

# Literacy for Life: Evaluating the National Literacy Trust’s bespoke programme for schools

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## Abstract

This paper presents an evaluation of ‘Literacy for Life’ (LfL) – a whole-school literacy programme, implemented in five secondary schools in England. The aims of LfL were to improve literacy attainment and to promote positive attitudes to reading and writing. However, when compared to other schools, there is little or no evidence that being in a LfL school, had any differential benefit for pupils’ attainment. In LfL schools, the gap for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEN grew in the early years of the intervention. There is also no evidence from repeated surveys that pupils’ attitudes to and enjoyment of reading showed any improvement. As such, LfL did not achieve its intended objectives. This matters because, despite limited evidence in its favour, schools continue to use it and programmes similar to it. We argue that programmes such as LfL, which are implemented on a whole-school level, need to be based upon evidence-informed approaches.

## Introduction

Strong literacy skills are important to help pupils to access the wider curriculum at school (Quigley et al. 2019, Education Scotland 2019). They are also key to criticality, an understanding of social practices, digital texts, and reading for pleasure (Cambridge Assessment 2013, Bloome and Green, 2015). They are related to individual progress and opportunities in life, as well as providing wider economic and social benefits to society (Gilbert et al. 2018, Grotlüschen et al. 2016).

However, not all pupils aged 16 in England have strong literacy skills in reading, writing and speaking. A high proportion do not gain what is now considered a standard pass in English language at Key Stage 4 (KS4). These pupils are more likely to be from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, their choices for further study and careers become more limited, and they are likely to earn less than those with at least pass grades in the subject (Andrews et al., 2017; Gorard 2018). In order to try and break this cycle of underperformance and inequality, there is considerable interest in programmes designed to improve young people’s literacy skills.

Many individual interventions have been developed for use in schools, often focusing on specific aspects relating to reading or writing, and sometimes oracy skills. In the UK, US and elsewhere, an increasing number of trials have been conducted over the past 15 years in order to identify potentially promising strategies for improving children’s literacy (Gorard et al. 2017; Quigley et al., 2019). This is linked to the establishment of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), along with other What Works Centres (WWC) for Education.

The EEF, for example, have listed a number of promising projects for improving literacy, including Accelerated Reader, Abracadabra Phonics and the Nuffield Early Language Intervention for spoken language skills in early years children (Dimova et al. 2020). The WWC (2017) report that self-regulated strategy development approaches to writing can also be beneficial. However, few of these successful individual literacy protocols have been used with secondary-age pupils. There are even fewer accounts of whole-school approaches or multi-component programmes where a combination of strategies is used together. This is because these multi-component programmes are harder to implement with fidelity, and even if deemed successful it is difficult to pinpoint the successful element(s). The RCT conducted by Carroll et al. (2020) is rare in covering a whole school reading programme, known as Bug Club. There

was a small improvement for the intervention group in the first year, but this was not replicated with the next cohort.

This new paper looks at ‘Literacy for Life’ (See et al., 2019) – a whole school programme developed by the National Literacy Trust, and used in five secondary academies from 2015 to 2018. The paper summarises the elements of this complex programme, describes the methods used with a focus on the impact evaluation, presents the headline results, and then discusses how and whether the programme should go forward.

### *Whole school, multi-component literacy approaches*

Success for All (SfA) is a whole school approach intended to improve literacy for early years pupils in primary schools. The programme involves extensive professional development and training for all teachers, leaders and teaching assistants within schools, the introduction of a challenging reading programme for pupils, and a focus on parental involvement. The components of SfA differ depending on the curriculum stage of pupils but are delivered to whole classes and small groups by trained teachers and teaching assistants. Prior evidence suggests that SfA is a promising approach for supporting young children’s literacy development and attainment (Borman et al, 2007; Miller et al., 2017; Quint et al., 2015; Tracey et al., 2014).

The Every Child a Reader (ECaR) strategy, linked to the Success for All approach, was developed and rolled out in England 2005-2010. It included a series of different ‘waves’ of strategies to support children aged 4-7 with literacy. In addition to whole-class teaching and small-group reading support, the Reading Recovery programme provided one-to-one, phonics-based intensive intervention for pupils at risk of underachievement. An evaluation of ECaR suggested strong positive outcomes on attainment (Tanner et al. 2011). The programme ended following a change of UK administration in 2010. Reading Recovery continues as a popular intervention with ongoing evidence highlighting its positive impact on targeted learners (Agostino and Harmeay 2016), even though this is in dispute (Chapman and Turner 2018).

