

Blackpool Key Stage 3 Literacy Project Evaluation Report

December 2022

- Section 1: Background
- Section 2: The Blackpool KS3 literacy project
- Section 3: Process evaluation methodology
- Section 4: Main findings
- Section 5: Main recommendations
- Section 6: Recommendations for funders
- Section 7: Appendices

Section 1: Background

Blackpool is an area facing significant disadvantage. It is the most deprived local authority in England, with an estimated 7700 Blackpool children living in low income households, and with 8 of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England located in the town (English indices of deprivation, 2019). The proportion of Looked After Children is the highest in the country, and the proportion of Children in Need or subject to child protection plans is double the national average.

Blackpool was identified as a Department for Education (DfE) Opportunity Area (OA) in 2017. The identified Opportunity Areas were social mobility “cold spots” - Blackpool ranks 316th out of 324 districts in the Social Mobility Index. Through additional funding disseminated through an Opportunity Area partnership board, the DfE aimed to prioritise resources where they were needed most, and to bring local and national partners together to improve social mobility for children and young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The national OA programme centred around two core objectives:

- to improve outcomes for children and young people from early years through to employment
- to learn from what works in these areas, capturing which challenges all areas share and what is unique to a particular place, and spread effective practice to other areas.

At a local level, Blackpool OA partnership board set itself the vision ‘no child is left behind and every child can progress in the world of work’. To support this, three key local priorities were identified:

1. to raise attainment and progress in Blackpool's schools
2. to provide support for vulnerable children and families to improve attendance and outcomes and reduce exclusions from school
3. to improve advice and support for young people when moving between schools/colleges and into work

The Key Stage 3 literacy project supports Priority 1: to raise attainment and progress in Blackpool's schools. At the start of the project in 2017, 81% of Blackpool secondary schools were rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' by Ofsted, compared to just 18% nationally (School census, Ofsted).

In support of Priority 1, the Blackpool Secondary Heads Group initially identified literacy as a priority issue for their pupils. Children who struggle with reading are at a significant disadvantage in every one of the GCSE examinations they take, not just English, and the DfE's "more demanding" reformed GCSEs introduced in 2017 include wordier questions which prove additionally problematic for a significant minority of students with a low reading age (GL assessment, 2020).

With a focus area defined, GL Assessment's New Group Reading Test (NGRT) was used town-wide to ensure this issue had been accurately identified. These assessments showed that the majority of Blackpool secondary schools were working with children with below average reading abilities, and that 16% of pupils in Key Stage 3 were in the lowest NGRT performance band (Stanine 1), four times the national average. Coupled with below national average GCSE outcomes, both in English and across other subject areas (DfE Compare school performance, 2017), and the recognised importance of reading and vocabulary on attainment across the curriculum (EEF, 2018), the Opportunity Area board and Blackpool Secondary Heads Group had confidence that the focus area had been correctly identified.

At the initial planning stage of the project, it was decided that effective Implementation would be a project priority. Implementation is a key aspect of what schools do to improve, and yet it is a domain of school practice that rarely receives sufficient attention (EEF, 2019). Headteachers reported that previous attempts to lead change in Blackpool at a town-wide level had not been successful, with a short-term focus on improving GCSE outcomes and Ofsted grades often taking precedence over evaluation, implementation, and high-quality sustained professional development.

Section 2: The Blackpool KS3 literacy project

“The Blackpool KS3 Literacy Project is a world leading example of evidence-informed implementation in schools.”

Professor Jonathan Sharples: Implementation Lead and Research Fellow, Education Endowment Foundation

The project design is based around a collective impact approach developed by the programme team at Right to Succeed, underpinned by a robust use of research evidence, a commitment to the project being locally led, and a vision to build capacity in the local system. The following five principles were central to the programme design:

1. A common agenda

The common agenda agreed at the start of the project was a focus on improving literacy (more specifically reading and vocabulary), initially in Key Stage 3, in order to raise attainment and progress in Blackpool’s secondary schools (aligning with Priority 1 of the OA). This agenda was agreed by all schools at headteacher and CEO level, and backed up by a commitment by all Blackpool secondaries to include improving literacy as a whole-school priority, committing a senior leader for two days each week to lead on this agenda. Project funding provided to schools was reliant upon this commitment.

