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# **Evaluation of Making it REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy)**

## **Evaluation of the Local Authority Development projects and the National Rollout**

### **Executive summary**

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# Executive Summary

## Background to Making it REAL 2013-2015

- This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the first year of Making it REAL (2013-2015) which delivers an evidence-based family literacy intervention for two to five year olds. The evaluation was carried out by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Research Centre on behalf of the NCB Early Childhood Unit (ECU) and Department for Education (DfE).
- Making it REAL builds on an evidence-based programme *Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL)*<sup>1</sup> which involves practitioners in working with parents<sup>2</sup> to help them support their children's literacy development within four key strands of literacy: environmental print, books, early writing and oral language. The intervention uses the ORIM Framework, which is based on the idea that there are four main ways in which parents can help support their children's literacy development relating to: Opportunities for literacy; Recognition of children's literacy development; Interaction around literacy; and Models of literacy users<sup>3</sup>.
- Making it REAL 2013-2015 is funded under the DfE National Prospectus Grant and aims to provide a replicable scalable model of the Making it REAL approach and embed it nationally through two strands: (i) A National Rollout of one-day Making it REAL training to early years settings across England and (ii) Local Authority Development projects led by ECU. The latter involves eight local authorities delivering a prescribed programme over a two-year period. Each year practitioners receive two days of training on the Making it REAL approach and deliver the project to a number of families by providing home visits, group activities and trips.

## Evaluation aims and methodology

- The main aim of the Year One evaluation was to report on the delivery of the first year of the project and the extent to which intended outcomes have been achieved. In particular, the evaluation examines the extent to which the project is progressing towards the overall aim of delivering a model others can adopt and embedding it nationally. It examines any positive outcomes identified to date in three areas (i) children's literacy outcomes (ii) parents' skills, confidence and behaviours in supporting their children's early literacy development, and (iii) the skills, knowledge and practice of practitioners working with parents and children in early years settings.

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<sup>1</sup> The original model was developed and tested by two projects: (i) Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL) Project – for details see: Nutbrown, C., Hannon, P. and Morgan, A (2005) *Early Literacy Work with Families: research, policy and practice*. London: Sage. <http://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu/making-it-real-2009-12>. And (ii) NCB Making it REAL Lottery project (2009-2012). For details see: <http://www.ncb.org.uk/ecu/making-it-real-2009-12>

<sup>2</sup> For brevity the term 'parent' is used here to signify both parents and carers and both mothers and fathers, though as mentioned in effect these were mainly mothers.

<sup>3</sup> Further details on the ORIM Framework <http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/docs/THE%20ORIM%20framework%20POSTER%20FINAL.pdf>

- The evaluation of the National Rollout of the one-day Making it REAL training involved self-completion census surveys of all practitioners who attended the training at three time points (before, after, and six months later)<sup>4</sup>.
- The evaluation of the Local Authority Development projects<sup>5</sup> was designed to be more detailed. In addition to the three-wave practitioner survey described above, the evaluation involved: pre-project and post-project observational measure forms completed by practitioners for each child/parent; a parent postal self-completion survey; and qualitative research in four case study local authorities and eight case study settings. This comprised interviews and discussion groups with the local authority leads, setting managers, practitioners, and parents.<sup>6</sup>

## Key findings

### *Delivery*

- **The National Rollout and Local Authority Development projects were broadly successful in meeting overall targets set for levels of training and delivery work with families.** Between April 2013 and March 2014, the National Rollout delivered 72 local training courses (meeting the target of 70) and four large regional training events to a total of 1,526 practitioners. The Local Authority Development projects successfully engaged 497 families in the full Making it REAL project. The 64 settings involved ran a total of 187 literacy group activities (average of 2.9 per setting versus a target of 3) and delivered a total of 921 home visits with families (average of 1.85 per family versus a target of 2).

