Press Release

Programme to boost early literacy shows promising results

A package of early literacy interventions has been found to improve significantly the reading and writing skills of young children who struggle to learn to read. As currently implemented, the policy is arguably expensive, costing over £3,000 per child in the first year and £2,600 per child thereafter. Even so, it could still offer good value for money, but that judgement will depend on the extent to which these improvements are maintained throughout children’s school careers.

These are the main findings of new research funded by the Department for Education, and carried out by IFS researchers in collaboration with the National Centre for Social Research. This work assessed the impact of the Every Child a Reader (ECaR) programme of initiatives, which targets low-attaining children aged 6 or 7 and attempts to raise their attainment to the expected level. The core initiative within ECaR is Reading Recovery, which provides children in the greatest difficulty with daily one-to-one tuition for up to 20 weeks.

The key findings in full are:

- Schools that introduced ECaR have significantly better test results in Reading and Writing at Key Stage 1 (the national assessment sat by all 7-year-olds in state schools). In 2009, the proportion of children reaching the expected level for their age in these subjects was around 2 percentage points higher in ECaR schools than in similar schools which had not yet introduced the policy.

- With only around 1 in 10 pupils in ECaR schools actually taking part in the programme, this implies that the effect on those pupils is likely to be substantially higher, or that other pupils in the school also benefit from the programme’s existence.

- The impact of ECaR on overall school attainment is driven almost entirely by an improvement in boys’ test results.

IFS researchers also conducted a cost-benefit analysis of the policy. To do so they attempted to quantify the value of improved earnings, health and crime rates that might potentially result in future from the improvement in test results at age 7. These estimated benefits were then compared to the costs of delivering ECaR.

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The key findings of this analysis are as follows:

- Based on current procedures of implementation, ECaR costs roughly £3,100 per child in the first year of delivery, taking into account initial costs such as capital investment and teacher training. The running costs in subsequent years – mainly covering salaries and teaching materials – are in the region of £2,600 per child.

- The expected future benefits of the policy depend on how long the improvement in attainment lasts. If it is completely permanent, then the pupils who took part in ECaR might be expected to earn, on average, £6,000 more over their lifetime than if they had not participated. If on the other hand the improvement in test results is only temporary, the extra earnings are negligible. These are both extreme scenarios.

- For the policy to ‘break even’ in terms of these costs and benefits, the improvement in attainment must be at least partially maintained. If participation in ECaR improves the chances of getting better formal qualifications at age 18 by at least 4 percentage points, then the policy’s running costs would be fully offset by the expected average increase in the pupils’ future earnings.

Commenting on the research, Haroon Chowdry, a senior research economist at IFS and co-author of the report, said:

“This evaluation illustrates some of the issues governments face in setting priorities. Every Child a Reader seems to have a substantial effect on the lowest-performing 7-year-olds, especially boys, but it is also arguably expensive. In the tightest public spending environment for decades, the key question is whether policies represent good value for money. The benefits of Every Child a Reader, while potentially significant, are very uncertain: if the policy results in better qualifications at 18 then it may end up paying for itself, but only time will tell.

The Government decided last year to remove the ring-fence on the funding for this programme, and redistribute the money as part of the overall schools budget. It will now be for schools and local authorities to make the difficult judgment of whether to continue the policy. The evidence from this study should assist them in doing that.”

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Notes to Editors:

1. The work was conducted by Haroon Chowdry and Ellen Greaves at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, along with researchers at the National Centre for Social Research.


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