Executive Summary

An Independent Evaluation of Business in the Community’s Time to Read Pupil Mentoring Programme

Sarah Miller, Paul Connolly and Lisa Maguire
Centre for Effective Education, Queen’s University Belfast
For many years Northern Ireland has prided itself on the quality of its educational system. This is reflected in the proportion of students achieving high grades in their GCSE and A level exams, compared with UK averages.

As well as enhancing the life prospects of individuals, a well-educated supply of school leavers is critical for economic success and the quality of our educational system has always been a source of competitive advantage in attracting new investors to Northern Ireland. This is particularly important in the 21st century as the knowledge economy requires a supply of young people with high educational attainments.

However Northern Ireland also suffers from a ‘long tail’ at the other end of the range, with above average numbers of young people leaving school with few or no qualifications. This results in poor economic prospects for these young people renders those highly likely to become economically inactive.

The problem arises long before young people reach school leaving age. The Chief Inspector of Education has noted that ‘overall improvement in the standards of literacy and numeracy remains a priority for all phases of the education system’. The Taskforce on Literacy & Numeracy for Northern Ireland reported in 2010[2] that in 2008/09 around 80% of children completing Primary education reached or exceeded the expected levels of literacy, leaving 1 in 5 of all those moving to post primary school, with what can be characterised as “poor” standards of literacy.

Low levels of literacy therefore represent an economic cost to our society. This is reflected in the costs incurred by government and employers to provide young people with these core skills when they enter the labour force or training schemes to prepare them for work. Furthermore there is a cost to society represented by the welfare benefits payable to those who cannot find work or are unable to work because they lack these core skills.

Conversely, the results of this evaluation give us hope that investment in the highly innovative and effective *Time to Read* programme can potentially have far reaching economic benefits in its contribution to improving literacy and creating a more educated and employable workforce. At a very modest cost, this programme offers excellent value for money in the benefits that it offers to individuals, society and the economy.

Furthermore the involvement of companies in the programme through the use of mentors has the added benefit of providing a direct link between improved literacy and the world of work and as this evaluation shows, helps improve the aspirations of children participating.

Philip McDonagh
Economist
Introduction

This report presents the findings of a randomised controlled trial evaluation of the *Time to Read* volunteer mentoring programme run by Business in the Community. There already exists a strong body of evidence demonstrating that *Time to Read* is extremely well received by schools, mentors and the children themselves who regard it as an important aid in helping improve literacy skills among struggling readers. This present evaluation has sought to add to this evidence base by assessing the actual effects of *Time to Read* and, more specifically, whether it is leading to real and measurable improvements on the reading skills of children taking part in the programme.

The trial is one of the largest evaluations of its type undertaken internationally and involved 512 children from 50 primary schools across Northern Ireland. The evaluation team is indebted to the volunteer mentors and their companies, the school principals, teachers, children and parents that participated in the study and also The Atlantic Philanthropies whose generous support made the research possible.

Business in the Community

Business in the Community is a unique movement in the United Kingdom and Ireland of over 800 member companies, almost 250 of which are in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to mobilise business as a force for good in society. As a membership organization, Business in the Community works with companies to help them address their responsibilities to society by focusing on three key themes – People, Planet and Place.

In helping companies demonstrate their commitment to making a positive impact on society, Business in the Community has developed a number of campaigns and programmes which have been introduced to support and engage businesses across Northern Ireland in addressing their responsibilities.

“I think my son Colin has really benefited from having a Time to Read volunteer. He reads a lot more at home and I am now buying him books which he chooses himself when we are shopping. He says that Marie is making his reading more enjoyable and I know he is always talking about Time to Read and he can’t wait for every Thursday to come around.”

*Anne McGeown, parent, St John the Baptist PS, Belfast*
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Business in the Community recognises that Northern Ireland has high levels of deprivation and disadvantage in certain areas with a worrying number of young people leaving school without the expected levels of literacy and numeracy and few formal qualifications. Business in the Community also recognises the advice of economic analysts that addressing essential skills levels at an early age will help contribute to Northern Ireland’s economic growth and to the potential for individuals at all levels to benefit both socially and economically. Taking this need into account, Business in the Community programmes have been instrumental in challenging companies to invest in education.

Business in the Community’s Time to Read Programme

Time to Read, introduced in 1999, involves adult employee volunteers spending one hour per week in company time working with primary school children with the aim of improving children’s reading skills. The mentoring support aims to complement the work of the teacher, with the emphasis being on the children discovering the enjoyment of reading and improving their reading fluency.

The programme has been extended over the years including participation from a greater number of schools with an emphasis on socially deprived areas. Consequently, Time
Time to Read now operates in 96 primary schools, with over 1,000 children, supported by close to 120 companies providing over 500 business volunteers. Last year through Time to Read, businesses contributed over 30,000 hours of employee time (an equivalent of £600,000) helping children with their reading through Time to Read.

