

Business in the

Community

Time to Read – A Ten Year Review



Business in the Community

Business in the Community is a membership organisation for successful companies committed to responsible business practice in the environment, workplace, community and economy. In Northern Ireland, hundreds of companies are working with us to improve the quality of life and opportunities for their employees, local communities, entrepreneurs, children and many other groups in society.

We have almost 800 members across the UK, 230 of these in Northern Ireland.

Our purpose is to inspire, engage, support and challenge companies to improve the impact they have on society.

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Authored by Michael Arlow, April 2009.



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Foreword

Few would disagree that learning to read confidently is a vital skill which all children must master. Those who fail to do so, face personally a lifetime of disadvantage, difficulty and frustration and in future years, add significant costs to society and the economy. At present in the UK one person in six has difficulty with reading and writing. In a country looking towards maintaining and improving its wealth and prosperity in the 21st century, this is a situation which is totally unacceptable.



Gaps in understanding appear early in young people and if ignored persist into adulthood, when remedial action is more costly and much less effective. Intervention needs to take place in the early years in order to build confidence, competence, self-esteem and a desire to read for enjoyment. Schools cannot do this alone and developing a 'reading culture' is best achieved when it is based on a positive partnership with parents and the wider community.

To really move things forward, we have to 'blur the edges' where traditional schools stop and where the world outside begins. We must use every resource, every parent and every stakeholder to get the message to children that reading matters and that is why schemes such as Business in the Community's 'Time to Read' are so important. Volunteers cannot replace teachers or parents, but giving children the opportunity to work with enthusiastic adults from the 'outside world' has great benefits in terms of developing their social skills, reading confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes the value of spending time in the school on a one-to-one basis is simply about making the child feel important, something special.

This is a very useful study which summarises clearly the key issues involved in this important debate and why initiatives such as 'Time to Read' are well worth pursuing.



Sir Robert Salisbury
Chair, Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce, Northern Ireland



Introduction

According to the National Literacy Trust (2009), across the United Kingdom, one person in six has difficulty with reading and writing. There is a growing body of evidence illustrating the specific and negative consequences of illiteracy for individuals, society and the economy. Early interventions to promote literacy are increasingly recognised as an effectual and *cost-effective* way of promoting academic achievement, employability and health, as well as tackling a range of related issues including social inequality and crime.

In Northern Ireland, as in other parts of the UK, attempts to improve literacy levels have not met expectations. Important targets for improvement have been missed and there is a disturbingly large gap between the highest and lowest achieving children, with evidence of inequality of opportunity in areas of social deprivation. With a major review of literacy and numeracy policy underway, policy makers are attempting to develop more effective approaches that also address the related problem of social inequality. However, in a context of growing financial constraint and far-reaching reform of the education system, the challenges are considerable.

While we do not yet know enough about the efficacy of mentoring or reading improvement programmes in the UK and beyond, rigorous qualitative and quantitative studies are showing that reading programmes involving one-to-one tutoring can have significant effects on an individual's literacy levels, confidence, self-esteem and a range of other measures.

Business in the Community's *Time to Read* project is one such initiative with significant potential to make a positive contribution to emerging policy priorities. *Time to Read* is a programme that involves volunteers from the business world spending an hour each week working one-to-one with primary school children (Key Stage 2) with the aim

of improving the children's reading skills. It has been operating for ten years and has shown a strong commitment to continuous improvement through interrelated processes of internal and external evaluation.

Qualitative studies have shown it to be well regarded as a worthwhile, successful and cost-effective programme. It is highly valued by children, parents, teachers and principals who report the development of new skills and new enthusiasm for reading as a result of the programme.

This review explores the development and success of *Time to Read* and considers how the programme makes a worthy contribution to development of children. This review begins by considering the costs of illiteracy to individuals, society and the economy and outlines the current policy context in Northern Ireland. Drawing on existing research, the review considers mentoring as a potential solution to the problem, and explores a number of existing mentoring programmes, drawing out the key characteristics and success factors of each. In light of this, the review moves on to consider *Time to Read* and evaluates ten years of evidence of the success of the programme. The characteristics and success factors of both the research and the programme are explored, before consideration is given to its appropriateness as a successful intervention model. Finally, the review makes a series of recommendations for the future development of *Time to Read*.

"*Time to Read* is the most successful school initiative that I have ever been involved in. It is now invaluable to our school. I can't emphasize enough just how much the children enjoy it."

Brenda McMullen, Principal, Cliftonville Integrated PS, Belfast



Context

The Costs of Literacy Difficulty: The impact on the individual, society and the need for early intervention

Literacy difficulties have long-term negative consequences for individuals. As the Northern Ireland Education Minister, Caitríona Ruane has commented,

“Children who leave school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills face a lifetime of difficulty and disadvantage” (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2008a).

Caitríona Ruane’s comments are clearly evidenced in research (most notably in the UK), including the work of Parsons and Brynner (2007) who found a strong correlation between literacy difficulties and social disadvantage. Those with the,

“Poorest grasp of literacy or numeracy, particularly literacy, had a relatively disadvantaged home life in childhood, both economically and in terms of education levels and educational support offered by parents.”

Parsons and Brynner (2007) continue by suggesting that those children were less likely to have had access to pre-school educational experiences and were already performing less well in cognitive assessments as early as five years of age. By the age of ten, the children were likely to have fallen further behind, becoming disillusioned with school and wanting to leave at the first opportunity. Stemming from this, they were most likely to have left full-time education at the earliest opportunity with no qualifications. Subsequently, they were found to be four times more likely to hold negative views of the value of education for future employment opportunities and often had lower career aspirations. Ongoing negative

consequences are likely to be experienced throughout life, in the labour market and at home, especially for men.

In a similar vein, James Heckman, the influential economist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2000, highlights the importance of early intervention as a cost-effective means of addressing social inequality, arguing that:

“Gaps in [reading] ability emerge early and persist. Most of the gaps at age 18 that help to explain gaps in adult outcomes are present at age five” (2008).

Heckman (2000a) also makes a strong connection between literacy difficulties and the family environment, once again highlighting the need for early intervention:

“The most economically efficient way to remediate the disadvantage caused by adverse family environments is to invest in children when they are young.”

Elsewhere (2007) he highlights:

“Later remediation of early deficits is costly, and often prohibitively so.”

He illustrates this by explaining:

“For every £1 invested in early years £17 is saved in future remedial action”

Heckman’s (2000) arguments and conclusions are supported by the research of Steve Aos and others at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) on the long-term cost-effectiveness of early intervention (see WSIPP, 2009).

Attempts have been made to quantify the cost to society of failure to address literacy difficulties. For example, in the UK, the Every Child a Chance Trust (2009) reviewed research on the long-term consequences for individuals and society. The research linked



literacy difficulties to a range of issues over and above the risks associated with social disadvantage and lack of qualifications. These included special needs provision, truancy, exclusion from school, reduced employment opportunities, increased health risks and a greatly increased risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. The cost, per person with literacy difficulty, of failure to master basic literacy skills in primary school was estimated at between £5,000 and £43,000 to age 30 and between £5,000 and £64,000 over a lifetime. The resulting cost to the taxpayer is between £198 million and £2.5 billion per year. As a consequence, the UK government has committed £160 million over a three-year period to offer 100,000 primary school pupils one-to-one tuition in literacy and numeracy. One component of this - Every Child a Reader, which offers six year old children one-to-one tuition with specialist teachers for 30 minutes per day for 12-20 weeks - has been successfully piloted and will initially be offered to 13,000 pupils rising to 30,000 in 3,000 schools by 2010-11.

While no comparable study has been conducted for Northern Ireland, it seems unlikely that the scale of costs will be significantly different. Philip McDonagh, economist with PricewaterhouseCoopers argues that early and effective literacy interventions are cost-effective solutions to these issues:

Effective early interventions are significantly less costly to the taxpayer than any later attempts at remediation or costs associated with social disadvantage.

