

**After-School Care in Disadvantaged Areas:
the perspectives of children, parents and experts**

Eilis Hennessy

Mary Donnelly

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Abstract

Large numbers of school children in Ireland spend time each day in the care of someone other than their parents. Research from the USA suggests that group-based after-school services have beneficial effects on the socio-emotional and academic development of children living in disadvantaged communities. The present study investigated whether these benefits might extend to children and families in disadvantaged communities in Ireland. A total of 32 children (6 to 12 years) attending after-school clubs and their families took part. Parents reported that the main advantages were social and educational. Children said that the activities they enjoyed most were sports, outings and spending time with friends, although there were differences in the activities preferred by younger and older children.

The School Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS) was used to provide a standardised assessment of the service offered by the club. The clubs received the highest average scores for the quality of the inter-personal interactions and programme structure. Teacher ratings of the children's socio-emotional development and homework were not statistically different from their ratings of a matched group of children not attending clubs. The findings are discussed in terms of our understanding of the differing perspectives on the advantages of after-school care offered by the children, their parents and experts.

Keywords: after-school, homework club, disadvantage

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1. Introduction

The number of children in Ireland who spend time in the care of someone other than their parents after school is substantial. For example, Williams and Collins (1998) estimated that 9.6% of children (about 46,000) between the ages of six and twelve are attending after-school care each day. Despite these large numbers the care provided for school-age children has typically attracted much less attention from policy makers, legislators and researchers than care provided for younger children.

Fortunately, there is evidence from the international literature that children attending good quality after-school services may derive a range of social and academic benefits from their experiences (Miller, 2003). There is also research evidence on what constitutes good quality care. For example, Vandell and Shumow (1999) highlighted the importance of a high staff-student ratio and low staff turnover. Rosenthal and Vandell's (1996) research emphasised the importance of staff education and having a wide range of activities available for the children.

While the international literature has emphasised that the majority of children can benefit from attending an after-school service, children living in socially and economically disadvantaged areas have been identified as standing to benefit more than most other groups. Halpern (1999, 2000), for example, has argued that after-school programmes can meet these children's needs for acceptance and for self-directed and enjoyable learning opportunities. In addition, he believes that such programmes have the potential to identify children's talents and provide them with safe opportunities to explore possible identities. There is now a small but growing body of empirical research to support his claims.

In one of the earliest studies designed to explore the relationship between after-school care and the development of children from families with low incomes, Posner and Vandell (1994) examined the benefits of after-school programmes in the United States that offered a variety of academic opportunities. Children attending these programmes were compared with children who went home with their mothers, had informal adult supervision or were in self-care (i.e. were unsupervised). In comparison to these children, the children in the formal programmes performed better on a range of academic tasks, and had better work habits. They also had higher scores on measures of emotional adjustment and peer relationships. Posner and Vandell (1994) also noted that, in their study, the children from low-income families would not have had access to classes in music and dance and other enriching extra-curricular activities, such as team sports, if they had not participated in the after-school programmes.

These findings are important because they demonstrate that after-school programmes can make a positive contribution to children's social and academic development. In turn, these positive outcomes might be expected to increase the chances that children will remain in the educational system and have better employment prospects in the future.

Further support for the value of after-school programmes in the lives of children from low-income families comes from research by Marshall et al. (1997). Their findings indicated that attending after-school programmes was associated with fewer internalising problems for the children of lower-income families living in urban areas of Boston. Observations in after-school care settings indicated that children attending programmes spent more time with peers and less time watching television than children with other forms of care arrangements. The authors suggest that the opportunity to play with peers in a setting that is less structured than school, but still

supervised by adults, may have increased children's opportunities to have the experiences necessary to reduce anxiety and other internalising problems.

In addition to the after-school programmes that are designed to offer children a broad range of experiences and opportunities, a number of studies with narrower goals also exist. For example, evidence that after-school programmes can successfully be designed and implemented to address substance abuse in inner-city communities comes from the research of Pierce and Shields (1998) and Morrison et al. (2000). These programmes are unusual, however, because of their very narrow focus on one risk factor in children's lives.