During the early 2000s in America, the Literacy Collaborative initiative gained traction as a long-term approach to improving literacy on a whole school basis. As with the programmes described above, the approach involved ongoing professional development and coaching for teachers and the designation and training of a literacy coach. The programme included provision of materials and supplies to support literacy instruction in schools, such as additional collections of books for school libraries, home-school reading support, and Reading Recovery for struggling readers. An evaluation of the programme described six core components forming the framework of the teaching and learning approaches: interactive read-aloud, shared reading, guided reading, interactive writing, writing workshop, and word study (Biancarosa et al., 2010). But while this evaluation suggests promise for Literacy Collaborative, it attempts to isolate and focus just on the effects of teacher coaching within the programme, making it difficult to draw conclusions on its overall effectiveness.

These initiatives outlined above are all based in primary, and often early years, settings. There is much less research which enables us to understand how whole school literacy approaches might work for secondary-age pupils. The next section instead focuses on the key components of Literacy for Life, reviewing what we know to date about these approaches and their impact.

### **The Literacy for Life programme**

The Literacy for Life programme is a composite approach, including a range of trademarked interventions developed by the NLT and other organisations (such as Premier League Reading Stars, Grammar for Writing, or Accelerated Reader), and more general approaches such as subject-specific professional development for teachers.

### *Core components of Literacy for Life*

The LfL Programme includes approaches and interventions which individual schools can adapt to fit within their specific context. The programme was designed to offer a bespoke approach to literacy and whole school improvement, focused on two strands: developing young people's academic language for the wider curriculum, and promoting reading for pleasure. Approaches designed to develop academic language include academic language development, Grammar for Writing, inference training, Debate Mate, subject-specific literacy training and spelling support. Reading for pleasure is promoted through strategies such as Reading Aloud, the Pupils as Writers programme, participation in literacy festivals, author visits, and the Premier League Reading Stars programme. To support schools in adopting these different strategies, a range of professional development workshops and training sessions are offered to teachers. Most of the interventions form part of a 'menu', allowing schools to select them for implementation if they were deemed to be potentially useful. Schools can also use programme funds provided by the NLT to buy into other existing interventions, such as Accelerated Reader and Lexia.

The sections below provide a brief review of these key components.

#### *Teacher development*

Literacy for Life includes a substantial element of development and coaching for teachers. This is designed to support teachers and leaders with content knowledge and pedagogical skills in relation to literacy, as well as supporting those who are interested in leading literacy improvement across the schools. A range of workshops, consultancy opportunities and coaching sessions were offered to intervention schools, plus the chance to nominate one staff member to participate in the MA Language and Literacy course based at Exeter University. While there are many studies which point towards a positive relationship between effective teaching and pupil academic outcomes (Mckinsey 2010, Sutton Trust 2011), there is less clear evidence linking teacher professional development with pupils' achievement (Harris and Sass, 2011, Garet et al. 2016). A review by See and Gorard (2020) showed mixed results for studies which included an element of teacher development, with 12 of the 21 studies reporting no benefits. A recent large-scale teacher effectiveness programme funded by the Gates Foundation which included substantial elements of professional development, also showed no gains for learners (Stecher et al., 2018).

Another earlier review synthesised 'what works' (and what does not) in relation to professional development, based on 46 existing reviews on the topic (Cordingley et al. 2015). Key findings indicated that effective programmes needed to: be prolonged; include elements of consolidation and follow-up; be relevant to teacher's day-to-day lives and to their aspirations for their pupils; and, to occur as part of a positive professional environment with adequate time allocated for such activities. The majority of the same elements have also been highlighted in a more recent review (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), which highlighted the role of coaching and expert support more strongly. This aligns with an increasing body of work which indicates that coaching may be a promising approach for supporting teacher development and improving children's outcomes (Kraft 2018).

#### *Reading interventions*

Literacy for Life offers participating schools a range of reading interventions to engage with. Some focus on improving children's reading skills, while others seek to develop pupils' enjoyment and engagement with reading. Interventions such as Inference Training, Reading Aloud, and the NLT's Premier League Reading Stars (PLRS) programme were taken-up in varying degrees in all of the LfL schools. The schools were also able to use additional funds from the LfL project to buy-in further interventions such as Accelerated Reader.

