

EVALUATION OF THE
3rd CLASS HOMEWORK
SUPPORT PROGRAMME

1998-2002



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Glossary

BAP Blanchardstown Area Partnership

DED District Electoral Division

HSLO Home School Liaison Officer

P/E Physical Education

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my appreciation to many different people who aided me in completing this evaluation for Blanchardstown Area Partnership.

Firstly thank you to the individual members of the steering group established to oversee the evaluation. I would particularly like to single out for praise Mr John Grainey the Home School Liaison Officer who along with Catherine Durkin BAP'S Education Co-ordinator advised me upon the methodology for this evaluation, helped set up many interview dates in such a tight deadline and provided me with accurate statistical information.

Thank you also to Principals Michael Shanley and Michael Downes their staff and teachers who helped enormously inform this overall evaluation.

Finally thank you to the parents of St Philip's S.N.S. Mountview school (and their children) who gave up a free morning of their time and who shared their thoughts as to the impact of the homework clubs.

Section 1

Introduction

In January 1998 the Blanchardstown Area Partnership's (BAP) Education Working Group met for the first occasion. This internal BAP body was representative of a broad range of educational expertise from throughout the Blanchardstown area. Over a series of meetings two strands emerged as key pillars of BAP's approach to educational matters i.e. prevention of early school leaving plus third level access for adults.

From a preventative educational perspective the group choose, after much discussion, to focus upon third class primary pupils, as it was agreed by all that this a pivotal point in the cycle of a child's development. "Time when a pattern of good habits could be developed".¹ It was noted that this was the stage when pupils began to miss school. In recognition of this, BAP's Education Co-ordinator and the Home School Liaison Officer representatives on the working group developed a 3rd class homework support programme model, which was brought back for further discussion within the Education Working Group. Thereafter it was decided to pilot this idea originally in Scoil Mhuire Blakestown from April to June 1998. Based upon positive feedback from the initial pilot project the programme was expanded to three additional schools namely St Patrick's Corduff, Ladyswell National School and St Philip's Mountview.

In the context of the fact that BAP has funded this initiative for several years now and with almost 200 children who have attended the clubs in the intervening time period it was considered appropriate to conduct a full evaluation at this stage and examine the inputs and discernible impacts (results and outcomes) of this programme. Ideally it should also help inform BAP's Mid-Term Review process currently underway. This programme has in recent years expanded to include a Travellers homework club, however it was decided by the steering group set up to oversee the evaluation, that it should only focus upon the four original clubs.

Aim and Objectives of Club's

It is worth recalling the aim and objectives ² of the 3rd class support scheme.

Aim: To foster positive attitudes to school, among the parents and children

Objectives: To offer children help and support with their schoolwork.

To develop children's skills and experience through activities and games.

To provide friendly supportive environment in which skills, confidence and self-esteem can be nurtured.

¹ Catherine Durkin Education Co-ordinator of BAP

² After Schools Club 3rd Class Support Scheme Handbook

To encourage parents to participate in the homework support scheme and develop skills they can use in the home situation

Methodology and Parameters of the Evaluation

A steering group composed of representatives from BAP Youth Implementation Board plus the Partnership's internal Research and Evaluation Officer jointly decided upon the research methodology. Attendance records did provide some quantitative data but overall it was decided that a predominantly qualitative approach would be the most conducive approach to completing this particular evaluation. Practical factors such as the pending closeness of term time dictated that greater emphasis was placed upon one to one interviewing than might otherwise have been the case. The Home School Liaison Officer in Scoil Mhuire, Mr John Greaney and the Partnership's Education Co-ordinator Ms Catherine Durkin both arranged several interview slots. Anne O'Connell of St Patrick's SNS also arranged a suitable venue to speak with a group of parents where a group discussion about the merits of the homework clubs took place. All of the above enabled the research process to progress smoothly.

Ideally in planning an evaluation one would like to measure the 'experimental group' (Children who receive the programme) against a non-equivalent (non-randomised) 'comparison group' i.e. class peers by administering pre and post-tests. This unfortunately was not possible in the circumstances. This issue is re-visited later on in the recommendations section.

It is the understanding of this evaluator that this evaluation should be both formative (as the programme is still being funded) but also summative (outcome orientated).