“Frequently employers find themselves incurring, directly or indirectly, the cost of training workers in these basic skills, who appear to have been failed by the education system... a scheme such as *Time to Read* which invests in strengthening these skills ... can therefore contribute to higher productivity and a more efficient labour market at a much lower cost than later interventions” (McDonagh, 2009).

There is clear evidence that reading difficulties begin early and require early intervention to address them effectively. Failure to do so brings significant costs for individuals, society and the economy.

The Northern Ireland Perspective

In the UK, improving national literacy levels has proved to be challenging, with Tymms and Merrell (2007) finding that,

“Levels of reading have been more or less static since the 1950s... Five hundred million pounds was spent on the National Literacy Strategy with almost no impact on reading levels.”

They suggest that,

“Clearer trials of material before general release, more attention to the research literature, and serious consideration of cost-effectiveness would all surely have helped.”

Literacy and numeracy policy in Northern Ireland has experienced similar challenges and fresh emphasis is being placed on raising literacy levels following harsh criticism of past performance. The Department of Education introduced the Strategy for the Promotion of Literacy and Numeracy in Primary and Secondary Schools in 1998. By 2004-5, in addition to normal spending on the curriculum, £40 million was spent on specific literacy and numeracy programmes.



In spite of this expenditure, a 2006 report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office found that significant numbers of children were still not reaching established targets. At Key Stage 1, around 5% (1,214 children) failed to achieve the targeted standard; and at Key Stage 2, it was around 23% (5,500 children). In secondary schools at Key Stage 3, around 41% (7,000 children) failed to meet the target as compared with 1% in grammar schools.

In the same year, a House of Commons Public Accounts Committee report, *Improving Literacy and Numeracy in Schools (Northern Ireland)* concluded:

“Improving literacy and numeracy standards in schools continues to be major challenge in Northern Ireland.”

The report went on to describe progress to date as, “manifestly unsatisfactory” and noted, in particular, lower levels of achievement for boys and for children attending controlled secondary schools in areas of high deprivation in Belfast.

Partly in response to this emerging evidence, PricewaterhouseCoopers conducted two studies (PwC 2008a and 2008b) for the Northern Ireland Department of Education.¹ “Clusters of underperformance” were identified in schools in Belfast and in the controlled sector. Factors contributing to underachievement were thought to include:

- A lack of parental involvement in their children’s education
- A perceived lack of value placed on education in certain areas, particularly deprived Protestant areas and a shortage of role models (including fathers and male teachers)
- The impact of 30 years of civil unrest
- A lack of baseline data on young children, hindering early intervention

Measures to improve boys’ performance were proposed, including mentoring, more

personalised learning and the creation of an ethos of high expectations and aspirations in schools. Characteristics of effective schools and school systems were reported as including close linkages with parents and the wider community and making learning fun. Schools were encouraged to consider ways to collaborate beyond the school boundaries to a greater extent and to identify appropriate role models for boys internally and externally to promote the concept of reading for pleasure.

The ETI Chief Inspector’s Report (ETI, 2009) noted that “key benchmark data has identified improvements” since 2006, but indicated that improving standards in literacy and numeracy remains a challenge. For example, the report cites the PISA 2006 assessments in reading and mathematical literacy which,

“Confirm that the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils is greater here than in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland.”

Of the 57 countries participating, only seven had a wider distribution of reading ability than Northern Ireland.

In response to these challenges, Education Minister Caitríona Ruane established a Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce in February 2008, chaired by Sir Robert Salisbury, to review the existing strategy. Proposals were published for consultation in *Every School a Good School - A Strategy*

“Of the 57 countries participating, only seven had a wider distribution of reading ability than Northern Ireland.”

¹ A Research Briefing summarising both reports is also available (PWC, 2008c).



for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2008b).

The proposed strategy aims to:

- Raise the levels of attainment for all young people in literacy and numeracy
- Narrow the current gaps in relation to the outcomes achieved by boys compared with girls and between those most and least disadvantaged
- Narrow the gap between the highest performing and lowest performing pupils and schools, after 12 years of compulsory education

“the gap between the highest and lowest achieving pupils is greater here than in England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland.”

The Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce argue,

“Improved parental engagement... accompanied by efforts to encourage those with significant standing in the community to support school-based education, and to emphasise to young people that a lack of competence in literacy and numeracy skills will inhibit greatly their future employment prospects and reduce their effectiveness as adults in an increasingly technological and diverse society.”

Having considered various interventions, the Taskforce is making a series of recommendations to the Education Minister to address the challenges highlighted.



Solutions to Date: Evidence from Research

The preceding sections have shown that literacy difficulties typically begin early in life and that early intervention is required to address them effectively. Failure to address literacy difficulty early and effectively leads to:

- Serious, negative, and potentially lifelong, consequences for individuals
- Significant social and economic costs

In view of these costs, early intervention is generally regarded as being highly cost-effective. This section suggests that mentoring presents a solution to these issues, and considers a number of volunteer literacy mentoring programmes and their impact and success. It draws on the findings of a QUB Desk Study Report; two major research reviews, one from the US and one from the UK; and on other recent, relevant literature, with a focus on three US interventions, *Success for All*, *SMART* and *Experience Corps*.

The Impact of Mentoring

Hall (2002) contrasts the substantial body of evidence of the impact of mentoring in the United States with the paucity of evidence in the UK, noting in particular the lack of large-scale quantitative studies. He concludes that,

“US studies indicate that mentoring can have a significant impact on a number of measures, but that this impact may not be large... There is a very poor evidence base in the UK. Claims are made for the impact of mentoring but there is as yet little evidence to substantiate them.”

Although not referring directly to volunteer literacy initiatives, Hall (2002) argues,

“Mentoring needs to be properly integrated into its organisational context.”

This argument is reinforced by Hartley (2004) who asserts that mentoring programmes are,

“One effective means of supporting young people, not a single solution to complex social and individual needs... mentors are best regarded as complementary and an addition to the work of professionals... not as a replacement to them.”

Whitby (2006) highlights the potential positive impact of mentoring exemplified in a project involving community to primary school mentoring which resulted in improvements in areas including self-confidence, self-esteem and motivation. She notes that,

“By targeting children of primary school age, it was felt that this project offered a cost-effective preventative intervention which caught problems before they became entrenched.”

Whitby also identifies five key actions for effective mentoring:

1. Identify clear aims and objectives
2. Ensure mentoring is integrated within an organisational context
3. Allow time to recruit, screen and select mentors
4. Provide training for mentors before and after they are matched with young people
5. Provide ongoing and varied forms of support for mentors

These key actions are a recurring feature throughout literature on mentoring. The following section explores the impact of mentoring through effective volunteer tutoring programmes and interventions involving one-to-one support.



Effectiveness of Volunteer Tutoring Programmes

In the United Kingdom “most aspects of reading improvement are under-researched” (Brooks, 2002) and in the US there have been few systematically conducted studies of the effectiveness of volunteer reading programmes (Ritter et al., 2006, Baker et al., 2000). What studies have been conducted most often relate to programmes with intensive tutor training or which use professional tutors. As Ritter (2006) comments, until relatively recently, evidence was often limited and conflicting.

Ritter (2006) considers the work of Wasik (1998) and Shanahan (1998). Wasik (1998) compared studies of 17 programmes utilising volunteer tutors and found some evidence that such programmes can help children to improve their reading skills. However, there was a considerable variation between programmes and only two studies compared participants’ achievement with that of a control group. On the other hand, Shanahan (1998) found that despite limitations, volunteer tutor programmes can be effective in improving reading skills. However, Shanahan gives few details about his methodology, and some significant studies may not have been included.

Published in 2006, Ritter’s own major systematic review gathered, summarised, and integrated empirical research on the effectiveness of volunteer tutoring programmes for elementary school students. Tutors included parents, college age students and community volunteers of various ages. The review is based on data from 28 separate study cohorts involving 1,676 participants and revealed a relatively strong research base including more than 20 randomised field trials, although generally small samples were used.

