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Policy Briefing

Educational outcomes for young children in care in Northern Ireland

Karen Winters, QUB

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Introduction

The Letterbox Club is an intervention that provides direct support to children in foster care aged 7-11 years to improve their educational outcomes. The intervention comprises once-monthly personalised parcels posted between May and October of each year to children in their foster homes and containing reading materials, story CDs, stationery and mathematics games. The aim of the intervention is to improve 'looked after' children's educational attainment levels in reading and number skills.

In England, Booktrust manages the Letterbox Club in conjunction with the University of Leicester. In 2007-2008 Booktrust received financial support from the Department for Children, Schools and Families to extend its programme to 1,600 children. In 2009 the Letterbox Club opened to every Local Authority in the UK. There has been further expansion in 2010 with 4500 children and 140 Local Authorities now involved.

The Letterbox Club was introduced as a pilot scheme in Northern Ireland in 2009. It is funded through a partnership between charities, Booktrust and the Fostering Network's Fostering Achievement Scheme. The Fostering Achievement Scheme aims to equip and support foster carers so that they can help those children and young people in care achieve their potential. Since its

commencement, over 272 'looked after' children in Northern Ireland have participated. Alongside the delivery of the parcels, the Fostering Network in Northern Ireland has also arranged a number of additional supporting activities for the children that tend to take place at local libraries and involve activities such as reading and storytelling.

As part of the delivery of the programme, the Fostering Achievement Scheme has collected detailed information on the children's levels of English and Mathematics competence before they took part in the Letterbox Club, and then again at the conclusion of the programme. The Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast has been commissioned by Fostering Network Northern Ireland to analyze these data in order to undertake a rigorous and independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Letterbox Club intervention as delivered in Northern Ireland.

Objectives

The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Ascertain whether the Letterbox Club is effective in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for children in foster care;
- Assess whether the Letterbox Club is more or less effective for boys and girls and also for those with differing lengths of time in care;
- Assess whether the additional supporting activities offered as part of the Letterbox Club programme in Northern Ireland have had any additional effects on improving the children's literacy and numeracy outcomes; and
- To make recommendations regarding the future development and delivery of the Letterbox Club in Northern Ireland.

In meeting these objectives the evaluation took the following form:

- A quantitative analysis of the pre-test/post-test dataset supplied by the Fostering Network Northern Ireland; and
- A focused literature review of the findings from evaluations of similar programmes for children in care and for disadvantaged children more broadly. Due to limited time and resources the literature search will be confined to a review of existing published systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Methodology

Personalised parcels were sent to foster children at their foster homes once monthly between May and October each year for the years 2009 and 2010. The parcels contained a mixture of books, stationery and mathematics games.

Children were tested prior to their involvement in the Letterbox Club and again once the programme had finished. Pretesting and posttesting took place in a three week period before the intervention began (between 26 April and 14 May) and after the intervention had finished (8 November and 26 November) each year. Tests involved the use of the *Neale Measurement of Reading Ability* (Neale 1997) and a bespoke mathematics measure (Griffiths 2005). The tests were administered by

teachers from Helping Hand Tutoring and involved the completion of reading and mathematics exercises by children. Raw scores were recorded. In total, data were made available on 268 children aged 7-11 years old.

Findings

The Letterbox Club materials

Overall, it is clear that the materials sent out in the Letterbox Club packs to the children have been very carefully designed so as to meet the children's developmental needs while also being fun and engaging. In relation to the reading materials, they are thematically wide-ranging, attractive and should help to encourage a sense of pride in their ownership and an enjoyment of reading among the children. Some of the issues covered in the texts have been sensitively chosen to reflect some of the feelings and life events that 'looked after' children may have experienced. This careful selection should therefore help promote 'looked after' children's sense of personal connection with the reading material.

Similarly, the mathematics games have been carefully designed to promote skills in number as well as problem solving and greater fluency in mental arithmetic. While being tailored to reflect the differing ability levels of the 'looked after' children, the games are also varied and fun to play. However it would be beneficial if the existing mathematics materials could be more diverse and incorporate additional contemporary mathematics games.

Gains made by children in reading and number skills

There is clear evidence that the children who participated in the Letterbox Club made significant progress during that period in relation to their reading accuracy and comprehension and also their number skills. In particular, the children made an average gain of 3.6 points on their standardised accuracy scores and 3.5 points on their standardised comprehension scores. Similarly, 35% of the children improved their number skills by the equivalent of one National Curriculum level.