The key issues ³, which the evaluation will examine from the 3rd Class Support Programmes perspective are as follows

- **Relevance-** to what extent are the programmes objectives still pertinent in relation to the evolving needs and priorities both at a local and national level
- **Efficiency-** how economically have the various inputs been converted into outputs and results?
- **Effectiveness-** how far have the programme's impacts contributed to achieving it's objectives?
- **Utility/Equity-** how do the programme's impacts compare with the needs of the target audience?
- **Sustainability-** to what extent can the positive changes be expected to last after the programme ceases?

³ A Guide Ex Post and Intermediate Evaluation January 1997 European Commission

Survey sample group

Two of the four-school principal's Mr Michael Downes of St Philips S.N.S Mountview and Mr Michael Shanley of St Patrick's S.N.S Corduff were interviewed via structured questionnaire format

A very informal discussion took place between the children in two of the schools and the evaluator i.e. Scoil Mhuire and Mountview

A semi-structured interview with the home school liaison personnel

Interview with several existing and former club leaders and teachers who in some cases also are 3rd class teachers

Interview with a mix of parents from Mountview-some parents whose children were in previous 3rd class support programme.

Interview with Catherine Durkin Education Co-ordinator of the Partnership

Interview with Anne O'Connell St Patrick's SNS Corduff Home School Community Liaison

Interview with club's cook Janet

Questionnaires were also distributed to all schools to ensure greater feedback from parents, class teachers and club leaders

A sample of attendance sheets from all the schools for selected years was provided

The exact attendance rates of 24 pupils over two separate academic years were also provided.

Section 2

How relevant are homework clubs in a Blanchardstown setting and how efficiently has the budget been spent?

An examination of statistical data from a variety of sources helps us to address this question. The 1998 Gamma report allows us to compare the educational attainment for the adult population in Blanchardstown versus the regional and national averages. More specifically however we must examine this data from a District Electoral Division (DED) basis and ask whether the four homework schools are actually located in Blanchardstown's most disadvantaged areas in the first instance?

The Gamma report indicates that this is indeed the case. Both St Philip's and Scoil Mhuire located in (Coolmine DED), Ladyswell National School (Mulhuddart DED) plus St Pat's (Corduff DED) are among the most disadvantaged in the country with a rank-scoring factor of 9 and 10 respectively. An examination of table 1 below illustrates also that 33.9% of the population in Corduff have no formal or primary education only, compared to a national average of 29.5%.

Table 1

DED	Pop no formal or primary education only %	Pop lower secondary education %	Pop upper secondary education %	Pop 3 rd level education %	Age education ceased < or =15 (%)	Age education ceased > or= 20 (%)
Abbotstown	29.4%	15.1%	28.6%	26.8%	28%	17.9%
Blakestown	18.9%	29.9%	35.3%	15.9%	29%	9.5%
Coolmine	32.6%	29.8%	27.2%	10.4%	42.9%	7%
Corduff	33.9%	31.4%	27.1%	7.5%	44.4%	4.2%
Delwood	15.5%	15.8%	38.4%	30.2%	19.3%	21%
Mulhuddart	32.7%	44%	19.9%	3.3%	61.7%	2.2%
Roselawn	17.4%	17.4%	36.9%	28.3%	23.5%	19%
Tyrrelstown	34.1%	42%	21.1%	2.8%	54.3%	1.8%
APC	24.2%	27.6%	32.1%	16.1%	33.5%	10.3%
County	18.3%	20.5%	35.9%	25.4%	25.3%	17.2%
National	29.5%	20.9%	29.9%	19.7%	34.5%	14.7%

Gamma Report 1998

We can also compare the attendance rates for the eight disadvantaged primary schools in Blanchardstown to the non-designated disadvantaged Primary schools. We can infer that the attendance rates for children in non-designated schools rate better from between 5-7%. The population of Blanchardstown in April 2002 stood at 51,333, an increase of 31.7% since 1996. Unfortunately we do not have available to us yet the breakdown by age. However at the time of the previous Census just under 32% of Blanchardstown's whole population were aged less than 15 compared to a national average of 23.7%. Therefore the youth population of Blanchardstown is very high, which puts an additional strain on school resources.

