

What Is It Like To Be a Guinea Pig? Teacher Experiences in a Randomized Controlled Trial

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The demand for more rigorous research in education has increased the number and intensity of studies conducted in schools. Yet, the voices of teachers who participate are missing from the literature. We examined the experiences of 115 teachers in an Institute of Education Sciences–funded randomized controlled trial (IES grant #R305A100583). Through interviews and surveys, teachers were asked to describe what was positive and negative about their involvement in the study over two years. These questions were intended to illuminate the reasons why teachers decide to participate in and engage with a study, why they remained in it, as well as factors that were challenging and might dissuade their engagement.

What it meant to be part of the study

Thirty Idaho schools and 115 fifth-grade teachers participated in the study during the 2011–2012 and 2012–2013 school years. Schools were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. Teachers in the control condition received the intervention in 2013–2014, a delayed treatment design.

Teachers in the study participated in data collection by:

- Administering one student assessment in the fall and three in the spring of each year
- Allowing researchers to observe their classroom four to five times
- Completing surveys monthly (treatment teachers) or annually (control teachers)
- Participating in four interviews (treatment teachers only)

The study team intentionally provided structures and incentives to create a positive experience for teachers. The program and training were aligned with their needs. We recruited all participants in person and personalized our communication throughout the study. We assigned a study liaison to each school as a point of contact. And, we provided teachers with regular updates on study events and findings. Monetary incentives included \$30 cash cards for each completed survey, \$300 annual gift cards for school supplies for administering assessments, and a \$1,000 stipend per school to coordinate study logistics.

What teachers said about participating in the study

In both the treatment and control groups, the majority of teachers were positive about their participation: 90 percent of treatment and 70 percent of control teachers said they were pleased that their school was part of the study.

Specifically, *treatment teachers enjoyed the training* and had very **positive impressions** of the intervention itself. They also appreciated the way the study had increased their **accountability** for implementing the program. *Control teachers* were **eager to participate in the training** in the

third year. A small number of participants in both groups said that they appreciated the **financial incentives**.

Teachers' primary complaint was the **assessment burden**. They were unhappy with both the amount of assessment and the timing of spring assessments. Some also found the **classroom observations** a challenge, either because the visits made them uncomfortable or because they didn't understand the purpose.

What we learned as researchers from these findings

We learned several lessons that can be applied to the design of future studies with the participants in mind:

- Spending time, money, and energy being attentive to participants' concerns benefitted the study
- Teachers' desire for the intervention and their excitement about being part of research were just as, if not more, important than monetary incentives
- The assessment burden was a challenge, but it would be hard to further minimize it

Further research would increase our knowledge about teachers' experiences in similar studies.

For the full paper: educationnorthwest.org/aera2014

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