

Cluster Randomized Trial of 'Ready to Learn': An After-School Literacy Program for Children Starting School

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Abstract : Background: Despite improvements in recent years, almost one in six children in Northern Ireland (NI) leaves primary school without achieving the expected level in English and Maths. By early adolescence, this ratio is one in five. In 2010-11, around 9000 pupils in NI had failed to achieve the required standard in literacy and numeracy by the time they left full-time education. This paper reports the findings of an experimental evaluation of a programme designed to improve educational outcomes of a cohort of children starting primary school in areas of high social disadvantage in Northern Ireland. The intervention: 'Ready to Learn' comprised two key components: a literacy-rich After School programme (one hour after school, three days per week), and a range of activities and support to promote the engagement of parents with their children's learning, in school and at home. The intervention was delivered between September 2010 and August 2013. Study aims and objectives: The primary aim was to assess whether, and to what extent, 'Ready to Learn' improved the literacy of socially disadvantaged children entering primary schools compared with children in schools without access to the programme. Secondary aims included assessing the programme's impact on children's social, emotional and behavioural regulation, and parents' engagement with their children's learning. In total, 505 children (almost all) participated in the baseline assessment for the study, with good retention over seven sweeps of data collection. Study design: The intervention was evaluated by means of a cluster randomized trial, with schools as the unit of randomization and analysis. It included a qualitative component designed to examine process and implementation, and to explore the concept of parental engagement. Sixteen schools participated, with nine randomized to the experimental group. As well as outcome data relating to children, 134 semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents over the three years of the study, together with 88 interviews with school staff. Results: Given the children's ages, not all measures used were direct measures of reading. Findings point to a positive impact of "Ready to Learn" on children's reading achievement (comprehension and fluency), as assessed by the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension (YARC) and decoding, assessed using the Word Recognition and Phonic Skills (WRaPS3). Effects were not large, but evidence suggests that it is unusual for an after school programme to clearly to demonstrate effects on reading skills. No differences were found on three other measures of literacy-related skills: British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS-II), Naming Speed and Non-word Reading Tests from the Phonological Assessment Battery (PhAB) or Concepts about Print (CAP) - the last due to an age-related ceiling effect). No differences were found between the two groups on measures of social, emotional and behavioural regulation, and due to low levels of participation, it was not possible directly to assess the contribution of the parent component to children's outcomes. The qualitative data highlighted conflicting concepts of engagement between parents and school staff. Ready to Learn is a promising intervention that merits further support and evaluation.

Keywords : after-school, education, literacy, parental engagement

Conference Title : ICE 2016 : International Conference on Education

Conference Location : Singapore, Singapore

Conference Dates : January 07-08, 2016