# Operationalising evaluation of attainment raising interventions within widening participation: a case study evaluating a literacy intervention

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**Abstract** This study investigates a reading support programme, offering key insights into the challenges of evaluating attainment-raising programmes within widening participation contexts in England. The research identifies three primary challenges: resource and infrastructure limitations, stakeholder engagement complexities, and data reliability, which present challenges to implementation and evaluation of such interventions.

The findings highlight the limitations of rigid, standardised evaluation frameworks, arguing that these approaches often fail to capture the full impact of interventions targeting disadvantaged student populations. Instead, this study advocates for a phronetic approach that emphasises practitioner-based, context-sensitive knowledge. By integrating experiential insights from practitioners, the research presents an adaptive evaluation strategy that better reflects the realities of educational environments.

**Key words** Attainment raising programmes; phronesis; reflective practice; context-aware methodologies; practitioner-based knowledge

## Introduction

Under the Office for Students (OfS) guidance, English universities are expected to collaborate with schools to improve the attainment of disadvantaged students as a key priority in achieving equality of opportunity (Office for Students, 2022). In response to this, the University of Kent piloted a reading support intervention aimed at enhancing literacy outcomes for Year 7 students (11–12 years old). Reading comprehension can be regarded as a fundamental foundation for all future learning, and yet local schools report students starting secondary school with lower-than-expected literacy levels (Melby-Lervag and Lervag, 2014; Horning, 2007). The intervention involved student

ambassadors providing one-to-one reading support to secondary school students, with the dual objective of strengthening reading skills and fostering more positive attitudes towards reading.

Initial informal feedback from both participating schools and students has been positive, with anecdotal evidence suggesting improvements in reading ability and confidence. However, the implementation of the intervention presented a number of operational challenges, which influenced both its delivery and the planned evaluation of its impact.

This article examines these challenges, offering practical insights into the planning and execution of attainment-raising interventions. It also considers how future iterations of the programme will address these obstacles. In particular, the article explores the potential role of 'phronetic knowledge', which is practitioner-based practical wisdom in refining and adapting such interventions, drawing on insights from practice-based fields such as nursing and social work. While the discussion is framed around a literacy intervention, the findings offer broader implications for the evaluation and design of attainment-raising initiatives.

## Intervention background

According to the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) think tank, in 2022, 41% of Year 6 pupils in England left primary school without meeting the expected standards in literacy and maths (Centre for Social Justice, 2023). Emerging research highlights a correlation between low reading age and attainment in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in maths and science, demonstrating that literacy deficits can have a lasting impact across all subjects throughout a student's school career (Mulcahy, Bernardes and Baars, 2016; Fernandes and Gallacher, 2021). The Education Endowment Foundation further emphasises that poor literacy levels negatively affect students across multiple dimensions, from health and wellbeing to long-term employment and financial stability (Quigley and Coleman, 2019). The well-documented link between achieving five GCSEs at Grade 4 and above including English and Maths (which is considered a minimum passing grade) and progression to higher education further underscores the importance of addressing literacy challenges early (Crawford, 2014).

The University of Kent delivers its widening participation provision across Kent and Medway. Situated in the Southeast of England, these areas have a distinctive geographical context, characterised by significant deprivation alongside areas of high affluence. This context is further shaped by a highly selective education system, with 25–30% of students attending grammar schools. Grammar schools are state funded schools where students are admitted based on academic ability, assessed through an entrance test. Consequently, non-selective schools typically enrol higher proportions of students eligible for free school meals (FSM), students with special educational needs and those traditionally under-represented in higher education. They also often have a substantial number of students with below-expected reading ages. Feedback from these local secondary schools suggests that the lower reading ability was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected disadvantaged learners.

The University of Kent has been committed to supporting schools with this issue for several years. The Outreach and Widening Participation (OWP) team has piloted multiple reading interventions within a local school, though formal evaluations have been limited. While some programmes showed promise, staff availability and resource constraints were recurring challenges. One particularly successful initiative involved a phonics specialist; however, due to staffing limitations, it could only be sustained for a small number of students. The time-intensive nature of literacy interventions also posed significant barriers to long-term implementation.

To address these challenges, the University piloted a small-group reading support programme. This 12-week intervention, delivered by student ambassadors, was designed to provide intensive reading support in a scalable and cost-effective manner. Crucially, the programme did not require ambassadors or staff to have specialist expertise or subject-specific backgrounds, making it a more sustainable and adaptable model. Early anecdotal evidence suggested positive outcomes, positioning the programme as a viable approach for wider implementation.

