Headsprout Early Reading Evaluation in Special Schools

Headsprout Early Reading (HER) is a targeted reading intervention, developed by researchers in America and owned by Learning A-Z. Bangor University have piloted the programme in UK special schools and developed additional training and materials to support implementation in this context.

HER is a computer-based programme that focuses on building fluency in essential early reading skills (such as decoding and blending) through providing explicit phonics instruction and giving children lots of opportunities to practice, until skills become fluent. Three times a week, pupils work through activities in a computer programme which adapts instruction in response to their answers. Activities are designed to be engaging, with pupils working through cartoon-based worlds via tasks that resemble computer games. There are 80 lessons and, depending on individual children and their needs, sessions typically take between 10 and 30 minutes. Teaching assistants also deliver additional one-to-one fluency exercises to selected pupils alongside the computer-based instruction.

Bangor University will conduct an initial day of training with three staff per school, at least one being a teacher, and provide an implementation support manual for using HER with students with SEND. Ongoing implementation support will also be provided by the Bangor team via a combination of school visits and telephone support.

Why are we funding it?

The EEF has not previously funded a project working in special schools and this was a priority for the SEND round. Two previous pilot RCTs of Headsprout in a small number of special schools have laid the foundations for a larger efficacy trial. These two pilot RCTs reported positive impacts on reading skills, but these studies are small and a larger trial is required. This trial will test whether Headsprout Early Reading leads to improved reading outcomes for children with SEND in special schools.

How are we evaluating it?

The evaluation will be conducted by a team from Warwick University, led by Dr Samantha Flynn. The impact of the programme on reading fluency will be estimated using a randomised controlled trial. An implementation and process evaluation will examine barriers and facilitators to implementation, compliance, dosage, and pupils’ reading for pleasure.

When will the evaluation report be due?

The evaluation report will be published in Spring 2022.

If you express interest in this project, the EEF’s project delivery partner and evaluation partner will use your contact details for the purposes of recruitment to the project. Your contact details will not be used for any other purposes and will be deleted when no longer needed. A full privacy notice will be shared together with the recruitment documents. More information about data protection in EEF evaluations can be found here.