Ritter (2006) reports that an analysis of the overall effect on all reading outcomes showed a,

“Positive and statistically significant positive effect of 0.30 standard deviations.”

Reading outcomes were grouped into six categories. Across the categories the average effect size was 0.23. Outcomes where volunteer tutoring programmes had a significant effect were: Reading Global (effect size = 0.26), Letters and Words (effect size = 0.41), Oral Fluency (effect size = 0.30) and Writing (effect size = 0.45). Positive but not significant effects were found in Reading Comprehension and Mathematics.

Ritter concluded that volunteer reading programmes can,

“Positively influence important reading and language sub-skills for young students. The results are substantial.”

As a secondary goal, the review attempted to identify characteristics of effective programmes. Effect sizes were calculated based on programme characteristics such as: types of tutors, age of children, highly structured vs. unstructured programmes. While highly structured programmes had a significantly greater effect on one category (Global Reading) no other significant

reading programmes can,
“Positively influence important reading and language sub-skills for young students. The results are substantial.”



differences were found, and Ritter argues:

“Programmes did not have to be highly structured to have positive effects, nor did they have to use a particular type of person as a tutor.”

Ritter asserts that his analysis,

“Should serve as one important piece of evidence used by policy makers and educators... as they seek affordable ways to offer additional services to students at risk of not meeting annual academic goals, it would be worthwhile to consider structured, reading-focused volunteer tutoring programmes as strategies to improve reading and language skills.”

Three elements of Ritter’s review are of particular interest here: (1) volunteer reading programmes can positively impact reading and language sub-skills for children; (2) the significant effect sizes identified; (3) programmes did not have to be highly structured to have positive effects.

it would be worthwhile to consider structured, reading-focused volunteer tutoring programmes as strategies to improve reading and language skills.”

Volunteer Reading Programmes: A partnership approach

In the UK, Greg Brooks (2002) reviewed early intervention schemes to help struggling readers and writers, in an attempt to enable schools to make informed choices as they plan interventions to support the minority of children who do not learn to read and write satisfactorily through high-quality classroom teaching.

“I have found the *Time to Read* programme to be one of the best initiatives implemented in the school to support reading. One of the main strengths of this is that the facilitators volunteer and are not coerced into it. They are highly motivated and very enthusiastic and this is passed on to the pupils they support.”

**Margaret McQuillan, Principal,
St Joseph’s PS, Belfast**

Brooks (2002) describes the use of a “partnership scheme” in which,

“Poorer readers are tutored one-to-one, or in small groups, by better readers of the same age, or by older children, or by adult volunteers, or (in some cases) by their teachers.”

Brooks observed that all effective partnership schemes provide poorer readers with substantially increased time for reading with support from,

“A sympathetic, more skilled reader who has received structured training for the purpose, and receives ongoing support... [Tutors must] know what to do when a reader falters or makes an error. As Bentley and Reid (1995, p.21) put it: ‘Hearing children read is not teaching them to read.’”

The evidence available to Brooks suggested that effective interventions of this kind can,

“Double the standard rate of progress... and it is reasonable to expect it.”

Proportionally greater gains were not necessarily achieved by interventions longer than one term. While he was unable to make generalisations about long-term impact, Brooks noted that most interventions



that conducted follow-up research found that “children maintained their gains” and concluded that,

“Where resources are limited, and partners are available and can be given appropriate training and ongoing support, reading partnership approaches deserve close consideration”

Brooks presents evidence that volunteer reading programmes can have a very significant effect on rates of progress and presents them as a valid policy option. While it is clear that we do not know enough about effective practice in this area, Brooks offers a strong indication of the major actual and potential impact of volunteer reading programmes.

“Where resources are limited, and partners are available and can be given appropriate training and ongoing support, reading partnership approaches deserve close consideration”



US-based Volunteer Reading Programmes: Success for All

In much of the literature arising from the *Success for All* programme in the US, the value of one-to-one tutoring is strongly affirmed (for example, Wasik & Slavin, 1993). *Success for All* is described by Slavin & Madden (2001) as “the largest research-based, whole school reform model ever to exist” and is cited as an example of the effective use of tutors. They argue that,

“One-to-one tutoring is the most effective form of instruction, especially for students with reading problems.”

Success for All tutors are generally certified teachers or highly trained paraprofessionals. They teach one 90-minute reading class per day and spend the rest of the day in one-to-one tutoring sessions with children in Grades 1 to 3. Children are selected for participation on the basis of assessment, results and teacher recommendation. Tutors meet with children for 20 minutes per day during school time every day for an 18-week semester, but some stay in the programme for up to one and a half years.

The *Success for All* programme, encourages:

- Students to learn to read by reading
- Effective communication between tutors and classroom teachers
- Tutoring to support the regular reading curriculum and not pursue different objectives
- The use of different strategies to teach the same skills in tutoring sessions.

Tutoring is the most expensive element of the *Success for All* programme, although Slavin and Madden (2001) claim that it is also,

“Probably one of the most cost-effective, because it is tutoring more than any other feature, that enables school to reduce retentions and special education placements.”

In their review of the programme, Slavin and Madden (2001) argue it is so effective because it:

- Allows tutors to teach to the individual student’s needs
- Allows tutors to learn about students strengths and weaknesses and what works best with them
- Gives children additional opportunities to read
- Allows for consistent and immediate feedback

Success for All strongly affirms the educational value and cost-effectiveness of one-to-one tutoring and provides useful descriptions of a successful methodology and the role of a literacy tutor. In contrast to *Success for All*, the following example presents a significantly less structured volunteer reading programme with minimally trained tutors.

US-based Volunteer Reading Programmes: SMART

Start Making a Reader Today (SMART) is a volunteer tutoring programme in Oregon. SMART aimed to reconnect schools and communities informed by the assumptions that adults can make a vital difference in the lives of young students by spending time reading to them and teaching them to read, and adults receive benefits as great as the students from the experience of meaningful involvement in the life of a young child. It was designed for low cost rapid implementation and expansion,

“Compared with the volunteer reading programmes evaluated... by Wasik (1998), *SMART* is low cost, serves a large number of students in predominantly low-income schools, and requires minimal training.”

It operates from kindergarten to second grade, focusing on students identified as being at risk of reading difficulties. By January 1999, *SMART* was operational in



144 schools, involving 7,100 volunteers and 7,100 children in one-to-one tutoring for two 30 minute sessions per week. Each school has a half-time *SMART* coordinator who is responsible for recruiting tutors and making practical arrangements in for the tutoring sessions. While tutors were diverse in age and background, the business community in particular was targeted for recruitment.

Tutor training lasted for 1-2 hours with only 30-40 minutes of that devoted to reading strategies. The remainder of the time concerned administrative and safety issues and most tutors received no further training, although a handbook was provided. The handbook encouraged careful preparation, presented sample questions that tutors might ask and recommended four main strategies:

1. The volunteer reads to the child
2. The volunteer and the child read together
3. The volunteer reads a section of text that the child then rereads
4. The volunteer asks the child questions during reading

SMART was evaluated by the Eugene Research Institute by means of a two year longitudinal study (Baker et al., 2000) and is widely promoted as a rigorously evaluated example of good practice².

Children in the *SMART* group participated in one-to-one tutoring for six months each of first grade and second grade. During this period, tutoring was offered in two 30-minute sessions per week. In the course of the study, individual students had between 49 and 98 sessions with a mean of 73 sessions.

During the study, students in the experimental group and the control group were tested three times using four measures: pre-reading measures; reading accuracy and fluency measures; reading comprehension measures and vocabulary measures.

Children in the experimental group scored higher than children in the control group on most measures. Effect sizes ranged from 0.32 on reading comprehension to 0.53 on Oral Reading Fluency. On word identification, the growth rate of the experimental group exceeded that of the comparison group and that of average achieving readers.