The evidence on the impact of inference training so far is largely negative. Although the results of a small experiment (McGee and Johnson 2003) showed that explicit teaching of inference skills had improved pupils' writing skills, this was based on only 75 children within one school. Results from large-scale randomised control trials have not shown positive results (Churches 2016, NCTL 2014).

The PLRS programme is designed to “increase [children’s] reading progress levels and encourage them to become more excited about and engaged in reading” (NLT, 2020). While the NLT and others have reported some evidence that the programme is generally enjoyed by those who participate (Pabion 2014, Wood et al. 2017), there has been no robust, randomised trial of the intervention, making it very difficult to know whether it has any positive effect on pupils’ reading. There has also been only very limited evaluation work done with secondary-age pupils participating in the intervention.

The Reading Aloud intervention provided intervention schools with a group of texts chosen by the NLT. Teachers were then asked to spend some time reading these to their classes, sharing language and promoting enjoyment of a novel. There has been no evaluation of the impact of this activity as used in LfL but there is some evidence pointing towards the benefits of shared book reading on young children’s emergent literacy and language skills (Duursma et al. 2008). The majority of strong studies on this topic focus on pre-school or early years-age children and on the role of parents in the book sharing/reading rather than its impact through school-based approaches. (Chacko et al. 2018, Weisleder et al. 2018).

Accelerated Reader has some fairly robust evidence linking its use with improved outcomes for children (Ross et al. 2004, Siddiqui et al. 2015). Again, though AR is designed to be used more with primary children or those at the transition to secondary school. Evidence on its use with older, secondary-age pupils is very limited.

A range of other reading-focused strategies and activities were offered to LfL schools as part of the programme. These included storytelling, author visits and improvement of the school libraries. Such approaches were introduced with a view to encouraging more pupils to engage with books and stories, and to participate in enjoyable reading-based activities. It is not clear whether it was also hoped that these strategies would improve attainment of participating pupils. No evidence basis relating to enjoyment or attainment was provided to schools.

#### Writing interventions

Three writing interventions were provided as part of the LfL programme: Grammar for Writing (GfW), support with teaching spelling, and Pupils as Writers. Two sessions of GfW training were provided to teachers in participating schools. The expectation was that teachers would implement the theory, subject knowledge and pedagogic strategies in their teaching. The evidence for GfW is mixed. Research by intervention’s developers suggests that GfW had a beneficial effect on children’s written work (Jones et al. 2012, Myhill et al. 2013). A more recent randomised control trial suggests small positive effects especially when delivered in small groups (Torgerson et al. 2014). However, when the trial was scaled-up, extending the duration of the intervention, it found no effect (Tracey et al. 2018). This trial included GfW being delivered to whole classes rather than small groups, suggesting that the small-group delivery may have been more effective.

The links between spelling ability, reading fluency and comprehension are well-established (Al Otaiba et al. 2010, Wanzek et al. 2013). There are different approaches to teaching spelling and a host of different interventions designed to improve children’s spelling (Brooks 2016, Williams et al. 2018). As part of LfL, training was provided to some teachers on using That Reading Thing, an approach using synthetic phonics to support spelling. Teachers were encouraged to develop subject-specific vocabulary lists to aid spelling of key words in their subjects. Evidence suggests that there is no clear link between systematic phonics instruction and spelling (Torgerson et al. 2006) and, to the best of our knowledge, there had been no robust evaluation of That Reading Thing prior to its inclusion in LfL (Brooks 2016).

The Pupils as Writers programme involved the NLT gifting a LfL notebook to all Year 7 children, for activities such as free writing in English or during library lessons. The aim was to develop writing as a pleasurable activity and to improve writing stamina. The writing in the books was not to be marked. While there is some potentially positive evidence linking reflective writing and enjoyable experiences to improved writing attainment (Torgerson et al. 2018), and linking writing frequency with attainment (Clark 2012), studies tend to indicate that careful structuring of the writing process is needed in order to promote learning and progress, particularly for those who have lower literacy levels from the outset.

### *Oracy and other interventions*

LfL promotes two interventions focusing upon oracy: Debate Mate, an extra-curricular activity which encourages children to participate in debate clubs and competitions, and the Voices Literacy Festival, one-day celebrations of spoken word held either at a local university or in school. Although no independent evaluation of Debate Mate has been conducted there is a body of research which suggests that developing pupils' debating skills can have a positive impact on academic outcomes, in particular literacy skills (Mezuk et al. 2011, Minnesota Public Schools 2015). More recent large-scale randomised control trials have also suggested promising results from teaching children to critique, reason and argue (Gorard et al. 2017, Hanley et al. 2015).