Time to Read involves the following process:
- Employers are recruited into membership of Business in the Community Northern Ireland and encouraged to support Time to Read as part of their corporate responsibility strategy.
- Time to Read volunteers are recruited, with each committing to spend one hour each week during term time working on a one-to-one basis with two children from Key Stage 2 classes (Primary 5) in a primary school. Volunteers are security checked by PSNI, trained by Business in the Community’s Education Team and supported by the Literacy Coordinators in the schools and from the Education and Library Boards.
- Pupils with below average reading ability are selected to participate on the recommendations of the class teacher and parental permission is secured.
- The first meeting takes place in the school, with children, volunteers, parents, the school coordinator and a member of the Business in the Community team all present. This is to ensure that everyone involved understands the purpose of the programme and the commitment required to maximize outcomes for the children.
- Each week the volunteer works on a one-to-one basis with each of two children, reading together from a set of reading resources chosen by the group of Literacy Advisors in the Education and Library Boards. Three or more volunteers work in one school at the same time.
- Each child participating in Time to Read receives two half-hour mentoring sessions a week, often involving two different mentors.
- Business in the Community staff meet with the volunteers twice each year to review progress.
- Volunteers are encouraged to introduce company visits as part of the programme.

“We wish it was the whole day for Time to Read”
“My spellings have improved”
“I understand what I am reading because I read more carefully”
“Our parents think it’s great”

Individual comments from children in Greenhaw PS, Derry*
The Perspectives of Key Stakeholders

A series of evaluations have taken place since 2003 to assess the impact of *Time to Read*. This began with an evaluation of the *Time to Read* pilot programme undertaken by Deloitte in 2003 which found that there was “overwhelming agreement amongst schools, volunteers and within business that *Time to Read* did make valid and important contributions to literacy witnessed through positive behavioural changes in children.” In relation to behavioural changes, Deloitte found that “the most common changes in children that were identified by schools were increased confidence and increased enjoyment in books and reading.” These findings have been consistently confirmed through annual in-house evaluations undertaken by Business in the Community with key stakeholders.

Business in the Community subsequently recognised the need to generate more robust evidence to assess the overall effectiveness of the programme. To achieve this, they engaged the support of leading academics and global literacy experts who, together with The Atlantic Philanthropies, conducted two major randomised controlled trials.

In 2008 as part of the first randomised controlled trial, a process evaluation of the implementation of *Time to Read* by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen’s University Belfast confirmed the initial findings. This evaluation included a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups and found a very strong perception among school principals, teachers and volunteer mentors that *Time to Read* had a positive impact on the pupils in relation to their: confidence as readers; enjoyment of reading; skills in reading; and also, more broadly, their appreciation of the world of work. Moreover, these perceptions were corroborated by the interviews with the children themselves who overwhelmingly reported that they found *Time to Read* to be a very positive and enjoyable experience.

The children in the Longtower Primary School are very excited about the Time to Read Programme. They enjoy their session with HML volunteers. The room is buzzing with reading, talking and even laughter. There is a real sense of reading for pleasure.

*Catherine Bowe, Time to Read Coordinator, Long Tower PS*
Methodology of the Present Evaluation

The present randomised controlled trial was conducted between October 2009 and June 2010 and involved 512 children from 50 schools across Northern Ireland. Children were randomly allocated to either the intervention or control group and were tested on a range of outcome measures at two time points: at the start of the school year (October 2009) before the intervention began and at the end of the school year (June 2010) when the intervention finished.

Children were tested on the following outcomes:
- Decoding
- Reading rate
- Reading accuracy
- Reading fluency
- Reading comprehension
- Enjoyment of reading
- Reading confidence
- Aspirations for the future
Findings

This trial has found clear evidence that the *Time to Read* programme is effective in improving reading outcomes for children, particularly in relation to the foundational reading skills of decoding (effect size, \(d=+.15\)), reading rate (\(d = +.22\)) and reading fluency (\(d = +.14\)).

These effect sizes can be translated into an ‘improvement index’ which expresses each effect size as an increase in percentile points. This means that children who took part in *Time to Read* experienced a 6 percentile point improvement in decoding skills, a 9 percentile point improvement in reading rate and a 6 percentile point improvement in reading fluency. The follow-up trial also found evidence of the continuing positive effect of *Time to Read* in improved aspirations for the future (\(d = +.11\)).

The size of these effects also compare very favourably with similar volunteer mentoring programmes internationally.

In addition, there is evidence that the amount of sessions provided impacted upon particular outcomes such that children who receive more of the programme were reporting greater enjoyment of reading and better reading fluency than children who received fewer mentoring sessions. The findings also suggest that the programme worked as effectively for boys and girls; for those from different socio-economic backgrounds; and also for those with varying initial reading abilities.

