

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

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1. Context –the importance of education

It is difficult to overstate the importance of education. Educational underachievement has far reaching consequences, not only for individual children but for society as a whole. Children who cannot or do not reach their educational potential, for whatever reason, are at increased risk of significant disadvantage. Barnardo's recognises that in today's knowledge-based economy, good levels of literacy and numeracy, accompanied by qualifications, are essential, not only to compete for employment, but to enjoy and engage in broader society.

Despite improvements in recent years almost one in six children in Northern Ireland leaves primary school without achieving the expected level in English and Maths. By Key Stage 3 this ratio is one in five; by GCSE, two in five children fail to achieve the standards deemed necessary to progress to sixth form studies. In 2010-11, around 9000 pupils had failed to achieve the required standard in literacy and numeracy by the time they left full-time education.¹

Barnardo's NI began working in schools during the late 1990's in response to the impact of poverty in disadvantaged communities. In more recent years it has expanded and developed its school-based work to include a portfolio of services and programmes with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention. Working in partnership with over 160 schools, Barnardo's provides a wide range of services and programmes including Primary School Counselling, PATHS,

All Stars, Incredible Years and a broad range of family support services. Currently, Barnardo's budget for school-based work in Northern Ireland is just over £3 million with Barnardo's voluntary funds contributing over £500,000 of this.

Background to Ready to Learn

The service design, delivery and evaluation of Ready to Learn was possible through funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies. OFMDFM also made a contribution towards research and evaluation in the early stages of the programme. At the service design stage Barnardo's commissioned the Centre for Effective Education, QUB, to conduct a survey of 1000 school children and review international literature on achievement related interventions within school, after school and with family involvement. The details of this research are available in a separate paper.²

The conclusion of this research highlighted that to help improve achievement for children in areas of disadvantage, services or interventions should focus directly on improving education attainment rather than indirectly through strategies to enhance well-being. Given that a significant gap in educational attainment is already evident by Primary 4, it was decided that the intervention should be provided to children before this stage (i.e. during Primary years 1 -3).

1. Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (2013) Improving Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Schools Northern Ireland Audit Office.

2. Miller, S., Lundy, L., Connolly, P., Maguire, L. & McEvoy, L (2008) Well Being and Educational attainment of Primary School Pupils in Northern Ireland Centre for Effective Education, QUB: Belfast

Out-of-School-Hours Environment

As the NI Curriculum had undergone fairly recent changes, Barnardo's were committed to a focus on out-of-school hours, rather than intervening in teaching during the school day. This approach had the advantage of increasing the children's engagement with, and exposure to, enrichment activities, as opposed to a within-school intervention which may have removed children from their every-day teaching environment. The QUB research, and good practice, also highlighted the importance of the value placed on education by the family, and of building the capacity of parents to assist their children with their learning.

Consultation with education staff and officials highlighted the importance of literacy and emerging literacy skills for young children, so literacy (as opposed to numeracy) was selected as the focus for the intervention.

The available evidence on out-of-school-hours learning³ suggested that an effective After School programme designed to improve literacy would have certain 'ingredients' embedded within it. These were incorporated in the programme design:

- (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;
- (7) Adult-child ratio to enable one-to-one and group work.

Research evidence³ also clearly highlighted the importance of having realistic expectations about what an After School programme can achieve, particularly when focusing on literacy skills. To help Ready to Learn achieve its goal, the 'shape' of the programme was designed to increase the 'time' and 'frequency' with which children could engage in the After School programme.



3. Miller, B (2003) Critical Hours: Afterschool Programs and Educational Success Nellie Mae Education Foundation, MA

2. The Ready to Learn Programme

This service design process led to the development of 'Ready to Learn', an innovative programme with a long-term outcome of raising achievement. The programme has two key components:

- (1) for children – a literacy-rich After School programme for one hour after school, three days per week;
- (2) for parents / carers – a range of activities and support to help them engage in and support their child's learning.