Other interventions offered to LfL schools included a social-psychological intervention to support pupils with social and emotional issues, plus some programmes to support pupils with the language skills needed for their lives beyond school. These included Words for Work and university interview practice/preparation activities. Some LfL schools opted for these approaches while others did not.

To summarise, Literacy for Life involves a host of different interventions, programmes and activities. Some of these appear to be supported with good evidence; others are not. This variation is a problem in itself as schools are being presented with a potentially promising intervention which is actually made up of elements likely to have no or even negative impact. The breadth of options also presents significant challenges. The programme assumes that every component presented could be beneficial in terms of quality and the outcomes that it would address. This is not the case. With such a range of different 'ingredients' within a multi-component approach such as LfL, it is difficult for schools to understand the intended effect of each element. There was no clear theory of change for LfL during this study phase, making it difficult to evaluate the intervention rigorously as participating schools all undertook different versions of the programme. Moreover, schools were encouraged to adapt and use the intervention components in the way that they felt was most appropriate for their school; this led to even further variation and no way of assessing, from an evaluation perspective, whether fidelity was being achieved or not. An additional challenge for evaluation was the fact that the programme had already started prior to our research commencing; the participating schools using the intervention had already been selected, reducing the possibility of a powerful research design.

### **Design and Methods used in the evaluation**

This new independent evaluation of LfL was funded through the NLT, and considers the impact of the programme on pupil attainment and attitudes to reading. A detailed process evaluation also formed an important part of the study, and findings from this are used to inform our interpretation of the impact data, but are not otherwise presented here. In the section below we summarise the research design used for impact evaluation and outline the methods used across the project as a whole.

#### *Design of the impact evaluation*

The design for the impact evaluation of the three-year intervention of Literacy for Life is quasi-experimental. It compares the outcomes and attitudes of pupils in five secondary academies (the treatment group) with the strongest comparators available. Each academy was in a different local authority across England - Blackburn with Darwen, Brighton and Hove, Norfolk, Sandwell, and Stoke-on-Trent. The schools were recruited by the NLT prior to the evaluation set-up; all were members of one of two medium-sized multi-academy trusts in England that had signalled their wish to work with the NLT to improve literacy outcomes. The intervention was set up in the year 2014/15, and the evaluation lasted until the year 2017/18. It should be reiterated here that intervention schools were encouraged to adopt some of the components of LfL but also had considerable freedom around using other elements (see above). While our process evaluation captured details of which programmes/practices schools engaged with and for how long, information about this was not always as available or detailed as would have been ideal.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the five intervention schools and the demographic characteristics and prior attainment of their intakes. This information was collated early in the evaluation in order to understand the contexts of the schools involved.

Table 1: Information on LfL intervention schools

	Number of pupils on roll	Ofsted rating	Free School Meals eligibility (%)	English as Additional Language (%)	SEN (%)	Attainment 8	% Achieving 5 A*-C grades (including English and Maths)
School A	575	Requires Improvement	35.4	10.1	37.3	42.1	29.0
School B	1197	Good	19.8	8.9	12.0	49.6	57.0
School C	1194	Good	26.6	19.4	12.0	48.2	50.0
School D	663	Good	26.6	1.8	23.2	47.9	62.0
School E	654	Outstanding	26.1	7.8	38.1	45.1	61.0
National (average)	1405	N/A	13.9	15.0	12.7	48.2	53.8

*\*\* Data collated from Ofsted website (January 2016) and DfE Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics (2015).*

For attainment outcomes, the comparison groups consisted of all mainstream, state-funded secondary schools in the respective local authorities of the five academies, and all mainstream state-funded secondary schools in England. Given that we were looking at progress in attainment (or value-added) we needed the comparator to be as stable as possible. Small numbers tend to be volatile and value-added is intended to be context free. Therefore, comparing the treatment schools with the average progress of all mainstream schools in the country was the most straightforward and robust approach. However, we know that value-added is not entirely context free and so we also compare with local schools. Reassuringly, both comparisons led to the same substantive conclusions (see results below). For attitudes to reading, the comparators are all other schools completing the NLT annual reading attitudes survey. Due to the nature of our comparison groups, we did not collect information on whether comparison schools were using elements that are also used in LfL. It is possible that some may have been using some standalone components (e.g. shared reading or Premier League Reading Stars); however, we are confident that they were not using the full LfL programme as this was not available beyond the intervention schools at the time of the evaluation.

