EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Randomised Controlled Trial
Evaluation of Business in the Community’s Time to Read Pupil Mentoring Programme

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation undertaken by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen’s University Belfast of Business in the Community’s *Time to Read* mentoring programme. The evaluation focused specifically on assessing the impact of *Time to Read* on children. 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 evaluation possible.

Business in the Community

Business in the Community is a unique movement in the United Kingdom and Ireland of over 700 member companies, more than 230 of which are in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to inspire, challenge, engage and support business in continually improving its positive impact on society. As a membership organization, Business in the Community works with companies to help them address their responsibilities to society – in the environment, the workplace, the community and also by assisting small firms to boost the local economy.

In helping companies to 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 companies across Northern Ireland in addressing their responsibilities.

Business in the Community recognises that Northern Ireland has high levels of deprivation and disadvantage in certain areas with a considerable number of young people leaving school without the expected levels of literacy and numeracy and few formal qualifications. Economic analysts believe that addressing essential skill levels at an early age will help to contribute to Northern Ireland’s economic growth and to the potential for individuals at all levels to benefit from that growth. Taking this need into account, a number of Business in the Community programmes have been introduced to involve companies investing in education.
Business in the Community’s Education Programmes

Business in the Community launched its first educational programme, *Time to Read*, in 1999. *Time to Read* began in five primary schools in Belfast with employee volunteers from Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). On a weekly basis, each volunteer spent one hour of company time working one-to-one with primary school children with the aim of improving the children’s reading skills. The mentoring was to complement the work of the teacher, with the emphasis being for the children to discover the enjoyment of reading and to improve their reading fluency.

*Time to Read* was then offered to a greater number of primary schools (with an emphasis on socially deprived areas) as a result of more Business in the Community member companies offering employee volunteers. Consequently, *Time to Read* now operates in more than 130 primary schools, with over 1,000 children, supported by close to 120 companies providing up to 500 business volunteers. Through *Time to Read*, businesses in membership of Business in the Community have, since 1999, committed over 53,000 hours of employee time (an equivalent of £1.3m) and £130,000 in book resources to supporting 3,500 children in the *Time to Read* schools.

**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, 6 and 7) in a primary school. Usually a volunteer will work with each child in the same specifically designated room as other volunteers and children. Volunteers are security checked by PSNI, trained by Business in the Community’s Education Team and supported by the Literacy Coordinators from the Education and Library Boards. During recruitment, volunteers are encouraged to commit to a three year involvement supporting the children through P5-P7.
- Schools participating in *Time to Read* appoint a *Time to Read* Coordinator and set aside a suitable location for the weekly *Time to Read* session. Pupils are selected to participate on the recommendations of the class teacher and parental permission is secured (for the present evaluation pupils were selected from a random sample).
- 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 spends 30 minutes 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.
- 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.
Previous Evaluation of *Time to Read*

A previous evaluation of the *Time to Read* pilot programme undertaken by Deloitte in 2003 found that there was “overwhelming agreement amongst schools, volunteers and within Business in the Community 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.”

However, beyond reporting these extremely positive perceptions of *Time to Read* held by schools, parents and volunteer mentors, the report acknowledged that it was not possible at that point to evaluate the actual impact of the programme in improving outcomes for pupils due to the lack of baseline data and standardized measures to track changes in pupils’ literacy skills, attitudes and behaviour. It was with this in mind that Business in the Community subsequently received support from The Atlantic Philanthropies to further develop the *Time to Read* programme and to undertake a robust evaluation of its effectiveness.

Further Development of *Time to Read*

During the past three years, and with the support of The Atlantic Philanthropies, Business in the Community has worked in partnership with Dartington Social Research Unit (DSRU) to test and refine the Time to Read programme in order to ensure that it:

- Reached the children and young people most in need;
- Could be expanded to reach large portions of the educational system in Northern Ireland;
- Could be delivered consistently across schools; and
- Achieved the desired results of better educational skills, self-confidence, and personal and professional aspirations.

Part of this work involved the development of the following logic model that describes how *Time to Read* might benefit pupils who take part in the programme:

**Logic model underpinning the Time to Read Programme**

1. Bringing extra adult support from the business community into schools and connecting schools to the communities that surround them
2. Children experiencing a better quality of relationships with adults
3. Children becoming more confident, having raised self-esteem and beginning to enjoy learning
4. Better school attendance, better educational skills and raised aspirations
5. Improved economic viability in the long-term

In developing this logic model, and in all planning for the subsequent research programme, Business in the Community also had the benefit of advice from the members of an Education Steering Group made up of researchers, school principals, educationalists, members of the Department of Education and leading business organizations.
On the basis of this logic model, Business in the Community commissioned the Centre for Effective Education at Queen’s University Belfast in 2006 to undertake a large-scale independent evaluation of the *Time to Read* programme. The evaluation comprised qualitative interviews, focus groups and a randomised controlled trial and its remit was specifically to test the effects of *Time to Read* on the following four pupil outcomes derived directly from the logic model:

- self-esteem (and later, locus of control)
- enjoyment of learning
- reading skills
- aspirations for the future

**Methodology**

In line with the requirements specified for the evaluation, a randomised control trial was undertaken between September 2006 and June 2008 in 50 primary schools in Northern Ireland. Children were considered eligible to take part in the evaluation if they scored below average in a standardised reading test and did not have a Special Educational Needs statement. A total of 734 children from 50 schools across Northern Ireland took part in the evaluation. 360 children were randomly assigned to the intervention group and 374 to the control group.