Key features of the Ready to Learn After School Programme

- A universal programme – any child in a participating-year group can attend
- Attendance is not compulsory but encouraged by school and programme staff
- Three days per week for one hour after school (aim of 90 hours per school year)
- Run in most schools on Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday to maximise attendance and
- Seeks to reinforce and consolidate the key literacy strands of the Foundation Stage curriculum

Different from school

Ready to Learn is designed so that it is recognisably not just 'another hour of school'. The programme is run as a voluntary, universal After School club for pupils in the participating year group.

A great deal of thought was given to making Ready to Learn look and feel different. There is a higher adult – child ratio than in many classrooms, there is a clear 'transition point' built in, to mark the end of school and the beginning of Ready to Learn, which includes a snack and a special Ready to Learn song. Wherever possible (not quite always) the After School programme takes place somewhere other than the children's daily classroom, in a space dedicated for that purpose.

Throughout each session there is an emphasis on creating a fun, literacy rich environment where each child is encouraged to develop a love of learning in addition to building key literacy skills.

Core components of the Ready to Learn After School Programme

The Ready to Learn programme for children is a fully specified and documented ('manualised') intervention, designed to ensure that all those participating receive the intervention 'as planned' and to a high standard. This is particularly important when a programme is being delivered in multiple settings and by different teams. The After School programme has two core elements:

- (1) An academic programme aimed at enhancing literacy achievement – the primary outcome that the programme aims to influence.
- (2) A social programme incorporating social, emotional and behavioural regulation skills – the secondary outcome.

The academic programme

Literacy within the Ready to Learn programme is understood in a holistic way, focusing on developing each child's ability to understand and use language, both spoken and written, as an integral part of learning in all areas.

The content of the After School programme reflects the 'Talking and Listening' component of the Northern Ireland Foundation Stage curriculum and focuses on the following key skills:

- Attention and listening skills
- Phonological awareness
- Concepts of print and beginnings of print
- Oral language, social use of language and thinking
- Extended vocabulary

In each afternoon session, the Ready to Learn Club focuses on two of five key literacy strands, integrating the social programme into the activities and learning covered in each session. Each After School Club is staffed by a team including (at

minimum) one qualified teacher and two qualified early years assistants. This enabled small group work to take place with a ratio of 1 adult to 8 children.

The social programme

Learning rich environments are not just those with books and other tangible learning aids; they are social environments in which children take turns, share, and are willing and able to wait, watch, listen, and generally adhere to social rules and norms. These social skills include showing respect for self, for others and for property.

Children who have not learned to regulate their emotions often find school difficult⁴, they find it hard to make and maintain friends, or respond appropriately to others. The same is true for children whose behaviour is disruptive or hinders their learning in other ways.

The social programme within Ready to Learn is indirect, and draws on social learning theory. Using the principles of basic positive behaviour skills, children are facilitated to develop a range of social, emotional and behavioural skills such as turn taking, sharing, and following rules and routines. Specific behaviour management techniques are highly positive and place emphasis on attention, praise, rewards, redirecting and positive boundaries. Most importantly, children are consistently praised for effort and process, rather than only for accomplishment: learning can be a challenging process.

4. McClelland, M., Morrison, F.L., & Holmes, D.L. (2000) Children at risk for early academic problems: The role of learning-related social skills. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15, 307-329

Making learning fun

The ethos of the Ready to Learn programme is to help children develop a love of learning. Children who enjoy learning, learn more, understand what they are learning better, and remember it for longer.⁵ Learning is enhanced by embedding Ready to Learn in a 'Club' format and promoting a strong sense of identity, for example:

- By means of a group song (sung at the beginning of each session)
- The use of the Ready to Learn 'family' – a set of three puppets used to help maintain children's engagement and promote their learning.



5. Stipek, D and Seal, K Eds (2001) *Motivated Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning*, Henry Holt: New York

3. Ready to Learn for Parents / Carers

The parent strand of Ready to Learn aims:

- (1) To assist parents in understanding what and how their children are learning in school, and;
- (2) To provide practical advice and support to assist parents in reinforcing their children's learning.