As we note above, establishing the fidelity of the intervention and its components was also challenging. Clear and consistent information relating to fidelity was not available to the evaluation team and was not collected by the NLT or schools. As a result of this we have only limited information (from our process evaluation visits and discussions, See et al. 2019) about the extent to which LfL (or elements of it) were being implemented as originally intended.

#### *Academic outcomes*

Academic impact is measured using:

- The percentage of pupils obtaining 5+ GCSEs or equivalent in English and maths at grade C or higher in 2015 and 2016, and grade 4 and 5 or higher from 2017 (due to a national change in the grading system)

- Attainment 8 scores (from 2016)
- Progress 8 (value-added) scores (from 2016)
- The percentage of pupils obtaining EBacc at grade C or higher from 2015, and grade 5 or higher from 2017
- Total Key Stage 4 (KS4) points scores (for sub-group analyses)

These outcomes were for each academy in LfL, all mainstream schools in the same local authorities as the LfL schools, and in England overall. The data for the first four outcomes were taken from the DfE Compare Schools website (<https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk>), and the School Level Annual Schools Census (SLASC). The KS4 points scores came from the National Pupil Database.

The differences between LfL schools, LA schools, and all schools in England were standardised by conversion to achievement gaps – the difference between two mean scores divided by the score for the larger group (local area or England), where the relevant standard deviation for that figure is not known. Where the standard deviation is known, the differences are standardised as effect sizes - the difference between two mean scores divided by their overall standard deviation. The scores for the combined LfL schools are the means of their individual scores, weighted by the number of KS4 pupils in each school. The scores for the combined LfL local authorities are also the means of their individual scores, weighted by the number of pupils in each area.

Disaggregated analysis was carried out to estimate the effects of LfL on disadvantaged groups, defined as those eligible for free school meals (EverFSM6) and those with special educational needs status (SEN, with or without statements).

#### *Attitude outcomes*

NLT run an annual attitude survey with all of their co-operating schools - the Pupil Attitude Questionnaire. This was administered by the NLT at three time points (pre-intervention, at the end of year 2, and post-intervention at the end of year 3). The questionnaires were designed by the NLT, and not specifically for this project. The evaluators had no input into the content or delivery.

For pupils' attitudes, NLT pre-specified the following themes to focus on:

- Enjoyment of reading and writing
- Frequency of reading and writing
- Self-confidence in relation to reading and writing
- Attitudes towards both reading and writing

There were a number of substantial limitations with the NLT's pupil attitudes questionnaire in relation to design, administration and the data provided by it. Unfortunately, no information relating to the school attended or pupil information was collected routinely as part of the questionnaire. There was, therefore, no way of tracking individual pupil progress, or even of ensuring that the comparator schools were the same on each occasion. A number of items were different between pre- and post-intervention, and even between treatment and comparison schools in one year. The number of cases responding to the survey declined considerably over the three years of the intervention representing a loss of 57% of the original total. This potentially biases the results, with the most engaged pupils or schools likely to be over-represented in the final results. The number of cases in the comparator schools, on the other hand, increased over time. This is because the comparator group did not contain the same schools on each occasion. All of this greatly reduces the comparability of the two groups and the extent to which robust and reliable conclusions can be drawn about any influence of LfL on pupil attitudes.

Only the questions focusing on the enjoyment of reading and writing were asked in the same way and with the same coded responses in the pre-, interim and 2017 surveys. These, therefore, are the only items which can be compared over time and so are the only ones presented here.

All pupils reported as being in a year group other than 7 to 11 were removed from the attitude datasets. Most survey items had a small number of missing values. These were mostly ignored and the cases dropped for that analysis. The pupil background variables were recoded to eliminate missing values, so that the variable represents membership of the minority group (if known) or not (otherwise). These include FSM or not, male or not, White British or not, and EAL or not.

The frequencies of responses to each key item, for each group on each occasion, are presented as percentages within treatment/comparison group. To assist readability, the differences in these percentages between groups are converted to standardised odds ratios for pre- and post-intervention. Where odds ratios are greater than one, they represent a better standardised outcome for LfL schools, and odds ratios less than one suggest a worse LfL outcome than for the comparator. Where they increase over time, the odds ratios give an indication that the treatment group has increased their response in that category.

