

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: University of Leicester</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: UoA25 Education</p>
<p>Title of case study: The Letterbox Club: Improving the literacy and numeracy skills of looked after children</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Looked after children (children in public care) generally have poorer outcomes in educational achievement and mental health than the wider population. The 'Letterbox Club' improves the educational attainment and well-being of looked after children in the UK, and now involves nearly 6,000 children and 130 supporting organisations each year. Each child is sent a parcel of books, number games and stationery once a month for six months, addressed to them at their home. Evaluation consistently demonstrates above-predicted average gains in reading and number skills, high levels of enjoyment, and improvements in educational support provided by foster carers. The scheme has led to changes in policy and practice at local and national levels.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research was conducted between 1998 and the present day. It was led by Rose Griffiths, Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Leicester. Dr Sue Dymoke and Dr Chris Comber, Senior Lecturers in the School of Education, contributed from 2007 to 2013.</p> <p><u>Early research (1998 to 2006)</u></p> <p>This initially explored, from the perspective of looked after children and their foster carers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • underlying issues relating to the academic underperformance of looked after children; • the educational involvement of foster carers with their children <p>and included focus group discussions with foster carers, a literature review and examination of relevant policy documentation (1&2).</p> <p>This early research led to Griffiths becoming a member of the Cabinet Office Advisory Forum on the Education of Children in Care, 2001-2003, leading to the Social Exclusion Unit's 2003 report, 'A Better Education for Children in Care'.</p> <p>Based on the above, the research then moved to exploring ways of improving the educational attainment of looked after children, in a manner that would encourage foster carers to support them at home. A literacy and numeracy intervention, dubbed the Letterbox Club, was developed, involving the postal delivery of reading books and mathematical activities over a period of 6 months, directly to 20 looked after children aged 7 to 11 within a single local authority in 2003. Evaluation involved pre- and post-intervention standardised assessments of reading (Neale Analysis of Reading Ability) and bespoke assessments in mathematics (3), an attitudinal questionnaire and interviews with children and foster carers.</p> <p>Analysis of the 2003 data showed greater-than-predicted gains in literacy and numeracy and indicated refinements to the scheme, in particular fine-tuning the nature and academic level of literacy and numeracy materials and streamlining the organisational structure. A revised Letterbox intervention involving two local authorities was trialled from 2004 to 2006, confirming the pattern of achievement gains (1).</p> <p><u>Further in-depth research: National Pilot in England (2007 and 2008)</u></p> <p>With substantial government funding, the scheme was piloted in 2007 and 2008 with 1500 children aged 7 to 11 and 52 local authorities in England. This confirmed earlier achievement outcomes, offered robust evidence of social and personal gains for children and identified increased levels of engagement between children and foster carers (4&5). An important feature of this phase was a focus on establishing an efficient and sustainable central organisation in partnership with Booktrust, a national charity, to ensure that the programme would have continued impact and</p>

would be sustainable.

Continued research and UK national roll-out (2009 onwards)

Letterbox Club was offered across the UK in 2009 as a subscription-based service, involving 4,500 children and 129 Local Authorities. Pilots in Wales (including Welsh language materials) and Northern Ireland explored the programme’s effectiveness in different cultural and organisational contexts. Positive outcomes consistent with those in England were found, indicating the robustness of the Letterbox model. An independent evaluation conducted by Queens University, Belfast, confirmed the impact in Northern Ireland, with positive gains in reading, mathematics and foster carer engagement. Additionally, pilots were held to extend the age range to children aged 11 to 13 (6), and to develop a set of parcels for children with learning difficulties.

Informal evidence suggested the effects of the Letterbox Club included organisational and cultural shifts at the level of supporting agencies. These issues were formally explored in 2012 through questionnaires to 84 local authorities in England, followed by interviews with key personnel from 14 local authorities, providing robust evidence of good practice that was shared through regional and national conferences. A further pilot for children aged 5 to 7 is researching ways of providing information for foster carers for this younger age group, and a pilot in Scotland is underway.