It was agreed that the initial focus of the project would be establishing effective interventions to tackle gaps in pupils’ literacy and developing a culture of reading across Blackpool schools. An ultimate goal of the project is to change classroom teaching across project schools to ensure evidence-informed literacy instruction is embedded.

2. A shared measurement system

Everyone across the project agrees on what success looks like, and uses the same system for measuring progress.

All project schools received funded access to a suite of assessment tools provided by GL Assessment. These included the New Group Reading Test (NGRT), Progress in English, and Pupil Attitude to Self and School (PASS). Conducted twice annually, and with very high completion rates, these allowed a shared language around assessment to be developed, providing rigorous and externally validated data sets on which schools could make decisions related to intervention, and providing the project team with a measurement tool to evaluate

the success of the programme and to make decisions about the programme's future direction. Schools also have access to optional dyslexia screeners.

Additionally, the SKEIN analysis, Teacher Development Trust School Audit, and Staff Literacy Audit, developed in collaboration with Alex Quigley allow schools to monitor progress against the agreed aims of the project.

3. Mutually reinforcing activities

Services and activities support and build on one another, making things run more efficiently. This means project training which supports project leads in implementing the aims of the project, access to intervention partners who can support schools in working with their weaker readers, and ensuring that the project's aims both feed into and support the implementation of each individual school's improvement plan.

4. Continuous communication

Communication is a cornerstone of the project. This is important, as programmes which incorporate practical social support, and which provide regular prompts and cues to participants are more likely to lead to longer term impact (EEF, 2021). This communication included regular face-to-face project board meetings (moved online during Covid-19 restrictions), regular supportive visits by the programme team, regular fidelity visits by the evaluation team, and regular email communication. This was in addition to the extensive training received by project leads in the initial phase of the project.

The funding provided by the project supported this continuous communication, with schools paid to release a senior leader for two days each week (initially one day for a literacy lead and one day for an evidence lead).

5. Backbone support organisation

The project has been supported throughout by a number of partners, including the programme team, evaluation partners, and intervention partners. A full list of these partners can be found in Appendix I. Funding supporting the project has been extensive: initial funding of £987,666 was provided by the Opportunity Area board, with an additional £420,000 raised by Right to Succeed.

Project lead training

As part of the project, leads undertook a rigorous programme of training designed to:

- increase knowledge and understanding of the evidence attending secondary literacy, based upon the EEF's 'Improving Secondary Literacy' guidance report
- develop understanding of the wider use of evidence to support school decision making
- improve understanding of the evidence supporting teacher professional development in order to effectively disseminate their own knowledge and understanding to their wider school teams

Where information is derived from has an impact on how motivated teachers are to use it: the more credible the source, the more likely they are to change their practice (EEF, 2021). For this reason, the project recruited nationally-recognised expertise in literacy, use of evidence in schools, and the design of effective professional development to construct a programme of high-quality training support for project leads that included:

- 'Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools' led by Alex Quigley (Education Endowment Foundation)
- 'Leading Learning' led by Alex Quigley (Education Endowment Foundation)
- 'Developing School Research Leads' led by Simon Cox (Blackpool Research School)
- 'Developing Great Teaching' led by David Weston (Teacher Development Trust)
- 'Response to Intervention' led by Phillipa Cordingley (CUREE - Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education)

"Working with Right to Succeed on a match-funded project in Blackpool Opportunity Area has been a hugely beneficial process. RtS have brought a rigorous approach to project management and implementation, and shared our focus on evidence-based practice in education. The project is bringing an innovative approach to developing literacy in KS3, and establishing a Blackpool-wide cadre of senior literacy leads"

Liz Franey: Head of Delivery, DfE Opportunity Areas

Section 3: Process evaluation methodology

Blackpool Research School conducted an extensive series of process snapshots (including a minimum of two visits to each project school per academic year of the programme with interviews with project leads at each visit, attendance at all project board meetings, observation of interventions in four project schools, and interviews with headteachers) to check that the programme and interventions were being delivered as intended, to understand the change from usual practice the project supported, and to identify any barriers to implementation, desirable conditions for success, and recommendations for future projects. Analysis of the qualitative data followed a process of coding and analysis, and the main findings and recommendations can be found in Sections 4 to 6.