### Impact on attainment

Judging the impact of LfL on the attainment of pupils in the five schools at KS4 is made harder by two main factors. The intakes and prior attainment to schools tend to vary over time, and so raw-score differences between cohorts may be due to such changes rather than changes in school “performance”. After the onset of this evaluation the publicly available measures of pupil attainment changed, most notably from a GCSE scale of A\*-G to the scale of 9 to 1 that does not map easily onto the former.

#### *Headline findings*

Progress 8 value-added scores are only available from 2016 onwards. The supposed advantage of Progress 8 scores is that they should take into account changes in school intakes, although these scores are both volatile and not completely independent of the raw scores underlying them (Gorard 2018). Table 2 shows that the P8 score for all five LfL academies was near to the national and local authority average in the second year of the intervention. Any differences are too small to trust. In the following two years up to the end of the intervention, LfL schools had P8 scores substantially below their local authorities and the national average. On this basis, there is no reason to suggest that the LfL programme had any benefit on successive cohorts from the intervention schools (over and above what was going on at other schools across England),

Table 2 - Comparison of LfL local schools, and all schools, KS4 Progress 8, 2016-2018

	2016	2017	2018
LfL schools	-0.05	-0.22	-0.18
LfL authorities	-0.04	-0.03	-0.10
All maintained schools	-0.03	-0.03	-0.02

The raw scores underlying P8 are the Attainment 8 scores. Table 3 shows, for these three years, that there is no indication of success from LfL. Whatever the reason, Attainment 8 in LfL schools was lower at the outset, and dropped away further from local and national averages over time.

Table 3 - Comparison of LfL local schools, and all schools, Average Attainment 8, 2016-2018

	2016	2017	2018
LfL schools	46.7	41.3	41.6
LfL authorities	48.4	44.6	44.2
All maintained schools	49.9	46.3	46.5
Gap with local authorities	-0.04	-0.07	-0.06
Gap with all schools	-0.06	-0.11	-0.11



For the two years when the main indicator used at KS4 was the percentage of pupils attaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, or equivalent, there is again no suggestion of improvement for LfL schools (Table 4). They start out in 2015 reasonably in line with their local authorities and the national picture, but drop in 2016 (by not improving as much as other schools).

Table 4 – Percentage attaining 5 GCSE A\*-C with English and maths, 2015-2016

	2015	2016
LfL schools	55.4	56.2
LfL authorities	55.9	59.4
All maintained schools	55.8	63.0
Gap with local authorities	-0.01	-0.05
Gap with all schools	-0.01	-0.11

For the next two years the main indicator used, and perhaps the closest to the C grade is attainment at grade 4 or better (Table 5). LfL schools have lower scores than other schools, and more importantly either stay at the same position, or their scores decline in comparison to other schools.

Table 5 – Percentage attaining Grade 4+ with English and maths, 2017-2018

	2017	2018
LfL schools	51.7	51.9
LfL authorities	60.2	59.7
All maintained schools	64.0	64.2
Gap with local authorities	-0.14	-0.13
Gap with all schools	-0.11	-0.19

Table 6 shows the equivalent scores at Grade 5, considered to be well above the equivalent to the old C grade. Again, the picture for LfL worsens over time in the national comparison.

Table 6 – Percentage attaining Grade 5+ with English and maths, 2017-2018

	2017	2018
LfL schools	28.9	31.8
LfL authorities	37.7	37.4
All maintained schools	43.0	43.0
Gap with local authorities	-0.23	-0.15
Gap with all schools	-0.20	-0.33

The English Baccalaureate (or EBacc) requires pupils to attain high grades in a range of subjects including science, language, maths and English (Table 7). As shown, this is achieved by only a minority of pupils (under 17% nationally in 2018). The EBacc was affected by the changes to grades in 2017. Nevertheless, there is no indication of a trend such that LfL schools improved relative to others. Indeed their EBacc scores in 2018 are quite poor.

Table 7 – Percentage attaining EBACC at Grade C+ 2015/16 and Grade5+ 2017/18

	2015	2016	2017	2018
LfL schools	11.1	12.0	13.1	4.6
LfL authorities	19.1	19.6	15.9	11.7
All maintained schools	22.9	23.1	19.5	16.7
Gap with local authorities	-0.42	-0.39	-0.18	-0.61
Gap with all schools	-0.52	-0.48	-0.33	-0.72

In summary, there is no good evidence here that LfL was effective for pupil attainment. In fact, if these changes *are* attributable to LfL overall there is a suggestion that the intervention was damaging.

