term impacts on reading and language development will be explored through the Phonics screening test at the end of Year 1.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
The benefits of participating in the study for schools that are randomly assigned to receive the Flexible Phonics training include: a selection of children's books worth £400 for the school; free professional development training from Prof. Robert Savage, who has run successful reading interventions in the UK, Canada, Australia, and Hong Kong; and the opportunity to work with the Education Endowment Fund to build evidence on what works to improve educational outcomes for all children.
The benefits of participating in the research for schools that are randomly assigned to the group that continues with their usual phonic teaching include £1,000 on completion of the study as thanks for taking part, and the opportunity to work with the Education Endowment Fund to build evidence on what works to improve educational outcomes for all children. No risks are foreseen. Parents/guardians can withdraw their child from the study at any time.

Where is the study run from?
The evaluation is being carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies (UK). The Flexible Phonics programme is designed and delivered by the Institute of Education, University College London.

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
June 2019 to April 2023

Who is funding the study?
Education Endowment Foundation (UK)

Who is the main contact?
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Contact information

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Study information

Scientific Title
A randomised controlled trial to investigate whether the Flexible Phonics programme, which introduces direct mapping and set-for-variability strategies, lead to improved reading outcomes for children in Reception in England when taught in addition to existing phonics programmes /practice?

Acronym
Flexible Phonics

Study objectives
The primary research question is:
RQ1. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention improve Reception children's word reading ability? (measured by the York Assessment for Reading Comprehension (YARC) Early Word Recognition subscale)

The secondary research questions are:
RQ2. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention improve Reception children's literacy outcomes?
RQ3. What is the differential impact of direct mapping and set-for-variability skills on children's word-reading ability?
RQ4. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention provide value-added improvement to Reception children's word reading ability compared to good phonics teaching alone in schools identified with good phonics practice?
RQ5. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention improve word reading ability differentially for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM)?
RQ6. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention improve word reading ability differentially for children of low ability?
RQ7. Does the Flexible Phonics intervention improve Reception children's phonics skills one year later at the end of Year 1? (added 15/12/2022: this question is no longer being explored)

Ethics approval required
Old ethics approval format

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 13/01/2020, Research Ethics Panel of the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) (City Gate, 185 Dyke Road, Brighton, BN3 1TL; +44 (0) 1273 763 400; becci.newton@employment-studies.co.uk), ref: not applicable

Primary study design
Interventional

Study design
Two-arm multi-centre cluster randomized controlled efficacy trial with pupil-level outcomes

Study type(s)
Other

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied
Early years literacy, with a focus on exception words

Interventions
Eligible schools are state-funded schools based in the Greater London area, England, UK. Those schools with larger numbers of free school meals pupils will be prioritised in recruitment. All teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) will be invited to attend the Flexible Phonics training and all children in Reception will be taught using Flexible Phonics. However, only one Reception class in each school will be included in the trial and its pupils will participate in literacy assessments at pre- and post-intervention.

Flexible Phonics is a programme for teaching phonics, which incorporates direct mapping and the teaching of set-for-variability strategies, with a particular focus on exception words and independent learning.

Randomization takes place at the class level and school level. Where schools have multiple Reception classes, the first stage of randomization involves selecting which Reception class will participate in the trial. The second stage of randomization involves randomly assigning classes (and thus schools) to the treatment/intervention arm or to the control arm.

In the intervention group, Reception teachers and teaching assistants will receive two half days of initial training, a further half-day of follow up training, two supportive school visits (or online /phone consultation if COVID-19 restrictions are in place) and ongoing online/telephone support. Training will enable teachers and teaching assistants to deliver the strategies to a whole-class of pupils as well as a smaller intervention group.

In the control group, Reception teachers and teaching assistants will continue with their usual phonics teaching approach. After the intervention and assessments have been completed, schools in the control group will receive £1,000 to thank them for participating in the study.