## Programme structure

A pilot intervention was implemented during the 2023–2024 academic year and delivered to selected Year 7 students across three schools in Kent and Medway. The programme aimed to support students who entered secondary school with lower-than-expected literacy levels. Students were identified based on reading ages at least one year below the expected level (as determined by the schools' routine assessments) and at least one indicator of disadvantage, such as eligibility for FSM, being in local authority care, or residing in areas of high deprivation or low participation in higher education. Although schools selected participants, the question of accurate targeting will be explored in a later section.

The intervention consisted of an intensive 10–12-week reading support programme, in which student ambassadors listened to students read aloud. To maintain motivation and engagement, students were encouraged to choose their own books with guidance from a school librarian. Throughout the sessions, ambassadors provided support with pronunciation, helped students decode unfamiliar words, encouraged progress, and facilitated discussions about the text to enhance comprehension and critical engagement. This approach was designed to support fluency, understanding, and overall reading confidence.

Initially, the programme was structured for small-group delivery. However, following consultation with outreach practitioners and school librarians, who drew on their extensive experience with literacy interventions, this was revised to a one-to-one format. Their insights highlighted key concerns: students might feel anxious reading aloud in front of peers, potentially undermining confidence, and differing reading preferences could make it challenging to select texts that engaged all students equally. Additionally, one-to-one support allowed for more personalised guidance and made it easier to track individual progress. This adaptation illustrates the value of phronetic knowledge in refining intervention design, ensuring that practitioner insights directly inform programme delivery.

The structure of the intervention varied across schools. One school ran two cohorts of 15 students on a 12-week programme, with each student receiving two 30-minute sessions per week.

The other two schools implemented a 10–12-week format, with 10–14 students each receiving one 30-minute session per week. These variations in delivery provide a useful basis for evaluating different implementation models and their relative effectiveness, which will be discussed further in the evaluation section.

## Objectives

The objectives of the programme were twofold: the primary objective was to support students in increasing their literacy scores and overall reading age; the secondary objective was to increase students' confidence in reading and improve attitudes towards reading.

## Evaluation methodology

A mixed method approach was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot programme. Melby-Lervag and Lervag (2014) note that given confounding variables, randomised control trials (RCT) would be the only way to ascertain whether the changes were due to literacy interventions. However, given the small size of the cohort it would not have been possible to conduct an RCT. It was hoped that adopting a quasi-experimental design alongside qualitative methods would provide a fuller picture of the impact of the literacy intervention, by contextualising findings within the broader education ecosystem. The following methods were employed:

- reading tests for intervention group and matched comparator
- attitudinal surveys
- attendance records
- ambassador journals

These will be discussed in turn in the following sections. The quantitative methods, such as standardised testing, would track statistical progress, whereas the qualitative research would provide insight into individuals, changes in confidence or perception, and the specific school context which cannot be captured by quantitative data (Thiele *et al*., 2018: 30).

## New Group Reading Test (NGRT)

The researchers opted for a test as an objective quantitative method to assess the impact of the reading intervention on literacy and comprehension. There are differing opinions on the use of researcher-developed vs standardised assessment for testing purposes. Researcher-developed tests are more likely to result in favourable results for intervention outcomes (Petscher *et al*., 2019; Cheung and Slavin, 2016; Kim, Petscher and Foorman, 2019. Petscher *et al*. (2019) suggest that this may be due to the alignment of intervention assessments with the intervention itself. They suggest that a solution for the incorporation of standardised testing would be the use of an adaptive item selection with greater sensitivity.

The New Group Reading Test (NGRT) was selected as a standardised, validated measure of reading attainment, enabling comparison against national norms, and is widely used in schools across the Southeast (Fernandes and Gallacher, 2021). Moreover, the NGRT assesses students across a range of literacy measures, including reading and comprehension. The adaptive nature of the test means that it offers more challenging questions to higher-ability students, whilst maintaining the test accessibility to those with lower literacy skills.

Students were assessed at both the beginning and end of the programme. According to GL Assessment[i], the test 'reliably measures reading skills against the national average' and provides insights into both sentence completion and comprehension abilities (GL Assessment, no date).