Table 2 Attendance Rates at Designated Designated Disadvantaged Primary Schools Blanchardstown

	93-94	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98
Traveller	62%	58%	64%	63%	66%
Total no days	545	546	541	538	541
General	88%	87%	86%	85%	86%
Total no of days	727	728	722	717	720
Special	85%	85%	86%	82%	84%
Total no of days	181	545	722	717	720

Source: Case Study Early School Leaving in Blanchardstown

Table 3 Attendance in Non Designated Disadvantaged Primary Schools in Blanchardstown

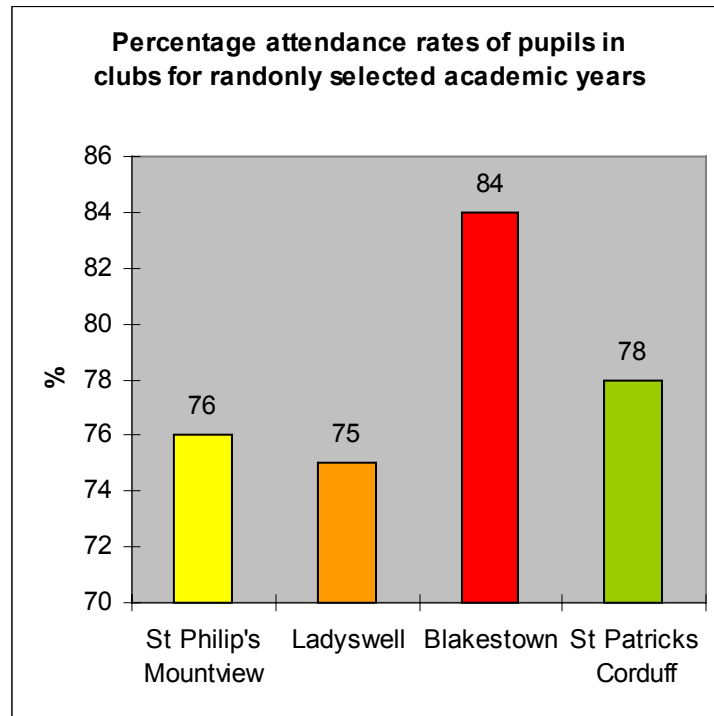
Years	93-94	94-95	95-96	96-97	97-98
Traveller	77%	45%	70%	63%	65%
Total no of days	181	183	180	179	181
General	93%	93%	93%	93%	93%
Total no of days	727	731	722	718	725
Special	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: Case Study Early School Leaving in Blanchardstown

The clubs have been located in the areas where educational attainments are at their lowest among the general population and absenteeism rates for school children at their highest. The 3rd class support programme's educational budget has been allocated in this instance to where the needs are greatest.

The Home School Liaison Officer provided a sample of the attendance rates from each of the 4 clubs to the researcher. These were examined and tallied in turn. The following are the attendance rates for one select academic year from each of the clubs. St Philip's Mountview 2001-2002 (76%), Ladyswell National School 2000-2001 (75%), Blakestown 2000-2001 (84%) and finally Corduff (78%).

Bar Chart 1

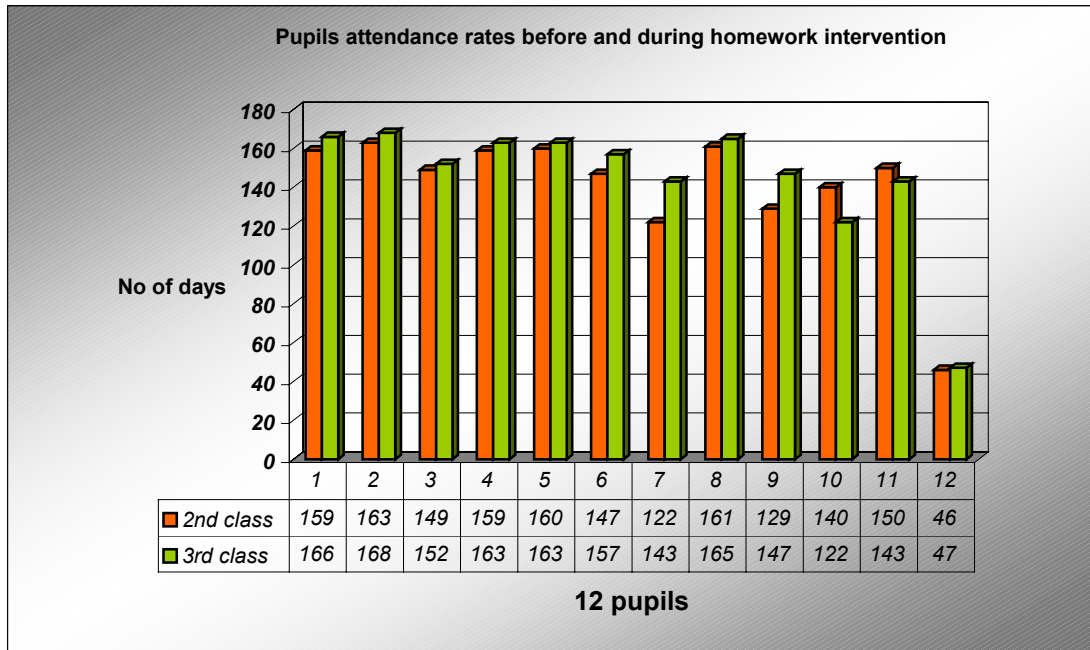


The above figures should be interpreted with caution. There were some cases where a pupil who stopped attending a club for whatever reason may not have been replaced by another child until after Christmas. Also some clubs invite along some more able kids who in general would be better school attendees. Both of these factors might distort the figures somewhat.