#### *Outcomes for disadvantaged pupils*

Sub-analyses were conducted to unpack the potential impact of LfL for children eligible for Free School Meals (the main proxy indicator for socioeconomic disadvantage in England) and those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Tables 8 and 9 show the KS4 results for the FSM and SEN pupils in the LfL group and for England, for four years. In both tables, results in LfL schools start out better than the national average (as indicated by the positive effect sizes) and drop for the first two years of LfL participation, before rising again but still below where they were at the outset. Participation in the programme, may therefore, contribute to a slight widening of the attainment gap between these disadvantaged groups and their peers.

Table 8 - Capped KS4 point scores, EverFSM pupils

	2014 Mean	SD	2015 Mean	SD	2016 Mean	SD	2017 Mean	SD
England	264.7	106.3	265.0	107.0	34.76	18.51	31.35	14.37
LfL	272.1	81.0	264.0	85.5	32.97	14.90	31.22	12.05
Effect size	+0.07	-	-0.01	-	-0.10	-	-0.01	-

Table 9 - Capped KS4 point scores, SEN pupils

	2014 Mean	SD	2015 Mean	SD	2016 Mean	SD	2017 Mean	SD
England	253.1	104.3	253.0	105.4	31.56	17.36	25.31	14.00
LfL	260.5	77.3	251.2	80.8	29.39	13.70	26.03	11.06
Effect size	+0.07	-	-0.02	-	-0.13	-	+0.05	-

### *Pupils' attitudes to literacy*

The findings relating to pupils' enjoyment of literacy should be read with caution and understood within the context of the limitations discussed in the previous section. While we were disappointed that the NLT did not set-up and administer the attitudes questionnaire more rigorously, we do still feel that it is important to publish the results that are available in order to highlight this important element relating to the LfL programme. Improving pupils' engagement and enjoyment of literacy was a key objective during the design and implementation of LfL. Responses from young people in the early years of the programme, however, suggest mixed results in relation to enjoyment.

Table 10 below shows the proportions of pupil respondents who indicated their level of enjoyment of reading over the three years. Pupils in comparison schools appeared to be more likely to enjoy reading ('very much', 'quite a lot') in each survey. More LfL treatment pupils reported not enjoying reading 'at all'.

Table 10 – Percentages of pupil responses indicating level of enjoyment of reading over three surveys

Enjoy reading	Pre-treatment	Pre-comparison	Interim-treatment	Interim-comparison)	Treatment 2017	Comparison 2017
Very Much	16	19	18	23	14	19
Quite a lot	23	29	26	31	27	34
A bit	43	40	41	37	42	38
Not at all	18	12	15	9	18	9
N	1,670	10,124	1,477	11,66	713	21,735

The odds ratio for those enjoying reading 'very much' or 'quite a lot' compared to 'a bit' or 'not at all' declined over the three surveys from 0.69 (2015) to 0.61 (2016) to 0.59 (2017). If the comparison is assumed to be meaningful then this suggests that the intervention had a small negative impact on pupils' enjoyment of reading.

After three years of the intervention, the treatment group also reported enjoying writing slightly less than the comparator group (Table 11). However, the odds ratio for those enjoying writing ‘very much’ or ‘quite a lot’ compared to ‘a bit’ or ‘not at all’ increased over the three surveys from 0.72 through 0.77 to 0.85. If the comparator is assumed to be meaningful this suggests that the intervention had a small positive impact on pupils’ enjoyment of writing.

Table 11 – Percentages of pupil responses indicating level of enjoyment of writing over three surveys

Enjoy Writing	Pre-treatment	Pre-comparison	Interim-treatment	Interim-comparison	Treatment 2017	Comparison 2017
Very Much	12	15	12	13	14	12
Quite a lot	25	30	23	28	26	32
A bit	45	39	46	44	41	42
Not at all	18	16	19	15	19	13
N	1,670	10,124	1,477	11,66	713	21,735

Sub-group analyses suggested that older pupils, male, FSM-eligible, EAL and White UK pupils tended to report slightly less enjoyment of literacy.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The data presented above indicate that the Literacy for Life programme had no positive impact on young people’s literacy attainment and enjoyment. This is an important finding for a number of reasons. First, LfL is a significant programme in terms of the time and resources invested in it by the NLT and the participating schools. Teachers and other school staff were encouraged to attend additional training and alter their practices. Leaders tended to engage enthusiastically with the programme too, committing time, overseeing implementation of the programme and making decisions regarding resource use. Furthermore, pupils in treatment schools experienced and were expected to engage with new and additional approaches to literacy teaching and learning. The findings from this evaluation suggest that this investment is probably not justified if the aim is to improve pupils’ achievement in reading and writing. Indeed, it seems possible that participation in the programme may even be harmful to some of the pupils involved, including those from disadvantaged groups.

