

Doodle Den: A Community Led Literacy Intervention

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Introduction

In the 21st century the importance of language and literacy cannot be overstated. Literacy underpins an individual's ability to function in society. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1999, p.12) defines literacy as the 'ability to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate effectively in society'. The importance, therefore, of developing and refining literacy skills cannot be given enough emphasis.

This paper will discuss an after-school literacy programme, Doodle Den, which is aimed at improving literacy attainment levels for children in Senior Infants classes in areas designated as disadvantaged. The programme was developed by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in Tallaght and forms part of a menu of early intervention programmes developed by CDI to meet the specific needs of the children and families living in communities in Tallaght West. The paper discusses the process undertaken by CDI to engage the community in identifying the service need, the Doodle Den curriculum and programme components. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings of an independent evaluation of Doodle Den carried out by the Centre for Effective Education Queens University, Belfast.

Background to Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) is one of three Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIP) in Ireland, which is jointly funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and The Atlantic Philanthropies (AP). The three sites, (CDI, Youngballymun and Preparing for Life) were set up with "*the objective of testing innovative ways of delivering services and early interventions for children and young people, including the wider family and community setting.*" (DCYA, 2011, p. 15). Based in Tallaght West, CDI identified, developed and implemented a number of evidence-based programmes aimed at meeting the specific needs of the children and families living in the area. Doodle Den is one such programme. It is an after-school literacy programme that was designed to work with five and six year olds.

Community Links

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Community involvement is central to the work of CDI and all of its programmes. In fact, it was the community of Tallaght West themselves who identified the need for an early literacy intervention to support the children living in their community. In 2004 CDI launched a report entitled '*How are our Kids?*' (HAOK) which identified the priority needs and concerns as concluded following extensive consultation with those living and working in Tallaght West (CDI, 2004). Education was recognised in this respect as being one of the key aspects in a child's wellbeing as it '*holds the potential to sponsor their intellectual, social, personal, physical and emotional development*' (CDI, 2004, p. 31). Another aspect identified was the lack of engagement with extra-curricular activities with 13% of children surveyed involved with homework clubs or after school clubs (CDI, 2004).

HAOK (CDI, 2004) identified the areas of support needed; the next step came in the development of appropriate programmes. From the outset, CDI had a commitment to bring evidence-based programmes to the community. This meant that the programmes implemented had a strong foundation and were built from research that clearly, as far as possible, showed what worked. This formed the next step of CDI's work plan which identified a 10 year strategy and was again carried out in conjunction with the community through a process of consultation and meaningful engagement, and included: consultation with residents and professionals in the local area; consultation with parents and children; and an audit of services to identify existing levels of service provision (O'Rourke, Kennedy & Axford, 2008).

Disadvantage and Literacy

While we know that there are many contributing factors impacting on a child's literacy development, such as early language development and the quality of classroom instruction the child receives (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2000), in recent years, a number of reports have outlined that there is also a clear link between educational disadvantage and literacy achievement (Eivers, Shiel & Shortt, 2004). Children growing up in low-income environments have lower-than-average levels of reading achievement and higher-than-average rates of special education placement. Research suggests that this discrepancy can be linked to differences in experiences during the early childhood years. Weir (2001) found that children from areas designated as disadvantaged had average reading scores that were between one half and one full standard deviation below national mean scores.

The children attending the Doodle Den programme come from Tallaght West, an area in West Dublin with high levels of long-term unemployment, overcrowding, inadequate services and facilities and widespread poverty (CDI, 2004). A study carried out by CDI in 2006 found that the mean scale scores for Tallaght West pupils in each class on reading attainment tests were considerably lower than the standard mean score (CDI, 2006).

A study carried out by the Educational Research Centre in 2004, found that those with low levels of literacy attainment in literacy were significantly more likely to experience educational failure and to leave the education system without qualifications (Eivers et al., 2004).

Parents and Literacy

It must also be acknowledged that the literacy domain surrounding the child is wider than schools, and also that being born into a disadvantaged community doesn't mean inevitable educational under attainment. International research confirms that the most significant effects on student outcomes continue to be impacted by factors beyond the immediate school setting and these effects remain persistent over time (Berliner, 2006) Literacy needs to be enhanced by parents, the school and the wider community.

Research suggests that children's early understanding of literacy is learnt through their family and community and that families' social and cultural practices shape the types of literacy children experience (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Developing links with family and the wider community is important, not only in terms of developing and delivering services but is in line with current national policy. The importance of parental involvement in children's learning is emphasised throughout the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (DES, 2011) and at all stages of the child's learning. As parents are recognised as being the child's primary educator, supporting them in their skills is crucial in supporting their child's holistic development.

Doodle Den Programme

Defining literacy

For the purposes of the Doodle Den programme, the formal definition of literacy adopted by the programme authors centred on the definition that was used by the Department of Education and Science (DES, 2005): Literacy is the integration of reading and writing, listening, speaking and mathematics for everyday life, for communication and learning to learn (p. 34). The definition espoused by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (DES, 2011), notes that:

Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media' (p. 8).

In light of extensive research findings on factors impacting children's achievement in literacy, the challenge was to design a programme which would support children in an afterschool environment. The underlying evidence emerged that these programmes are most successful when they are underpinned by a balance between formal learning opportunities and playfulness.

The programme also took account of extensive literature on emergent literacy and how children learn the skills and strategies to support them in later life. Research indicates that early literacy intervention that works for later success in school relies on two major assumptions: firstly, that children have access to a wide range of

appropriate and culturally inclusive literacy resources, and secondly, that adults interact with children effectively in order to draw their attention to print; model and demonstrate print in daily use for a wide range of authentic purposes and answer children's questions, discussing all manner of texts with them.

