Small group reading shown to boost student progress

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A trial scheme which sees primary school children reading in small

groups has shown that the program can help pupils to make an additional two months' progress during the course of an academic year.

The ABRACADABRA (ABRA) and Reading and Understanding in Key Stage 1 (RUKS) program involved more than 4,000 Year 1 pupils (age 5–6) from 157 schools across the West Midlands, East Midlands, Newcastle, Teesside and Manchester.

Schools took part in a 20-week trial in which two versions of the ABRA-based RUKS program were tested: an ICT-based model and a paper-based model, while some participating schools were assigned to a control group and carried on their usual approach to teaching literacy.

The content for both forms of the program came from the ABRACADABRA software developed by a team at Concordia and McGill University in Canada. The resources for the paper-based version were adapted by a team from Nottingham Trent University (NTU) and Coventry University, who also developed the 20-week RUKS program for both versions using the ABRA content.

Using a train-the-trainer model, the team trained teachers and teaching assistants to deliver four reading-based sessions per week to small groups of four to five pupils, and then monitored the delivery.

These fifteen-minute sessions consisted of decoding (including phonics), fluency and comprehension activities drawn from age-appropriate texts.

An independent evaluation by the York Trials Unit, University of York, and Durham University—released in an EEF report—found that children who received either version of the program made some additional progress on measures of decoding and phonics compared with pupils in the control group.

However, of the two models of delivery, the paper-based approach proved to be the most effective—children who received this version made up to two months' additional progress in reading.

The program was well-received by delivery schools, with staff reporting that they felt well supported to implement the program.

Both versions of the ABRA-based RUKS program first showed promise when tested in a smaller scale trial completed in January 2015, involving 1884 pupils from 60 English schools.

Janet Vousden, principal investigator on the project and senior lecturer in Psychology at NTU's School of Social Sciences, said, "It is very encouraging to see the results of this trial. They suggest that the program can be scaled up as a train-the-trainer model with similar positive outcomes for children."

Professor Becky Francis, Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, said, "We have so much to gain from education research and rigorously examining the impact of teaching and learning programs.

"These findings are a prime example—offering practitioners a tried and tested option to consider when looking to develop their approach to reading provision for Key Stage 1 pupils.

"However, it is of the utmost importance that educators have the means to implement evidence-informed programs and maximize the impact of their practice.

"As school energy and food costs increase, it is vital that they are not forced to direct resources away from the things which the evidence shows are likely to make the biggest difference."

Provided by Nottingham Trent University