



SAMPLE MATERIAL: Successfully Collecting Data From Comparison Groups

Purpose:

This reading offers tips for collecting high-quality data from comparison groups, an essential—and often challenging—step in conducting a rigorous, quasi-experimental evaluation. The focus is on building relationships with comparison group teachers that engender their trust and cooperation.

Source:

Excerpted from a research paper presented by Edvantia at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Evaluation Association: Cowley, K. S., Chadwick, K. L., Hughes-Webb, G. K., Jones, A. R., Voelkel, S., Samanta, D., & O'Connor, C. (2008). *The challenges of implementing experimental and quasi-experimental designs in Teaching American History (TAH) grant evaluations* (pp. 8-10). Charleston, WV: Edvantia.

Note: Although this reading is based on a Teaching American History grant evaluation, the information is useful for any rigorous evaluation.



The Challenges of Implementing Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs in Teaching American History (TAH) Grant Evaluations

Collecting Data from Comparison Groups

Collecting high-quality data from treatment and comparison groups is crucial for experimental and quasi-experimental TAH evaluations. It is often relatively easy to collect data from treatment teachers who have agreed to participate in all aspects of the TAH project, including the evaluation. However, collecting data from comparison groups has required evaluator flexibility and extensive use of persuasion skills, thus highlighting both the technical and people skills that evaluators must have to be effective.

Educating project staff about the importance of good data collection. Some of the same challenges that relate to teacher recruitment for evaluation activities overlap with the challenges evaluators face with collecting data from comparison group participants. One main issue with comparisons is that they may consent to be in the comparison group, yet not comply with data collection procedures.

- *Example:* Successful data collection relies heavily on the project directors and/or key staff, who can request, nudge, or even more forcefully ask that comparison teachers comply with data collection activities. This often requires patience on behalf of evaluators as they help project staff understand evaluation in general, so that project staff can communicate the importance of data collection to both comparison and treatment groups. For all projects, evaluators have strived to translate our language and standards into a format that our clients and other stakeholders (including comparison teachers) will understand, buy into, and actively support. Helping all stakeholders understand that accurate and complete data collection is key to ensuring study validity and to helping reveal project impact is a necessity for each and every project.

On a related note, personal contact is critical. If geographic distance and travel expenses prohibit evaluator on-site presence (as is the case with most of our TAH evaluations), then project directors and/or key staff (and even participating teachers) can provide personal contact that helps foster participation. Evaluators must be sure to provide project staff with the proper message, and then follow up with electronic communications if needed. (Note: this personal contact is critical for sustaining active participation by treatment teachers as well.)

Project director's influence. The influence or “clout” of the project director has also been critical to successful data collection. Usually, evaluators have no direct influence over the comparison teachers.

- *Example:* Some project directors have more clout than others. In one project, a director is also the social studies director of the district, has been there for a number of years, and subsequently has established good relationships with the history and social studies teachers. Therefore, she was able to use her personal relationships to persuade comparison teachers to comply with all requested activities.
- *Example:* In each project, participating teachers receive substantial benefits—free field trips, classroom materials, graduate credit, etc. Although participation in evaluation-related data collection activities cannot be mandated by evaluators, the project director has more of an opportunity to explicate/expect full compliance when teachers agree to participate as treatment or control teachers. Some projects include language in the agreements to indicate that certain activities/benefits could be withheld if participants do not comply with all data collection activities.

Trust. Evaluators must also deal with the challenge of trust—some teachers (or other stakeholders) may be distrustful of evaluation, thinking data might be used against them in some way. Again, the reputation of the project director can help ease any anxieties.

- *Example:* In several of our projects, the same staff have served as the directors for several TAH projects. As a result, teachers in the districts know and trust them, and they have seen firsthand that there has been no negative “fallout” from other teachers who participate in data collection activities. Too, for multiyear projects or districts with several projects, the projects themselves may have acquired a “good reputation,” resulting in teachers being eager to participate in the treatment or at least feeling safe enough to participate as a comparison. For those projects in which participating teachers recruit their own comparisons, trust has been much easier to establish because the teachers involved already know and work with one another.

Incentives. As noted earlier, incentives may increase the likelihood that teachers will agree to serve as comparisons. Incentives may also increase the likelihood that comparison teachers will fully complete all associated data collection activities.

- *Example:* The TAH project that seems to have been most successful with financial stipends linked the stipend vouchers to the final data collection activity. In other words, comparison teachers must have completed the final activity before they received their stipend. Another project paid part of the stipend at the beginning of the project year and the remainder at the conclusion of the project year. Still another project held the final data collection activity for comparisons at a restaurant. Not only did comparison teachers receive free refreshments; the arrangement also provided a controlled setting for the posttest administration.

Finally, one project provided controls from the first 2 years of the project with the incentive/assurance that they would become treatment teachers in the third and final year.

Comparison teachers without students or with students from different grades.

The last challenges we encountered are associated with collecting student data from comparison teachers. We have faced situations in which comparison teachers did not have classroom students and where comparison teachers do not teach the targeted grade level.

- *Example:* In some projects, several of the comparison teachers (and occasionally a participating teacher) ended up not having any students to complete the pre/post knowledge test. In most cases, these teachers held resource or special education positions, and did not have their own classrooms. Given the difficulties encountered in finding an adequate number of comparisons for several of the projects, these teachers were retained as comparisons and their own pre/post knowledge test results were used, although no student data were available for these teachers.
- *Example:* In one project in which the treatment year extends across school years, and the treatment is focused specifically on one grade level, we have encountered situations in which teachers (both treatment and comparison) were reassigned to different grade levels from one school year to the next. As a result, their students are no longer in the appropriate grade level. In these instances, we do not collect student data.