Baseline pre-testing will take place in November 2020 and these and additional tests will take place at the end of Reception year in June-July 2021. Assessments will include:
1. The York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC). The version of the YARC suitable for 4- to 7-year-olds is called Early Reading and covers four dimensions: sound isolation, sound deletion, letter-sound knowledge, and early word recognition. To reduce testing time and burden on the school, only the latter two measures will be used as a pre-test as they are most directly relevant to reading then all four dimensions will be used at post-test.
2. An adapted version of the Mispronunciation Correction Test (MCT) developed by Tunmer and Chapman (2012) to assess the impact of Set for Variability as used in Dyson et al. (2017) using the words most commonly used in English children's books.
3. There will also be a delayed post-test using the data from the National Phonics screening test at the end of Year 1

Additional data collection to explore perceived impacts and how the intervention was implemented includes:
1. Observation of three online training half days and two follow-up training sessions.
2. Teachers and TAs participating in the study will be asked to complete online surveys at the beginning and end of term to gather evidence about business-as-usual, changes to practice, and perceived impacts.
3. Case study visits to eight intervention schools towards the end of the programme to observe teaching including interviews with Reception teachers and/or TAs who are involved in teaching phonics to the class participating in the study, literacy or early years leads and a senior leader.
4. Interviews with the team at UCL who are delivering the training and support.
5. Analysis of data collected by UCL, such as attendance, support requests and cost data.

Intervention Type
Behavioural

Primary outcome(s)
Word reading measured by the York Assessment for Reading Comprehension Test: early word recognition subscales at baseline and 8 months

Key secondary outcome(s)
1. Literacy measured by the York Assessment for Reading Comprehension Test full score comprising all four subscales measured at 8 months (letter sound knowledge and early word recognition subscales also measured at baseline)
2. Set for variability measured by the Mispronunciation Communication Test at 8 months
3. Phonics knowledge measured by the National Phonics screening test at the end of Year 1 (at 20 months)

Completion date

30/04/2023

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Children attending Reception class during the academic year 2020/2021 at participating schools in the Greater London area, England, UK

Participant type(s)
Other

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Child

Sex
All

Total final enrolment
3166

Key exclusion criteria
1. Where a child does not participate in Reception year phonics teaching
2. Where teaching staff or parents/guardians believe that a child's participation in the assessment will cause unnecessary distress or unsuitable data, e.g. where a child is diagnosed with a learning difficulty which means that the tasks in the assessment are unsuitable for their current level of learning
3. Where a parent has requested to withdraw their child's data from the trial. The child will still receive the same intervention/control phonics teaching as those participating in the study but their data will not be collected through assessment or will be excluded where an assessment has already taken place

Date of first enrolment
01/01/2020

Date of final enrolment
12/10/2020

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre

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Sponsor information

Organisation
Education Endowment Foundation

ROR
https://ror.org/03bhd6288

Funder(s)

Funder type
Charity

Funder Name
Education Endowment Foundation

Alternative Name(s)
EducEndowFoundn, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Education Endowment Foundation | London, EEF

Funding Body Type
Private sector organisation

Funding Body Subtype
Trusts, charities, foundations (both public and private)

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The datasets generated during and/or analysed in this study will be stored in a non-publicly available repository; the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Data Archive, which is managed by the Fischer Family Trust (FFT). Further details are available here: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Evaluation/Submitting_your_data_to_the_FFT_archive/Archiving_EEF_project_data.pdf.
These data will be submitted to the archive by the evaluation team within 3 months of project completion. The dataset will be at an individual level (i.e. one row per pupil), including information on the treatment they receive and the outcomes of testing (at baseline and follow-up). The data will be archived for an indefinite period for archiving, historical or scientific research purposes, with access criteria determined by the EEF and FFT. The legal basis for processing data is legitimate interests, with individuals able to express objections to data processing. Data will be available in a pseudo-anonymised format so that future analysis incorporating data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) could be facilitated.

IPD sharing plan summary
Stored in non-publicly available repository

Study outputs

Output type	Details	Date created	Date added	Peer reviewed?	Patient-facing?
Funder report results	version 1	01/10/2023	04/06/2024	No	No
Funder report results	version Final	05/03/2024	04/06/2024	No	No
Protocol file	version 2		04/06/2024	No	No
Protocol file	version Final		04/06/2024	No	No
Statistical Analysis Plan		09/06/2021	04/06/2024	No	No
Study website	Study website	11/11/2025	11/11/2025	No	Yes