The following research questions were considered as part of this process evaluation:

1. Has the KS3 literacy project improved the understanding of the evidence around the teaching of literacy in secondary teachers across Blackpool? Is this leading to a change in classroom practices across the town?
2. Has the KS3 literacy project led to changes in the decision-making processes employed by senior leaders in secondary schools across Blackpool? Is this change limited to literacy-focused decisions, or does it also apply to broader school improvement planning?
3. What have been the key ingredients of improving KS3 literacy in Blackpool and what have we learned about what does and doesn't work for the town?
4. What next? What are schools' intentions beyond the end of the project? What would schools continue doing if all financial constraints were removed, and what do schools intend to keep doing given the reality of school finances?

The questions asked as part of the final visit conversations with project leads and headteachers can be found in Appendix II.

Section 4: Main findings

“Working on the KS3 Literacy project has been a real privilege. There are few evidence-based, sustained projects that train teachers and school leaders in challenging circumstances. Working so closely with Blackpool schools, with the support offered by the project and the attendant funding, has meant I could engage in a sustained way to support the schools to improve. The project leads’ implementation plans are strongly evidence-informed and of a very high quality”

***Alex Quigley: National Content Manager,
Education Endowment Foundation***

In this section, we present findings from school visits and school leader interviews across all project schools collected by Blackpool Research School throughout the project. Where relevant, these interviews have been considered alongside GL Assessment data from project schools, although no data is included in this report in order to preserve schools’ anonymity.

The three main successes of the programme, as reported by school senior leaders have been:

1. The rigorous use of data, which has allowed a sharp focus on identifying those pupils in need of support and intervention and afforded a more joined-up approach to literacy, behaviour, and SEND
2. The raised profile of reading across all schools and the regularity with which pupils now actively engage in reading challenging texts across Blackpool secondary schools
3. Close collaboration with other schools, including an open and honest dialogue around schools’ challenges and successes, facilitated by and backed up with extensive support at a project level from Right to Succeed and other project partners

Across all interviews and school visits, the following elements have emerged as common themes supporting the successful implementation of the programme.

Main Finding 1

Headteachers across Blackpool secondary schools have made reading a priority

Interviews with headteachers and project leads show that reading and literacy are now established priorities across all project schools, and have been throughout the duration of the project. They report without exception that the project has been very successful in keeping literacy high on their school's agenda, and in ensuring that literacy has not been pushed aside by the many competing priorities facing Blackpool headteachers. Leaders have communicated this commitment to improving literacy effectively to all staff, raising the visibility of reading and literacy across their schools so that all staff know the part they played in supporting literacy development. Every secondary school in Blackpool now describes themselves as 'a reading school'. For instance, one project lead shared that:

"Children in lower school all have reading books - they can now talk about these and willingly show teachers summaries of books they have read and have reviewed. Reading logs are well-established across the school, and focus not just on reading for pleasure but on reading in curriculum areas, too"

A headteacher agreed, stating that:

"We are now a reading school, in a way that we never have been before. There has been a real change in culture, and there are lots of conversations around literacy and reading. Pupils are happy to read in a way they were not before."

Many headteachers report that the focused and sustained approach to change supported by the project has not historically been present across Blackpool schools, and none could recall a town-wide approach to change having such a sustained impact previously. The organisation and leadership of the Key Stage 3 literacy project, led by Right to Succeed and Stephen Tierney, has been a significant factor in its sustained implementation. One headteacher shared that:

"Literacy is very high on our agenda as a result of the project - and it will remain so for the foreseeable future"

Main Finding 2

Schools have found the project valuable in developing pupils' literacy skills across Key Stage 3

Project leads and headteachers from across project schools report that the focus the project has supported, through training, implementation support, and financial support, has been very valuable in developing a whole-school approach to the development of literacy. As one project

lead shared:

“The people and organisations we have received training from - Alex Quigley, David Weston, Curree - are of very high quality. The support and time we have had to embed the evidence has led to teachers talking about tiers of vocabulary, what disciplinary literacy means in their subject, strategies for the explicit teaching of vocabulary. Conversations like these were just not happening prior to the project”

Two more project leads supported this:

“Without a doubt the project has been extremely valuable, and the data supports this. The project has given us an enormous step forward”