The NGRT is designed to establish a clear reading baseline and track progress using multiple indicators. These include the student's reading age on the day of testing, as well as an upper and lower confidence range for reading age. Additionally, the test provides a Standard Age Score (SAS), which is derived from the student's raw score and 'adjusted for age and placed on a scale that makes a comparison with a nationally representative sample of pupils across the UK' (GL Assessment, no date).

Crucially, when the test is repeated, it allows for an evaluation of whether the progress made aligns with, exceeds, or falls below the national average for expected reading development. This

enables a more robust assessment of the programme's impact, distinguishing improvements attributable to the intervention from those expected through regular school-based learning activities (Petscher *et al*., 2019).

## Attitudinal surveys

Attitudinal surveys were developed to obtain insight into how students felt about reading, their confidence in their abilities and how often they engaged in reading outside of school. The importance of reading for pleasure and its impact on reading levels has been well documented (Cremin, 2012; Brunello, Weber and Weiss, 2017; Clark *et al*., 2024). Surveys were completed before and after the programme to ascertain whether there were any shifts in students' perceptions about reading. Attitudinal surveys were selected to capture changes in participants' perceptions over time (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The surveys used were drawn from the student questionnaire in Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (IEA, 2021). PIRLS' internationally recognised standards allow exploration of not only reading comprehension but also students' attitudes, habits and home literacy environments, providing a richer understanding of the factors influencing reading development. By incorporating PIRLS-style questions into pre- and post-intervention evaluations, the researchers aimed to track changes in motivation, confidence and reading behaviours, offering evidence of impact beyond academic scores.

Where possible, it was requested that the full year group undertake the attitudinal surveys to be able to make a comparison between the participating cohort and the remainder of the year group.

## Matched-comparator group

Given the inability to run an RCT in this context, a matched-comparator group was established in one school to evaluate intervention effects (TASO). Campbell and Stanley (2015) explicitly argue for the use of comparator groups in quasi-experimental research designs. They emphasise that including a comparator group is essential for determining causal effects because it allows researchers to account for confounding

variables. The school provided a list of students who had literacy age below what would be expected at the start of year 7. Within the dataset, the school also provided sex, home postcode, free school meal status and reading age. Students were matched using sex, FSM status and Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)[ii] quintile (+/-1). These inferences most closely align with the programme objectives and widening participation targeting criteria. From the matched students, the researchers randomly assigned students to group A (treatment) or group B (comparator).

As requested by the school, the comparator group received the intervention later in the academic year in order to ensure that students who were recognised as needing the intervention were not excluded from participating. The comparator group undertook the NGRT at three different intervals: at the start of the first cohort, at the end of the first cohort (before starting their intervention) and upon completing the intervention.

## Attendance registers

There is ample research that suggests a link between attendance and academic achievement (Hancock *et al*., 2013; Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler, 2014; Gottfried, 2014; Komakech, 2015; London, Sanchez and Castrechini, 2016; Griffiths, Franklin and Heyne, 2022; Klein and Sosu, 2024). Klein and Sosu (2024) discuss the application of Faucet Theory to school attendance, which describes how students enhance their learning through regular exposure to learning, which stops if the exposure is 'turned off'. This theory could also be applied to attainment raising interventions within widening participation. Therefore, attendance registers were collected to ascertain whether there was any correlation between progress and attendance on the programme.

## Ambassador journals

To keep track of student progress – for example, what page number they had read to each week – ambassadors completed regular journals for each student. These journals ended up providing rich qualitative insights into their fluency, speed, ability to conquer difficult words and their engagement. Reflective

journalling is recognised in educational research for its ability to document nuanced behavioural changes that standardised tests may miss (Moon, 2006). Hubbs and Brand (2005) similarly argue that journalling enables practitioners to notice and record micro-level changes in confidence, engagement, and skills over time. From an evaluation perspective, a study by Laferriere and Bertram (2024) identified that reflective questions allowed for evidence to be captured that would not have emerged from using a purely quantitative approach.

A central concern of journalling is subjectivity and bias. Journals capture personal reflections, which may not accurately represent actual learning outcomes. Learners may consciously or subconsciously present themselves in a favourable light, leading to social desirability bias (Hubbs and Brand, 2005). Moreover, the reliability and consistency of data is often weak, since students (and student ambassadors) vary in their ability to express themselves in writing, and the depth of reflection can differ significantly across participants (Moon, 2006). This may be exacerbated with ambassador journals, where ambassadors are being paid to deliver an intervention and may want to portray themselves and the activity in a positive light.