The children in the intervention group took part in *Time to Read* for between one and two academic years and the children in the control group did not take part in the programme. Children in both groups were tested on the four outcomes before the intervention started and again every four months for the next two years.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with the programme developers, principals, teachers, mentors and pupils specifically to explore issues relating to the delivery of the *Time to Read* programme.

**Findings and Discussion**

Data from the qualitative interviews and focus groups confirmed the findings of the previous evaluation undertaken by Deloitte. *Time to Read* was believed to be cost effective and was well regarded. More specifically, there was 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 confirmed by the children who overwhelmingly reported that they found *Time to Read* to be a very positive and enjoyable experience and that they looked forward to the visits from their mentors.

The evidence from the formal randomised controlled trial indicated that *Time to Read* had a positive effect in terms of increasing the children’s future aspirations (effect size = +0.17) yet was unable to find quantitative evidence that the programme had any effect in relation to the three remaining outcomes identified through the logic model (the children’s general levels of self-esteem, enjoyment of education and reading skills).

Further exploratory analysis suggested that the programme may be having a differential effect for particular subgroups of pupils in relation to specific outcomes, most notably boys from deprived areas as well as those pupils with low initial levels of self-esteem and reading ability. However, this analysis was exploratory in nature and further research would be required to confirm these findings.

The report argues strongly that the findings of the randomised controlled trial should be treated with caution. All that this present randomised controlled trial has demonstrated is that the current logic model, with its associated outcomes, does not capture the effects that the programme may be having. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the trial, as pre-specified, may have been looking in the wrong place.
In recent years a number of research studies have made important distinctions between global sense of self-esteem and more specific aspects of self-esteem and have studied the relationships between these and educational outcomes. The findings of such studies suggest that while doing well in education is not associated with a child’s general self-esteem, it is related to their more specific academic self-esteem.

Thus, and in relation to the present programme, this evidence would suggest that children’s participation in Time to Read may not lead to them feeling more confident about themselves in general (and thus in relation to all aspects of their lives) but could well lead to them feeling more confident about themselves as readers.

A similar argument is also applicable to the other outcomes that have been pre-specified. Thus rather than expecting Time to Read to increase children’s general enjoyment of education, it may be more realistic to expect it to increase their more specific enjoyment of reading. In a similar vein, while the programme might not have a significant effect on their general reading levels it may be having an effect on specific reading skills.

This possibility that the randomised controlled trial, as pre-specified, may have been looking in the wrong place is also consistent with the findings of the qualitative element of the evaluation as well as previous evaluations of Time to Read. In particular, it will be noted that many of the comments made by teachers and mentors related to what they perceived to be improvements in more specific outcomes such as children’s confidence as readers (i.e. academic self-esteem) and their enjoyment of reading.

Recommendations

In considering the implications of these findings, it is worth stressing the fact that there now exists a strong body of research evidence demonstrating that mentoring schemes that are well designed, that use well-trained mentors and that are focused and structured do lead to positive outcomes for children. As such, and given the fact that Time to Read is now a very well established and well regarded programme, it is strongly recommended that further work is undertaken.

Given the way the randomised controlled trial was pre-specified, however, it is difficult to make recommendations at this stage regarding possible changes required to the programme. For the reasons given above, it could be that Time to Read is actually effective as it currently stands in terms of improving a range of more specific literacy-related outcomes in children. Until it can be established whether this is the case or not, it would be premature to begin recommending revisions to the programme.

Therefore the report recommends that a further randomised controlled trial be undertaken of the existing Time to Read programme to examine whether it is effective in relation to a number of more specific reading-related outcomes. This trial need not be as large as the one reported here and would be sufficient to run for just one school year. However, if it is decided to undertake a second evaluation it is strongly recommended that sufficient preparation is put into researching and identifying a more appropriate logic model to describe Time to Read that incorporates more specific and reading-related outcomes and that this preparatory work be conducted in close consultation with Business in the Community and key stakeholders involved in the programme.

In making these recommendations, the report also acknowledges the groundbreaking nature of Business in the Community’s approach to its development of the Time to Read programme and especially its commitment to ensuring that it is evaluated to the highest and most rigorous of standards. This present randomised controlled trial is the first of its type and scale ever to be undertaken and completed on the island of Ireland. The commitment of Business in the Community to this form of evaluation therefore represents an important milestone in the use of evidence-based approaches to the development of educational programmes.

Copies of the Report

A copy of the full report of the evaluation is available to download from the Centre for Effective Education website at: www.qub.ac.uk/cee