The above research findings all informed the content and processes which underpin the Doodle Den programme.

Doodle Den Programme Outcomes

The overall aim of the Doodle Den programme is to achieve moderate improvements in children's literacy. Secondary outcomes include:

- Improvement in children's regular school attendance.
- Improvement in the children's broader engagement in learning outside the school through improved literacy, increasing confidence and improved home environment relating to literacy.
- Enhancing the relationships between the child and their family and peers through increasing parent/carers involvement in supporting their child's literacy development and increasing family use of library services.

Doodle Den Curriculum

In recognition of the important role the child's family plays in the development of literacy, the programme encompasses three main components:

- Child component.
- Parent Component.
- Family Component.

Child Component

The child component of the programme targets key literacy domains; writing, phonics, text comprehension, sight vocabulary and reading fluency, all underpinned by the importance of a rich oral language environment. In order to learn to read effectively, children need a balanced instructional approach that includes learning to break the code and engaging in meaningful reading and writing. The Doodle Den programme encompasses a balanced literacy framework using 'story' as a context for children's learning. Supporting 'centres' or small group work activities/games follow the discrete elements of the programme.

The Doodle Den programme has a structured approach in that each session begins with a snack and sign-in routine, followed by various aspects of literacy teaching and activities, and concludes with a 'fun' element, e.g., art, physical education (PE), drama or music. Each element of the programme is given a specified time, within each 90-minute session. The environment is deliberately different to that of the schoolroom and the programme is delivered in all cases by two facilitators; a teacher and youth or childcare worker. The programme elements combine to reflect current practice in early years' provision outlined in the Aistear Framework (NCCA, 2009, p. 54):

Emergent literacy is concerned with children developing a growing understanding of print and language as a foundation for reading and writing. Through play and hands-on experience children see and interact with print as they build an awareness of its functions and conventions.

Parent component

The parent is the primary force that propels the child into the world of discovery, the world of literacy, and the world of success' (Gilliam, Gerla & Wright, 2004, p.226).

Taking account of the primary role of the parent in children's learning the Doodle Den programme seeks to actively involve parents in supporting their children. Neuman, Hagerdorn, Celano and Daly (1995) found that parents are willing, able, and motivated to help in the literacy development of their children. Most, however, are unsure of how to teach reading or help their children with literacy development (Cunningham & Allington, 2003). The literature accentuates the need for parent education programmes to be practical and comprehensible. The parent component of Doodle Den comprises a mixture of active learning, modelling best practice, discussion and active interaction with materials/games/books.

The parent component of Doodle Den comprises a mixture of active learning, modelling best practice, discussion and active interaction with materials/games/books. It reflects the approach advocated by Lilly & Green, 2004, who suggest that a workshop approach to family involvement should be a dynamic, relevant opportunity for families. They note that communication with parents is vitally important for building integrated, collaborative literacy partnerships with families' (Lilly & Green, 2004).

Family Component

The family component of Doodle Den focuses on linking the parent and child components. These sessions include opportunities for parents to participate in the child sessions and one organised family activity per term such as a visit to the local library and story-telling sessions.

Evaluation

An important element of CDI's work to date has centred on ensuring that each of the programmes it implements is not only of a high quality, but has also undergone a rigorous and independent evaluation process. In 2008, following a comprehensive tendering process, a research team from the *Centre for Effective Education* in Queen's University, Belfast was appointed to evaluate the Doodle Den programme.

The evaluation was carried out over a three year period and closely monitored the progress of the children in Doodle Den through a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) and a process evaluation. Each year, 210 children were referred to the Doodle Den programme with 105 being randomly assigned places in either the control or

intervention groups. The children were then assessed using standardised evaluation tools, such as the *Drumcondra Primary Reading Test*. The process evaluation involved conducting a series of interviews with relevant stakeholders and observations of Doodle Den groups in action.

Biggart, Kerr, O'Hare & Connolly (2011) concluded that Doodle Den had brought about a demonstrable change in the children's overall literacy, noting a seven percentile point gain. This was an important finding and when combined with teachers' ratings the overall improvement increased to an eleven percentile point gain (Biggart et al., 2011). The evaluation team further concluded that children made gains in three specific areas: word choice, sentence structure and word recognition, as demonstrated by the assessment carried out through the *Drumcondra Primary Reading Test* (Biggart et al., 2011). The children who attended Doodle Den were also found to have a reduction in negative behaviours associated with classroom disruption or difficult behaviour and benefited from improved concentration. Participation with Doodle Den increased family library activity and children's literacy activity in the home (Biggart et al., 2011).

The authors of the report concluded that as Doodle Den brought about an improvement in the children's overall literacy ability, the programme should be expanded and offered to children in communities in other disadvantaged areas in Ireland (Biggart et al., 2011). In October 2012, Doodle Den groups were established with three primary schools in Limerick as well as six continuing provision schools in Tallaght West.

Conclusion

Literacy learning experiences are crucially important to children in the early years. This is particularly true in relation to children living in disadvantaged areas. It is imperative that services are developed in line with community need in order to ensure the maximum impact. Doodle Den is an example of an early literacy intervention that works not only with the child but with the parent and family as a whole. Furthermore, Doodle Den links with services within the community to ensure literacy opportunities are readily available to all. It allows the children opportunities to develop their literacy skills in a fun and warm environment. The parents' sessions further reinforce this and give a mechanism for talking about children's learning. The evaluation of Doodle Den has demonstrated that the programme is effective and has had a wide ranging, positive impact on the children and families that participate in it.

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