Arguably, LfL would have benefitted from clearer, more focused (and possibly fewer) aims and intended outcomes. While it is commendable that the developers of the programme wanted to explore impact on attainment and attitudes, and to examine effects on teachers, pupils and the whole school, prioritisation of these needed to be determined from the outset and reflected within the design and implementation of the programme and the evaluation. Such an approach would have been helpful in providing a framework for understanding what each element of LfL was aiming to contribute to the programme, and what the intended outcome for pupils, teachers or schools was. Instead, due to a lack of a clear theory of change, interventions and approaches were sometimes included with limited awareness of the assumptions and causal mechanisms important to their effectiveness. An example of this was the view that improving pupils’ attitudes and aspirations would improve their attainment too. While there is evidence pointing towards the importance of attitudes such as motivation (Huang, 2011; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2018), other studies have highlighted the inconclusive evidence on the issue of attitudes and aspirations and the complexities involved with embedding interventions for these in to school settings (Gorard et al., 2012; Sibieta et al., 2014). That is not to say that improving children’s motivation, confidence or enjoyment of literacy is not a worthy goal. It is. But in devising and planning a complex, multi-faceted programme such as LfL, a strong evidence base for the inclusion of each element and each aim would have been helpful from both a practical and academic perspective.

Commissioning an independent evaluation of Literacy for Life at a relatively early stage was important. However, it is only of use if the findings are taken on board, shared transparently with funders, the

academic community and other stakeholders such as school leaders, and that developments happen to the programme before it is further rolled-out to other schools or organisations. There is an ethical imperative here. It would be irresponsible to continue promoting programmes such as LfL - which require a lot of resources and time and which make claims about positive impacts on attainment and attitudes – if their developers and funders know that they are likely to be ineffective, and may be potentially harmful.

At the time of completing the evaluation, LfL was reportedly being embedded into initial teacher education provision in at least one university. Many of the CPD elements of the programme are also available to purchase as part of the NLT's current Literacy for Learning initiative (NLT, 2020). Furthermore, LfL and some of its components (e.g. training for teachers, poets visiting schools) appear to be featuring within the NLT's regional hubs programme (UoB 2019a, 2019b). This is not necessarily problematic in itself but it does demonstrate the appetite that there is for interventions and approaches designed to support children's literacy. It is vital though that trusted, national organisations such as the National Literacy Trust are clear about the extent to which the approaches they are promoting and selling are evidence-informed. Organisations such as universities, local authorities, schools and businesses, who also choose to invest in, engage with and support the work of the NLT, with a view to improving literacy for young people, should be responsible for proper scrutiny of the interventions being adopted. If high-quality evidence is not available, then caution should be urged before implementing these new strategies, however positive or well-meaning they may seem. Alongside this, these organisations should be demanding that robust, meaningful evaluations are planned from the outset and delivered in order to assess whether a programme has had the desired impact and whether it is worth persevering with.

Further, while it is certainly possible to evaluate the impact of complex, multi-faceted interventions such as LfL (Minary et al., 2019), careful consideration of the evaluation design and methods should ideally be integrated from the outset. Without this, we have a situation where it becomes difficult, for example, to identify and include an appropriate sample and sensible comparators; to know what elements the schools are participating in and whether they are completing them with fidelity; and, to determine the most relevant outcome measures and data availability over the period of the study. All of these have a significant effect on the robustness of evaluation results and the claims that can be made about the programme's value.

The key to the success or failure of the project is the ability to identify and use approaches that have been robustly evaluated and have shown promise in a number of independent evaluations. These programmes could be continued and promoted within the LfL programme. Examples include Reading Recovery/Switch-on Reading, Accelerated Reader, Philosophy for Children (P4C), Fresh Start (systematic, synthetic approach to reading), Response-to-Intervention and My Reading Coach. Approaches that have no prior evidence of impact on academic improvement (such as some of those included within LfL) should be assessed for impact at a smaller scale before implementation as a whole-school programme.

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