“The way the project support has been structured has stopped people feeling ‘done to’ - it has been a significant support in changing the culture around literacy. The project has been massively useful in terms of the way it is plotted out and has been extremely valuable”

Main Finding 3

Schools with a consistent approach to project leadership have seen the biggest impact

Recruitment and retention of teachers and leaders remains a challenge across Blackpool secondary schools, and the literacy project has not been immune to this with many schools experiencing changes in project leadership during the course of the programme. Where project leadership has remained consistent, there has been a more consistent and sustained approach to improving literacy across the school, and the biggest gains in pupil progress have been seen - both in improvement of NGRT scores across the whole cohort, and in reduction of the proportion of pupils in the lowest reading stanines. As one headteacher shared:

“The success of the project is linked to the strength of project leadership. Implementation of the project is only as good as the leadership of the school and the leadership of the project within school - once we had consistent and focused leadership in place in our school, the success of the literacy strategies followed.”

In one school which has had consistent project leadership throughout, the headteacher reported that:

“The work that [project lead] has done in leading literacy across the school has been transformational. Consistent communication and raising of expectations has been key to this - staff know what is expected and are growing in confidence, and pupils expect they will be reading challenging texts.”

The consistency of leadership proved challenging to some schools, especially given the uncertainty about project funding from year to year. One headteacher shared that:

“One real challenge is the dedicated time of a senior leader to lead the project. To take out a senior leader for two days a week doesn’t help the running of the school and has been difficult”

Main Finding 4

Awareness of effective implementation strategies has led to a more sustained impact and a change in approach across the town

The approaches taken to implementation of the project have been a major contributor to its sustained impact across the town. Project leads and headteachers recognise this, and report a significant change in mindset compared to previous projects their schools have been involved in. Many project leads also report changes in the way internal school changes are implemented as a result, with a less short-term approach and more consideration given to accurate and careful identification of issues prior to an approach being implemented. As one project lead shared:

“Implementation of the project has been huge work but well supported, and definitely worthwhile”.

Another reported:

“Having 2 days of time genuinely protected and blocked out on the timetable has been invaluable in leading the implementation, and the strong foundations provided by the project through the initial training have made it easier in the long term. Overall, the project has been really well implemented”

“We now look for sources of evidence to support the decisions we make as a leadership team, on teaching strategies or how we should lead our tutoring programme. And we definitely take a longer term view than we used to - it was often about a short term approach to ‘what can we do with Year 11!’ That has definitely changed for the better”

There does remain an Ofsted focus in some project schools, but as one headteacher shared:

“Ofsted has taken over much of our thinking this year as we were due an inspection, but literacy has been a part of this thinking. Curriculum and assessment have also been a focus, but literacy is a key part of this”

Main Finding 5

Frequent communication between the programme team and the school project leads has helped to sustain effective implementation

A cornerstone of the project has been regular communication between the programme team, Right to Succeed, and the school project leads through regular supportive visits, regular fidelity visits by the evaluation team, and regular email communication. Schools were clear in their support for this approach which, coupled with the ringfenced senior leadership time, has allowed a constant focus on implementation and has successfully ensured that the project aims have remained a high priority for all schools. It has also meant that challenges have been quickly addressed. As one project lead shared:

“As a result of the consistent and sustained support, it has really helped us in keeping literacy on the agenda and helped with buy in from SLT and from middle leaders. It’s a supportive relationship and it feels like we are steering rather than being steered”

Main Finding 6

The impact of additional funding on the project implementation has been significant

The sustained impact of the project did not come about by chance: the systematic approach to implementation with consistent communication, high-quality training, and project management from Right to Succeed at its heart has been a key aspect of the project from its inception. Most notable is the project’s aim to build capacity within schools in order to lead the project at a school-level, and simultaneously work closely with the project’s leadership team.

None of this would have been possible without significant funding: directly to schools in order to build capacity by ringfencing senior leadership time to attend meetings and training and to deliver the project’s aims at a school level; to secure high-quality leadership at a project level; and to bring in external literacy and training expertise. Making funding dependent on key milestones such as attendance at meetings and completion of GL assessments has also supported collaboration and the generation of a rich data set across the town.

Headteachers without exception report that these things would not have happened without

the core project funding in place.

