

2012



Meeting needs, making changes, improving outcomes

## Improving Literacy Outcomes in Early Childhood through the *Doodle Den* After-School Programme

### Policy Brief

This policy brief outlines ways in which we can improve child literacy outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities through an independently evaluated after-school literacy programme called *Doodle Den*. This programme was piloted by one of the three Prevention and Early Intervention Programme organisations, the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI). The brief highlights how implementing evidence-based programmes such as *Doodle Den* with young children in disadvantaged communities can help meet the aims of the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011–2020).



## Key Points

- Literacy includes the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication. We know that developing good literacy skills has social, economic and health benefits for the individual and for society, and that children from socially and economically disadvantaged communities are significantly more likely to experience difficulties in literacy (Bowey, 1995);
- **Doodle Den** is an after-school programme which uses an evidence-based curriculum featuring a balanced literacy framework. The programme is distinctive in that it focuses on improving children's literacy through a wide range of activities in an after-school setting;
- Using gold standard research techniques, **Doodle Den** has been proven to improve literacy outcomes for children in a disadvantaged community in Tallaght West. **Doodle Den** led to improved concentration and reduced problem behaviours in school, an increase in family library activity, and in the child's reading at home;
- **Doodle Den** offers value for money and an effective use of existing financial and educational resources in a time of economic challenges to secure positive literacy outcomes for children living in disadvantaged communities. As such, CDI recommends that **Doodle Den** should be part of a menu of evidence based after-school programmes;
- CDI also recommends that all Government Departments commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery. Implementing evidence-based programmes such as **Doodle Den** is an important step in this commitment.

## Background

Literacy is a gateway skill and is important for general academic achievement and broader social outcomes. Children who fail to gain adequate basic literacy skills at an early stage are unlikely to catch-up at a later stage (Juel, 1988).

The Irish Government has launched the 'National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020: Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life' (2011) to target the teaching of this important life skill. Launching the Strategy's report, the Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, noted that:

*Literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to a person's ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society. Ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country, (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).*

The Government has also recently launched plans for the development of the first ever Early Years Strategy. The Early Years has been identified as a critical time for the development of many skills including literacy. Among the aims of this strategy is the intention to look at ways to:

- (1) Improve educational outcomes including progressing the objectives of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy;
- (2) Examine approaches to providing targeted early childhood programmes for disadvantaged children; and
- (3) Increase positive parental engagement in early childhood care and education.

**Doodle Den** was implemented by the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) to target literacy among young children in Tallaght West. The CDI Initiative is one of three Prevention and Early Intervention Programme organisations, jointly funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Atlantic Philanthropies. The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme explores new methods for improving outcomes for children in an integrated way, with a fund of over €36 million. **Doodle Den** is an output of this investment and demonstrates a proven method of improving literacy outcomes for young children in a disadvantaged community through an after-school literacy focussed programme.



## Doodle Den: Programme

*Doodle Den* is an after-school programme which uses an evidence-based curriculum featuring a balanced literacy framework. The programme is distinctive in that it focuses on improving children's literacy through a wide range of activities in an after-school setting. It has a child, parent, and family component, and places a strong emphasis on parental engagement. *Doodle Den* has a manual with detailed guidelines to maximise fidelity of implementation.

Fifteen Senior Infant children participate in three 90 minute sessions a week which are facilitated by a teacher and a youth worker during the academic year. There are six parent sessions and three family sessions per year, each lasting an average of 90 to 120 minutes.

The cost of this intensive programme for one year, per child is €1,656.

*Doodle Den* was piloted in 2008-2011 and is being rolled out in 2012 in sites in Tallaght West and Limerick under the School Completion Programme.

## Doodle Den: Evaluation

*Doodle Den* was independently evaluated by the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast using a Randomised Controlled Trial design. Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) are internationally recognised as the gold standard of evaluation research.

- 464 children, 472 teachers and 197 parents in Tallaght West participated in the randomised control trial over 3 years;
- The evaluation found improvements in children's overall literacy ability which included the following areas: word recognition, sentence structure, and word choice;
- Although improvement in literacy was the main aim of the programme, the evaluation also found that *Doodle Den* led to improved concentration and reduced problem behaviours in school, an increase in family library activity, and in the child's reading at home;
- *Doodle Den* was positively received from a wide variety of stakeholders, including facilitators, school principals, parents and the children themselves.





## Recommendations

The strong evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the **Doodle Den** programme in improving children's literacy outcomes and the positive effect of the programme on children's social outcomes highlights ways in which literacy can be best approached in Ireland. CDI has five key recommendations for effectively targeting literacy in early childhood.

CDI recommends that:

- 1.** **Doodle Den** is offered as part of a menu of evidence-based programmes for delivery within the School Completion Programme and other services working with young children in an after-school setting;
- 2.** All Government Departments commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery, and commit to giving serious consideration to the implications of the evaluation for professional training, service planning and service integration;
- 3.** That all services for children are evaluated, and those services and models which have no demonstrable impact on outcomes for children are incrementally removed, and replaced with evidence-based programmes;
- 4.** Key training and supports are provided to appropriate structures to ensure fidelity of intervention delivery, and so ensure the potential for positive outcomes; and
- 5.** Pre-service training for professionals working with children includes mandatory modules on engaging parents.

For the full report of the evaluation findings please see: Biggart, A., Kerr, K., O'Hare, L. and Connolly, P. (2011) *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative's Doodle Den Literacy Programme*. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

For more details on the Doodle Den programme please visit [www.twcdi.ie/doodle-den-programme/](http://www.twcdi.ie/doodle-den-programme/)

### References:

Bowey, J. (1995). Socioeconomic status differences in phonological sensitivity and first-grade reading achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 87, 476–487.

Department of Education and Skills, (2011) *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People (2011–2020)*. Dublin: Government Publications.

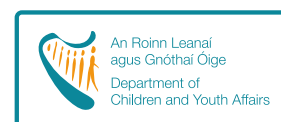
Juel, C. (1988). Learning to read and write: A longitudinal study of 54 children from first through fourth grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80, 437–447.



The Childhood Development Initiative,  
St Mark's Youth and Family Centre,  
Cookstown Lane,  
Fettercairn,  
Dublin 24.

Phone: 01 4940030  
Fax: 01 4627329  
Email: [info@twcdi.ie](mailto:info@twcdi.ie)  
Web: [www.twcdi.ie](http://www.twcdi.ie)

[www.facebook.com/ChildhoodDevelopmentInitiative](http://www.facebook.com/ChildhoodDevelopmentInitiative)  
[twitter.com/twcdi](https://twitter.com/twcdi)



The  
ATLANTIC  
Philanthropies