Another key issue is the validity of reflective writing as a measure of learning. While journals capture learners' sense of progress, they do not necessarily demonstrate knowledge acquisition or skill development in the same way as standardised tests or performance assessments (Mann, Gordon and MacLeod, 2009).

However, journals were considered a valuable tool when triangulated with other qualitative and quantitative findings.

It should be noted that as these notes were not originally included in the approved ethics submission, they were not included in the final analysis of the programme. However, the ambassador notes have provided qualitative details which support the successes of the programme. Therefore, this is something that will be included in future evaluation designs.

## Incorporating phronetic knowledge within evaluation methodologies

When implementing evaluation strategies for attainment raising interventions, such as the reading support programme, resource and infrastructure limitations often present substantial barriers to assessing impact. These challenges may include staffing constraints, time restrictions, access to technology, limited school resources, student availability, school capacity and timely access to data. For instance, the already demanding nature of school schedules can limit the time available for intervention delivery and data collection, potentially compromising the depth and reliability of evaluation efforts.

Phronesis, a phrase coined by Aristotle, can broadly be defined as 'practical wisdom'. It refers to knowledge that is action-orientated and context-specific (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012: 2). Incorporating phronetic knowledge into widening participation research could harness the expertise of practitioners to build a more relevant and adaptable evidence base. This could reduce operational challenges in implementing and evaluating attainment raising interventions as outlined previously.

By emphasising the role of practitioners as essential knowledge agents, phronetic approaches encourage a broader, more inclusive view of evidence that complements scientific designs with the nuanced insights of practical experience (Crockford, 2020). In doing so, it would provide unique contributions to the 'what works' policy directives from the Office for Students (OfS) (Crockford, 2020).

While Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)[iii] guidance advocates for generating evidence that demonstrates a 'causal impact on outcomes for students' (TASO, no date), achieving this level of rigour often requires significantly more resources than initially anticipated. Therefore, it is essential to account for resource and infrastructure considerations at the evaluation design stage to ensure feasibility and sustainability.

A phronetic approach – one that values practitioner-based, context-sensitive knowledge – can be particularly useful in addressing these challenges. By incorporating the experiential insights of those directly involved in intervention delivery,

evaluations can be adapted to better fit the realities of school environments. Therefore, feedback was gathered from practitioners, student ambassadors and teachers at the school on the evaluation methods and their implementation.

## Evaluation: Perceived impact and implementation challenges

Feedback from key stakeholders, including teachers, student ambassadors and outreach practitioners, suggests anecdotal improvements in students' reading ability and confidence. This aligns with research highlighting the role of one-to-one literacy support in improving both attainment and self-efficacy (Quigley and Coleman, 2019). Ambassador journals provided qualitative evidence of progress in reading flow, pace and self-assurance. Such observational tools are recognised in educational research for their ability to capture micro-level behavioural changes that standardised tests may miss (Moon, 2006; Hubbs and Brand, 2005).

However, it is also important to acknowledge the potential limitations of journals, including observer bias, selective recall and the influence of the recorder's own expectations (Alaszewski, 2006). In this evaluation, the absence of specific training for ambassadors in reflective practice may have shaped what was recorded and how. Nonetheless, the richness of these qualitative insights – particularly in capturing changes in confidence, engagement and rapport, – illustrates the value of integrating journalling more systematically in future evaluation designs, alongside quantitative measures.

Furthermore, teachers and librarians have reported increased engagement with reading throughout the school day. Outreach practitioners also noted that students valued the opportunity for one-to-one engagement with ambassadors, which appeared to contribute to increased reading confidence.

One member of staff illustrated this impact:

> From what I have observed, and from anecdotal feedback from the ambassadors, the students (in general) were not very enthusiastic about the thought of reading to an ambassador, but that quickly changed. Students appear noticeably more confident and comfortable with the ambassadors. Rapport is building well, and ambassadors

> have been encouraged to get to know the students as well as they can, which I think is having a great impact. There were a number of comments in the first week from students about how they were 'rubbish' at reading, so I definitely think confidence is a big factor. Additionally, it does not sound like the students read very much at home. I feel that it has been positive when we look up new words or phrases together with the students to show that we, as adults, don't necessarily know all the answers either, and we can learn together. - outreach practitioner

These qualitative insights represent context-specific evidence that enhances understanding of programme impact (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012; Brown, 2013). However, statistical analysis did not yield consistently positive results. While approximately 34% of students increased their reading age by one year or more, the average reading age across the cohort remained largely unchanged. Challenges operationalising the evaluation, described in full later in this paper resulted in invalid or non-existent test results for a number of students. This meant that the sample size was not sufficient for any conclusions to be drawn from this approach. Based on teacher and practitioner feedback, it is believed that this outcome reflects operational challenges in implementing the evaluation rather than an accurate representation of the programme's impact. The remainder of this paper will examine these challenges in detail and outline recommendations for addressing them in future iterations of the programme.