A follow-up study indicated that children maintained these gains after leaving the programme. By fifth grade, *SMART* participants are 60% more likely to reach the state benchmark reading competency level than similar students who did not participate in the programme.

In conclusion, Baker et al (2000) argue that,

“Extensive training may not always be necessary,”

and that,

“Accelerated reading outcomes can be achieved by volunteers with minimal formal training, using their own judgement and instincts on how to support literacy development.”

SMART is one programme, well regarded, of proven effectiveness that demonstrates the potential for volunteer reading programmes to have a positive benefit at relatively low cost.

“Accelerated reading outcomes can be achieved by volunteers with minimal formal training, using their own judgement and instincts on how to support literacy development.”

²See for example, www.evidencebasedprograms.org.



US-based Volunteer Reading Programmes: Experience Corps

The Experience Corps (EC) programme aims to bring adults aged 55+ into public elementary schools to tutor and mentor children that are deemed to be at risk of academic failure. Each Experience Corps volunteer receives training focusing on literacy and relationship building, and is assigned to a local school participating in the programme. The mentors provide one-to-one training to children aged six to nine years (Key Stage 1 and 2). Currently, almost 2,000 EC volunteers mentor approximately 20,000 students, resulting in each EC volunteer working approximately 15 hours per week.

In 2000, an evaluation of the effects of Experience Corps was undertaken by the Center for Social Development at Washington University's Brown School of Social Work. Data collection services were provided by Mathematica Policy Research Inc. (MPR).

881 students were involved in the evaluation - 430 were involved in the EC programme, while 451 were in the control group. The evaluation lasted for two years in total and involved data from three sources: student interviews; assessments completed by teachers; official school records.

The report found:

“over 97% of the teachers agreed that EC was beneficial to the students and the majority rated the program as no or low burden on teachers” (Howell et al, 2009: 16).

In addition, it was noted that,

“the tutors reported that the EC program had a positive impact on students, and their overall relationships with students were good” (ibid)

In addition, standardized reading tests were used to capture the impact of EC on the students' reading ability (tests used were: Woodcock Johnson Word Attach Subscale; Woodcock Johnson Passage Comprehension Subscale; and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test). Results from the standardized reading tests demonstrated that over the course of the evaluation, both groups made positive gains on the reading scores (i.e. those involved in the EC programme and those in the control group).

Upon further analysis, it emerged that students in the EC program outperformed students in the control group in a number of areas:

“on the WJ-passage comprehension measure and grade specific reading skills, the changes made by EC students were statistically more positive than the changes made by control students ($p < 0.05$). Effect sizes associated with these gains are 0.13 and 0.16, respectively” (Howell et al, 2009: 13).

The success of Experience Corps evidences the positive impact that a volunteer mentoring programme can have on young children, across a number of areas.



Time to Read

Time to Read is a mentoring programme that links business volunteers with local primary schools. The programme is aimed at promoting fluency, comprehension and an enjoyment of reading in children. Initiated in 1999, *Time to Read* was Business in the Community's first educational engagement programme and operated in five primary schools with support and volunteers from Northern Ireland Electricity. *Time to Read* currently involves more than 1,000 children in 130 primary schools and 500 volunteers from 120 companies. Since 1999, *Time to Read* has worked with 3,500 children during more than 53,000 hours of volunteer time, at a value of £1.3m, and has provided £130,000 worth of reading resources to schools. The programme is currently supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

Time to Read represents an important link between business and education. Indeed, the case for greater collaboration between business and education is a compelling one, and schools are increasingly encouraged to establish links with business as a current priority. Although business identifies the need to engage with schools, there is a recognition that this needs to be focused and pragmatic and centred on addressing real social and economic needs. Business



Since 1999, Time to Read has worked with 3,500 children during more than 53,000 hours of volunteer time, at a value of £1.3m, and has provided £130,000 worth of reading resources to schools.



in the Community has identified *Time to Read* as a programme that fits within the policy context and meets the needs of both business and schools.

The Process

Members of Business in the Community are encouraged to support *Time to Read*, and if they elect to do so, volunteers are recruited from within the company, screened through the Access NI clearance procedure and trained by the Business in the Community Education Team. Volunteers are encouraged to commit to three years in order to support children throughout Years 5, 6 and 7.

Volunteers undertake a two-hour training session and are given a handbook as a guide and point of reference. Three or more volunteers are placed in each school at the same time and Business in the Community staff meet with each volunteer twice per year to review progress.

"Time to Read is my one hour oasis in an otherwise hectic week. It gives me the opportunity to have some quality one to one time with some great children in a happy, relaxed environment and brings great rewards seeing the enthusiasm from the children each week and the progress they are making with the reading."

Effie Adair, Sx3

Schools appoint a *Time to Read* co-ordinator who is a point of contact and is responsible for practical arrangements. Teachers choose the children to benefit from the programme. Those chosen are from the mid-range in the class and are reluctant readers, underachieving, with low levels of confidence and self-esteem.

An initial meeting is held in school to ensure that the purpose and commitment required



to gain maximum benefit are understood. It is attended by the children, parents, volunteers, the school co-ordinator and a member of the Business in the Community Education Team.

Volunteers select from a bank of Key Stage 2 reading resources initially chosen following advice from the ELB Literacy Advisors and other specialists. They spend one hour each week during the school day in one-to-one sessions with two Key Stage 2 children, each child having 30 minutes, with a variety of paired reading approaches used.

Providing quality time and support each week through a positive role model from the world of work, with the children having an opportunity to visit their mentor's workplace, is seen as an important part of *Time to Read*. These visits provide opportunities for both the children and their teachers to experience workplace situations outside of the classroom.

The Costs

Business in the Community has calculated that it costs an employer on average £2,400 to allow one employee to be out of work every week to support two children as a *Time to Read* mentor (per school year). At present, no expense accrues to education authorities or to schools. Costs associated with *Time to Read* relate to the management of the programme, which, based on numbers of children currently participating, equates to £200 per year for each child being mentored.

Defining characteristics of *Time to Read*

At this point it is worth drawing attention to four defining characteristics of *Time to Read*:

1. It is simple in approach and delivery. Extensive training and high levels of expertise are not required nor is an elaborate or costly support system.

2. It is a volunteer programme relying on the commitment and goodwill of individuals from outside the education system.
3. It is highly cost-effective, especially when the costs of literacy difficulty to individuals, society and the economy outlined above are taken into account. Currently no costs accrue to education authorities or schools.
4. It is a mutually beneficial partnership between the business sector and the education system.

The following sections examine the key findings and recommendations of *Time to Read* evaluations to facilitate a better understanding of the efficacy of the model and specific elements within it.

It is *highly cost-effective*, especially when the costs of literacy difficulty to individuals, society and the economy outlined above are taken into account.



Evaluating Time to Read

This section presents key findings and recommendations of internal and external evaluations of *Time to Read*. It is important to recognise that Business in the Community has a clear commitment to the ongoing development of *Time to Read* through interrelated processes of internal and external evaluation, with a view to maximising the outcomes and refining the programme. Evaluations and surveys conducted include:

- An evaluation conducted by Deloitte & Touche (2006)
- A supply and demand study by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2006)
- An evaluation through a series of in-depth focus groups, undertaken with support from Atlantic Philanthropies (2006)
- A survey of school principals conducted by Business in the Community (2008)
- An evaluation including a randomised controlled trial conducted by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University, Belfast (2009)

Business in the Community's commitment to ongoing improvement through rigorous reflection has been recently acknowledged by Queen's University Belfast (QUB), who noted:

"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."

Business in the Community's dedication to pushing the boundaries of *Time to Read* is reflected in the fact that the most recent piece of research conducted,

"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."

Business in the Community's commitment to ongoing evaluation reflects a desire to record the achievements of the volunteer group and their contribution to the development of children at primary school. It also reflects a desire to continuously improve the methods employed and to contribute more effectively to wider literacy policy goals in Northern Ireland.

"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."



