



# Effects of a book gifting programme on literacy outcomes for foster children: A randomised controlled trial evaluation of the Letterbox Club in Northern Ireland



Jennifer Mooney<sup>a,b</sup>, Karen Winter<sup>a,\*</sup>, Paul Connolly<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast, UK

<sup>b</sup> School of Education, Queen's University Belfast, 69-71 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HL, UK

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## ABSTRACT

The poor educational outcomes of children in care are a significant concern internationally. Whilst there have been many interventions developed to address this problem, very few of these have been rigorously evaluated. This article presents the findings of a randomised controlled trial that sought to measure the effectiveness of a book gifting programme (the Letterbox Club) that aims to improve literacy skills amongst children aged 7–11 years in foster care. The programme involves children receiving six parcels of books sent through the post over a six-month period. The trial, which ran between April 2013 and June 2014, involved a sample of 116 children in Northern Ireland (56 randomly allocated to the intervention group and 60 to a waiting list control group). Outcome measures focused on reading skills (reading accuracy, comprehension and rate) and attitudes to reading and school. The trial found no evidence that the book-gifting programme had any effect on any of the outcomes measured. Drawing upon some of the emergent themes from the accompanying qualitative process evaluation that sought to determine foster carer/child attitude towards and engagement with the parcels, it is suggested that one plausible reason for the ineffectiveness of the Letterbox Club, as intimated by carers and children (rather than explicitly explored with them), is the lack of support provided to the carers/children in relation to the packs received. Reflective of an ecological model of children's development, it is recommended that for book-gifting programmes to be effective they need to include a focus on encouraging the direct involvement of foster carers in shared literacy activities with the children using the books that are gifted.

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## 1. Introduction

Nationally and internationally, statistical information collated by governments and children's organisations is consistent in highlighting the gap in educational achievement and attainment between those in out of home care compared with their peers and that the gap begins at a young age, persists over time and worsens the older the child becomes (Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke, & Aubry, 2012; Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2012; Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarsson, 2005). Across the four nations that comprise the UK, for example, the most recent data reveals that whilst there has been some modest success in narrowing the gap against key indicators of educational performance (attendance, absenteeism, exclusions/expulsions, achievement in statutory key stage attainment scores and end of school qualifications), children and young people in out of home care generally still fair worse than the child population as a whole (Department Health, Social Services & Public Safety Northern Ireland, 2015; DfE,

2015; The Scottish Government, 2015; Welsh Government, 2015). In England in relation to 16 year olds and their formal educational qualifications, for example, there is 'a difference of 40.1 percentage points between the rates of looked after and non-looked after children achieving 5 + A\*-C GCSEs and equivalents including English and mathematics' (DfE, 2014, p. 10). Further afield in the United States (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008) and Canada (Brownell et al., 2015; Courtney, Flynn, & Beaupré, 2013), figures also indicate a similar level of underachievement for this group. Importantly, we also know from other international studies that the picture remains the same even once socio-economic background and cognitive functioning are controlled for (Berlin, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2011; Vinnerljung et al., 2005) and that the pattern regarding the widening of the gap with age is reflected in a range of other countries, including Sweden (Tordön, Vinnerljung, & Axelsson, 2014).

In light of these concerns there has been a concerted effort to ameliorate the situation. One core strand of activity has focused on legal developments. In England, for example, the law has recently been changed through the introduction of the Children and Families Act (2014) with the result that Local Authorities (charged with the delivery of services to children and young people) are now placed

\* Corresponding author at: School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, 6 College Park, Belfast BT7 1LP, UK.  
E-mail address: [k.winter@qub.ac.uk](mailto:k.winter@qub.ac.uk) (K. Winter).

under a national legal obligation to promote the educational achievement of those in their care. In practice what this means, as outlined in the accompanying statutory guidance (DfE, 2014), is that: educational placements have to be found before moving a child; existing educational provision has to be maintained wherever possible; a suitable educational placement has to be found within 20 days post placement if provision has to change; and that all children are the subject of what is known as a personal education plan (PEP) and/or education, health and care (EHC) plan. Furthermore, care leavers – those of 16 years plus – are entitled to a range of financial and practical supports that extend into adulthood. Similar measures are in place for this group of young people in other countries including Canada (Flynn & Tessier, 2011) and the United States of America (Knoke, 2009).

Second, a wide range of policy and practice initiatives have emerged both nationally and internationally designed specifically to tackle educational under achievement (Bowyer & Wilkinson, 2013; Connelly et al., 2008; DfE, 2013, 2014; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Forsman & Vinerljung, 2012; Pecora, 2012). Recently published reviews in this area (Forsman & Vinerljung, 2012; Liabo, Gray, & Mulcahy, 2013; Tideman, Vinnerljung, Hintze, & Isaksson, 2011; Winter, Connolly, Bell, & Ferguson, 2011) highlight a wide range of activity with interventions that are targeted variously at: the child (such as book gifting, additional tutoring, provision of additional activities and/or targeted financial support); their carer/supporting professionals (including, for example, training to increase the awareness and practice of reading support); and/or the school systems and processes (including identification, assessment, monitoring and management systems). However, it is also the case that despite this wide ranging activity, very little of it is accompanied by robust evaluations of effectiveness (Forsman & Vinerljung, 2012; Liabo et al., 2013).