### *Outcomes for children*

- **The project is perceived to have contributed strongly to positive outcomes for children across all four areas of literacy** (environmental print, books, early writing and oral language) in particular via the Local Authority Development projects. There is also indicative evidence of perceived impact on children and parents as a result of practitioners attending the National Rollout of one-day training and subsequently incorporating ideas into their practice in some settings (based on practitioner reports).

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<sup>4</sup> Survey findings among National Rollout training attendees are based on the 1,333 practitioners who attended 66 local training events and three regional events between July 2013 and March 2014. A pilot of the evaluation survey was carried out with the participants who previously attended six local training events and one regional event between April and June 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Sometimes referred to below as the 'Development projects' for brevity.

<sup>6</sup> The surveys were intended to be broadly representative of practitioners, parents and children. Strong response rates were achieved to the post-training surveys and pre-project and post-project observations completed by practitioners. However, note that some level of survey non-response should be borne in mind in the case of the parent feedback survey (response rate of 44%) and practitioner six-month follow-up surveys (response rates for the Development project and National Rollout were 56% and 34% respectively) and it may be that responders were among the most engaged with the programme. The qualitative work provides illustrative examples of some of the ways in which the Development project have been experienced and is perceived to have impacted among a small number of case study settings and families, and are not necessarily generalisable.

- In the Local Authority Development projects there were increases between pre-project and post-project practitioner measures of the proportions of children observed to: 'know one or two rhymes' (up from 24% to 61%); share books 'most days' (up from 43% to 74%); make drawings and marks and say what they mean 'most days' (up from 38% to 69%); and identify 'more than two words, letters or logos' (up from 6% to 35%).
- Among practitioners who attended the National Rollout training and who said they had changed practice as a result of Making it REAL (this was 78% of all practitioners), just over half reported improvements in children's level of positive literacy activity across all four areas of literacy six months after attending the training.
- **There is also evidence that the intervention may have wider benefits to children's development beyond supporting early literacy, in particular in terms of early identification of children's additional needs and increased referrals of families to specialist services,** primarily as a result of increased engagement in the home setting. Seven in ten practitioners (71%) reported that Making it REAL had had at least 'some impact' on linking children and families to other services and had helped them identify additional needs in one or more of the target children (68%). Practitioners also noted that Making it REAL had had 'some' impact (37%) or 'a great' impact (18%) on the earlier identification of additional needs in siblings.

#### *Outcomes for parents*

- **The Local Authority Development projects were successful in giving most parents a greater understanding of and confidence in their role as early educators, enabling them to do more and new things to support children with early literacy, and in facilitating improved relationships with staff in settings. National Rollout training participants also reported perceived benefits for parents in some settings.**
  - The majority of parents responding to the Development Projects feedback survey indicated they now do new things at home to help their child learn (89%). In qualitative interviews parents described spending more quality time listening to and interacting with children to support their literacy and gaining genuine and newfound pleasure from doing so. Many also described doing things differently, for example, reading stories more interactively and creatively with their child, or supporting children's progression by praising them or prompting them in a neutral way, rather than correcting mistakes or giving negative feedback. The majority of parents surveyed reported they were now 'very confident' when talking about their children's development (76%); over half of parents (54%) were observed by practitioners to be asking questions and starting conversations with practitioners about their children's learning more frequently following the project.

- Three in ten of the practitioners who attended the National Rollout of one-day training, and who had changed practice as a result of following the training, reported that parents were now attending more activities and events at the setting six months after the training (this was 21% of all training attendees responding to the follow-up survey).
- **The Development projects were successful in engaging many fathers and male carers as well as mothers, which may be valuable in contributing to children receiving increased attention from male as well as female adult role models.** A father or male carer was present for 121 of the first home visits and 96 of the second visits; 66% of practitioners in the six-month follow-up survey reported that Making it REAL had had at least some impact on the numbers of fathers and male carers involved in children's learning.