Main Finding 7

Leaders and teachers are now more aware of the reading needs of their pupils

Leaders have very effectively shared information about struggling readers with staff, made possible through the cross-town use of GL assessments across Key Stage 3. This means that teachers are more aware than previously of who the weaker readers are within their classes. Dissemination of training by project leads to both middle leaders and teaching staff means that teachers are also more aware of classroom strategies that will support these weaker readers, and literacy surveys show an improvement in teachers' knowledge of the evidence base and confidence in explicitly teaching literacy as part of their day-to-day teaching. Support for weaker readers has been targeted more sharply where it is really needed, with project schools using data from the GL assessments to inform which pupils receive targeted intervention and why. As one project lead shared:

“There has been a really positive impact in terms of colleagues now understanding what [the data] mean, and knowing which students they work with have literacy needs. This links to our reading risk register, and gives everyone - teachers, pastoral leaders, subject leaders - a real understanding of where individual students are at.”

A headteacher also noted:

“Every stanine 1 and 2 [the lowest NGRT performance bands] pupil is highlighted on our registers, so all teachers now know who the struggling readers are. Not only did they not know this before, but we as a school were not always aware of the specific literacy needs of many of our pupils. We certainly didn't appreciate the scale of the issue - but the data now means we can target help where it is needed.”

Main Finding 8

Schools have valued the collaborative approaches supported by the project

The development of a common agenda, and regular opportunities for schools to communicate and collaborate have proven to be very effective implementation supports. Many project leads and headteachers report that there have been limited opportunities for genuine sustained collaboration across Blackpool schools in recent years, and that academisation has exacerbated this. While opportunities for collaboration alone would be unlikely to lead to sustained change, this coupled with the common agenda and project leadership has produced an environment conducive to effective change.

Project leads particularly identified the opportunity to collaborate on and learn from other

schools' experiences in choosing and implementing interventions such as Lexonik and Lexonik Leap, and in putting into place a whole-school approach to reading challenging texts such as a Reading Canon. As one project lead shared:

“Lexonik Leap has had a big impact on our very weakest readers - and on pupils with SEND in particular. This almost certainly is not something we would have implemented with project support, and the fact that multiple other schools were doing similar things, and we had the opportunity to talk and to share experiences was very valuable”

A second project lead stated:

“I really valued the opportunity to talk to other schools outside of our Trust - we just don't get the chance to do that anymore, and definitely not in the way that has been possible over the last few years as part of the project”

Main Finding 9

Rigorous and accurate data has been very valuable to schools and is unusual in Key Stage 3. This has enabled schools to monitor teaching and interventions and their impact on struggling readers.

The data provided by the project has given schools a rich and valuable source of evidence both for identifying pupils in need of additional targeted intervention, and in judging the impact of these interventions. School level data such as the Teacher Development Trust Audit and the Literacy Audit has also been instrumental in school decision making, particularly in supporting teachers with effective and relevant professional development. A key element of the use of data has been the training provided to project leads in interpreting the data, and having GL assessment as a measurement and evaluation partner was critical to this. The most successful practice saw project leads disseminating this training to middle and senior leaders within their schools, allowing them to identify need at a subject or pastoral level. As two project leads shared:

“Honestly - the GL assessment data is gold dust. It has transformed our approach to supporting pupils with literacy needs”

“Teachers having access to the data has led to more intelligent classroom groupings - including more targeted deployment of teaching assistants.”

A consequence of this data use in some schools has been a more 'joined up' approach, with pupil need not seen in isolation but as a part of a wider picture. As one headteacher shared:

“The use of data has allowed for real joined-up thinking - pastoral leaders, the SEND team, class teachers, subject leads all working together and all understanding what the

data tells us about a pupil's literacy needs”

Finally, the use of school level data such as the Literacy Audit has allowed a tracking of teachers' confidence and knowledge over time, and has allowed targeted professional development to be planned. This is important, as we know that professional development which aligns with the needs of teachers and the school can impact positively on pupil outcomes (EEF, 2021). As one professional development lead shared:

“The staff literacy survey has been really valuable - it helps to inform and shape each year what CPD we put into place to really target those areas for development. The fact we do it every year is great - we can track our improvement over time and keep checking that we are focusing in the right areas.”