From general discussions there was a widespread belief held among various parties to the clubs that because of their very existence, the attendance rates of the pupils were higher in 3rd class than would otherwise be the case. In order to ascertain whether this was factual, the attendance rates of twelve pupils in Mountview School who attended the clubs in 3rd class, were contrasted to their previous years attendance in second class. Figures from two separate years were provided to make this analysis.

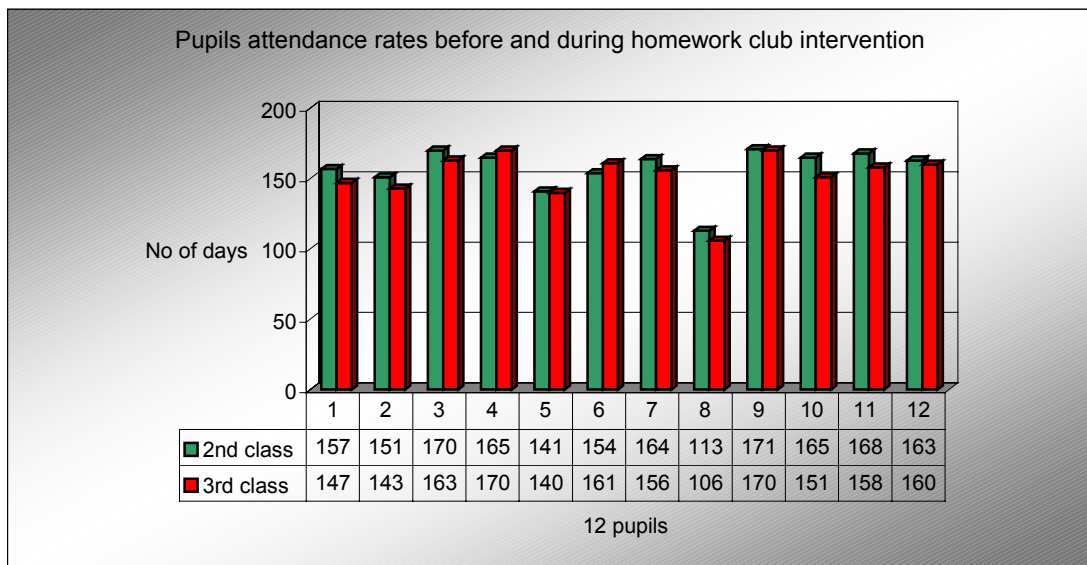
What the statistics actually reveal is that in one particular year the attendance rates of children in third class did improve. (See below Bar Chart 2) However surprisingly and contrary to most parties perceptions, the attendance rates of the children actually deteriorated in another year. (Bar Chart 3) It should be pointed out this was just a random sample from one of the four schools but nevertheless it does demonstrate that it doesn't always follow that pupils attendance rates will improve just because they attend a homework club.

Bar Chart 2



2000/2001-2001/2002

Bar Chart 3



1999/2000-2000/2001

Unfortunately it is not possible to discuss this programme much further from an efficiency perspective, as there is no other comparable programme to contrast it against. Between 1998 and 2002 inclusive, the Partnership invested € 55,990 in the programme. At a more intangible level many different people have invested a lot of time and effort into the smooth running of the clubs over the past number of years i.e. School Principals, Club Leaders, 2nd/3rd class teachers, Home School Liaison Officers plus BAP's Education Co-ordinator. It should be noted that the financial and non-financial support of the Partnership has been very much appreciated by all those associated with the programme down through the years. Some of the individual schools have successfully managed to secure additional finances from the Department of Education to operate clubs in 4th and 5th classes. Very often the same children that have attended 3rd class courses subsequently go on to enrol in these clubs also.

