



# Investigating what works





The National Foundation for Educational Research's evaluation research can provide a range of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and innovations.

There is increasing awareness of the importance of gathering rigorous, research-based evidence of what works in education.

Publishers and developers of innovative schemes and approaches have a need for independent evidence produced by expert researchers. The NFER has many years of experience of evaluating interventions, from the Fruit and Vegetable Scheme and Excellence in Cities to much smaller projects tailored to individual clients. Many of our smaller projects are commissioned by individual publishers, or by charities and non-governmental organisations to investigate interventions they have developed.

There are many possibilities for research which will give valid and reliable information underpinned by NFER's reputation for objectivity and rigour. To produce the right kind of evidence for the purpose, a research study needs to be carefully defined and meticulously planned.

## Gathering research evidence

Before involving a research organisation, it is important to do some groundwork by working out exactly what effects and impacts the intervention is expected to have. These need to be defined as tightly as possible, so that researchers can find ways of measuring them. Below are some of the most frequent questions that evaluators set out to answer, with an indication of some kinds of research that might provide the evidence. Actual evaluations could combine these in different ways.

### ***How does it help children?***

***How do children/learners interact with the intervention?***

If the intervention aims to develop or enhance particular skills, thought processes or behaviours, the research might use focused group or classroom activities, with audio, video or written recording. This kind of research can give rise to rich descriptions of children's/learners' ideas and reactions, which can demonstrate that such interventions are validly meeting their aims.

'I want to see more data generated by the profession to show what works, clearer information about teaching techniques that get results, more rigorous, scientifically-robust research about pedagogies which succeed and proper independent evaluations of interventions which have run their course. We need more evidence-based policy making, and for that to work we need more evidence.'

Michael Gove, June 2010

### ***Do people find it useful?***

What do users – teachers, practitioners, children or young people – think of the intervention?

Focus group research can be used with children or adults to gain an in-depth picture of the way the intervention is used and viewed. If the intervention is in large-scale use, these perceptions can be investigated by means of a postal or online questionnaire, followed by statistical analysis.

These kinds of research give a good picture of reactions to an intervention, but do not show whether the intervention makes a difference. For this, a comparison with others who have not experienced the intervention is needed.

### ***Does it make a difference?***

Does the intervention make a measurable difference to the attitudes, perceptions or behaviour of the users?

There are a number of ways of investigating this question, but for all of them a comparison group of non-users is necessary. The two groups – the

intervention group and the comparison group – are surveyed initially and compared statistically to check how similar they are. Then, differences between the two groups following the intervention are analysed to seek out statistically significant differences.

The best way of demonstrating a direct causal link between users experiencing the intervention and any improvement in outcomes is through the use of a randomised controlled trial. This is a scientifically designed study with rigorous approaches to sampling and analysis to provide strong evidence.

### ***Does it raise standards?***

Does the intervention make a measurable difference to the attainment of learners?

As with surveys, research of this kind needs intervention and comparison groups of sufficient size and carefully-drawn samples. In addition, evidence of attainment is required, in the form of results from a test or other formal assessment. NFER's own e-assessment provides one way of doing this.

## Examples of recent projects

These examples focus on smaller projects that we have conducted for publishers, charities and other clients, rather than our large evaluations for government agencies.

- The National Literacy Trust's Partners in Literacy programme aims to improve literacy in the hardest-to-reach families. In our evaluation we analysed existing documentation and interviewed local co-ordinators. Our findings identified the enabling and inhibiting factors affecting progress so far and made recommendations for the next phase of the project.
- For Pearsons, we carried out a randomised controlled trial of its Rapid Reading materials which showed how they improved reading attainment for struggling readers. Children were tested before and after the intervention, and a control group of non-users was involved.
- For the Royal Society of Chemistry, we evaluated the LabSkills interactive software resource. By surveying a sample of PGCE

students we demonstrated the usefulness of the resource in improving the confidence of trainee teachers.

- As part of the development of the Oxford University Press Assess and Progress resource, we gathered detailed qualitative evidence of how teachers can assess the comprehension of young children through questions and discussion as they read aloud.

## For further information

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