When evaluating after-school programmes researchers in the United States have typically been consistent in the nature of the outcome data they have collected and in their research methods. Thus, research questions that focus on children's academic performance and the prevalence of problem behaviour predominate. For example, ratings of problem behaviour were used by Posner and Vandell (1994), Marshall et al. (1997) and Morrison et al. (2000). Measures of academic performance were included in the studies of Posner and Vandell (1994) and Morrison et al. (2000). In these studies parents and teachers typically supply information about children's behaviour and/or academic performance and children may be asked to complete self-report questionnaires about self concept (e.g. Morrison et al., 2000) or to take tests (e.g. Posner & Vandell, 1994; Pierce & Shields, 1998). Thus, although parents and children supply researchers with information, they are typically not asked to contribute to the debate about what outcomes are desirable for the children attending the services.

There is, unfortunately, very little published research that tells us about the benefits of after-school programmes for children in Ireland. However, the potential value of after-school programmes has been highlighted by a number of reports, e.g. Costello, Walsh and Abery (2000), Murphy (2001) and Richie (1999). Costello et al. (2000), for example, reported an improvement in the level of school attendance for participants in a programme that included a range of in-school provisions as well as after-school activities. Murphy (2001) and Richie (1999) reported teachers' views that children had benefited from participating in after-school clubs in Clondalkin (Dublin) and Co. Monaghan. Thus, research conducted in Ireland appears to suggest some similarity with research findings in the USA although it is important to note that the research data collected in evaluations in the two counties have typically been different.

The present study aimed to extend our understanding of the value of after-school care in the Irish context. Previous studies conducted in Ireland have typically gathered interview data from parents, teachers and children but have rarely used standardised instruments or rating scales such as those used in the American studies. By combining interview data with standardised rating scales the present study combined elements of previous research in Ireland and the USA. The range of data collected made it possible to compare the perspectives of the children and their parents with ratings from an American scale and with teacher assessments. The final aim was to determine whether teachers perceived a difference in the socio-emotional development and homework quality between children attending the after-school clubs in the study and a matched group of children who were not attending.

After-school care in Ireland

Pugh (1999) identifies four types of group-based service available in Ireland.

- The first of these is crèches that operate in the private sector and usually incorporate after-school provision with the provision of care to younger children. Crèches are typically used by families in middle- to high-income groups, as the charge for the service can be very substantial.
- A second type of service is provided by primary schools in the form of cultural or sporting activities. The nature of the activities can vary considerably and may be offered free or involve a cost to parents.
- The third type of service is community-based after-school projects in disadvantaged areas that cater for the needs of the children within the context of the needs of the local community. Their emphasis is on providing a service that parents will find accessible and affordable.
- The fourth type of service is generally called a 'homework club' and exists primarily as a support service to children in disadvantaged areas. These services are typically offered by local partnership areas and may provide help with homework, other academic work (such as reading or numeracy), non-academic activities such as drama and art or some combination of these. All the clubs participating in the present study could be classified as homework clubs.

After-school services in Ireland are not regulated and an important consequence of this fact is that no formal statistics exist on the number of these services, the number of children and families that they cater for or their distribution around the country. In order to locate individual after-school services it is necessary to seek information from funding agencies and other support services that have contact with the clubs.

2. Methods

Design

The design used was a cross-sectional group comparison. Four community-based after-school projects were selected for the research, two in disadvantaged urban areas and two in disadvantaged rural areas. The original aim had been to select eight children in each setting (four boys and four girls). In the case of one of the centres this was not possible as there was only a small number of girls in the younger age group – two girls from the other urban setting were asked to participate instead. Where possible four children in each setting were in the age group 6 to 8 years (referred to as the younger group), and four were aged 10 to 12 years (referred to as the older group). These children were matched as closely as possible for age, gender, school attended and SES with children from the community who did not attend the target services.