3. References to the research

1. Griffiths, R. (2012) The Letterbox Club: an account of a postal club to raise the achievement of children aged 7 to 13 in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34 (6), 1101–1106
2. Griffiths, R. (2005) *The Letterbox Club: help with numeracy and literacy for children aged 7 to 11 in public care*. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Glamorgan, September 2005.
3. Griffiths, R. (2009) Evaluating the Letterbox Club: Developing Assessment Items to examine the progress in number of children aged 7 to 11 in public care, in J. Novotna and H. Moraova (eds) *Proceedings of SEMT '09: International Symposium Elementary Mathematics Teaching*, August 23-28; Prague, Czech Republic. Prague: Charles University.
4. Dymoke, S. & Griffiths, R. (2010) The Letterbox Club: the impact on looked-after children and their carers of a national project aimed at raising achievements in literacy for children aged 7to11 in foster care. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10 (1), 52-60.
5. Griffiths, R., Comber, C. and Dymoke, S. (2010) *The Letterbox Club 2007 to 2009: Final Evaluation Report*. London: Booktrust.
6. Griffiths, R. and Comber, C. (2011) *Letterbox Green 2010: an evaluation of the Letterbox Club pilot for children in secondary school*. London: Booktrust.

4. Details of the impact

Children in care are a difficult population to reach because they comprise only about 0.6% of the school population (with perhaps only one looked after child in a school); many move address frequently, and many children come in and out of care during each year.

The Letterbox Club is now established as a national programme that improves the achievement in reading and numeracy of children aged 5 to 13 in public care in the UK, and provides an effective means of supporting families. It has significantly influenced a range of stakeholders, including children, foster families and children’s services. The programme was praised in 2011 by Edward Timpson MP, now the Children’s Minister for England, who said that Letterbox Club is “a very effective tool for ensuring that children who need the support most in society are actually getting it in a way that really does get to the heart of the issues they face”. Professor Sonia Jackson described the programme in 2011 as both unique and valuable, based on careful and detailed research at Leicester that included consideration of the best materials, timing and organisation of

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the intervention, leading to “strong evidence that it has really changed things for children” (A). Further endorsements have been received from Fostering Network, Booktrust, OFSTED, the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, and other researchers in this field (B-G).

Feedback from children shows that participation in Letterbox Club is enjoyable and practical. Development of the scheme included consideration of sustainability and provided quantitative and qualitative evidence to those holding strategic and financial responsibility that Letterbox was cost-effective. The Northern Ireland Minister for Education, John O’Dowd, said in 2013 that the cost of Letterbox Club was “money well spent”. Dissemination made full use of local and national press, professional networks, a website, and individual advocates at all levels – from children’s author Jacqueline Wilson, who has spoken about the value of Letterbox Club many times, to Ryan, aged 8, who said “It’s brill!”

The Letterbox Club has expanded from 20 children aged 7 to 11 and one local authority in 2003, to almost 6,000 children aged 5 to 13 and 130 organisations in 2013, in all four countries of the UK. From 2008 to 2013, over 25,000 children have been members of Letterbox Club. Children can now be members four times, every other year, receiving different materials each time. The project already reaches around 60% of eligible children aged 7 to 13 in England, 100% in Wales and 100% in Northern Ireland, and is still growing, with a funded pilot in Scotland. A pilot based on Letterbox Club is currently underway in Ontario, Canada, with 540 children.

The impact on children and their foster carers is substantial. Each child receives a parcel once a month for six months, addressed to them personally. Children are excited and pleased to receive a parcel and they decide for themselves what to do with the materials provided. Shaariq, aged 11, said “I loved opening the parcels. My hands shivered with excitement to see what I got next”. The majority of children choose to engage in reading and playing number games with their foster parents, siblings and other family members, as well as using the materials on their own.