This brings us on to the question regarding the sustainability of the clubs. In other words would the 3rd class clubs be in a position to continue operating in the absence of BAP funding and more importantly, have any active steps been taken to prepare for such an eventuality? The answer to this is not straightforward. Some of the schools have chosen to run similar homework clubs in 4th and 5th classes on the basis of direct funding sourced from the Government under various initiatives e.g. Stay in School Initiative etc. Obviously this would be a matter for the individual schools to decide what the best course of action would be in the event of them having to choose between 3rd, 4th or 5th class clubs. Some of the schools, with varying levels of success, have attempted to involve parents. Clubs in other regions of the country have successfully managed to engage retired people in the running of clubs who give literacy support to the young people on a one to one basis. There are also examples of parents deciding to take the initiative to run clubs at their own behest and actively contribute towards their own children's education. However the population of Blanchardstown is by and large still very young. Mr John Greaney did mention that on one occasion he put together a rota to increase parent's involvement. Unfortunately this didn't work, as more often than not, he had to ring the day before to remind the parents that it was their turn to go along to the club. Sometimes people would either forget or just not attend.

Organisation and Staffing Structure of Clubs

The clubs operate twice a week in the afternoons from October until June of the following year and generally are a combination of supervised homework support, sporting activities, arts and crafts plus a meal for the children. The approach of individual schools towards the organisation of the clubs differs however.

In St Patrick's Corduff, the two club leaders also happen to be the pupils third class teachers. This ensures a tight operation and "*also means pupils will all turn up*"⁴ according to Corduff's Principal. In his view it is almost an extension of school with a greater fun element attached, but it also means that the club leaders know their pupils better. This is somewhat a unique arrangement and came about when the previous years club leader left. This allows both leaders to split the post between them and enables one to cover for the other should any mitigating circumstances arise. In

⁴ Mr Michael Shanley

Corduff school there would also be a “*break in between the end of the formal day and the start of the homework club*”⁵ whereas in Scoil Mhuire the club directly follows class. According to the clubs cook in one of her two assigned schools they “*don’t always have an activity..if they have time left they might have 5 minutes play*”. Both Scoil Mhuire and St Philips up until now have shared a cook from the Full Time Jobs Initiative. This was found to have been of enormous benefit to the clubs operation as a whole as it has provided the club leaders with additional time to concentrate on helping the pupils. At one stage one of the club leaders had to take on the responsibility for buying food and preparing it. The cook attached to the clubs, has also in the past, walked the children back to their houses afterwards, as she happens to live in the same vicinity as many of the kids. This builds up trust and helps ensure the kids get home safe in the evenings. However “Some of these kids are going back to empty homes”

Selection Process

The children that attend the clubs are targeted through a combination of different approaches. Firstly the school would be aware of families where in the past there had been difficulties in completing homework and where there was a family history of early school leaving. The club leader would consult with the 2nd class teachers to help identify potential early school leavers. The Home School Liaison Officer would also pay a visit to the family home and explain the concept of the club. Very often the parents would admit their own difficulties in helping their children complete their homework. Another approach that has been tried and found to be successful was where a parent whose child had attended the club the previous year spoke to a group of parents directly about her positive experiences in relation to the club.

Parental involvement with the clubs has fluctuated over the years since they first begun. It is definitely a notable trend however that it has become ever increasingly difficult to attract parents along to the clubs. The reasons for this are varied such as more female parents working part time in the evenings. The amount of free time parents have available to them now has therefore dwindled. Another explanation is that in some cases parents are reluctant to offer assistance to the clubs as they feel that due to their own spelling difficulties for instance, they might end up embarrassing themselves and their children. The issue will be revisited later on in the recommendation section.

⁵ FTJI Cook Janet

Section 3

The Impacts of the Clubs on Participating Children

In order to satisfactorily discuss this issue in sufficient depth it was necessary to talk to everyone involved with the delivery of the programme. (See methodology section)

Parent's views

A group discussion took place in St Philips School with parents whose children were either attending the club at present or had done so in the past. This session was partly facilitated by Anne O'Connell the teacher.

- Parents were asked to rate the most important factors, which persuaded them to send their kids to the club.
- Likewise there were also asked to indicate in what ways (if any) their children had improved since joining the clubs.
- A questionnaire was circulated to parents in Anne O'Connell's school. This combination of qualitative and quantitative data from two of the four schools allows us to satisfactorily discuss matters from the parent's perspective.