A range of qualitative and quantitative methods were used in the research:

- *Parent interviews:* Interviews were used to gather information on family background and views on the value of after-school care for parent, child and family. A total of 27 parent interviews were conducted by phone over the course of the study. Five parents had more than one child in after-school care so the parents of all children participating in the study were interviewed.
- *Child interviews:* Children were interviewed in order to gather information on their experiences of the after-school settings. Specifically, children were asked about their emotional reactions to after-school care (positive or negative), the activities available in the setting and their ratings of different aspects of the service provided. In addition the children were asked to provide an overall rating for their club on a scale between 1 and 10. The questionnaire was based on one developed by Hennessy (2001) but was modified for use in the present study because of the wide age range of children participating.
- *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS)* (Harms, Jacobs & White, 1996): This instrument was developed as a means of measuring the quality of service provision in child care centres catering specifically for children of school age. The items included in the instrument reflect academic experts' views on what constitutes quality. The SACERS has 43 items that are organised into six sub-scales: space and furnishings, health and safety, activities, interactions, programme structure and staff development. The internal consistency for the individual scales and the whole scale is excellent, with kappa coefficients ranging from .67 to .95. The authors also report that experts in the United States and Canada gave average ratings of 4.8/5.00 for the importance of the items, suggesting a high level of content validity.
- *Teacher questionnaire:* Teacher rating of socio-emotional adjustment and the quality of homework were used to compare children attending the after-school services participating in the study with those who were not attending. Because some teachers were being asked to rate a number of children the questionnaire was kept as brief as possible and ratings, than open-ended questions, were used. The questionnaire was developed by the authors specifically for use in this study. Information on the internal reliability of the instrument is provided in the results section.

Principles of service selection

Selection of after-school services was based on their motivation to participate, on service structure and the fact that they served a disadvantaged community. There was a deliberate attempt to seek diversity in services. In the absence of official records of operating after-school services, a shortlist of ten clubs was prepared based on lists provided by the voluntary sector and by community groups. Services that met the research criteria, i.e. those in disadvantaged areas which served children between the ages of six and twelve, were approached and invited to take part in the research project. Written information outlining the objectives of the research and detailing what would be required from the providers was included.

Positive responses were received from six clubs, three in rural areas and three in inner city Dublin. From this group four were selected, two urban and two rural. Children generally attended the clubs on four days per week except in the case of one of the urban clubs, which most children attended just one or two days. This unusual situation arose because the staff was trying to meet the needs of as many children as possible and therefore restricted the number of days each child could attend.

Selection of children and families

The selection of children and families to participate in the study was random within each centre (based on the age and gender balance described), drawn from those children whose parents had given written permission and who indicated their willingness to participate. Parents and children were given information about the study to allow them to make an informed decision about participation. Everyone who took part in the study was given guarantees regarding anonymity and confidentiality.

The children who were selected to take part were typically living with two parents (75 per cent) and the average number of children per family was 3. Parents had an average of 12 years of full-time education and in about half (53 per cent) of the families both parents were working, although almost 19 per cent of the families had no full-time worker.

Comparison group

A comparison group of children was chosen from the same local schools as the children in the after-school clubs. This was done by school teachers who were asked to choose another child in their class of the same age, gender and socio-economic background as each child in the after-school club. Because the parents of the children in the comparison group were not asked to provide information on family background we can only compare the groups of children on age. The younger children attending the after-school groups were an average of 7 years and 11 months; the comparison group were 8 years and 4 months. The older children attending the after-school groups were an average of 10 years and 9 months; the comparison group were 11 years. Thus, the comparison children were slightly older on average than the children attending the after-school clubs.

3. Results

Parent interviews

The questions put to parents began by focusing on the advantages of the after-school service for their child and went on to explore parents' views of how the service also benefited the rest of the family and how the service could be improved. Because some parents had more than one child participating in the study, parents' responses are expressed as a percentage of the total number of children participating rather than as a percentage of the number of parents interviewed.

What do you think are the advantages for your child of using the club?

The majority of parents' responses to this question referred to one of three types of advantage: social, educational and the provision of opportunities that would not be available at home.

- The first of these, social advantages, was mentioned by parents of 53 per cent of children and in all cases referred to the value of the club in allowing their child to spend time with other children of the same age. The following is the response of a mother of a seven-year-old boy using a rural service:

There's a bit of social time there for the children. The children love it. They get a chance to do lots of things. They are interacting in a different level with other children and older children, unlike school. It gives them a chance to get to know them and to hold their own with older children.