The parent / carer component of Ready to Learn

Children in primary schools spend much more time at home with their parents and carers than they do in school with teachers. Ready to Learn encourages parents to see themselves as an important resource for the child's learning, and to use it to their child's advantage. However, not all parents have the resources, skills or knowledge to realise this potential.

The parent component of Ready to Learn aims to help parents understand what and how their children are learning in school. It provides practical advice and support to assist parents in reinforcing their children's learning. In this way it facilitates parental engagement with the school, and the kind of collaborative approach to learning that most benefits children.

Ready to Learn offers parents / carers the opportunity to:

- Support their children's language and literacy skills
- Motivate and support their children's readiness to learn
- Provide creative activities to stimulate curiosity and a love of learning
- Improve relationships and communication between children, parents and teachers
- Develop their confidence in relation to interacting with the school.

All groups were led by at least one experienced parent facilitator and aimed to create an interactive, stimulating and safe space for parents / carers to meet.

The parents' groups were held in the school and with a couple of exceptions, took place within school hours.

The groups:

- Provide information about the content of the school day
- De-mystify educational language and concepts
- Provide practical tips parents can use at home
- Help parents identify a space in the day to spend some quality time with their child
- Help parents improve the home learning environment
- Offer practical tips to help parents to be an effective coach / mentor / educator for their child.

Maintaining high standards

It is important to ensure that a complex intervention like Ready to Learn is delivered 'as intended' and to a high standard. In keeping with good practice, Barnardo's prepared a detailed manual for each year of the programme, for both the children's After School programme and the parents' groups. Appropriately qualified and experienced staff were recruited to deliver the programme and received a comprehensive induction as well as on-going support and training throughout the three year trial period.



4. The Evaluation

Ready to Learn began in September 2010 with 300 Primary 1 children (then aged 4-5 years) and their families in nine Primary Schools. This cohort received the programme for three school years until June 2013. From the outset, Barnardo's planned a robust evaluation of the Ready to Learn programme. The Institute of Child Care Research was commissioned as independent evaluators of the Ready to Learn programme and used a cluster randomised trial design to assess the impact of Ready to Learn on children's literacy achievement and the other outcomes of interest.

Aims and objectives

The main aim of the evaluation was to find out whether, and to what extent, Ready to Learn improved the literacy of socially disadvantaged children.

The primary objectives of the evaluation were:

- To assess the effectiveness of Ready to Learn in improving the literacy of social disadvantaged children;
- To increase and maintain the engagement of parents with their child's education.

The secondary objectives were:

- To assess the effectiveness of the Ready to Learn programme in improving children's social, emotional and behavioural regulation skills;
- To ascertain the relative contributions of the two components of the programme;

- To explore issues of process and implementation, and the factors that might account for the Ready to Learn impact, if found.

Who was eligible?

Schools eligible for the study were co-educational primary schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. Two Education & Library Boards (BELB and NEELB) were chosen to provide a mix of inner-city and more rural environments. In addition, schools needed to have:

- Evidence that they were in need of the intervention
- No involvement in other Barnardo's projects / programmes
- Sustainable numbers
- No similar programmes planned or underway

How the effectiveness of Ready to Learn was measured

Prior to the evaluation commencing, sixteen schools were invited to participate in the study, all 16 accepted this offer on the understanding that they were not guaranteed to receive the programme. These 16 schools were randomly allocated to either receive the Ready to Learn programme (the Experimental schools) or 'education as usual' (the Control schools). The randomisation was carried out by N.WORTH, the clinical trials unit at Bangor University in Wales. As a result, 9 schools

were randomised to the experimental group and 7 schools to the control group.

The research team invited parents and children in Primary 1 in all 16 schools to participate in the study and sought parental / carer consent as confirmation.

All children in P1 in the Ready to Learn schools were eligible to participate in the Ready to Learn programme and Barnardo's gained consent from the parents / carers of P1 children for their participation.

