

Unlocking the potential of out-of-school-hours learning

No.18 Policy and practice briefing

Findings from the Barnardo's 'Ready to Learn' Programme

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Despite improvements in literacy, in 2013 the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NAIO) highlighted “that unacceptably large numbers of pupils are failing to achieve even minimal levels in literacy and numeracy” stating that:

“It is vital our education system does all it can to address underachievement in order to improve the life chances of our young people (NAIO, 2013)”

However schools cannot (and should not be expected to) address the complex issues leading to under-achievement alone. Research and practice (Miller, 2003) highlights the potential of the out-of-school-hours environment, showing that pupils who regularly participate in high quality learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day can show improvement in behaviour, attitude and / or achievement.

With support from The Atlantic Philanthropies and OFMDFM Barnardo's NI engaged in a rigorous service design process to develop an early intervention programme with a focus on raising achievement. As a result of the process, Barnardo's created Ready to Learn. An innovative After School programme, Ready to Learn provides children in Primary Classes 1-3 with an additional 3 hours literacy input each week of school.



The programme has been evaluated by the Institute of Child Care Research (QUB) using a cluster randomised controlled trial. From 2010 – 2013, 16 schools (from Belfast, Antrim, Larne and Ballymena) and 500 children participated in the study.

In brief, results (Macdonald et al, 2014) suggested that in comparison to control group children, children who received Ready to Learn:

- Performed better on measured reading accuracy and comprehension;
- Performed better on linguistic phonics;
- Were less likely to display problem behaviour.

‘Definitely...(I would recommend it)... especially (for) a school that would be in...similar circumstance(s) to here... high level of deprivation and need support. It’s been absolutely fantastic!’

RTL School, P3 Principal

Potential of the out-of-school hours environment

The design of Ready to Learn was inspired and informed by of out-of-school-hours research and good practice mainly from the US, but the UK also. The programme has two strands:

- A literacy rich After School programme, delivered for one hour after school, three afternoons per week (aim of 90 additional hours each school year);
- A range of activities to encourage and help parents / carers support their child's learning at home.

In a comprehensive review of the research literature Miller (2003) highlights that:

- Students who regularly participate in high quality learning opportunities beyond the traditional school day can show positive improvement in behaviour, attitude and / or academics;
- Partnering schools with community and other organisations can provide children with additional learning time and offer good value for money;
- Research into enrichment activities shows that high quality delivery can contribute to higher achievement and prepare children for further education and careers;
- More learning time, used well is highly correlated with higher achievement.

However, research from the Joseph Rowntree Trust (Wikeley et al, 2007) shows that children from lower income families or areas of high disadvantage often miss out on such high quality, well-structured programmes as they are expensive or difficult to access.

Clearly out-of-school activities are valuable in helping young people gain a variety of valuable skills and understandings. However young people from families in poverty participate in fewer organised out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers denying them of important learning experiences. Such experiences are important as they may affect their engagement in the more formal learning in school.

Essential elements of the Ready to Learn programme

- (1) Explicit outcomes and focused content;
- (2) Complementary to (but not repeating) the school day;
- (3) Practice based on an appropriate philosophy about how children learn;
- (4) Sufficient dosage and duration (greater number of hours = more improvement);
- (5) Qualified and well trained staff, clarity of roles;
- (6) High expectations of participant attendance and behaviour; and
- (7) Class sizes to enable one-to-one and group work.

These elements along with key research findings were incorporated into the final design of the Ready to Learn Programme:



- Delivered three days per week, for one hour after school;
- Aim of 30 weeks per year with 90 hours extra support;
- Led by a qualified teacher and early years professionals;
- Literacy-rich programme content based on NI Curriculum;
- Range of support and activities for parents to engage in child's education.

Findings from the Cluster Randomised Trial

The Institute of Child Care Research at Queens University Belfast carried out an independent evaluation of the Ready to Learn programme. They used a cluster randomised trial to assess the impact of the programme on children's achievement and other outcomes. Children in nine Primary Schools taking part in the Ready to Learn programme were compared with children in seven similar schools not receiving the programme.

The results of the evaluation were mixed but overall they

point to a positive impact of the Ready to Learn programme on children's reading achievement. Children in the Ready to Learn schools performed better overall than those in the control schools in the two measures that directly tested reading skills.

The findings from the independent evaluators suggest that Ready to Learn may be able to make a positive difference to children's reading (Macdonald et al, 2014). This is in contrast to other after school programmes that have been subject to similarly rigorous evaluation (Goerlich et al, 2006 and Black et al, 2009). The most important differences were in those measures that directly assessed literacy behaviour – reading accuracy, reading comprehension and decoding.