Another mother of a slightly older girl (eleven years), also using a rural service, said: 'It's something out of the house, away from TV and computer. It develops artistic skills and interpersonal skills and provides friends for children on their own.'

Although some parents of children of all ages referred to the social advantages of the after-school service it was mentioned almost twice as often by parents of younger children (11:6).

- The second theme that emerged in response to this question is the educational advantages of the club, mentioned by parents of 34 per cent of children, and in particular the help that the club provided children in completing their homework. For example, a father whose ten-year-old daughter was attending an urban after-school project commented: 'I think it helps her to communicate better with people. She really likes it and she seems to be doing better with school work.' The mother of a seven-year-old boy commented: 'He's getting homework done. It's difficult to do the homework at home. He wants to be out playing football all the time.'
- A third theme identified in parents' responses to this question (mentioned by 34 per cent of children's parents) came from their perception that the clubs offered children opportunities that would not be available to them at home. A mother whose two sons, aged eight and ten years, attend the club said: 'The activities [are the main advantage]. The club knows the activities that would interest the children. As foreigners we would not know what there was to do or where it was.' Although other themes emerged from parents' interviews they were not mentioned by such a high proportion of the parents. It is, however, worth noting

that 22 per cent of children's parents emphasised that their child's enjoyment of the after-school club was one of its major advantages. One mother whose eight-year-old son was attending one of the urban settings focused exclusively on her son's enjoyment of the club: 'He enjoys going and meeting the other kids. He likes the trips.'

What are the advantages of using the club for you and for the rest of the family?

Parents' responses to this question have been grouped into three themes.

- The first of these is the fact that the after-school club provided parents with free time that they otherwise would not have had, and this was mentioned by 41 per cent of children's parents. Why this free-time was valuable to the parent varied from family to family as is illustrated in these responses:

It gives me a break and gives me time with the younger child [a baby]. When [daughter] comes in the baby is ready to go for a sleep and then I can spend time with [her] – I'm a single mother. It allows me to split my time between them. (Mother of 8-year-old girl)

Our family run our own business and I do the paperwork. It takes one day a week from 9.00 to 6.00. I get someone to mind the new baby and the children go to the after-school. It allows me to do the paperwork. (Mother of 8-year-old boy)

My husband is not working. He is free to go to interviews etc. He is not tied to the house. (Mother of 6-year-old girl)

Although free-time was mentioned by parents of children of all ages it was more commonly mentioned by the parents of the younger age-group of children (9:4).

- The second theme emerging in response to this question is the role of the club in helping children with homework (mentioned by 32 per cent of children's parents). Parents had already mentioned that help with homework was a major advantage for their children. Their responses to this question reveal that they also believe that removing the need to do homework at home is a major advantage to them and the rest of the family. The advantage to working parents of help with homework is particularly well illustrated by the response of this mother whose 7-year-old son attends one of the rural clubs:

It's fantastic for me. When I come home from full-time work their homework will be done. Seven o'clock is too late for homework. I make dinner when I come home so it's seven by the time we would be ready to do homework. Not having homework means that I can play with the children, play a game for example and relax with them. I have four children so homework would be a nightmare if they were starting it at seven.

Sometimes getting help with homework was an advantage to parents for other reasons, particularly if their first language was not English or they did not feel competent to help for another reason:

It's helping him at his homework. I'm not great at reading and writing. I couldn't really help him. Now he can do it himself without help. He still asks me but he doesn't mind if I don't know the answers. (Mother of 10-year-old boy in urban setting)

- Peace of mind also emerged as an advantage to parents although it was mentioned by a smaller proportion (16 per cent). These responses refer to the concerns that parents have for their children's welfare and safety and their need to know that they are well looked after. The following response from a mother illustrates concerns that were echoed by other parents:

[The main advantage is] Peace of mind. Gives him another interest. There is nothing for kids around [mentions the area where they live]. There is no playground attached to the flats. The neighbours give out if the kids kick a football. It gives him something to do and keeps him off the street and out of trouble. He tends to follow older boys. He is not allowed to go away from his own street but he sometimes 'rambles' and gets punished. I'm worried about him getting into trouble.