## Implementation of testing

The NGRTs are undertaken online, and it became apparent throughout the programme that not all schools offer student access to IT (such as computers/laptops/tablets. This can take a significant amount of time in physically setting students up with the test. For example, one school could not offer IT access for the students and so staff used university tablets for set up – this required multiple Wi-Fi access codes being set up for each student.

In all schools, students are asked to follow a link to the testing platform, which has proven difficult and time-consuming, as the link is printed on a slip of paper (which also contains their access code to begin the test) rather than an accessible link.

## Student perception of testing

In many cases, the tests were also perceived poorly by students. Feedback from staff and ambassadors indicates that students were easily distracted or disrupted by their peers, were put off by the idea of a test, shared answers with peers or skipped through the test quickly without fully engaging with the questions. Concerns about how testing can result in decreased motivation, disengagement and test fatigue are widely documented in critiques of standardised testing (Brookhart and Durkin, 2003; Koretz, 2017). Therefore, this raises questions about the validity of the test results and whether they reflect the students' true abilities. To ensure accuracy and validity of results, these tests must be undertaken under exam conditions.

## Challenges completing attitudinal surveys

It was the original intention to complete attitudinal surveys about reading with the whole year group in each pilot school. This would allow practitioners to gauge any attitudinal shifts in comparison with other students in their cohort. However, this proved operationally challenging to implement, both for the schools and the department.

Survey software cannot be used for students under the age of 13 (due to licensing restrictions on the collection of children's data). This meant that the planned online evaluation forms were not compatible for use with the intended target audience. The alternative, paper surveys, proved difficult to administer, time consuming to import the data and prone to clerical errors. This made operationalising surveys for the full cohort unrealistic. This led to a largely incomplete data set with little comparison possible.

## Targeting appropriate students

In some of the interventions, students who were already at the expected reading level or above were selected by the school on the basis that they met widening participation metrics. It would be expected that these students would benefit less from the intervention than those who have experienced more difficulty with reading and comprehension (who the programme was intended and designed for). Therefore, it would also be expected that the

increase in reading scores would not be as significant for this group of students, given that they were already performing as expected for their age. The inclusion of these students' scores skewed the average results of the cohort.

## Student attendance

This activity was delivered in-school, and students' participation was therefore dependant on them being in attendance on a particular day. In addition, students could opt not to attend the reading sessions (either deliberately or because they forgot). Delivery staff feedback highlighted inconsistencies in attendance. Some students opted not to attend the sessions where the testing was taking place, whilst others had inconsistent attendance throughout the programme. It should be noted that the cohort of students selected to participate in the reading intervention all met at least one widening participation indicator (area-based indicators, such as IMD and Tracking Underrepresentation by Area (TUNDRA)[iv], care experienced and/or eligible for FSM). The school reported that attendance is less consistent for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (using WP metrics as a proxy). This also aligns with research from Sosu *et al*. (2021), which, upon reviewing research between 1998 and 2019, found that students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds were associated with higher levels of absenteeism. This would support the Faucet Theory described by Klein and Sosu (2024) whereby disrupted attendance causes reduced improvements in learning, which may account for inconsistent improvements of reading age.

There seemed to be correlation between lower attendance at sessions and poorer test results. However, caution needs to be exercised here given the small sample size.

This has caused issues whereby some students, whom teaching staff feel would benefit from the reading support, had joined the sessions on an ad-hoc basis (not included as part of the research) in place of the student for whom it was planned. Though the joining of additional students ensures that the resource provided to the school can benefit students, it is unclear what the benefit was for those who attended on an ad-hoc basis. Equally, from an

evaluation perspective this makes evidencing the impact challenging.