1. Deloitte & Touche Evaluation 2003

The first external funding for *Time to Read* was provided by the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) with additional support from Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). In 2003, Deloitte & Touche was commissioned by BRO to undertake an evaluation of *Time to Read* with the aim of: assessing impact to date; providing guidance on future delivery; assessing the contribution of business and, assessing the usefulness of one-to-one reading support in tackling educational disadvantage in deprived communities. At the time of the evaluation, 93 volunteers and 36 primary schools were participating (with 21 of the primary schools being from the Belfast Education and Library Board area). 57% of the schools were in BRO targeted wards.

The evaluation included surveys of participating schools, parents and volunteers, as well as interviews with board members, Business in the Community staff, volunteers and school literacy coordinators.

The evaluation found that *Time to Read* was generally regarded as,

“An enriching experience”

and that there was,

“Overwhelming agreement amongst schools, volunteers and within Business in the Community that *Time to Read* did

“Overwhelming agreement amongst schools, volunteers and within Business in the Community that *Time to Read* did make valid and important contributions to literacy.”

make valid and important contributions to literacy.”

Schools pointed to increased self-confidence and self-esteem in the children, which they felt would have a lasting impact on academic achievement.

Of volunteers who responded, 100% indicated that children showed greater understanding when reading; 87% felt they began to read unsupported more often and expressed greater interest in books. However, in view of the absence of baseline data and standardised literacy tests, the evaluators found it was impossible to disaggregate the impact of *Time to Read* from other factors, or to give any quantitative measure of improvement in literacy skills.

Schools valued the additional range of reading materials and volunteer time and commitment. The volunteers were perceived to have,

“Made a considerable impact on the participating children who have identified with positive role models in the business world and as a result have developed stronger interpersonal skills with adults.”

From the volunteers’ perspective, all respondents believed that the project had a positive impact and would recommend participation to colleagues. All respondents found the initial training either “useful” or “very useful” and were either “well prepared” or “very well prepared” for the *Time to Read* programme. Some would have liked more information on, for example, “how to cope with phonetics”, while others would have liked a follow-up meeting after a few tutoring sessions had taken place.

There was a variety of experience with school support: 21% of volunteers met with the literacy coordinator or Principal on every visit while 19% met only once per term. More than a third of volunteers felt that they were either “badly” or “not well



supported” by the literacy coordinator but 75% felt well supported by Business in the Community.

The evaluation also noted Business in the Community’s success in engaging private sector entities and nurturing strong relationships with sponsoring companies to secure sufficient numbers of volunteers.

In terms of potential opportunities for improvement, the report identified a need for more robust and systematic support and feedback to ensure a standardised approach with volunteers, within schools and with parents. It was also acknowledged that while efforts had been made to align *Time to Read* with wider policy objectives, further work was needed.

Key Findings

1. *Time to Read* has been well received in schools and is considered a worthwhile project in terms of:
 - a. Building self-esteem in children
 - b. Increasing their confidence
 - c. Engendering enthusiasm for reading
2. There is consensus that the project has not been viewed as a “literacy improvement” scheme but rather as a “literacy enhancement programme”
3. No tangible evidence exists to prove any real increase in literacy levels
4. The general experience of volunteers is positive, however 50% will not be continuing beyond the three year commitment

Schools pointed to increased self-confidence and self-esteem in the children, which, they felt would have a lasting impact on academic achievement.

5. There are areas for improvement in volunteer experience with regards to:
 - a. Business in the Community support and feedback mechanisms
 - b. Standardising approach within schools and with parents
 - c. Ensuring succession planning to meet future demand

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. *Time to Read* has been an enriching experience for all concerned
2. There are valuable communication, logistical and administrative lessons to be learnt which would enhance the scheme for volunteers and schools
3. *Time to Read* has made valid and important contributions witnessed through positive behavioural changes in children (eg, self-esteem and increased self-confidence)
4. The *Time to Read* scheme should be viewed as a “literacy enhancement” project rather than a literacy improvement project because improvements cannot be measured in any quantitative manner. Influencing factors include:
 - a. Absence of any standard literacy test within Belfast primary schools to use as a baseline
 - b. Impossible to disaggregate the impact of *Time to Read* from all other literacy initiatives used within primary schools
 - c. Business in the Community failed to carry out their own baseline school assessments at start of the project
 - d. No formal logging of books read by children or monitoring of subsequent progression
5. Continuation of programme is dependent on securing additional funding and volunteers
6. Alignment required on strategic educational issues between BITC/Belfast Education & Library Board/Department of Education



This very positive evaluation reflects the value of the *Time to Read* model as perceived by those involved. Findings and recommendations should be seen in this context of positivity. Some recommendations also emerge in later evaluations, for example, support for volunteers, monitoring progress and alignment with wider policy objectives. It is important to recognise that effective support for schools and volunteers is essential to maintain commitment and also to promote quality and effective practice. The formal logging of books read by children has the potential to provide important evidence of the efficacy of *Time to Read* as well as adding value for children and teachers.

Alignment with wider policy objectives was important in 2003, but is perhaps even more so now as literacy policy in Northern Ireland is reviewed. Business in the Community is aware of ongoing developments and must decide if it is necessary to adapt *Time to Read* to be consistent with policy by refining the aims and objectives, reviewing current training for volunteers and focussing on the nature of interactions that take place in mentoring sessions. Changes are unlikely to be major and should not significantly add to the complexity of the mentoring process.

“The children have thoroughly enjoyed the experience and have gained not only in terms of improved literacy skills, but have also built up a warm and personal friendship with their volunteers and grown in confidence and self esteem.”

**Maura McAnaney, Literacy Co-ordinator,
St Malachy’s Primary school, Belfast**



2. Focus Group Evaluation 2006

Following the completion of the Deloitte & Touche evaluation, a relationship began to develop between Business in the Community and The Atlantic Philanthropies. Arising from this, funding was provided for a seconded teacher to evaluate the impact of *Time to Read* on children and volunteers; to identify strengths and areas for improvement; and to make recommendations for good practice. Data was collected through focus groups, interviews, school visits and written feedback from parents and volunteers.

Impact on Children

The evaluation found that,

“Children, volunteers and teachers identified confidence as the most obvious impact of *Time to Read*... and many felt this was the main outcome.”

Encouragement and praise from volunteers helped to boost self-esteem, and increased confidence was reported in terms of reading in general and reading in public. One parent observed that increased confidence had helped their child to learn and achieve more.

Children clearly enjoyed their involvement in the programme, some saying “it was the thing they enjoyed most in school” and that they were envied by others in their class. Participation often led to an increased appetite for, and enjoyment of, reading.

Some teachers and principals reported significant improvements in levels of attainment in reading after one year of participation, though the report

Participation often led to an increased appetite for, and enjoyment of, reading.

acknowledged that it is difficult to determine how much progress is attributable to *Time to Read* or to other factors. Some parents reported that their children were now able to help *them* with difficult words.

Positive relationships developed between volunteers and children with volunteers often described as friends. It was also felt that participation contributed to aspirations for adult learning and work, especially where a workplace visit had taken place.

Impact on Volunteers

Volunteers were very positive about their experience, with some describing it as a highlight of their working week. Many expressed their commitment to helping children and sharing their love of reading. Some said that more feedback from schools on the child’s progress would be useful and thought that Business in the Community could be more proactive in facilitating such communication. Some reported that volunteering was valued at senior management level, but not necessarily at line manager level, especially when their department was under pressure.