Children’s progress in literacy and numeracy has been very positive. Using standardised/age-normed reading and number assessments, greater-than-predicted gains were found in all evaluations, for all age groups. The Letterbox Club model is effective across different educational systems: evaluations in Wales and Northern Ireland (2009 - 2011) revealed above-predicted gains in both reading and number (H,I).

Questionnaires and interviews with children (evidenced in all evaluation reports) showed high levels of satisfaction (>85%) with the contents of the Letterbox parcels across all cohorts, and immense pleasure at “being remembered”. Interviews with children 6 months after they received their last parcel showed lasting impact, as children were still using the materials. Responses from foster carers were equally positive, and equally consistent over time and context, indicating high levels of approval for the scheme: for example, one foster carer from Brent commented, “This is the best thing my local authority has ever done” (J).

There has been considerable impact on children’s social and emotional development, reported by both children and foster carers, including:

- children feeling validated (typically expressed as ‘feeling special’), leading to improvements in pro-social behaviour and self-esteem;
- greater engagement in learning/schoolwork;
- improved relationships and attachment between children and carers through joint exploration of Letterbox materials.

Many foster carers have commented on the contribution that the programme has made to their own confidence in helping their foster child. Many have also said that the programme was especially important for children who had moved frequently: for example, the foster carer of Kelly, aged 10, who had moved three times in a year, said that “the Letterbox Club was the continuity,

something that stayed the same when she moved. It was very important to Kelly". As another child (aged 9) said, "So somebody knows where I live?"

Interviews with key personnel in involved agencies revealed that Letterbox has acted as a catalyst for wider impact than initially expected. Participation in Letterbox Club induction events, reading research reports and the experience of taking part in Letterbox have all encouraged staff to change and develop their professional practice. Some local authorities have begun to hold "Letterbox Club" events, to give children and foster carers a welcome opportunity to meet. This has often been in conjunction with library services; some authorities have added materials to the parcels about joining the library and about library events. The focus of Letterbox Club has facilitated better inter-professional collaboration (for example, between social workers, virtual school teams and schools).

The scale of funding indicates confidence in the impact of the Letterbox Club:

2007-2008	DCSF, England	£254,895
2009-2013	Subscriptions, England and Scotland	£2,264,224
2009-2013	Northern Ireland Assembly	£119,477
2009-2013	Welsh Government	£918,250
2007-2013	Charitable funding	£108,900

Total direct funding was **over £3.5 million from 2008 to 2013**. In addition, the programme receives support in kind from all of the major UK children's publishers, who provide books at a high discount as part of their charitable practice. This support is equivalent to approximately **£1.25 million from 2008 to 2013** bringing the total support to almost **£5 million**.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Prof Sonia Jackson OBE, Thomas Coram Research Unit and Institute of Education, University of London. Prof Jackson is internationally known for her research on children in public care. She is a patron of the Letterbox Club.
- B. Chief Executive of Fostering Network, which is the UK's leading charity for everyone involved in foster care.
- C. Trustee of Booktrust, professor at the Open University, and trustee of the UK Literacy Association
- D. OFSTED (2011) *Removing barriers to literacy*. Manchester: Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. (page 47)
- E. C4EO (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services) (2010) *Improving educational outcomes for looked after children and young people: Vulnerable children knowledge review 1*. London: C4EO (page 21)
- F. APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) *Education Matters in Care: a report by the independent cross-party inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children in England*. London: Houses of Parliament (page 38)
- G. Feiler, A. (2010) *Engaging 'Hard to Reach' Parents: teacher-parent collaboration to promote children's learning*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. (pages 82 to 84)
- H. Griffiths, R., Comber, C. and Lewis, G. (2011) *The Letterbox Club in Wales: Evaluation Report of the Pilot in 2009*. London: Booktrust
- I. Winter, K., Connolly, P. Bell, I. And Ferguson, J. (2011) *Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Letterbox Club in improving educational outcomes among children aged 7 to 11 years in foster care in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast.
- J. Head of Brent Virtual School, London.