*Outcomes for practitioners and early years practice and quality*

- **Measures of practitioners' knowledge and confidence in working with parents to support children's literacy improved in a number of key areas in the Local Authority Development projects, and to a smaller degree among National Rollout participants. Many practitioners also described numerous ways in which they had changed their practice, not only with target families, but by embedding these changes in the wider setting.**
  - In the Local Authority Development projects, between the pre and post-training surveys, there were increases in the proportion of practitioners saying they had 'a great deal or a fair amount' of (i) knowledge in supporting children with early literacy (up from 64% to 88%), and (ii) confidence in engaging parents to help them support their children's development (up from 62% to 93%). Slight increases were also seen for each of these measures among practitioners who attended the National Rollout one-day training (six percentage points in each case).
  - The proportion of Local Authority Development projects' settings who said that supporting children's early literacy featured in their setting 'a great deal' increased between the pre-training and six-month follow-up survey (from 40% to 67%). A similar, but smaller, increase was reported by National Rollout attendees (up from 49% to 62%).
  - Individual Local Authority Development projects' practitioners described how Making it REAL had augmented their practice in various ways, and that this had been embedded in the wider work of the setting. This included: incorporating ideas of environmental print, embedding mark making activities throughout the setting, not just in drawing/painting areas; greater engagement with parents and home visiting and more value placed on these; creating more opportunities to promote and include literacy; and following children's lead more and adjusting to how they preferred to learn.

- Among the 78% of National Rollout training participants who said they had made changes in their practice as a result of the training, over half (56%) said ORIM and REAL activities were now used in curriculum planning.
- **Some practitioners had started to find that Making it REAL was proving useful in supporting their settings' quality ratings.** Among the Development projects' practitioners who reported using a quality framework in their setting, almost eight in ten (22 of the 28) perceived that Making it REAL had contributed to rating improvements. Among national training participants who had changed their practice following training, a quarter stated that they used REAL and ORIM activities in the Ofsted Self Evaluation process (26%).

*Design features and delivery considerations identified as important in the success of Making it REAL*

- Engaging children effectively:
  - **The content of home visits was key to children's engagement in Making it REAL.** Strong engagement in learning arose from excitement, enjoyment and a sense of feeling special that was generated among children by the focused attention they received from their early years practitioners visiting them at home, and from having a box or bag of activities they could regard as their own.
- Achieving sustainable change in parents' skills, confidence and involvement in learning activities with their children:
  - **Home visits were likewise seen as invaluable** in providing opportunities to build stronger relationships with parents in a relaxed way and build parents' confidence in talking with practitioners and getting involved in literacy activities with their children.
  - **The low cost and accessible nature of the literacy activities** promoted among parents was regarded as important to parents' ability to continue supporting their children after direct participation in Making it REAL ended, and an important comparator to some other family literacy interventions.
- Enabling practitioners to take forward changes in their practice:
  - Making it REAL's distinctiveness in providing **concrete methods** to help establish more trusting relationships with parents along with a **clear framework** (the ORIM Framework) which enabled them to provide suitable ideas for parents was regarded as key to success. Practitioners found ideas and guidance on involving children in environmental print and mark making particularly useful in extending their existing practice in early literacy.
  - The **quality and design of training was rated highly by participants.** The training was delivered by experienced ECU associate trainers, and incorporated practical sessions, as well as

theory based learning opportunities. These enabled practitioners to benefit from peer support and ideas. *All* practitioners who attended the Development project training said it met its aims and 63% reported that they felt *very* confident about putting the training into practice. Ratings were only slightly lower among practitioners who attended the National Rollout training (98% said it had met its aims, 65% rated it as 'excellent' and 51% said they felt *very* confident to put it into practice).

- **Discussions with case study local authorities, practitioners and parents about their experiences of Making it REAL highlighted a number of key issues important to consider for the successful delivery of Making it REAL in practice. These may be useful to bear in mind in Year Two of Making it REAL and for future delivery in general.** Considerations related to budgeting and resourcing, as well as some challenges in supporting two-year-olds, parents who are more reluctant to engage in services, and parents with English as an Additional Language. Key points are discussed in Section 5 of the main report.