Interviews with children

Interviews with children focused on their enjoyment of the activities provided in the after-school clubs. Children were also asked to give a quantitative rating of the service provided using Likert-like rating scales.

What do you like most about after-school?

Children's responses to this question typically mentioned just one or two preferred activities.

Table 1 Children's top five preferred activities

Activity	Younger (N=16)	Older (N=16)
Sport	4	6
Outings	4	1
Social activity	0	5
Indoor activities	5	3

The figures presented in Table 1 indicate that there were differences between the preferred activities of different age groups of children but these must be interpreted with caution because the numbers are too small to allow statistical analysis. The older children mentioned the importance of the after-school project for spending time with their friends – an aspect of after-school life that was not mentioned by the younger age group. For example, a 12-year-old girl attending one of the urban settings said: '[What I like best is] all the children. When I go home there is no-one to play with. I live in an apartment. There is only one other girl to play with in the back area.'

Children's quantitative evaluations of their experiences of the after-school clubs were measured in two ways. The first involved asking children to rate four aspects of their experience in the club: how they feel when they arrive, how comfortable they feel with the club leader, how much they enjoy their time with the other children and how much they enjoy the meal. Each was rated on a four-point scale from very negative to very positive. The ratings were then added together to provide an overall evaluation of the setting, with a possible total of 16. Based on these ratings all the clubs received very positive evaluations by the children, with ratings varying from 14.00 to 15.50 (average 14.59, SD 1.64). In addition to this scale, children were asked to give their centre an overall rating by awarding the centre a number between 1 and 10 to indicate how good they thought it was. Again the average rating for each centre confirms children's positive evaluations, with scores between 7.38 and 9.70 (average 8.72, SD 2.44).

Teacher evaluations

The questionnaire used to gather information on teachers' evaluations of children's socio-emotional development and standard of homework was developed for use in the present study. It was therefore necessary to establish the internal reliability of the instrument before proceeding with any further analyses. Statistical estimates of the internal reliability of the instrument (alpha coefficient) indicate very high scores for the instrument as a whole and the two component sections: overall questionnaire alpha=.98; socio-emotional development alpha=.97; homework standard alpha=. 97.

Having established the internal reliability of the instrument the next analyses compared the performance of the children who were attending after-school clubs with matched control children from the same schools who were not attending these clubs. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of after-school group and control group on teacher questionnaire

Teacher questionnaire	After-school group (N=32)		Control group (N=32)		t-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Socio-emotional development	48.56	12.78	47.19	17.08	.36
Standard of homework	16.59	6.03	16.62	7.24	-.02
Overall score	65.12	18.35	63.81	23.96	.25

These results indicate that the children in the after-school group received higher overall scores than the children in the control group. However, none of the differences was statistically significant. It should be noted that many teachers reported that it was difficult to select appropriate comparison children because the after-school service was specifically targeted at the children and families whose needs were greatest. In these circumstances the fact that the two groups have such similar levels of socio-emotional development and quality of homework may be a measure of substantial achievement by the clubs.

School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS) scores

The researcher's evaluation of each setting was completed using a standardised assessment instrument to rate all aspects of the centres' services. These ratings covered five areas of the centres' services as well as giving a rating for staff development. They are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Mean SACERS scores and percentage of available marks

Aspect of service (available marks)	Club 1	Club 2	Club 3	Club 4	Overall Mean score
Space and furnishings (77)	23	58	50	32	40.75
Health and safety (56)	32	30	30	23	28.75
Activities (56)	23	34	29	21	26.75
Interactions (63)	43	58	53	31	46.25
Programme structure (28)	20	23	16	19	19.50
Staff development (21)	12	17	16	4	12.25
Total score (302)	153	220	194	130	174.25

SACERS scores provide an indication of how each centre's service meets the requirements of a high quality service, as determined by US experts. It is evident from the data presented in Table 3 that the clubs generally received moderate to high scores on each of the sub-scales, although there were also a few lower ratings. These figures need to be interpreted in light of the fact that the clubs that participated in the study were not always operating from ideal premises and that very limited advice and support is available for after-school clubs in Ireland. In addition, the clubs were all operating in disadvantaged areas and serving some of the families with the greatest needs in those areas. In these circumstances the fact that they achieved such high ratings, when judged against an international standard, is a tribute to the staff involved.