Strengths

Children, teachers, volunteers and parents agreed that the single most valuable aspect of *Time to Read* was the opportunity for one-to-one tutoring. Teachers in particular valued volunteers as role models for children and the additional reading resources provided by companies. Some noted the mutual benefits to be gained by both businesses and schools from collaboration. The simplicity of the programme was understood as a strength and there were concerns that it might become overcomplicated because of the demands of evaluation or assessment.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations

The report identified areas for improvement and recommendations for good practice in relation to the *Time to Read* process, schools, and communication within



companies. Most of these related to administrative issues or to better communication and information sharing between partners. Other recommendations included:

- More comprehensive initial training
- Better opportunities for volunteers to share good practice
- Better targeting of schools in areas of social need

In a minority of cases other needs were expressed, including:

- New or replacement books
- School rooms better suited to the purpose
- More and better contact between schools and volunteers
- *Time to Read* sessions should coincide with class reading time

The report correctly stressed the importance of ongoing and regular evaluation for the quality and continual improvement of *Time to Read* provision.

Conclusion

Time to Read is a simple initiative that clearly results in desired outcomes for the child. It is a programme that offers a child in Key Stage 2, one-to-one attention from an adult on a regular basis. It introduces a new role model and an opportunity for the child to see something of the world of work.

There are obvious benefits for the volunteer and the employer.

It is clear that this is a successful programme but that there are some key areas of improvement. With effort to implement the recommendations for good practice the intended outcomes for children and volunteers can be maximised.

This evaluation mirrors the positivity of the Deloitte & Touche evaluation, strongly

reflecting perceptions of *Time to Read* as a successful programme with obvious benefits to all involved. Impact on children is described in terms of increased confidence and improved reading. The introduction of children to a new role model and to the world of work are elements worthy of note, which resonate with new proposals on literacy policy in Northern Ireland. The recommendations have some similarities with the Deloitte & Touche evaluation, such as urging better communication and information sharing between partners; more comprehensive initial training and better opportunities for sharing good practice. Better targeting of schools in areas of social need is also proposed.

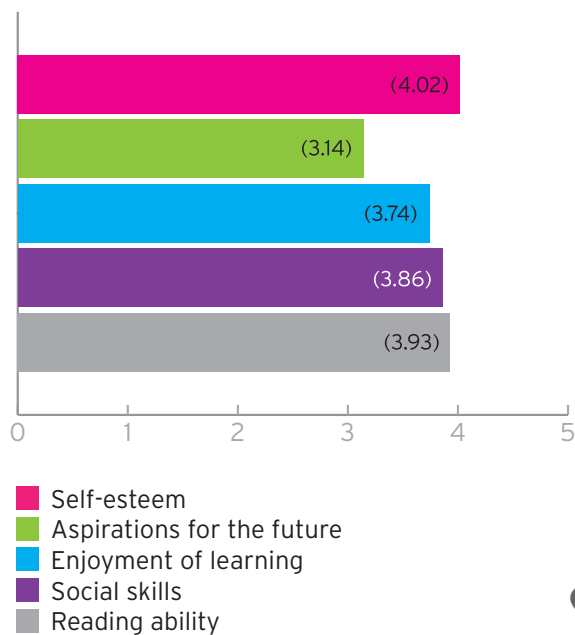
"I think my son Colin has really benefited from having a *Time to Read* volunteer. He reads a lot more at home and I am now buying him books which he chooses himself when we are shopping. He says that Marie is making his reading more enjoyable and I know he is always talking about Time to Read and he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

Anne McGeown, parent,
St John the Baptist PS, Belfast



3. The Principals' Perspective 2008

In September 2008, Business in the Community staff surveyed 48 principals who had been directly involved in the QUB evaluation of the *Time to Read* programme. Each principal had been introduced to the programme at the beginning of the 2006/07 school year. The survey was conducted face-to-face where possible and otherwise by telephone. Principals were asked to rate the impact on children of *Time to Read* on a five-point scale in five main outcome areas. The areas are as follows and mean averages of principals' responses are included in brackets:



In the course of interviews, principals made a range of additional comments and it is particularly interesting to note that 77% wanted more *Time to Read* volunteers, 98% said they would recommend the programme to other schools and many regarded *Time to Read* as a great form of support and benefit to the children.

It is evident that the surveyed principals value the contribution made to the development of pupils by *Time to Read* and a significant majority would like to have more volunteers. The contribution is valued particularly in relation to self-esteem and

reading ability. It is also important to note the perception of a wider contribution to social skills, enjoyment of learning, aspirations for the future as well as a support function offered by many volunteers.

Most principals are satisfied with the scheme as currently operated, although systems for communication between Business in the Community, schools and volunteers could be strengthened. A significant number of principals indicated that the reliability of volunteers is a key to success. While there is no indication of problems in this area, more effective communication would help to ensure that it does not become a problem.

Key Findings

Time to Read is perceived to have a particularly strong impact on:

- Self-esteem
- Reading ability
- Social skills

It also impacts on:

- Enjoyment of learning
- Aspirations for the future

98% of principals would recommend *Time to Read* to other schools.

77% of principals wanted more *Time to Read* volunteers.

98% (of principals) said they would recommend the programme to other schools and many regarded *Time to Read* as a great form of support and benefit to the children.



Some principals want better communication between Business in the Community, schools and volunteers.

Principals clearly have a strong perception that *Time to Read* represents effective practice in terms of engagement of volunteers with children and in the development of skills and dispositions. While some principals felt that the QUB research was an “imposition on the programme”, it is possible to develop routine feedback systems which are not demanding in time or effort, but which enable ongoing, low level monitoring and evaluation to become embedded at the level of the school and volunteer.

One aspect worthy of further consideration is the potential to explore more effective sharing of practice across the programme. This could facilitate the collection of data in relation to effective and valued behaviours and roles played by volunteers. For example, it may be possible to establish an Internet forum for the sharing of practice. It is certainly open to question whether it would be used and useful, nevertheless, it has the potential to be a low, or zero cost, mutual support system facilitating more effective communication.

“these children are gaining the invaluable experience of conversing and engaging with adults other than teachers and relations which is building their self esteem and their social skills. This dovetails neatly with our school’s vision for our pupils, in promoting their self esteem and confidence.

Mr G Cosgrove, Principal,
St Eithne’s PS, Derry



4. Queen's University Belfast Evaluation 2009

Business in the Community identified the need for a new evaluation capable of providing robust empirical data on the effectiveness of *Time to Read*. This was facilitated by financial support for development and evaluation from The Atlantic Philanthropies. With the Dartington Social Research Unit, work began to ensure that *Time to Read*:

- Was effectively targeted to children most in need
- Could be scaled up to provide support for many more children
- Could be delivered consistently across schools
- Was capable of achieving the goals of developing literacy skills and self-confidence as well as raising personal and professional aspirations

Business in the Community established an Education Steering group whose membership included principals, academics, Department of Education officials and representation from business partners. With their advice, a logic model was developed to identify the aspirations and objectives of *Time to Read* for children. The model involves progression through each of the following:



In 2006, the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University, Belfast was commissioned to evaluate *Time to Read* using a randomised control trial on the basis of the logic model and to test four pupil outcomes:

1. Self-esteem (and later, locus of control)
2. Enjoyment of learning
3. Reading
4. Aspirations for the future

A baseline survey was conducted in 2006 to establish baseline data in relation to specific outcome measures and to identify and profile any clusters of children who share similar socio-demographic characteristics with relation to their progress in the four outcome measures.

It was hoped the baseline survey would identify those who were most likely to benefit from participation in *Time to Read* and their specific needs. Contrary to the expectations of some *Time to Read* stakeholders, no significant clusters were indicated. It had been anticipated that children with low self-esteem or low reading confidence, for example, would emerge as cluster defining characteristics.

Partly on the basis of these findings, a decision was taken to depart from the previous *Time to Read* practice of asking teachers to identify children most likely to benefit from participation. For the purposes of the randomised control trial, no account was taken of socio-demographic factors that had been perceived by some *Time to Read* stakeholders as key predictors of impact on individual children.

The randomised control trial involved 734 children from 50 schools across Northern Ireland, 360 in the intervention group and 374 in the control group. Additionally, focus groups and qualitative interviews with programme developers, principals, mentors and children explored issues relating to programme delivery.