Schools receiving the programme (Experimental schools)

- Avoniel PS
- Cliftonville Integrated PS
- Holy Family PS
- Nettlefield PS
- St Vincent de Paul PS
- Corran Integrated PS
- Moyle PS
- Parkhall PS
- St Brigid's PS

Schools not receiving the programme (Control schools)

- Elmgrove PS
- Euston Street PS
- Lowwood PS
- St Malachy's PS
- St Matthews PS
- St Mary's Star of the Sea PS
- Roundtower Integrated PS

Outcomes

A variety of measures (detailed in Table 1) were used to assess the impact of Ready to Learn on the primary outcomes of children’s literacy and parental engagement, and the secondary outcomes of social, emotional and behavioural regulation skills.

As the children were aged 4-5 years during the first year of the programme measures needed to be appropriate for this age group. In recognition of the children’s developing skills an additional measure of oral reading skills and reading comprehension (the York Assessment of Reading Comprehension) was added in Year 3.

In Year 3 it was also decided to discontinue the home environment measure (HOME). There were several reasons for this. No differences had been identified between the control and treatment groups during Years 1 and 2 (both groups were scoring ‘high’), and the measure felt ‘outdated’ because of its references to out-of-date technology, and lack of references to new technology, such as computers and tablets.

Measures involving the children were administered at three points during the school year, to reduce the burden of data collection on schools and children.

Table 1. *Measures used to assess the impact of the Ready to Learn programme.*

Primary outcome – CHILDREN	Measures
Improved reading achievement	<p>York Assessment of Reading Comprehension [YARC] (Year 3)</p> <p>Concepts about Print [CAP] (Years 1+ 3)</p> <p>The Naming Speed and Non-Word Reading Tests from the Phonological Assessment Battery [PhAB](Years 1, 2 + 3)</p> <p>Word Recognition and Phonic Skills [WRaPs3](Moseley 2003)A standardised measure of word recognition and phonic skills (Years 1, 2 and 3).</p> <p>British Picture Vocabulary Scale –II [BPVS-II] (Years 1+3)</p> <p>Elementary Reading Attitude Survey [The Garfield Test] (Years 1, 2 + 3).</p>

Table 1. cont... *Measures used to assess the impact of the Ready to Learn programme.*

Secondary outcomes – CHILDREN	Measures
Social, Emotional and Behavioural Regulation Skills (assessed in each year of the programme)	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire [SDQ] The Social Skills scale of the Teacher-Report of Child: Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales[PKBS] The Assessment of Children’s Emotional Skills [ACES] Teacher/principal interviews
Primary outcome – PARENTS	Measures
Engagement in child’s education	The Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment [HOME] (Years 1+ 2). The Home Learning Environment [HLE](Years 1+2). Parental interview (Years 1, 2 + 3)

Trained research assistants collected most of the measures, with the children’s class teachers completing those measures that required knowledge of the children’s everyday behaviour (i.e. the SDQ and the PKBS).

Further information about these measures can be obtained online, or from the Queen’s research team.



Ultrasaurus

Supersaurus



5. Findings from the Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial

Participation levels in the After School programme

Ready to Learn was not compulsory and, as a new service, it was unknown how many parents would agree to their children attending the After School programme (or the study). In the event, almost all parents in Ready to Learn schools said they wanted their children to participate in the After School programme, and the evidence points to children being very happy to do so. In some schools take up was 100%. As can be seen in Table 2, attendance was fairly consistent, tailing off slightly in Year 3, possibly in response to the children having the choice of other after school activities to choose from.

Impact on children’s reading achievement

The results of the study are mixed, but overall they point to a positive impact of Ready to Learn on children’s reading achievement. Not all the measures used were direct measures of reading, due to the young age of the children and the likelihood that a good percentage would be starting from a very low base. It is therefore particularly encouraging that Ready to Learn had most impact on those measures that more directly tested reading skills i.e. reading comprehension [YARC-Comprehension], reading fluency [YARC-Accuracy] and one of two measures of decoding [WrAPS].