It is a particularly positive feature of the findings that interactions receives a relatively high percentage of the marks in each of the four settings and is the aspect of service provision that is, on average, given the highest mark. This finding suggests that staff interact positively with the children in all four centres and that the children interact positively with one another. The programme structure, including items such as daily schedule, free choice, and use of community resources, receives a high score on average across all four centres.

Aspects of the services that do not achieve such high scores are health and safety and available activities. The four clubs, on average, were awarded just over 51 per cent of the marks available for health and safety. This sub-scale includes 8 items, only two of which relate to emergency and safety practices and policy. The other 6 items focus more on health-related topics such as records of attendance, supervision of children's departure, food preparation and personal hygiene. To be awarded high marks on any of these items the service providers must take on an educational role with parents and children alike. It is unlikely that the majority of after-school service providers in Ireland would see this as within their remit, given the limited time that they spend with the children each day.

Finally, the sub-scale that received the lowest average mark across the clubs is activities, which received an average of just 47 per cent of the marks available. The reason for this low score is that the SACERS demands a very wide range of available activities including, for example, arts and crafts, music and movement, blocks/construction material, drama/theatre activities and a range of educational activities including maths, science and language. Although all four clubs offered the children a range of activities, the activities were not varied enough to achieve very high ratings on this scale. Another factor contributing to this score is that the varied sports activities offered by the clubs do not form part of this SACERS sub-scale. It is worth noting that only one item in the SACERS makes any reference to sports activities and this is included in the 'Interactions' sub-scale rather than activities.

4. Discussion

The results of the study indicate that parents and children place a high value on participation in after-school clubs. Parents particularly value the social opportunities for their children and the educational value that children derive from attending the clubs as well as other opportunities that children might not have if they went home after school every day. Parents also believed that the clubs gave them more free time, and helped them by providing assistance with homework and offering peace of mind regarding the care of their children.

For their part the children valued the activities that the clubs offered, with the older children placing particular value on the opportunities to spend time with friends. All four participating clubs were rated on the SACERS and the ratings were generally moderate to high, although individual scores on some sub-scales were lower.

When the interview data were being analysed careful attention was given to the possibility that parents of boys and girls might express different views about the after-school services or that the children might report a preference for different activities. In practice there were no striking gender differences in the responses of parents or children. Nor was there any evidence that either gender was more or less satisfied with the services provided. These findings are consistent with the findings of Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) in the USA, who reported no relationship between parental reports of after-school programmes and their child's gender.

In the course of interviews with parents and children it became apparent that there were age-related differences in experiences and expectations. Thus, parents of younger children were more likely than parents of older children to refer to the importance of the social advantages of attending an after-school club and to see the social role of the club as one of its most important features. In contrast, when the children were interviewed about the aspects of the club that they enjoyed most, the older children were more likely to mention social aspects of the club. It is possible that the younger children may have been taking the social aspects of the club for granted whereas the older children may have had a better insight into the value of social contact with friends out of school hours.

When parents were asked to reflect on how the after-school club benefited them and their family, the parents of younger children were more likely to mention the advantage of having time for themselves. Parents of older children may find it easier to make casual child care arrangements so they are less concerned about having free time. These age-related differences emphasise the importance of providing children with developmentally appropriate activities and acknowledging in the provision of services that children's needs and preferred activities are age-related. Clubs need to provide a sufficient range of activities to appeal to the age range of children that they are serving. These findings also suggest that the wider benefits that families derive from after-school services are related to the ages of the children attending.

