



A randomised control trial evaluation of a literacy after-school programme for struggling beginning readers[☆]



Andy Biggart^{*}, Karen Kerr, Liam O'Hare, Paul Connolly

Centre for Effective Education, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

While there is evidence for effective in-school programmes for struggling beginning readers, the evidence in relation to after-school interventions focusing on academic outcomes is particularly weak. This study seeks to contribute to this body of evidence through a randomised trial ($n = 464$) of an after-school literacy programme (*Doodle Den*) for struggling beginning readers in a deprived area of Dublin, Ireland. The programme based on a balanced literacy framework, was delivered in group settings, and had a strong focus on staff development. *Doodle Den* was found to improve the children's overall literacy ($d = +0.17$), teacher assessments of their literacy ability ($d = +0.28$) and to positively impact on problem behaviours in regular school class ($d = -0.18$). The implications for the development of after-school programmes are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Overall, due to its role as a gateway subject, children's early literacy development has had, and continues to have, a great emphasis placed on it. Literacy skills are widely recognised as an important precursor to general academic achievement as well as in relation to broader participation in society. Longitudinal studies have also shown that children who fail to gain adequate basic literacy skills at an early stage are unlikely to catch-up later (Brooks, 2007; Francis, Shaywitz, Stuebing, Shaywitz, & Fletcher, 1996; Juel, 1988). The importance placed on the development of children's literacy has resulted in the design of numerous interventions for children in the form of programmes, products, practices and policies. Whilst many of these initiatives take place within normal school hours after-school programmes are increasingly being adapted from their traditional role which focused on childcare and recreational activities to one focused on academic achievement. This is particularly the case in the United States (USA) where they have been extensively used to try and reduce attainment gaps among pupils perceived at risk of academic failure.

The current paper reports the key impact findings of an independent evaluation of a newly developed after-school literacy programme that was based on a balanced literacy framework. While there have been long running debates over the best ways to teach literacy there is an increasing consensus internationally that a variety of approaches are required, including the use of systematic phonics (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Rose, 2006; Rowe, 2005). Balanced approaches that combine the teaching of phonics together with meaning and understanding are currently widely

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Centre for Effective Education, School of Education, 69/71 University Street, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1HL, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 02890 975946.

E-mail address: a.biggart@qub.ac.uk (A. Biggart).

supported as a means to maximise learning among all children in the early stage of learning to read (Center, 2005; Cowen, 2003; Pressley, 2006; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, & Hampston, 2006). This programme, adopting a balanced literacy framework, was targeted at struggling beginning readers from an area of particular socio-economic disadvantage and the research design employs the random assignment of pupils to the after-school intervention (*Doodle Den*) or control group (business as usual).

The study tested a number of research hypotheses. The primary hypothesis was that the *Doodle Den* after-school programme would lead to moderate gains in the children's overall literacy in comparison to their control group peers. Other secondary hypotheses tested were related to the children's attendance at school and their concentration and behaviour within the regular school classroom. Exploratory analyses examined differential response to intervention according to year cohort, gender, family affluence, the child's ethnicity and the number of sessions attended.

1.1. Literature review

To date, the research from major educational review bodies, systematic reviews and meta-analyses in relation to what works with literacy interventions on beginning readers' shows the evidence is both rich and limited. There are many studies with strong evidence of the effectiveness of literacy programmes delivered in the normal school context, but less evidence in relation to after-school programmes focused on academic outcomes. Before examining the literature on after-school programmes some of the wider evidence on literacy interventions will be considered.

Slavin, Lake, Cheung, and Davis (2009), provide an extensive review of experimental evaluations for beginning readers. They categorise literacy interventions into four broad typologies: reading curricula, instructional technology, instructional process programmes and mixed methods programmes that combine a new curriculum with professional training.

From the existing evidence that met their criteria, Slavin, Lake, Cheung, et al. (2009) found that Instructional Process Programmes showed the largest impact with an average effect size of +0.37, although there was an indication that some of these programmes were more effective than others. Cooperative learning and phonics-focused professional development showed particular promise with an average effect size of +0.46 and +0.43, respectively. Programmes that combine a new curriculum with professional training were found to have an average effect size of +0.29. Reading curricula and instructional technology programmes appear less effective, but on average, showed positive but less promising results, with average effect sizes of +0.12 and +0.09, respectively.

Slavin, Lake, Cheung, et al. (2009) review concluded that successful programmes had a number of common elements, these included: extensive professional development and follow-up on specific teaching methods for teachers; co-operative learning at their core, with children working together on structured activities; a strong focus on teaching phonics and phonemic awareness and well-developed programmes that integrate curriculum, pedagogy and extensive professional development.

In a Best Evidence Encyclopaedia review focusing upon struggling readers at the early elementary stage Slavin, Lake, Davis, and Madden (2009) concluded that, regardless of programme type, a strong emphasis upon phonics was evident in the most successful programmes, and one to one programmes appear particularly effective especially if delivered by a teacher rather than a paraprofessional or volunteer. These programmes, however, tend to be expensive to deliver and while the evidence suggests they are more effective than small group programmes, the review found that instructional programmes with a focus on cooperative learning and phonics could provide average effect sizes among the lowest performing children that were similar in magnitude to one to one tutoring (average effect size +0.56). These syntheses provide clear evidence of the types of programmes and the factors associated with improvements in the literacy outcomes of young struggling readers when delivered in the context of the normal school day. However, the next section reviews the evidence in relation to after-school programmes that focus on academic outcomes where the evidence to date presents a much more mixed picture.

After-school programmes have expanded in recent years, particularly in the USA where they have been supported by federal funding for over a decade. Initially, these were established to address concerns about keeping children safe and out of trouble given changing patterns of labour force participation. After-school programme goals can be wide and varied, from providing a safe environment and recreational activities, to homework clubs, or more structured programmes that have typically focused on behavioural or academic outcomes. In recent times, in the USA, they have been adopted as a means of raising achievement and closing the attainment gap promoted through the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

A What Works Clearing House practice review of out-of-school time programmes focusing on academic outcomes identified a number of after-school programmes that met their standards with or without reservations (Beckett et al., 2009). Five studies showed positive impact, although sample sizes in these studies were small ranging from 48 to 84 children. The larger studies included in their review were located among those that showed either mixed effects (1 programme) or no discernible effects on academic outcomes (6 programmes). One of the largest studies included in their review was the national evaluations of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers in the USA, federally funded after-school programmes, which found no impact on average attainment such as reading and mathematics (Dynarski et al., 2003, 2004). The evaluation, however, highlighted that the opportunities presented for instruction in these core subject areas was often limited within many of the programmes. A more recent systematic review on the topic also reported no effects on reading outcomes for after-school programmes, but this was limited to only 5 randomised control trial evaluations that met their rigorous inclusion criteria, which also included reading outcomes (Zief, Lauer, & Maynard, 2006).

More promising evidence is provided through another meta-analytic review of after-school programmes that focused upon interventions with academic outcomes (reading and math) for children deemed at risk (Lauer et al., 2006). This analysis

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