

CELCIS Education Conference 2017: Kirsteen Watson, the Dollywood Foundation

Fostering a love of books and an interest in learning starts at a very young age. Here, Kirsteen Watson, Regional Director of the Dollywood Foundation explains why it's important for the Foundation, and for Dolly Parton, to make sure vulnerable children have the best start.

In Scotland we have 3,000 looked after children aged 0 to five years old, eligible to receive free books with love from Dolly every month as a gift. The programme is about giving children the gift of reading, a love for learning, a love for lifelong learning. And through getting these high-quality age-appropriate selected books from Penguin Random House and through the post every month it's a way for a family to engage with their child around that book every month from birth until their fifth birthday and really excite them about reading. In Scotland we have a partnership with the Scottish Book Trust and every single local authority, and we work with Social Work teams and local administrators within Social Work teams who register their local looked after children. And they'll get the consent from the parent or carer or kinship carer to register the child on the book order system. Once they're on our book order system, every single month they get a book mailed to them through the post. Some authorities do additional training with the carers and link it into other initiatives like the book bug for the home programme and that's working really really well to support and extend the use of our books every month.

Since the program started back in 1996 in Sevier County, Tennessee 20 years ago we've sent over 88 million books across America, Canada, the UK, Australia and now Belize because we're trialing it for developing countries as well. So, it's a really exciting time for us and this piece of work with the Scottish Government, Scottish Book Trust and local authorities has been a really exciting part of the journey and we're looking to help support that to grow and develop in the longer term. We've done some self-evaluation, and we did do an external evaluation with KSO research on the operational side of it and but Dolly is investing in the next 5 to 10 years more in research. We're also about to embark on a bit of work with LuCiD (The ESRC International Centre for Language and Communicative Development) and the University of Liverpool on a

randomized control trial on some work that we're going to do in England with Beanstalk (Coram Beanstalk), a national partner. So, all this is helping us build and develop the research work that we're doing.

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