Data from the qualitative interviews and focus groups confirmed the earlier findings of the Deloitte & Touche evaluation noting that,

“*Time to Read* was perceived to be cost-effective... very well established and well regarded.”

More specifically, principals, teachers and volunteers had a “very strong perception” that the programme has a positive impact on children in terms of their:

1. Confidence as readers
2. Enjoyment of reading
3. Skills in reading
4. Appreciation of the world of work

These views were shared 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.”

Evidence from the randomised control trial showed a positive effect on increasing children’s future aspirations (effect size = 0.17) yet was unable to find quantitative evidence in relation to the other outcomes, and recommended further research. It is important to note that the evaluators themselves emphasise,

“It would be wrong to interpret the... findings as implying that *Time to Read* is ineffective. All that this present randomised controlled trial has demonstrated is that the current logic model, and 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.”

They draw attention to studies suggesting that doing well in education is not associated with general self-esteem; it

is associated with academic self-esteem. Similarly, it is suggested that participation in *Time to Read* may not lead to children having greater global self-confidence, but to greater confidence as readers. Similarly, *Time to Read* may lead to improved reading skills rather than impacting on general reading levels.

In view of the randomised controlled trial findings, evaluators concluded that it would be “premature to begin recommending revisions to the programme.” However they did propose that a further and smaller-scale randomised controlled trial be conducted on the basis of a “more appropriate logic model to describe *Time to Read* that incorporates more specific and reading related outcomes.” Furthermore, additional exploratory analysis indicated that *Time to Read* may have a stronger effect on some subgroups, particularly boys from deprived areas and children with initially low levels of self-esteem and reading ability. This lends support to the view of some stakeholders that the trial may have overlooked the need to target significant clusters and/or particular groups of pupils.

Key Findings:

Qualitative interviews and focus groups found that:

- *Time to Read* was perceived to be cost-effective, well regarded and had a strong impact on children in relation to their:
 - Confidence as readers
 - Enjoyment of reading
 - Skills in reading
 - Appreciation of the world of work

“I think it has had a dramatic impact on their confidence, their enjoyment of reading and it has certainly made them more interested in finding books with different titles that they previously were not interested in.”

Teacher quoted during focus groups for the Queen’s University Evaluation 2009



- Children found *Time to Read* to be a “positive and enjoyable experience”
- The randomised controlled trial:
- Indicated that *Time to Read* had a positive effect in terms of increasing children’s future aspirations
 - Was unable to show any effects in relation to the three remaining outcomes (levels of self-esteem, enjoyment of education and reading level)
 - “As pre-specified, may have been looking in the wrong place” for evidence
- Further exploratory analysis suggested that the programme may have a stronger effect for particular subgroups of pupils (notably boys from deprived areas and those with low initial levels of self-esteem and reading ability).

In view of the growing body of research and current developments in Northern Ireland literacy policy, the evaluation demonstrates that this is an opportune time to review the programme’s future and intended target audience.

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.

Recommendations

- It is premature to recommend revisions to the programme itself
- A further, smaller scale randomised controlled trial should be conducted
- A more appropriate logic model should be developed in close consultation with stakeholders to include more specific and reading-related outcomes

It is interesting to note that the randomised controlled trial was able to find a positive effect in terms of increasing children’s future aspirations. This finding emphasises the unique contribution of the business background of volunteers to the *Time to Read* model, by being role models and introducing children to the world of work while working on reading skills.

The qualitative data was very much in line with the highly positive findings of earlier evaluations showing *Time to Read* to be a well established, well regarded and cost-effective initiative, enjoyed by children and which impacts on their confidence as readers, enjoyment of reading, skills in reading and their appreciation of the world of work.



Summary and Conclusions

The Need for Early Intervention

There is clear evidence that literacy difficulties begin early and require early intervention to address them effectively. The consequences for the individual, society and the economy of not addressing literacy difficulties effectively are well understood. For individuals,

“Children who leave school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills face a lifetime of difficulty and disadvantage” (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2008a).

It has been recognised that early intervention represents a potential solution to this issue. Effective early interventions are recognised as a highly cost-effective solution in comparison to later attempts at remediation or subsequent costs associated with social disadvantage. As James Heckman, the influential economist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2000, has noted,

“The most economically efficient way to remediate the disadvantage caused by adverse family environments is to invest in children when they are young” (2000a),

“Later remediation of early deficits is costly, and often prohibitively so” (2007).

In the UK, the cost of failure to master basic literacy skills in primary school has been estimated at between £198 million and £2.5 billion per year. Attempts to improve literacy levels across the UK and Northern Ireland have proven expensive and have yielded disappointing results. However, in response to the considerable criticism of literacy and numeracy policy in Northern Ireland, a Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce was established in February 2008 to reviewing the existing strategy and make proposals for the future.

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The Positive Impact of Mentoring

Research into mentoring programmes continues to be a growing area of interest and existing and emerging research highlights the potential of volunteer literacy mentoring programmes to have a positive impact. For example, based on research in the US, Ritter concluded that volunteer reading programmes can,

“Positively influence important reading and language sub-skills for young students. The results are substantial.”

Additionally, he found that,

“Programmes did not have to be highly structured to have positive effects, nor did they have to use a particular type of person as a tutor.”

Ritter asserted that his analysis,

“Should serve as one important piece of evidence used by policy makers and educators... as they seek affordable ways to offer additional services to students at risk of not meeting annual academic goals, it would be worthwhile to consider structured, reading-focused volunteer tutoring programmes as strategies to improve reading and language skills.”

In the UK, Brooks (2002) suggested that effective interventions, similar to *Time to Read*, can,



“Double the standard rate of progress... and it is reasonable to expect it.”

Brooks concluded that,

“Where resources are limited, and partners are available and can be given appropriate training and ongoing support, reading partnership approaches deserve close consideration.”

Evidence from existing programmes highlights the positive impact of the mentor, regardless of their experience as a qualified teacher, or as a partly trained volunteer. *Success for All* is an example of a programme using qualified teachers and other professionals as one-to-one tutors, whereas *SMART* successfully uses minimally trained volunteer mentors, highlighting that:

“Extensive training may not always be necessary... Accelerated reading outcomes can be achieved by volunteers with minimal formal training, using their own judgement and instincts on how to support literacy development” (Baker et al., 2000).

Business in the Community's Time to Read is simple in approach and delivery, and focuses on early intervention. Time to Read presents a unique opportunity for schools to establish links with local business and in some cases can lead to effective business-education partnerships.

An Effective Model

Business in the Community's *Time to Read* is another example of a volunteer mentoring programme that works. The programme is simple in approach and delivery, and focuses on early intervention. *Time to Read* presents a unique opportunity for schools to establish links with local business and in some cases can lead to effective business-education partnerships.

While mentor training is provided, a high level of expertise is not required, nor is there an elaborate or costly support system. Rather, the programme relies on the commitment and goodwill of employers and individuals from the business community. It currently operates at no cost to schools or education authorities, as most costs are met by businesses that participate in the scheme. Costs relate to the management of the programme, which, based on numbers of children currently participating, equates to £200 per year for each child. Especially when compared to other literacy initiatives, *Time to Read* is highly cost-effective.

Evaluations have shown *Time to Read* to be a well established, well regarded and cost-effective initiative, enjoyed by children and which impacts on their confidence as readers, their enjoyment of reading, skills in reading, their appreciation of the world of work. It has also been shown to have a positive effect on increasing children's aspirations for the future.

As with any model, evaluations have made suggestions for improvement. These largely relate to training and support of volunteers, communication between partners, the content of mentoring sessions and monitoring of progress. It is also important that the articulation of the aims and objectives of *Time to Read* is closely aligned with emerging literacy policy in Northern Ireland. These recommendations relate to practice and programme articulation and do not undermine the validity of the model or require significant changes to it.



Time to Read represents a positive example of a partnership between business and schools to address the problems of illiteracy and social disadvantage that opens channels of communication and opportunity in a striking and powerful way. Children enjoy additional support in the development of literacy skills but there is also evidence of wider support developing through social interaction. Children also gain an appreciation of the world of work and an enhanced view of their potential place within it.