*Outcomes in terms of embedding Making it REAL for the longer term*

- As above, many settings had made changes to some elements of setting-wide practices meaning that **Making it REAL is already resulting in the successful embedding of many REAL 'principles' at some level.** However, it was **too early for most settings to judge whether they would continue with the more resource intensive elements of Making it REAL** after funding ended (e.g. home visits).
- **Two out of the four case study local authorities had also chosen to build Making it REAL into local authority level planning.** In the other two areas, it was not clear whether Making it REAL could be prioritised and sustained through local authority funding in the context of severe budgetary constraints facing local government.

## Conclusions

**Making it REAL was successfully delivered in Year One and has already achieved positive outcomes in terms of starting to embed Making it REAL in many participating early years settings and achieving positive outcomes for children and families.**

*Local Authority Development projects*

The vast majority of the individual practitioners and parents participating in Making it REAL in the Development project settings reported positive experiences and outcomes. Promisingly, **positive outcomes were reported for two-year-olds as well as three and four-year-olds.**

In this context, the **practitioner training and delivery models adopted in the Development project strand are proven to be effective models** and a solid basis on which to build further in Year Two.

There are minor aspects identified in the study where **small scale refinements to approaches might help optimise effectiveness further.** This includes supporting practitioners to be more confident when first conducting home visits, and further advice including sharing the most effective practice in supporting parents who are more reluctant to engage with services, and parents with English as an Additional Language. Some practitioners requested additional guidance on tailoring for two-year-olds which has already been planned for in the second year of Making it REAL: ECU developed practice examples and guidance to support working specifically with two-year-olds during Year One and these have been incorporated into both the National Rollout and the Local Authority Development projects' training.

Whilst the primary outcomes for children relate to literacy, it is also promising that, via the closer relationships facilitated between practitioners and families, **there are strong indications that the intervention delivers wider benefits in terms of early identification of need, and onward referral to additional support.** It may be helpful to evidence the prevalence of such outcomes further in the Year Two evaluation (for example, by measuring actual prevalence in the post-project practitioner observation forms for each participating child).

It is promising that key principles of Making it REAL are starting to be embedded in the wider practice of settings, based on training two practitioners per setting over two days. **The next step in Year Two will be to explore the contribution made by rolling out training to up to two additional staff, its sufficiency to facilitate fuller embedding of the approach and its sustainability in these settings over the longer term.**

It will also be **critical to explore the extent to which settings are able to secure local funding to continue Making it REAL after the project ends in 2015,** particularly in terms of delivering home visits which are the most resource intensive element of the approach. Year Two of the evaluation will include questions about future intentions of settings in terms of local sustainability, to explore experiences of the relative costs and benefits to their settings and the children and families they support.

#### *National Rollout of one-day Making it REAL training*

The Year One evaluation findings provide clear evidence that **the National Rollout of one-day REAL training model, whilst being relatively light touch and with no specific project design input from ECU, has been proven to make some difference in practitioners' practice in settings.** The majority of attendees have been provided with the motivation and know-how needed to make at least some changes to their practice. For example, 78% of practitioners who attended the training said they changed an element of practice, while a third (33%) indicated that there had been an increase in the number of literacy workshops and events since attending the training.

The reporting of **perceived improvements in children's outcomes among a significant proportion of the practitioners who made changes to their settings' practice following the one-day National Rollout training, is**

**also promising.** However this does not necessarily provide conclusive proof that the one-day REAL training did result in improved literacy for children, given that outcomes among individual children and parents themselves have not been assessed. As discussed above, delivery of high quality home visits were identified as a key ingredient for the success of Making it REAL in achieving change for children and parents in Local Authority Development projects' settings. In this context, it is promising that 11% of National Rollout training attendees have newly started doing home visits since the training.

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