Findings

83% of parents view the homework aspect of the club to be very important while the remainder (27%) class it as 'important'. Obviously these parents realise the critical importance of education to their children's future development. On the other hand 41% of the parents indicated that art and drama to be an 'extremely important' consideration. In addition all but one parent thought that getting help with the child's weak points was not 'extremely important'. The opportunity to engage in additional 'social interaction' was rated as 'extremely important' by close on 60% of parents, with again the remainder rating it as 'important'. Finally just one parent thought that getting help with specific learning difficulties was only 'slightly important'.

As was mentioned above, parents were asked to indicate how their children had improved since joining the clubs. Nine of the twelve parents stated that 'yes' their children were both 'more eager to go to school' and also 'more settled both inside and outside of school'. More impressively though every parent could indicate that their children's 'self-esteem levels' had increased and consequently they were also more 'confident'. Again a large majority of parents (75%) stated that their children 'completed their homework in the evenings' of non-club days but still had to be supervised. In conclusion therefore it appears that most of the children are benefiting to a large extent from their participation in the clubs. However it shouldn't be overlooked that for up to a quarter of kids the benefits are less pronounced. These children could possibly in all likelihood require additional support in 4th class as a follow up.

For one of the parents the fact that her child was going along to the club had calmed matters in her own home and she felt that there was “less pressure” on her shoulders. This particular parent experienced reading difficulties herself as she was diagnosed as being dyslexic. “*Ma it’s your fault*” is frequently an accusation that would be put to her by her children. One of the parents also remarked that family members and friends had in the past often been very cruel to the children who were not in a position then to get additional help with their homework. However, remarkably, one of the perhaps unexpected results from the clubs was that the

“Homework clubs had given the children an air of status amongst peers” and so was *“counteracting previous prejudices”*.

Some of the kids would understandably be shyer than their classmates and therefore might find it more difficult to mix with other boys and girls in general. However a couple of the parents indicated on the questionnaires that this had begun to change.

“Carla had spent a lot of time on her own before joining the homework club, is now starting to mix well and express her opinion”

“ Lee-anne is new in the area and she was still in the process of missing her old school, where she attended the after school project 5 days a week. My heart went out to her, now she feels she is fitting in”.

A parent also stated that sometimes kids were getting away with out doing homework back in the house and that there was a “*need for someone to be stern*”. This was a positive factor of the club from this parent’s point of view.

One of the class teachers observed that P/E was also an important factor. As the kids were mixing in a smaller setting with 11 fellow pupils (as opposed to perhaps 25 in a full class) they had a greater likelihood of simply scoring a goal in an arranged game of football. This therefore allowed them to ‘shine’ whereas in a larger classroom setting this may never be the case.

Teacher’s Views on the Impacts of the Clubs

Two of the 3rd class teachers, who also happen to be the ‘club leaders’ in Corduff, were interviewed. This potentially lends us an additional insight into the impacts of the club that perhaps might not necessarily be observable if we were to depend solely on teachers who are detached from the club itself. On the other hand one could point out that these teachers would be more inclined to highlight the positive impacts emerging from the club. To counteract this argument and to lend greater credibility to the research findings, a questionnaire was circulated to teachers in other schools where the 3rd class teachers did not deliver the club plus another teacher who is now distanced from the clubs having been involved for a couple of years was interviewed. The following quotes are a spread of opinions from across this above spectrum.

What indicators suggest that the ASAC is having a positive impact on their 'in school' performance?

"Their homework throughout the week has improved dramatically. Now the children are more confident coming to school and their attendance has also improved. Some children were quite withdrawn in the beginning but now have become quite outgoing. The children have also acquired a more positive attitude towards homework".

Self-Esteem and confidence building

"Homework club can only help a child's confidence not only regards to work also helping them to develop social and personal skills with regards to school and everyday life experiences"

"Self esteem and confidence has improved dramatically"

Developing favourable study habits

"The children seem to start with the more difficult tasks and leaving the homework they like doing until last. This ensures that they complete their homework, particularly, when they are at home. Whereas before those tasks that were more demanding were either attempted or not done at all".

Develop their social skills

"The social skills of the group has developed in leaps and bounds. They have developed a proper eating manner –are able to hold their cutlery and also realise that they speak only when they are finished eating"

"The homework club has helped children to be able to work and play together. It also has helped children to learn personal, social and hygienic skills from something as basic as learning the importance of washing their hands before a meal to having table manners."

Improving their performance in ordinary mainstream subjects?

" A lot of the children would have maths difficulties but with help in the homework club and through the grouping they are in school they are finding that maths is not as impossible as they thought"

"The homework club has encouraged more participation in class. The children in the club, having done their homework in the club are inclined to be more confident in correcting and presenting their homework".