The evidence presented in this paper places *Time to Read* firmly within the realm of effective practice, and evaluations of *Time to Read* reinforce this view. The Northern Ireland education system is in the midst of major administrative reform, literacy policy is in transition and financial stringency is likely to be a constraining factor for some time.

In this context, there is a compelling case for business and the education sector to work together to develop *Time to Read*, as

one element of an integrated literacy policy. *Time to Read* has the potential to make a unique and cost-effective contribution to raising literacy levels particularly in the “clusters of underperformance” (PwC, 2008c) identified in recent research. More broadly, this would represent a strengthening of civil society and an expansion of an important and productive model of collaboration between business and government to address social and economic need through education.

In this context, there is a compelling case for business and the education sector to work together to develop *Time to Read*, as one element of an integrated literacy policy.



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Testimonials

Parents

Megan really enjoys going out to the reading sessions with her *Time to Read* volunteer. She is now more interested in reading and reads more at home and I know this is because of the extra help she gets in *Time to Read*.

Jenny Goodman, parent, S Joseph's PS, Belfast

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

Caolan was not a very confident child. Being involved in *Time to Read* he has become more confident and is really interested in reading. Now you never see him without a book and it is nice to see him with a book in his hands. It is a fantastic thing.

Sinead Doherty, parent, St John's PS, Derry

Teachers/Principals

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. I can't emphasize enough just how much the children enjoy it. The interaction with our volunteers, Bob, John and Mary, on a regular basis has benefited the children both socially and academically.

Brenda McMullen, Principal, Cliftonville Integrated PS, Belfast

Time to Read volunteers have been coming every week to my school in Newtownabbey for nearly three years and the pupils

who have had one-on-one support have really benefited from the experience. Most children naturally love to read and to have the constant company of a tutor "friend" makes it truly special for them. The encouragement and guidance of the volunteers from a variety of businesses cannot fail to make a difference in a child's confidence and achievement.

Teachers can see evidence of improvements made, sometimes in general confidence and attitude, sometimes in improved scores in standardised tests. A primary 5 teacher at the school stated, "It is fantastic to have the regular resource of a personal tutor available on a weekly basis." A pupil commented, "I like my "teacher" because she helps me when I make a mistake." We at King's Park are extremely happy to be participating in this scheme, which not only helps some of our pupils, but also provides a relevant community link. We hope that the programme here will continue well into the future.

Len Johnston, Principal, King's Park PS, Newtownabbey

As a school we are delighted that a group of our primary 5 children have the opportunity to be involved in such a valuable project. The children benefit greatly from the work undertaken by the volunteers. They have an opportunity to enjoy reading with and for adults who are interested in them and adults who are so enthusiastic about the whole reading process. The benefits can not only be measured in academic terms (improvement in reading and comprehension skills), but also in social and emotional terms. The children also get a flavour of the world of work from the volunteers themselves and their visits to the various workplaces.

The two children Miss McElhinney is working with have shown very good improvement in reading skills and comprehension skills. They are reading more fluently and can engage in discussion of texts they read and more confidently answer questions. Their



teachers report that they are much more enthusiastic about reading generally and very much look forward to the *Time to Read* days. They also report an improvement in communication skills. These children are now more confident in speaking out in class, joining in discussion work, putting forward their answers or offering their thoughts or ideas.

An extremely valuable benefit of the project that would not be immediately obvious is that these children are gaining the invaluable experience of conversing and engaging with adults other than teachers and relations which is building their self-esteem and their social skills. This dovetails neatly with our school's vision for our pupils, in promoting their self-esteem and confidence.

*Mr G Cosgrove, Principal,
St Eithne's PS, Derry*

Children

I liked all the plays because they were fun. I really enjoyed pirates because there were lots of swords and they had a boat and it fell into the water. The lady was very helpful who read the books with me. I would like to say a big thank you as my reading has improved.

*Colin McGeown, P5, St John the Baptist PS,
Belfast*

I like *Time to Read* because you learn more about books. When I started *Time to Read* I didn't know many words. Then I got better.

Paul, aged 8 years, St Joseph's PS, Belfast

Volunteers

Last year I noticed an article on NIONet about a scheme run by Business in the Community called *Time to Read*. It was an opportunity to volunteer to work in a local primary school for an hour a week to help give children an enthusiasm for reading. When I investigated it further I thought that I would like to apply. So with line management

approval I submitted my application through the Business Improvement Team. I was invited to attend induction training at the Business in the Community headquarters and following my security vetting, I was allocated to Brooklands Primary School in Dundonald. At the beginning of September I went along to the school and met initially with the principal, Mr McCartney. The scheme has been running in their school for the last two years and they have found it to be very beneficial to the children taking part. Children enter the scheme at the start of primary 5 and continue through to the end of primary 6. There are three other volunteers working in the school and we have each been allocated two children. The children are chosen by the teachers and parents must give their permission for a child to take part. These children can already read but they may not see reading as something enjoyable. Our job is to try and show them that reading can be fun as well as educational and to help develop their social skills and increase their confidence. The two children I work with are very different. Andrew loves a good story where as Jess is much more interested in factual books. Both boys have really come out of themselves over the past few months and I hope they look forward to Wednesday mornings as much as I do. I know I am getting a lot out of the programme and think that volunteering means I can give something back to the community. The NIO fully supports this initiative and I would recommend it as a very worthwhile activity.

Brenda O'Neill, NIO

For the last eight 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 eight years!

Jill McMullan, Royal Mail

The aim of *Time to Read* is to improve the children's literacy levels and to encourage them to work independently to achieve their goals and aspirations. I have witnessed not only improvements in their literacy levels, but their confidence and self-esteem have soared. Having the one-to-one attention certainly seems to be working wonders for 'my kids'. *Time to Read* is a great opportunity for businesses to give something back to their local community. The benefits not only extend to the children involved but also to the employees who become volunteers. The volunteer work is so rewarding, especially when you can witness, firsthand, the positive impact the programme has on the children involved. Long may it continue!

Heidi Nicolls, Manager, Texthelp Systems Ltd

The Company

The College welcomes the opportunity to participate in *Time to Read* in these schools and feels it has a social responsibility as an education and training provider to help their local community and primary school children improve their reading skills. It is also helping to motivate staff who sometimes underestimate the importance of their role to the organisation and ultimately to our customers.

Donna O'Connor, Manager, Belfast Metropolitan College

Northgate Managed Service's CSR strategy is based around providing social, economic and environmental improvement in the communities in which we work.

Our involvement in Business in the Community's *Time to Read* program helps us to encourage and support employee involvement with the local community

enabling engagement within the market in which we operate, while also enhancing the learning environment of local school children.

Currently working with two local schools Whitehouse and King's Park primary school through the *Time to Read* Programme we are integrating with and promoting a positive impact within the local community.

Three volunteers each spend one hour per week with two students reading books in line with the school curriculum and encouraging the students to fulfill their potential, each volunteer participating in *Time to Read* is finding the experience rewarding and enjoyable and have recognised a great progress in the pupils' confidence, ability and reading skills.

Northgate Information Solutions



The Author

Michael Arlow has been an education consultant based in the United States and Northern Ireland since 2004. His clients have included the British Red Cross, the Belfast Education and Library Board/City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee, UNESCO: International Bureau of Education and the Asia Pacific Bureau for Education, the International Labour Organisation, and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit. Projects have included project evaluations and the development of training programmes for education policy makers on curriculum renewal and child labour. Prior to this he taught in universities and schools and had responsibility for the development and implementation of Local and Global Education as a new element within the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum.

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Business in the Community is a unique movement in the UK and Ireland of over 750 member companies (230 of these in Northern Ireland), with a further 2,000 plus engaged through our programmes and campaigns. We operate through a local network of more than 100 business-led partnerships and 60 global partners.

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