Of focus in this article is one particular intervention – book gifting – that has proven to be a popular response in a number of countries. Book gifting programmes aim to encourage children's engagement in reading through the distribution of free books. Book gifting interventions vary in terms of: the mode of delivery (through the post or left with a family by a professional such as a health visitor); the number and type of books gifted, the target age group (0–5 year olds, 7–11 year olds or older); the use (or not) of instructional manuals for parents/carers; and their intended outcomes. A recent literature review carried out by Burnett, Daniels, and Bailey (2014) indicates that the overarching aim of book gifting programmes is to increase and improve children's literacy skills. Book ownership, reading for pleasure, enjoyment of books and book sharing (reading with parents/carers) are identified as important contributory factors in the development of literacy skills that book gifting schemes aim to support. A review of research on book gifting schemes (Burnett et al., 2014) and a review of early literacy programmes that include single studies of book gifting schemes (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009) both indicate that, with notable exceptions such as the research by Jakobsen (2012) and Jakobsen and Andersen (2013) on a book gifting scheme in Denmark that targeted migrant children and found positive effects, there are few robust evaluations that use experimental designs. Furthermore, the evidence that does exist indicates varying levels of effectiveness and impact. There are currently no studies that consider the effectiveness of book gifting schemes for children in out of home care. It is within this context that this article makes an important contribution by reporting the findings of a trial that examined the effectiveness of one such book gifting intervention that aimed to raise the literacy skills of all foster children in Northern Ireland between the ages of 7–11 years old and between April 2013 and June 2014.

## 2. The Letterbox Club

The Letterbox Club (<http://www.letterboxclub.org.uk/>) is a book gifting intervention that provides direct support to children in foster

care aged 7–11 years to improve their educational outcomes. The intervention comprises once-monthly personalised parcels posted between May and October of each year to children in their foster homes. Parcels comprise a brightly coloured envelope (with different colours depending on the age group targeted – in this study blue for ages 7–9 years and red for 9–11 years) which is personally addressed to the child at their foster carers home and which has, as its contents: a personalised letter; two books (one fiction and one non-fiction which have been selected by a panel at Booktrust); stationery items (for example pencils, exercise book, stickers); and a mathematics game (comprising puzzle sheets/practice papers, games with a die/plastic coins for example). The parcels are delivered between May and October each year and over the six-month period it is anticipated that children will have built up their own collection of books and related items consisting of a range of books including non-fiction (biology, history), activity-based, fun based, story based books as well as a book of poems and other items (Winter et al., 2011). As a book gifting scheme directed at the child, the intervention does not rely on, expect or demand foster carer involvement and, as such, there is no manual or guidance for carers about how and in what ways they/the child should engage with the parcel.

Designed initially as a small scale project by its founder, Rose Griffiths, early pilot work with two Local Authorities in England (Leicester and Suffolk) from 2003 to 2006 provided the platform from which a partnership with Booktrust, the national charity that runs Bookstart and other book-gifting schemes, was established. This was followed by a successful bid for a national pilot for 2007–2008, funded by government. In this period Booktrust received financial support from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to extend its programme to 1600 children. Subsequently, and in 2009, the Letterbox Club opened to every Local Authority in the UK. In the same year The Letterbox Club was introduced as a pilot scheme in Northern Ireland, where it has been funded through a partnership between the charities Booktrust and the Fostering Network's Fostering Achievement Scheme since that time.

Previous evaluations of the Letterbox Club, which in total have included 852 children, note positive findings (Griffiths, 2012; Griffiths & Comber, 2011; Griffiths, Comber, & Dymoke, 2010). Gains in literacy were made for those in receipt of the Letterbox Club over and above the expected age related standardised norm. Qualitative feedback indicated that the materials were well received and engaged with by the vast majority of children. However, as noted in a followup secondary data analysis of the Letterbox Club in Northern Ireland (Winter et al., 2011) all findings in relation to the Letterbox Club should be viewed with caution because the evaluations have been largely undertaken by the programme developers and have focused simply on differences between pre and post test reading scores, with no inclusion of a control group. As noted earlier, in a context where the government is increasingly demanding robust evidence of programme effectiveness in decisions about funding priorities and in the absence of any robust evaluation of the Letterbox Club, this article makes an important contribution to our knowledge by reporting the findings of a randomised controlled trial of the Letterbox Club with all children, aged 7–11 years, in out of home foster care placements in Northern Ireland between April 2013 and June 2014.

## 3. Method

A randomised controlled trial was undertaken involving all children in foster care in Northern Ireland aged 7–11 years. The primary aim of the trial was to ascertain whether the Letterbox Club was effective in improving the reading skills (specifically: reading rate, accuracy and comprehension) and enjoyment of reading (both recreationally and academically) amongst the children. In addition, the trial also sought to assess whether the programme was having differential effects for particular subgroups of children in relation to: their gender; their age;

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