Qualitative findings

Feedback from parents

Parents appreciated and liked the Ready to Learn After School programme. Some were initially concerned that staying on in school an extra hour, three times a week might be too tiring for such young children, but these concerns quickly disappeared.

'she just loves going, she never wants to miss a session';

'I think it's a brilliant club, she's at a much higher level than any of her brothers'

By the end of year three, most parents reported a perceived increase in their children's literacy skills (in comparison to their other children at that age) and in their enjoyment of books.

'Ready to Learn got [child] to the level he is at, at the minute... his reading is fantastic and that's down to Ready to Learn.'

'I can see a difference in [child]...compared to his friends of the same age – Ready to Learn has helped with his English.'

'I've noticed my son is more interested in reading and their confidence has been built up.'

Feedback from school personnel

School staff thought that Ready to Learn:

- Contributed to the development of literacy and social skills among children:

'They're very confident. They're progressing very, very well academically. Their reading skills...they've all jumped ahead, so Ready to Learn is helping that.'

RTL School, P2, Teacher

'(Ready to Learn) has undoubtedly enhanced their literacy...skills... and they love it and enjoy it.'

RTL School, P3, Principal

- Was seen as a fun activity by the children:

'They have great fun...they do lots of singing and lots of stories with puppets...they're all having a lot of fun... they don't realise they're learning.'

RTL School, P2 Teacher

'The children love it...the activities are fun...maybe stuff that we (as teachers) don't have time to do during the day.'

RTL School, P2 Teacher

- Supported and reinforced their teaching:

'That wee cohort of children that have been involved, well it has given them good foundations, it's given them the skills necessary to be able to engage that bit more in school...hopefully we'll see the benefits long term from that.'

R2L School, P3 Principal

All those interviewed said they would recommend it to other schools:

'I would recommend the programme because it's developing literacy skills and just trying to make sure (the children are) fully equipped for the lessons.'

R2L School, P1 Teacher

Practice Recommendations

Delivery

- Although most regular after school activity is aimed at the years above Foundation Stage, with the right environment, children as young as four years can stay after school

for an extra hour, three days per week. However schools highlighted Primary 2 children as best placed to engage and benefit.

- Every minute is precious and high quality, focused delivery is important. Using experienced, qualified staff to deliver a manualised programme helped utilise time effectively, reducing planning time and maximising the proportion of staff time spent with the children.

Programme Content

- Further research is needed to replicate the programme with continued rigorous evaluation to deepen our knowledge of the programme impacts and seek to improve the outcomes.
- Given that all children in the study scored below the expected level in relation to vocabulary, this is something the programme (and schools) need to work on to strengthen this key literacy element.

Partnership

- Communication and engagement between Ready to Learn staff and school staff is essential for smooth delivery and to consolidate children's learning, and is particularly powerful when endorsed and facilitated by the Principal and other school leaders.

Working with parents

- Although RCT results from the parent component did not demonstrate an impact on the children's outcomes, data from parents and schools

highlights that the parent engagement was of value;

- Activities involving both parents and children were the best attended and received positive feedback and is something the programme can build on for future replication.

Policy Implications

Enrichment activities offered outside of school hours can contribute to higher achievement and prepare children for further education and careers.

We have many of the right ingredients in place to unlock the potential of the out-of-school hours environment:

- An extended schools programme with an explicit aim of facilitating schools as the hub of a local community;
- Commitment from Department Education to encourage and promote parental and community involvement in school development and pupil achievement;
- Policies, research and reports highlighting the importance of high expectations and building aspiration;
- A wealth of programmes and initiatives aimed at improving achievement and community well-being (in and outside of school).

However, the co-ordination and planning to maximise the benefit of the above is often missing, due to a lack of time, lack of resources or frequently a lack of ownership. Whose role is it to facilitate and co-ordinate the multi-faceted barrage of



initiatives, organisations, departments and strategies?

Conducive to Barnardo's beliefs, research (Kania & Kramer, 2011) suggests that large-scale change (such as tackling under-achievement) is best achieved through cross-sector co-ordination rather than the often fragmented interventions of individual organisations.

Partnering schools with community / voluntary organisations can provide children with additional learning time and offer good value for money. The experience of Ready to Learn shows that additional learning time, used well can contribute to improved literacy skills and could offer a valuable tool to help raise achievement.

Policy Recommendations

NI Executive should develop a collaborative, cross-departmentally funded community schools strategy to:

- build on extended and full-service school initiatives to maximise use of the school estate after school, during week-ends and holiday periods;
- enable schools to make a long-term commitment to extending the school day with high quality programmes and evidence-based practice;
- provide training and capacity building to strengthen the quality of extended school and other out-of-school-hours activities aimed at improving achievement;
- promote sustainable investment and innovative partnership working across sectors;
- emphasise not just outputs but demonstrable change in children's outcomes and return in investment when commissioning and funding services.

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