The data collected in the present study allowed comparison of the after-school clubs from different perspectives. Children's ratings of their clubs were all very high, indicating that they were generally very satisfied with the service they were receiving. The children's enjoyment of their experiences in the clubs was also mentioned by a number of the parents as an important feature of the service. The ratings given by the researcher on the SACERS were generally moderate to high, although a number of sub-scales had lower scores. It was noted, in particular, that that sub-scale of

SACERS that focused on interactions among staff and children in the club were, on average, given high ratings. This finding appears similar to the findings of Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) who reported that children's ratings of their childcare programmes were related to staff-child interactions. In other words, children were positive about their experiences in after-school programmes where researchers observed positive interactions between staff and children. It should be noted, however, that the number of clubs taking part in the study was too small to permit a statistical analysis of the correlation between children's ratings and ratings on SACERS.

The perspectives on after-school care explored in the present study can also be compared for shared priorities in service provision. Interviews with parents and children highlighted many of the same aspects of the clubs as valuable or enjoyable, e.g. the opportunities for social activity and to do things you would not normally do at home, such as go on outings. These aspects of the services provided by the clubs are also an important element of the SACERS. Parents agreed with the SACERS that educational opportunities are an important part of the services provided, although this was not mentioned by the children. Parents uniquely valued the fact that the clubs gave them free time and peace of mind. Children's interviews suggested that many of them particularly valued the sports activities available in the clubs and these were not specifically mentioned by parents, nor do they form an important part of SACERS ratings.

Acknowledging that each group of stakeholders will have a different and possibly unique view of a service is important and is consistent with the views expressed by the EC Childcare Network (1996). The Network argued that multi-functional after-school services would have the potential to become resources for supporting the development and functioning of children, families and communities. They would have 'the potential to enhance the stability of family life: to promote the social inclusion of children and parents and to contribute to the cohesion and prosperity of communities, to the advancement of equal opportunities and to the well-being of children and their families' (EC Childcare Network, 1996, p.7). The report advocated that services should be conceptualised as institutions of social, economic and cultural significance rather than as mere businesses.

The present study compared teacher ratings of socio-emotional development and quality of homework for children attending the after-school clubs with a comparison group of children. There was no significant difference between their scores. In this respect the findings differ from those of Posner and Vandell (1994) who reported the children attending group-based after-school services performed better on a range of measures than children with other after-school arrangements. The very small sample size in the present study and the difficulty of finding a matched comparison group means that it would not be appropriate to conclude that Irish children living in disadvantaged areas do not benefit academically from attending the after-school clubs.

5. Policy Implications

The present study included both qualitative and quantitative data and allowed for comparison of after-school services operating in different environments from the perspectives of a number of different stakeholders. These features of the study have provided a rich source of data on a type of childcare provision that has received relatively little attention from researchers, either nationally or internationally. Making policy recommendations based on the findings of the study must be tempered by the fact that only four after-school services participated in the study and that the total number of participating families and teachers was also small. There are, nevertheless, a number of findings that are consistent with those of much larger studies published in the international literature and this adds some weight to their value as the basis for policy recommendations.

The children and families that participated in this research reported that they were benefiting from the services offered by the after-school clubs. This finding is consistent with the benefits to children reported by other studies (e.g. Marshall et al. 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1994) and extends these findings by suggesting a benefit to the whole family. For these reasons it is recommended that support be offered to after-school services in disadvantaged communities to allow them to continue to offer a service to children and families. This support could take many forms but the findings of the present study (based on researcher observations and the SACERS ratings) suggest that the clubs would benefit particularly from the provision of on-going training for staff and of support to upgrade their premises and acquire the equipment necessary to offer children a wide range of age-appropriate activities.

The present study did not address the important question of how after-school environments in Ireland can best meet children's needs. The second recommendation of the study is that further research be carried out on how children's experiences are influenced by aspects of the after-school environment. Important aspects of the environment that need research include staff training, staff-child ratio and the number and ages of children in a group. The findings of this research could provide important information for the development of future policy initiatives and legislation to regulate the sector.

After-school services have a potentially important role to play in disadvantaged communities where they can serve as an important link between families, schools and a variety of community services. They can offer children a safe environment in which to learn new skills, to spend time with friends and to have a good time. They can play a valuable supporting role for families. While there are examples of excellent after-school services across the country there is as yet no coherent national policy on the development of these services. If the sector is to develop its full potential and meet the needs of disadvantaged communities then such a policy is essential.

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