Main Finding 10

Intervention is important, but awareness of evidence is now leading to changes in classroom practices

An initial aim of the project was to provide appropriate literacy interventions to those pupils identified as being in need of additional support. The project did not mandate which literacy interventions schools should use, but did provide support with implementation and monitoring fidelity.

Much of this intervention work was successful and led to a development in pupils' literacy skills. For example, one reported success involved teachers and support staff knowing which pupils were getting additional help, what that additional help looked like, what aspects of reading they struggled with and what intervention they were receiving. They used this information in lesson planning, and it helped teaching and support staff to create a consistent approach to teaching struggling readers.

One barrier to successful intervention with weaker readers was poor attendance. Many of these pupils had existing attendance issues which then impacted on the success of the interventions, with some pupils missing a significant number of the planned intervention sessions.

But a longer term aim of the project was to influence everyday classroom teaching so that it better aligns with the recommendations from the EEF's 'Improving Secondary Literacy' guidance report. Literacy Audits and conversations with leaders in schools show that this work is now having an impact. As these project leads noted:

“The EEF model of improving secondary literacy that was shared during training has been used to develop disciplinary literacy approaches across school. Teachers and

leaders are definitely much more aware of the need for us all to be teachers of literacy and of the evidence around teaching literacy than they were before”

“Subject specific vocabulary is now front-loaded and explicitly taught and broken down across all subject areas. This is something that was not happening prior to the project”

“Everything we do around whole-school literacy links to the EEF guidance report which we explored as part of the project - explicit vocabulary teaching, guided reading, our reciprocal reading model, and the new tools we have developed to support writing. It’s been a significant change to the way we teach across the school”

Section 5: Main recommendations

In this section, we present the main recommendations for further work, either as part of a continuation of the project or otherwise. These recommendations are taken from school visits and school leader interviews across all project schools collected by Blackpool Research School throughout the project.

An overarching recommendation is for schools to plan for sustainability of any literacy approaches they implement - including interventions, approaches to classroom teaching, and leadership. This includes financial sustainability, and schools should carefully consider which aspects of their literacy strategies they can themselves find sustained funding for should this be necessary.

Main Recommendation 1

Further work is needed to meet the needs of Blackpool's weakest readers

The original aim of the project was to develop a general strategy to improve reading in Key Stage 3 across Blackpool. While some intervention was intended to form a part of this strategy, it was not the sole intention for this to target the very weakest readers. Throughout the course of the project, and through the analysis of GL assessment data, it has become apparent that Blackpool has a very significant minority of pupils facing exceptional literacy challenges, and that this minority is far in excess of the national averages.. Some schools have started to take action in this area, and the project's recruitment of Professor Jessie Ricketts (Department of Psychology, University of London) to provide support to project schools was mentioned very positively by project leads. Professor Ricketts has recently published a paper about this work citing all of the input from the Blackpool project, with a particular focus on the use of an assessment decision tree to align students' reading needs to support in secondary schools (Ricketts, J., Jones, K., O'Neill, P., & Oxley, E., 2022). It is clear that, given the scale of the challenge, further work needs to be done in this area and any subsequent literacy strategy or iteration of the KS3 literacy project should have this issue at its heart.

Main Recommendation 2

Continued funding is likely to be needed to sustain the impact of the project, although sustainability needs to be considered

Headteachers were mixed in their opinions of the necessity of further funding in order to continue with a literacy focus in their schools, with some reporting that aspects of their approach such as implementing a literary canon and a whole-school focus on reading would be very likely to continue without further project funding.

However, there was widespread agreement that aspects of the project such as the use of GL assessment, the ringfencing of senior leaders' time to focus on literacy, the collaboration across schools, and the attendance at meetings and training would be more difficult to sustain

without additional investment. Some schools suggested that they would continue to pay for GL assessments, would continue to have a literacy lead (although this would be unlikely to be a senior leader) and would continue collaboration between schools but the consistency with which this happens at a town-wide level would almost certainly be lost. It should also be noted that new approaches, such as a focus on the weakest readers which did not fall under the original project aims, would likely be more successful if funding was in place to implement these.

There was widespread agreement that any funding provided needs to be timely and long-term in order to allow schools to plan for sustained change - this is explored further in Section 6: Recommendations for funders.

