



Queen's University
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The Use of Randomised Controlled Trials in Educational Research

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Keynote Address
Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society
Annual Conference, 24-26 April 2009, Enniskillen

Imagine the scene ...

... a GP and a school teacher living in 1959 jump in a time machine and travel forward 50 years to 2009 ...

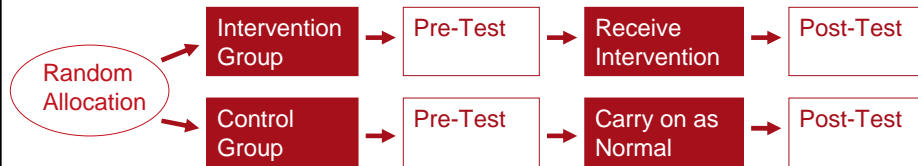
(Thanks to Bob Slavin for this scenario!)



Outline

1. What randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in education look like
2. How the education research community have responded to RCTs, and why
3. Towards a new way of working: example of the evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children
4. Issues and challenges in the use of RCTs in education

1. RCTs in education: the basic design



1. RCTs in education: some local examples

- Evaluation of 'Lifestart' Parenting Programme (all-Ireland)
- Evaluation of the 'Time to Read' Pupil Mentoring Programme (NI)
- Evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children (all-Ireland)
- Evaluation of the 'Eager and Able to Learn' Programme (NI)
- Evaluation of 'Sesame Tree' TV Series and Outreach Pack (NI)
- Evaluation of 'Doodle Den' (Tallaght, Dublin)
- Evaluation of 'Mate-Tricks' (Tallaght, Dublin)

For more details see: www.qub.ac.uk/cee

2. RCTs and the education research community: setting the context

- Education as an applied, professionally-based, inter-disciplinary subject
- Typical route into academia via professional practice
- Lack of research capacity (as noted through successive RAEs) but getting better
- Strong professional ethos as teachers/educators; emphasis on autonomy and individual practice

2. RCTs and the education research community: the response

- Strong resistance to RCTs.
- Dominant discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) characterised by the construction of two binary opposite subject positions:

Critical Research	'What Works' Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• For practitioners• Encourages professional autonomy• Small-scale, qualitative, action research• Emancipatory• Democratic• Theoretically-informed• Encourages reflective practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Against practitioners• Undermines professional autonomy• Large-scale, quantitative• Oppressive• Dictatorial• Descriptive and theoretically naïve• Stifles reflective practice

3. Towards a new way of working: a case study of the Media Initiative for Children©

Short media messages ...



... supported by curricular resources for preschools

early years
the organisation for young children



peace initiatives institute

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3. The development of the Media Initiative for Children

- Facilitated by the Peace Initiatives Institute (Pii)
- Involving a wide range of stakeholders working in partnership
- Programme development and delivery led by Early Years – The Organisation for Young Children
- Evidence-informed
- Grass-roots approach to identifying aims and objectives and, crucially, the key outcomes

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3. Media Initiative for Children: Efficacy Test

- Small, pilot quasi-experimental study in 2004 involving 10 preschool settings and 193 3-4 year old children
 1. To increase children's ability to recognise instances of exclusion
 2. To increase children's ability to recognise how being excluded makes someone feel
 3. To increase children's willingness to be inclusive of others in general as well as those different to themselves
- Results from efficacy test used to inform further focus group discussions with educators to refine the programme

3. Media Initiative for Children: Full Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial

- Further refinement of the programme 2005-2006
- Establishment of full cluster randomised controlled trial involving 80 preschool settings (60 in Northern Ireland and 20 in the Republic of Ireland) and approximately 1,600 children aged 3-4 years
 - Further development of outcomes for children
 - Inclusion of outcomes for parents and early childhood educators
 - Results from the trial due to be published in the Autumn 2009

4. Issues and challenges in the use of RCTs in education

- Need to model out new ways of working
- Importance of working in partnership with policy-makers, educators, parents and local communities
- Need to think very carefully about outcomes
 - Specificity matching
 - Near- and far-generalisation
- Importance of theory, efficacy tests and taking your time
- Issues in statistical analysis
 - Analysing cluster randomised trials
 - Bayesian approaches and significance testing