These improvements are encouraging in two respects. Firstly, they have occurred over a six month period that includes the long school holidays over summer. This is typically a period where children's progress tends to stagnate, if not regress. The fact that the children are making such significant gains during this time is therefore noteworthy. Secondly, the size of these gains is similar in order to the findings reported from the three other evaluations conducted of the Letterbox Club to date (two in England and one in Northern Ireland). There is thus a growing body of evidence now to suggest that the size of the gains made by the children in reading and number during the period they participate in the Letterbox Club can be regarded increasingly as a reliable predictor of what one can expect.

Beyond these main effects, it is also worth noting some of the variations that emerged in the rates of progress made between different groups of children. More specifically, there is some evidence that:

- Boys made greater progress in relation to number skills than girls, with 38.1% of boys having increased a National Curriculum level in number compared to 25.4% of girls;

- Attending the Fostering Network Summer Scheme is associated with higher gains in reading accuracy, with those attending the Scheme experiencing a average increase of 5.4 points over the period of the Letterbox Club programme compared to an average increase of 3.1 points for those who did not; and
- Attending additional Letterbox events is also associated with higher gains in reading accuracy, with those attending at least one of these events experiencing an average increase of 5.5 points in their scores over the Letterbox period compared to an average 3.5 point increase for those who did not.

The above patterns need to be treated with some caution however as they relied upon multiple statistical testing (that increases the risk of producing some spurious results) and also some of the evidence was only reaching statistical significance. However, these findings do suggest that the gains made by children during the period they are engaged with the Letterbox club may vary in relation to particular background factors and also any additional activities they are involved in over the period. As such, this would be an area worthy of further investigation with a larger sample.

Interpretation of the findings

However, and beyond these key findings, a significant limitation to the study is noted associated with the lack of any control group to compare progress against. Without such a control group of similar 'looked after' children, there is ultimately no way of knowing definitively whether some or all of the progress made would have happened in any case. Moreover, even if it can be established that progress in reading and number has been made above and beyond what would typically be expected of 'looked after' children over this period, there remains the problem of determining how much of this progress is due to the children's participation in the Letterbox Club and how much it is due to the effects of other policies and initiatives targeted at 'looked after' children (such as involvement in schools peer mentoring and reading schemes for example).

In this regard it is disappointing to note that while four evaluations now exist of the Letterbox Club, none has made use of a control group and thus there remains a lack of any robust and valid evidence of the actual effects of the programme that would meet the acceptable standards for evidence of effectiveness by international educational bodies such as the *What Works Clearinghouse* or the *Best Evidence Encyclopedia*.¹ Neither would any of these evaluations be likely to be recognised or feature in a wider systematic review of existing evidence of the effectiveness of reading and number programmes.²

Moreover, it is worth noting that it is quite possible and straightforward to undertake an evaluation of the Letterbox Club that would provide the type of robust evidence required to meet these international standards. More specifically, it would be possible to undertake a simple randomised controlled trial where the number of eligible children in foster care across the UK were randomly split into two groups: one that received the packs during the year in question and the other that acted as a control group and who would receive the packs the following year and once the trial was completed. Moreover, such a trial need not be overly expensive.³

7.2 Recommendations

Given the findings reported above, a number of recommendations can be made for the future development of Letterbox Club:

1. In relation to the existing materials sent out in the Letterbox Club packs, Fostering Network in conjunction with Booktrust should consider extending the variety of mathematics games included to reflect more contemporary materials and methods.

¹ See <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/> and <http://www.bestevidence.org/> respectively

² See, for example, the Campbell Collaboration that is the leading international organization for the production of systematic reviews of evidence in education: <http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>

³ See O'Hare and Connolly (2010) for an example of a relatively inexpensive randomised controlled trial completed recently in relation to an evaluation of the effects of the Bookstart+ programme in Northern Ireland.

2. Booktrust should commission a full national randomised controlled trial of the Letterbox Club in order to provide robust evidence of its effectiveness in improving educational outcomes for 'looked after' children.

3. In any future evaluation of the Letterbox club, alongside the inclusion of standardised reading measures, it would be worth considering incorporating a more standardised and comprehensive measure of children's numeracy skills as well as other related measures of children's attitudes towards education.