Table 2. *Children’s attendance in the Ready to Learn After School programme*

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
78%	76%	75%

Table 3. Results of Ready to Learn on Children's Literacy and their Social, Emotional and Behavioural Regulation Skills

Primary outcome				
	Measure	Effect Size	Standard Error	Significant?
Improved Literacy	YARC (composite score)	0.18 ^a	0.09	Yes*
	CaP (raw scores)	0.06 ^b	0.27	No
	PHaB (raw scores)	-0.43 ^b	0.30	No
	WRaPS (standardised scores)	4.45 ^a	0.74	Yes***
	BPVS (standardised scores)	0.51 ^a	1.18	No
	Garfield (aggregate scores)	-0.12 ^c	0.18	No

Secondary outcome				
	Measure	Effect Size	Standard Error	Significant?
Social, Emotional and Behavioural Regulation Skills	SDQ (dichotomous problem score)	OR =0.20	0.14 (95% CI = 0.05 to 0.80)	Yes*
	PKBS (aggregate scores)	-0.42 ^c	0.20	Yes*
	ACES (aggregate scores)	0.12 ^c	0.22	No

^a based on standardised scores; ^b based on raw scores; ^c based on aggregate (or transformed) scores;

* sig. at 0.05 level; *** sig. at 0.001 level

Note: The WRaPs, PHaB and Garfield effect sizes refer to the yearly rate of change in the RTL pupils compared to the control pupils. The other measures refer to the effect of the programme in Year 3 while adjusting for Year 1 scores.

In relation to each of the outcome measures, children in Ready to Learn schools:

😊 Performed better overall than those in Control schools on the measure of reading comprehension (the YARC). The effects were not large, but the evidence suggests that it is unusual for an After School programme so clearly to demonstrate effects on reading skills⁶;

😊 Outperformed those in the Control schools, on linguistic phonics (as assessed by the WRaPS). This is an important reading skill and improving children's linguistic phonics at these age levels can lead to direct improvements in oral reading ability and reading comprehension;

😐 Did no better than children in Control schools on the second 'decoding' test, the PhAB Non-word Reading Test. Children in both groups improved each year, and the intervention was associated with some gains, but similar gains were observed in the Control group;

😐 Did no better than children in Control schools in relation to the BPVS. This is a measure of receptive vocabulary which, in this evaluation, served as a proxy measure for monitoring children's oral language development. As is evident in this evaluation, the

lack of improvement in the BPVS did not prevent children from making clear reading growth, and yet, studies suggest that over time, low vocabulary performance can undermine or reduce future growth. Particularly of concern, for both the Ready to Learn and Control schools, is that, by the end of the evaluation, the children performed below the level expected of children of their age, indicating that they were not keeping up with the amount of growth in language that the test's norming sample had evidenced and;

😐 Appeared to do less well than children in Control schools in relation to Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (Garfield), but this was a very modest difference, and in exploring these data, the research team found evidence to raise doubts about the validity of the Garfield, despite its extensive use.

6. Black AR, Somers M-A, Doolittle R, Unterman R, Grossman JB and Warner E (2009) The Evaluation of Enhanced Academic Instruction in After-School Programs. Final Report. NCEE 2009-4077. *National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance*.

Interpretation of the Findings

It seems likely that Ready to Learn improved children's reading achievement by improving their ability to decode words.

Decoding

In order to read a word correctly, we need to be able to 'translate' the letters we see into sounds. This involves learning how to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes (the smallest unit of sound in a language e.g. ball is made up of 3 phonemes: /b/ /awl/ /l/) independent of meaning.

Decoding or phonological awareness is at the heart of learning to read, and has sometimes been called the skill of 'word attack'. Children need to learn how to pronounce words using phonics rules. There are many phonics rules, and a variety of strategies to help children learn them.

- 'When two vowels go together, the first one does the talking (it says its name) and the second one does the walking (it is silent.)' Examples are 'feed', 'pain' and 'moat'.
- 'Sneaky E doesn't make a sound! At the ends of words he hangs around.'