"Spelling and reading has improved, more inclined to do it in the ASAC whereas at home it might be signed off by the parent. They make more of an effort in the ASAC-at home they rush it."

According to Aine Kirwan, former club leader in Ladyswell National School, she perceived the positive impacts to be much more gained in relation to the child's 'social skills' development rather than in pure 'academic terms'. The improvement in mainstream subjects was 'negligible'.

The club, in her view, did wonders for their self-esteem because they're doing things others wanted to do. All the other children in the year wanted to be in the club. Interestingly this teacher also observed on one particular occasion, the children from the 3rd class club, happily playing with toys from a 1st class. Relative to their age they were quite immature. The school garden element was important according to the same teacher in the overall success of the club as it got the children out of a classroom setting and saw nature at work.

Importantly, in her opinion, the food aspect of the club was very important, as clearly some of the kids were not being properly fed at home. As the cook associated with the club pointed out "*some of these kids are going back to empty homes*". From a simple etiquette point of view the children were now able to say thank you, sit down at the table and eat their meals. Some of the children up until that point were sometimes eating with their hands.

The success of any club in Aine Kirwan's view was largely dependent upon the mix of pupils attending the club. In her opinion it was more beneficial to actually skew the mix of pupils i.e. kids with greater academic ability along with those with low self-esteem. This in the second year of the programme resulted in more parental involvement, as the parents whose children were achieving higher grades in school were more likely to help out with the club if requested. There was a similar discovery in Corduff School at one stage when a couple of kids dropped out only to be replaced by more able students to give a hand out to fellow class mates. This was found to have worked well.

Another factor she found helpful on one occasion was to invite a parent whose child had entered 4th class to discuss with the parents from the following years club the clubs positive factors. This helped sell the concept of the club to the other parents and made them more enthusiastic as to the potential merits of the club.

Children's Views

The following are the opinions of children from two of the four clubs' that are currently being supported under the 3rd class support programme. There can occasionally be a tendency to overlook or discount the views of children. However it should be pointed that according to the United Nations where a programme is publicly funded i.e. social inclusion, the views of children must be ascertained or in the case of the previous Area Action Plan 1996-2000 Operational Programme for Urban and Rural Development. Some of the quotes are quite striking and revealing in themselves.

Children's views on the homework clubs in Mountview and Scoil Mhuire

	What things do you like best about the club?	Do you get good help with your homework?	Do you find it easier to do your school because of coming to the club?	What would you do if you weren't at the club?
	"Teachers help me a lot" "Get to go to P/E" "Do your homework in school" "Cooking" "Food" "Get out of uniform when you go home and play" "Games-Connect 4" "Doesn't have a favourite part" "Get to draw" "Art"	"Tells us what to do and goes around and checks up after" "Doesn't really need it-kept back because of bullying"	"Yes" "Sometimes Mommy is not at home out working" "No-one to help you at home" "Get it done quicker at club" "Don't have to do any homework at home"	"Out" "Doesn't always do homework" "Tells her mum she doesn't have any" "At home bored" "Playing out"

From just chatting informally to the children it was apparent that they were very happy to be in the clubs and looked forward to them very much. It is obvious the difficulties some of these kids could feasibly encounter in finishing their homework on non-club days. Several of the kid's parents, as was mentioned before, are out working in the evenings. A feature of the 'Celtic Tiger' has been the large increase in the percentage of women working in the 'labour market'. A straw poll at a meeting with the HSLO and club leaders in mid-June revealed that three quarters of the parents from Mountview were working and fifty percent were lone parents in Mulhuddart.

Section 4

Conclusions

There is sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the 3rd class support programme has been an effective action to date. By re-visiting briefly some of the programmes impacts we can clearly see that most of the objectives have been met.

- Better school attendance and academic achievement

The attendance rates for the children would in all probability have been worse had it not been for the intervention. Very often the kids chosen to attend the clubs are from households where there has been a history of early school leaving. The individual attendance rates for the children in each of the schools ranged from between 75-83% based on a select examination of a sample of school records. A couple of people interviewed did however remark that attendance rates had deteriorated in certain schools and were far lower than suggested above.

Turning to the question of academic achievement, overall most people were of the opinion that the children's spelling, penmanship and maths had improved. Unfortunately there is no way of actually scientifically proving that these reported improvements were due to the intervention.