Finally, in relation to the children’s higher level reading skills, particularly comprehension, and also their enjoyment of reading and reading confidence, the evaluation was unable to show any significant effects.

Conclusions

There are five key conclusions arising from this programme of research on the effectiveness of the *Time to Read* programme:

1. This trial provides strong and robust evidence that the *Time to Read* programme is effective in improving core foundational skills that children need in order to become effective readers. It is comparable with leading international literacy interventions based on volunteer mentoring as an effective way of improving literacy skills among children who are currently struggling as readers.

2. It is well established that a family of skills, including decoding, oral fluency and reasoning are important for the development of comprehension. Given the research was unable to show significant effects that *Time to Read* impacted on reading comprehension, Business in the Community should review the future development of the programme. This should explore whether the organisation wishes to maintain the existing focus of *Time to Read* on improving core foundational skills.
required in order for children to become effective readers or whether to develop the programme further in order also to make gains in relation to reading comprehension. This is not a straightforward decision however as the teaching of comprehension is a specialist skill that would require significant amendments to the existing programme, including

“Time to Read is the most successful school initiative that I have ever been involved in. It is now invaluable to our school. Our children need positive adult role models and the volunteers are all of a very high calibre and very committed.”

*Brenda McMullen, Principal, Cliftonville Integrated PS, Belfast*
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greater training of volunteer mentors and a much more structured programme of activities that they will need to be followed during the mentoring sessions in order to improve reading comprehension.

3. There is strong evidence that the intensity of the programme matters. Those children who received more mentoring sessions showed better reading fluency and enjoyment of reading than children who received fewer sessions. It is therefore recommended that the existing number of sessions that are provided for children (namely two 30 minute sessions per week) are maintained as a minimum.

4. There is both qualitative and quantitative evidence that, alongside impacting positively on core reading outcomes, *Time to Read* also has a positive effect upon children’s aspirations for the future. The feedback gathered from the qualitative interviews in previous evaluations suggest that this may in part be due to the development of positive and encouraging relationships with successful adults, including visits to their workplaces.

It is therefore recommended that this particular element of the programme be considered further as a secondary outcome of *Time to Read* and with an enhanced focus as part of the programme. There is evidence from the wider literature that aspirations for the future can positively and significantly contribute towards later adult attainment, both in terms of educational achievement and type of occupation chosen. It is therefore possible that increasing children’s aspirations at this age may be able to contribute to increased aspirations in the future and thus, through this, to a number of other educational outcomes.

5. Finally, in relation to the non reading outcomes which were considered – namely children’s enjoyment of reading and their confidence as readers – the results suggest that it may be necessary to revise the current way of thinking about how *Time to Read* works. In particular, rather than children’s reading skills being dependent upon them first increasing their enjoyment of and confidence in reading, the evidence presented here suggests that the two are unrelated. Indeed, if a relationship exists it may be in the other direction such that improving children’s reading skills will lead onto improvements in their enjoyment of and confidence in reading. This, however, is an hypothesis that would require testing through further research.

The research has been undertaken over time culminating in this randomised control trial suggests that there is now robust evidence to show that *Time to Read* improves reading outcomes of children and enhances their future aspirations.
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Further Information

Full copies of the main evaluation report are available to download online from the Centre for Effective Education’s website at: www.qub.ac.uk/cee

“For the last 8 years I have been a Time to Read volunteer at Ballysillan Primary School. We visit the school every Wednesday for two hours and thoroughly enjoy our time with the children. I read with two P5 girls for half an hour each and have seen big changes in their reading and more so in their personality. They both started out shy and quiet but with each week have progressed into chatty, confident and lively girls. We have been welcomed into the school and invited to concerts, plays and much more. I really value my involvement in the programme and hope to continue for another 8 years!”

Jill McMullan, Royal Mail*

*All quotations have been gathered by Business in the Community independently of the evaluation reported here.
Business in the Community is a unique movement in the UK and Ireland of over 800 member companies (almost 250 of which are in Northern Ireland), with a further 2,000+ engaged through our programmes and campaigns. We operate through a local network of more than 100 business led partnerships and 60 global partners.

Registered Details
137 Shepherdess Walk, London N1 7RQ.
Registered Charity No: 297716. Company Limited by Guarantee No: 1619253

Business in the Community
Northern Ireland
Bridge House
Paulett Avenue
Belfast, BT5 4HD
T (028) 9046 0606
F 0870 460 1731

North West office
BEAM Social Enterprise Centre
Invista House
Maydown Works
Derry/Londonderry
BT47 6TH
T (028) 7186 1550
F (028) 7186 1577