Although there are always exceptions, decoding skills give children a good handle on reading.

Asking children to read nonsense words (like 'pootfeg') is one way of measuring their decoding accuracy. The WRaPS does this, and is the measure used in this study.

Impact on children's emotional and behavioural regulation

😊 Children in Ready to Learn schools were less likely to display problem behaviour at the end of the study compared to those in the Control group. Problem behaviour was assessed through the Strengths & Difficulty Questionnaire completed by teachers familiar with the child. However, other differences between children in the Ready to Learn and the Control schools were not found e.g. conduct problems. The results are encouraging, and even a modest impact on the lessening of children's problem behaviour may be important, but results need to be replicated and extended.

😐 Ready to Learn children did not outperform those in the Control group in relation to the development of emotional skills, as measured by ACES (the Assessment of Children's Emotional Skills), which assesses children's ability to recognise emotional arousal and to distinguish between feelings of being 'happy', 'sad', 'angry' and 'scared'.

😞 By the end of the study, children in Ready to Learn schools were outperformed by those in Control schools in relation to social skills, as measured by the Teacher Report of Child on the Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scale. This measure consists of 34 items that describe adaptive or positive

behaviours (e.g. 'is cooperative', 'follows directions', 'shows self-control') and includes three subscales: Social Cooperation, Social Interaction, and Social Independence.

evidenced their strong commitment to engaging parents with the school, from parents' evenings, through maintaining parent-teacher contact, to ensuring that children did their homework by the use of homework diary systems and teacher-parent communication.

Qualitative Findings

Challenges to parental engagement

Maintaining engagement in the parent sessions was challenging and often disappointing. Barnardo's succeeded in establishing a parents' group in three of the nine schools; these were largely maintained with a core group of five or six parents over the three years. In one school the Ready to Learn parent group went on to form a PTA. Another school never had a regular group of parents attend the sessions, despite Barnardo's best efforts and the repeated assurances from parents that they were interested in attending sessions.

Whilst those who attended the groups spoke very highly of them, this component of the programme was not as successful as Barnardo's hoped. This is not dissimilar from other programmes that have sought to engage parents in this way, and reflects the challenges of engaging parents whose educational histories may not predispose them to find such engagement easy.⁷

Attendance across all intervention schools was highest when the session involved the children i.e. the end of term celebration or an invitation to visit the 'Club' to observe or join in with activities. Interviews with school principals and teachers

Assessing the Impact of the Parent Component

Small numbers of participants and the difficulties encountered arranging interviews with parents in the Control group schools, meant that it was not possible to assess the particular contribution of the parent component directly to children's outcomes. The difficulties for the research team in securing interviews with parents reflects some of the same challenges faced by Ready to Learn staff in engaging parents.

However, feedback from parents who attended the groups suggested that this had improved their understanding of what and how their children were learning in school. They also felt that the advice and support they were given helped them to reinforce their children's learning at home.

In year three, nine of the parents interviewed had attended at least five of the parent sessions over the three years. Most appreciated the ethos of the Parents' Group and the reasons they gave for not attending more often, or for longer, included family commitments and the timing of the group sessions. The very small size of some groups may account for one or two parents saying that they did not find the group helpful. Most liked the groups; some valuing the social contact

7. See Harris and Goodall (2007) *Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement. Do Parents Know They Matter?* Department for Children, School and Families: Research Report DCSF-RW004.

and others the support provided with their children's learning, referencing the sessions on the Curriculum and Phonics as particularly helpful.

'I like coming here on a Wednesday, I like having other adults to talk to'

'I can't wait to try this at home'

'It gives me comfort that other mothers are going through the same thing'

One parent commented specifically on the help that the parent component contributed in setting and maintaining a routine with her child:

'I hadn't thought about how important it was to have a consistent routine, not just for her but for me as well. [Facilitator] was great in showing me how important this was'.