Main Recommendation 3

Schools should focus on sustaining the impact of the project in the classroom

Significant work has been done on changing classroom teaching to better align with the evidence on secondary literacy, including the explicit teaching of key vocabulary, reading of challenging subject-specific texts, and writing. Schools should consider their ongoing programmes of professional development to ensure the impact of this work is sustained.

Recruitment and retention of teachers remains a national challenge, and Blackpool is no exception to this. Hence there is the need for a consistent town-wide approach for professional development supporting key elements of the teaching of literacy to mitigate against this. At a project level, this might include the development of a programme for teachers new to Blackpool schools which outlines the work done by the project to date and shares key teaching strategies to support the teaching of literacy in classrooms. This could take the form of live online twilight sessions, or a series of pre-recorded videos. Should this be implemented, a town-wide 'induction agreement' across all schools would be beneficial.

Additional work could include working closely with local Initial Teacher Training providers, or an approach to working with trainee teachers on placement in Blackpool schools to introduce them to the evidence around secondary literacy and the work done across the town to embed this.

Main Recommendation 4

The rigorous use of data across all schools should continue, and be extended

Schools have reported the impact that a consistent and rigorous assessment programme has had on their practice: in identifying pupils in need of intervention, in supporting teachers in understanding the literacy needs of their classes, and in providing a way of 'joining up' pastoral, academic, and SEND colleagues across the school to understand pupils' needs. Given this impact, it is recommended that this approach is sustained where possible.

Schools should additionally consider the use of finer grain data for their weakest readers. Improvement for these pupils is often too small to be seen using headline measures such as the NGRT test, meaning that progress being made can be missed. The work that Blackpool schools have started, supported by Professor Jessie Ricketts, is a strong example of this.

An additional strand of data should also be considered. Due to transience in Blackpool - both pupils moving in and out of the area, and pupils moving between Blackpool schools - it is challenging to monitor the impact of a multi-year approach given the proportion of pupils at the end of the period who were not in the cohort at the start. There should also be a focus not just on the interventions provided to pupils identified as needing support, but on the attendance to those interventions, with many schools reporting that many of the pupils identified as needing intervention also had below average school attendance. At a project level, it would be useful to be able to access these data sources, so that a true and realistic picture of the impact schools' literacy strategies are having on pupils can be assessed.

Main Recommendation 5

Transfer of leadership should be considered from the outset

It was found that those schools with consistent leadership across the duration of the project saw a more consistent and sustained approach to improving literacy across the school, and the biggest gains in pupil progress.

Changes in leadership are not unpredictable and become inevitable the longer a project is in place and the more schools it operates across. At a school level, leaders need to consider effective transfer of project leadership, including the use of clear, well-specified implementation plans as part of the handover process. At a project level, a short leadership training programme might be considered which new leaders can take part in to bring them up to date with the aims of the project and the progress made to date. This programme would ideally consist of a series of recorded video sessions which could be viewed online.

Section 6: Recommendations for funders

Funding has been critical to the success of the project, but has been subject to its own challenges. The funding model for the project, which saw funding agreed for an initial two-year period, followed by a series of one-year extensions which were often agreed very late in the academic year, led to some funding uncertainty for headteachers who were subsequently unable to plan for sustainability. This had an impact on staffing decisions, project leadership decisions, and intervention decisions.

We have the following recommendations for funders involved in a project such as this one in the future.

Recommendation for funders 1

Ensure timings of funding decisions align with the rhythm of the academic year

School staffing and timetabling decisions are usually made in the Summer term, meaning that funding decisions made late in the Summer term can be too late to impact on these. To ensure schools have adequate time to have effective project leadership in place, we would recommend that funding decisions that impact upon staffing are made no later than the end of the Spring term of the academic year prior to implementation.

Recommendation for funders 2

Plan for long-term, sustained implementation

Long-term sustained change in schools rarely happens quickly. Large scale complex projects across multiple schools which run for one or two years are less likely to see a sustained impact than projects which run for a longer period of time. For this reason, we would recommend a five year plan for large scale projects, in order to allow changes the chance to embed, and to reduce uncertainty around funding, giving headteachers the opportunity to plan for sustained long term changes through secure funding to impact on staffing and resourcing.