## Ambassador engagement

This intervention relies heavily on ambassador engagement, particularly when the intervention was amended to provide 1:1 support. This requires student ambassadors who can commit to the intervention weekly over a sustained period and are confident and comfortable engaging with reading, and that the department can recruit enough ambassadors to provide support for a suitable number of students. This level of commitment from student ambassadors can be challenging given changing timetables and other academic commitments.

## Staffing resource

It should be acknowledged that operationalising the evaluation of this intervention is time-consuming. It involves a considerable amount of staff time, ambassador time and ultimately both student and teacher time. Consideration for how this can be streamlined is important. In addition to the time requirements, it was felt that the testing could be perceived as a barrier to engaging with the programme. The focus of generating an evidence base should not come at the expense of effective implementation of interventions.

## Overcoming operational challenges

Whilst the previously outlined challenges are specific to the implementation of the reading support programme, they can be categorised into three broader themes which have application to evaluating attainment raising interventions more generally. Namely:

- resource and infrastructure limitations
- stakeholder engagement
- data reliability.

By reflecting on these three challenges, insight can be provided into how to overcome them through reflective practice and implementation of planning and preparation procedures.

## Resource and infrastructure limitations

Following a phronetic approach, we have incorporated feedback from outreach practitioners and teachers involved in the reading support programme. One example was their feedback regarding testing. They provided crucial insights into the practical difficulties of additional testing. Their feedback highlighted that conducting a separate baseline assessment placed unnecessary strain on school resources and risked disengaging students early in the programme.

In response, future iterations of the programme will align NGRTs with schools' existing assessment schedules (which themselves use NGRT), using data already collected at the start of the academic year. This adjustment, informed by practitioner expertise, reduces the administrative burden on schools, students and practitioners while avoiding duplication. Furthermore, removing the requirement for an additional baseline test eliminates a potential barrier to engagement, allowing students to experience a more interactive and engaging first session.

By embedding phronetic knowledge into the evaluation process, this approach not only enhances the feasibility of data collection but also ensures that evaluation methods are contextually relevant, practitioner-informed and more likely to yield meaningful insights.

## Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement presents another significant challenge in the evaluation of attainment-raising interventions. Securing 'buy-in' from teachers, parents and students is essential, as their active participation is necessary for gathering reliable data. However, not all stakeholders may immediately recognise the benefits of additional assessment, which can hinder participation and ultimately impact the quality of evaluation outcomes.

Teachers, for instance, may be tasked with data collection but often lack the time required for consistent and thorough reporting. If data is incomplete or inconsistently recorded, any feedback shared with schools risks being of limited use, reducing the potential for meaningful programme refinement. Similarly, student engagement plays a critical role in the success of any

evaluation process. However, traditional methods, such as surveys and questionnaires, may not effectively capture authentic student responses, particularly if students perceive these tasks as tedious or disconnected from their immediate learning goals.

A phronetic approach, which prioritises practitioner insights and context-specific adaptation, suggests that evaluation methods should align more closely with the experiences and motivations of students. Based on practitioner reflections from the reading support programme, future iterations will replace standardised surveys with a more interactive discussion format. Instead of completing a written questionnaire, students will engage in a structured conversation with their student ambassador about their attitudes towards reading. While the questions will remain aligned with standardised survey metrics, this approach fosters rapport-building between students and ambassadors, potentially yielding richer and more candid responses.

Similarly, insights from ambassadors and teachers provided context-specific value that standard tests or rigid evaluation frameworks would have missed. Ambassadors were able to observe improvements in students' confidence, reading fluency and engagement, which are elements that traditional assessments failed to capture. For example, ambassadors noted changes in reading flow, speed and willingness to engage with texts, while teachers and librarians reported an increase in library visits among participating students and a shift in the overall perception of reading within the school context. These qualitative indicators suggest a broader cultural impact of the intervention that quantitative measures alone would not reveal.

Additionally, we are exploring more creative evaluation tools, such as a ‘reading journey map’, where students visually track their progress and reflect on their own improvement. This method may not only enhance engagement but also foster a sense of ownership over the process, thereby increasing students’ willingness to participate in evaluation activities. By integrating practitioner-informed adaptations such as these, evaluation strategies can be made more effective, ensuring that the data collected is both meaningful and practically useful for future intervention planning.

## Data reliability

Ensuring data reliability is essential for generating accurate insights and drawing valid conclusions from an intervention. As evidenced in the earlier discussion, challenges to data reliability are often directly related to resource and infrastructure limitations and stakeholder engagement. This can lead to inconsistencies in data collection, human error and unintended biases.