The parents also enjoyed the craft activities and parallel sessions with their children.

Another parent, who had previously shied away from helping with homework due to her lack of knowledge, said the sessions she attended had better equipped her, and encouraged her, to be more supportive and actively involved:

'Once I understood how phonics worked I was able to help her more. It's hard to get your head around'.

In short, the interviews confirmed the potential of providing parents with such support, but the evidence suggests that this part of the intervention was ineffective in the overall aim of Ready to Learn, which was to help raise achievement.

6. Children's views of the After School programme

The children loved Ready to Learn. Their feedback was captured through a series of focus groups that were convened annually. The children in these groups indicated that they enjoyed participating in Ready to Learn; they were positive about both the staff involved and the overall experience. At the end of year three, the majority said they would miss Ready to Learn and the staff, and one group was adamant that they wanted Ready to Learn to continue into P4 as it was 'really fun'.

When asked what they did and did not like about Ready to Learn the children said they liked:

- Being a 'helper' to the leader (e.g. putting the snack out or clearing up),
- 'Golden Time' where children choose an activity to do,
- The arts and crafts activities,
- Reading a different story each week,
- Taking 'Beat Baby⁸' home,
- Spending time with their friends after school and playing games.

Not all children were as enthusiastic. Some said they didn't like reading or the stories that they read each week. One or two did not like staying on after school;

'I don't like doing MORE work'

But these were a minority of the 80 children who took part in the focus groups. Most were very positive about the programme and the After School staff, and saw Ready to Learn as something quite distinct from school.

Most of the children said they liked to read, and these children were able to phrase this in terms of future benefits to themselves:

'When you grow up you'll know how to read and no-one will have to help you'

'If you didn't know how to read how could you teach your children?'

'You're better off getting smart so you can get into bigger schools and get a better job'.

Focus groups also explored children's perceptions of reading. They wanted books that were 'fun' to read i.e. pop-ups or ones that made noises or had funny drawings and made them think. They said that adults could make reading more fun by making funny voices when reading, or by giving them half a word and encouraging them to guess the rest.

In terms of reading **outside** of the Ready to Learn Club, most children had experience of reading on a computer, a digital reader or on a tablet. They liked the interactive aspect of reading electronic books, which gave them the chance to be the character in the story they were reading, or to watch the story acted out in video format. They liked being able to decide how a story ended. They also liked some of the practical benefits:

'You don't have to worry about the pages being ripped, you just swipe side to side'

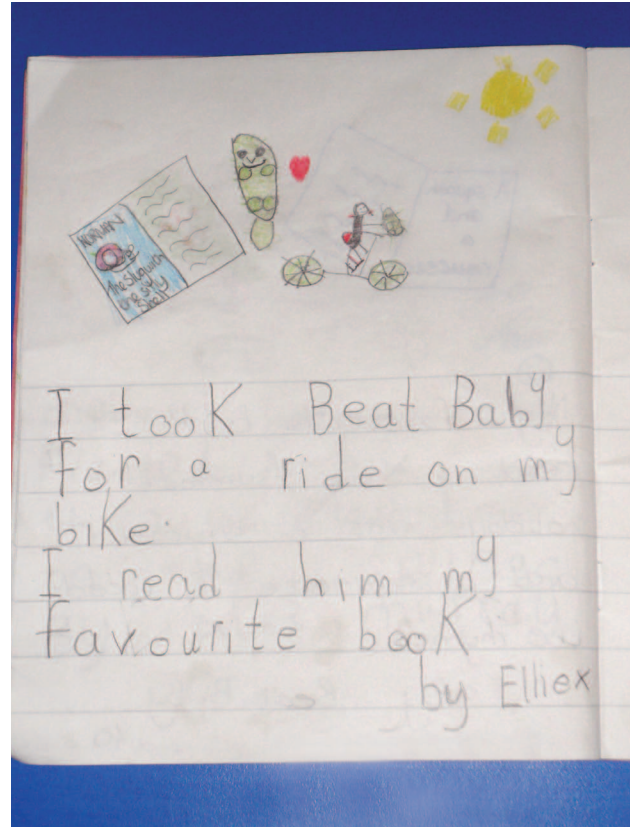
8. Beat Baby is a soft toy used in a variety of fun and creative ways to support Rhythm, Rhyme and Music sessions, holding children's attention and bringing emotional engagement to sessions with young children.