- Improved confidence and social skills

The most startling result is that the children's social skills developed considerably. A lot of the children it appears were not able to sit at a table and properly use a 'knife and fork' beforehand. The children on the whole appeared to be far more confident and capable of mixing with their peers.

- Increased appreciation of school

The children going along to the clubs were very enthusiastic and taking it upon themselves to inquire as to whether there would a club for them next year or not. Also one person pointed out that by the end of the year the children were taking out their copybooks and pens without any fuss or having to be asked.

- Increased adult supervision

Many of the children's parents are working so there isn't always someone at home to help the children with their homework. These children otherwise, would be to a certain extent, left to their own devices. In addition the children are safer being a classroom setting than being home on their own.

- Parent satisfaction

The parents who attended a one-hour discussion for the purposes of this evaluation were very appreciative of the fact that their children had attended the club and could tell in various ways how their child had improved since joining the clubs. The teachers and principals were also able to point out that through casual conversations with parents they were very happy with the clubs. e.g. reduced pressure load at home.

Turning to the issues of utility/equity of the programme, the children attending the clubs require additional supports for perhaps only as little as one year. In other circumstances some children need support over a number of years. Those schools that operate clubs in fourth and fifth classes are currently meeting these needs. Some of the schools have deliberately skewed the mix of pupils attending the clubs. This has been found to bring about better results in those children fortunate enough to have been picked out to attend the clubs. However the downside to this is that children who really need to attend a club are not being provided with that opportunity. This is something that may need to be addressed or re-examined by the education-working group. There has been a big demand from children to be allowed go along to the clubs. However due to the shortage of spaces children have had to be turned down. If indeed it is the case that skewing of individuals brings about more positive outcomes then there is a strong possibility that there would be a requirement for a second club in order to ensure equity for the most needy of children.

In conclusion the programme appears to be running smoothly overall. At the same time however some clubs operate more efficiently than others. The break between the end of the school day and the start of the homework club in one school can tempt a pupil to avoid the club. Also some clubs appear to put more importance upon the homework element of the clubs. This means that very often there is very little time set aside for leisure activities i.e. sport and drama.

The biggest concern lies over the longer-term sustainability of the clubs. Certainly without BAP funding at the moment the 3rd class clubs could not be held unless those schools that operate clubs in 4th and 5th classes decided to deflect resources in favour of 3rd class clubs. Parental involvement is extremely low and in fact one of the schools appears not to have involved parents in any way whatsoever over the past year. The replacements teachers were not aware that this was in fact one of the stated objectives of the clubs.

The clubs have reached now a stage of maturity, which should be perceived as a positive development. However it would still be important for all parties to engage at set intervals throughout the year.

Recommendations

BAP should continue to fund the 3rd class support programme as a preventative education action in its yearly programme of activities in the short term. However other models of homework clubs from around the country should be examined to determine whether aspects of learning especially ‘in terms of sustainability’ could be transferred back to a Blanchardstown setting. BAP’s original purpose was to fund the initiative as a pilot action. Therefore continued reliance of BAP, as a mainstream fundee is not appropriate.

A more structured approach in developing and delivering the 3rd class support programme across schools would better assist best practice in the initiative. This structure might also employ a project worker or a co-ordinator.

Due to the difficulties the schools are encountering in engaging parents, the possibility of running a pilot purpose Parenting Programme e.g. Growth and Partnership as operated by other Partnership’s should be explored by the educational working group. Also BAP’s planned adult literacy courses could be discreetly offered to these children’s parents via the intervention of the Home School Liaison Officer.

If possible parents whose children have attended in the past should be facilitated at the beginning of each academic year to discuss with parents whose children are about to enter the club, to the positive aspects of the clubs.

Lone Parents should be financially aided to attend the likes of Growth and Parenting Programmes via BAP’s Lone Parent Management Committee if childcare costs are a barrier to them attending any training.

From an equity perspective, the working group should re-examine whether it is correct that it is not always the case that the most needy of children attend the clubs.

In order to further validate the findings from this piece of research (most of which is anecdotal) a pre-test and post-test should be administered to both the kids who go on to attend the clubs but also their class peers at the beginning of the academic year. This would help display the improvements in the kid’s academic abilities more clearly and perhaps strengthen the schools probabilities of acquiring more mainstream funding from the government in the future. This could also be fitted into BAP’s proposed tracking system of early school leavers.

The playtime aspect (art and sports) to the clubs should not be undervalued. Currently it appears that some schools are not allocating enough time to these activities.

There is an urgent requirement to find an individual to follow on from the cook who for the past few years worked with both schools.

Bibliography

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