Infrastructure limitations, such as lack of access to technology, may lead practitioners to rely on paper-based assessments which increase the likelihood of data loss and human error. This is a more prevalent consideration for interventions that target younger students, as there are a lack of data tools that are licensed for this age group. It may also make it difficult to track when these assessments are completed.

Stakeholder engagement is another critical factor affecting data reliability. For example, if students do not actively participate in assessments, the data collected may not reflect the intervention's impact. Students who are disengaged or unmotivated might rush through assessments or fail to show up consistently, leading to missing or skewed data that does not capture their true progress, as has been evidenced earlier in regard to the literacy assessments implemented for the reading support programme.

## Enhancing the evidence base with phronetic knowledge

The evaluation of the reading programme discussed earlier, evolved and was shaped by the practitioners' experiences of delivering the programme, thereby highlighting the value of phronetic knowledge.

For example, within the reading support programme, practitioner experience enabled evaluators to critically reflect on how evaluation methods were facilitated in practice and what additional considerations were needed when trying to operationalise them. This led to adaptations in evaluation methods which improved engagement and data quality in future iterations of the programme. For example, the decision to conduct NGRTs on a one-to-one basis, as opposed to groups,

emerged from practitioner feedback. As practitioners felt doing so would reduce anxiety over testing and remove distractions.

Similarly, insights from ambassadors and teachers provided context-specific value that standard tests or rigid evaluation frameworks would have missed. For example, ambassadors were able to reference changes in confidence levels and speed and flow of reading, which the assessments were not able to capture. Feedback from schools enabled practitioners to find out that there had been an increase in visits to the library from students participating in the programme and changes to the perception of reading within the school context.

Finally, phronesis encourages continuous reflection and adaptive practice. It also encourages practitioners and evaluators to consider the ethical dimensions of their work. Embedding phronetic knowledge within evaluation ensures that insights from those delivering interventions shape their assessment and future development. Crucially, it reframes reflective practice as a form of evaluation rather than an informal add-on, strengthening the evidence base for what truly works in widening participation.

## Conclusion

This study of the University of Kent's literacy intervention reveals critical insights into the challenges of evaluating attainment raising programmes within widening participation contexts. The research illuminates the complex interplay between intervention design, implementation, and assessment, demonstrating that effective educational support extends beyond traditional measurement approaches.

The findings underscore three fundamental challenges in implementing such interventions: resource and infrastructure limitations, stakeholder engagement complexities, and data reliability concerns. These challenges are not merely methodological obstacles but represent substantive barriers to understanding intervention effectiveness.

Critically, the study advocates for a phronetic approach to intervention evaluation, one that values practitioner-based, context-sensitive knowledge. By integrating experiential insights from those directly involved in programme delivery, researchers can develop more nuanced and adaptive evaluation strategies

that better reflect the intricate realities of educational environments.

The research contributes to the broader discourse on widening participation by highlighting the importance of flexible, context-aware methodologies. It suggests that rigid, standardised evaluation frameworks may inadvertently obscure meaningful programme impacts, particularly in interventions targeting disadvantaged student populations.

Future research should continue to explore innovative evaluation methods that balance rigorous assessment with contextual sensitivity. By embracing adaptive, practitioner-informed approaches, educational interventions can become more responsive, effective and transformative in addressing systemic educational inequalities.

[i] GL Assessment is a company that provides assessment tools to schools across the UK and Ireland. For more information visit: https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/

[ii] IMD is the government's official measure used to classify areas of relative deprivation. IMD combines data from a range of categories including income, employment, education, skills and training, health and disability, crime, barriers to housing and services and living environment. In widening participation, it is used as a measure to identify students who potentially may experience socio-economic disadvantage. For more information visit: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-indices-of-deprivation

[iii] TASO is an independent charity which supports higher educator practitioners to build evidence on what works in widening participation and reducing gaps to equality of opportunity for disadvantaged students. They provide toolkits, evaluation guidance and evidence libraries to help higher education institutions implement evidence-based widening participation and student success initiatives. For more information visit: https://taso.org.uk/

[iv] TUNDRA is an area-based measure that uses postcode profiling as a means of tracking state-funded mainstream school pupils in England to calculate young participation in higher education. TUNDRA classifies local areas across England into five equal groups, known as quintiles. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation. For more information visit: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/

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