Recommendation for funders 3

Don't expect constant change

It can be tempting to expect 'new' things to happen during each year of a longer term project, but evidence suggests that doing fewer things better is more likely to lead to long term changes in schools (EEF, 2018). Funders should be satisfied that, provided the issue to be resolved has been accurately identified and the proposed solutions are rooted in evidence, a period of schools doing 'more of the same' and 'keeping the main thing the main thing' should be viewed positively. This is particularly relevant in Blackpool where more urgent issues such as Ofsted inspections can distract from issues like town-wide, sustainable literacy development.

Appendix I - Project partners

Programme Team

- Right to Succeed
- Stephen Tierney

Commissioners

- Blackpool Opportunity Area board

Measurement and Evaluation Partners

- GL Assessment
- NFER
- Blackpool Research School

Funding Partners

- Porticus
- Rothschild & Co
- John Laing

Intervention Partners

- CUREE
- Accelerated Reader
- Bedrock Learning
- Lexonik
- Education Endowment Foundation

Schools

- Armfield Academy
- Blackpool Aspire Academy
- Montgomery High School
- Unity Academy
- St Mary's Catholic Academy
- Highfield Leadership Academy
- St George's Church of England Academy
- South Shore Academy
- Educational Diversity

Questions about training and development

- Thinking about the training days we held, what would you have liked to know more about?
- What would have been useful for improving literacy at a whole-school level that was not covered by the training?
- What did you like about the training?
- Did the training leave you confident and ready to deliver on your implementation plan?
- How might this have been improved?
- Can you tell me about how the training you received was disseminated to the wider staff in your school? Are there plans to continue this training beyond this year?
- What additional support would be helpful?

Questions about acceptability and implementation

- How valuable do you think the project has been in developing pupils' literacy skills across KS3?
- How challenging has implementation of the project been in your school?
- How successful has the project been in keeping literacy high on the school's agenda, and not being pushed aside by competing priorities?
- Thinking about where you are now in the project, how positive do you feel about the KS3 literacy project and its aims?

Questions about the use of evidence to inform school decision making

- Thinking back to before the start of the KS3 literacy project, to what extent did research evidence inform whole school decision making?
- Can you talk me through how evidence has been used across the time of the KS3 literacy project to inform literacy-based decisions in your school?
- To what extent do you consider evidence to inform other decisions made at a senior leadership or middle leadership level (aside from literacy)?
- What sources of evidence would you usually use when considering your school priorities?
- Would you consider your school to be 'evidence-informed'?

Questions about continuity

- If all funding relating to the project were to cease at the end of this academic year, which aspects of the work you have implemented would you look to continue?
- If funding were no object, what would your whole-school literacy plan for the coming years look like?

Questions about future plans

- What will your literacy strategy look like during next academic year?
- Assuming the project were to end at the end of this year, what do you think your literacy strategy would look like then?

Questions about impact on teachers

- In what ways do you think the KS3 literacy project has had an impact on the understanding of the evidence around literacy in teaching staff at your school?
- If I were to visit lessons in your school, in what ways might I see the impact the literacy project is having on everyday classroom teaching?
- What plans do you have to continue to develop this work with classroom teachers?

Questions about impact on pupils

- What are the two or three things that you feel have been the most successful aspects of the project?
- How do they know that these things have been successful?
- Are there any things you have implemented that you have subsequently dropped?
- Why did you drop these things?
- In general, how do pupils feel about the focus on literacy in your school since the start of the project?

Wrap-up

- Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences of the KS3 literacy project?
- Do you have any questions for me?

References

- Education Endowment Foundation (2011). Effective professional development. London: EEF
- Education Endowment Foundation (2018). Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools. London: EEF
- Education Endowment Foundation (2019). Putting Evidence to Work – A School’s Guide to Implementation. London: EEF
- English indices of deprivation (2019). Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019> (Accessed: 13 December 2022).
- GL assessment (2020). Read all about it: Why reading is key to GCSE success. Available at: <https://reports.gl-assessment.co.uk/whyreading/> (Accessed: 13 December 2022)
- Ricketts, J., Jones, K., O'Neill, P., & Oxley, E. (2022). Using an assessment decision tree to align students’ reading needs to support in school. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/tm5cg>