'You don't lose your place in the book with a Kindle or have to turn the pages!'

In P1 most children said they were read to at night time by their parents, but by P3 they were reading by themselves, a fact they seemed proud of by laughing whenever they were asked if someone read to them. A typical response was:

'No way, no-one reads me stories! That's for babies, I read all by myself'.

The children did like being read to, but not when it was deemed a 'bed time' story.



7. Parents' views on the After School programme

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. Most parents thought their children really enjoyed attending Ready to Learn and some reported their child being upset when they could not attend due to other appointments:

'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'

'I'm sorry it's ending, it has been fantastic to have this extra support over three years. [name of child] will really miss going'

The consistent friendliness and approachability of the Ready to Learn staff was particularly valued. Using some of the children's writing, art and craft work, staff in the programme created a special record of each individual's progress which went home at the end of the three years. This was particularly valued by parents:

'I loved seeing what she did over the past three years. She always talked about Ready to Learn and how fun it was so it was nice to see all her work'

By the end of year three, most parents reported an 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.'

'My child's literacy is much better than my other child...phonics seems to work so much better.'

Although some of these perceptions are at odds with some of the assessment data reported earlier, it is not unusual for perceptions to differ from the results of standardised instruments. It is also important to note that there are aspects of literacy that were not measured in this study, which might also account for some of the discrepancies.

8. Principals' and teachers' views on the After School programme

Every year interviews were conducted with the school principal and the class teachers in the Ready to Learn schools – some 88 interviews in all. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

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.'

RTL 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.'

RTL School, P1 Teacher

'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

9. Conclusion

In brief, the results of this cluster randomised trial are complex but promising. Successfully embedding an After School literacy programme within a school (in fact, in 12 classes in nine schools), run by another agency, with such positive results, is no mean achievement: it reflects well on both the schools and Barnardo's NI.

More than that, the findings suggest that Ready to Learn may be able to make a positive difference to children's reading, in contrast to other after school literacy programmes that have been subject to similarly rigorous evaluation.^{9 & 10} Whilst the findings were undoubtedly mixed, this in part reflects the challenges of assessing the impact of a literacy programme on such young children. The most important differences were in those measures that directly assessed 'literacy behaviour' - reading fluency, reading comprehension and decoding. Given the importance of reading to improving the life chances of children, this is an important finding and one that is worth celebrating and pursuing.



9. Zief, G. S., Lauver, S. and Maynard, R. (2006) Impacts of After-School Programs on Student Outcomes. The Campbell Collaboration, DOI10.4073/csr.2006.3.

10. Black, A. R., Somers, M.-A., Doolittle, F., Unterman, R., and Grossman, J. B. (2009). The Evaluation of Enhanced Academic Instruction in After-School Programs: Final Report (NCEE 2009-4077). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.

10. Key Learning

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, the Barnardo's experience and feedback from schools indicates that the second term of P1 or waiting until Primary 2 is a preferable stage to start a three day per week programme.
- 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

- Ideally, further research is needed to replicate the programme with continued rigorous evaluation to deepen our knowledge of the programme's impacts and to seek to improve its 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.
- The mixed findings in relation to social, emotional and behaviour outcomes also warrant further investigation and continued evaluation of future replication.

Partnership

- Careful planning and procedures must be in place to ensure smooth handover at end of the school day and to parents / carers when 'Club' is finished.
- 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 evidence from the parent component did not demonstrate an impact on the children's outcomes, data from parents and schools highlights that parental engagement was valued.
- Activities involving both parents and children were the best attended and received positive feedback and is something the programme should build on for future replication.

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

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