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UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

An exploration of the benefits of after-school club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development

Terri Lacey

CARL RESEARCH PROJECT

in collaboration with

Before 5 Family Centre

CARL
COMMUNITY - ACADEMIC
RESEARCH LINKS
University College Cork, Ireland

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Date Completed:	**May 2016**

What is Community-Academic Research Links?

Community Academic Research Links (CARL) is a community engagement initiative provided by University College Cork to support the research needs of community and voluntary groups/ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). These groups can be grass roots groups, single issue temporary groups, but also structured community organisations. Research for the CSO is carried out free of financial cost as much as possible.

CARL seeks to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
- enhance the transferrable skills and knowledge of students, community representatives and researchers (www.livingknowledge.org).

What is a CSO?

We define CSOs as groups who are non-governmental, non-profit, not representing commercial interests, and/or pursuing a common purpose in the public interest. These groups include: trade unions, NGOs, professional associations, charities, grass-roots organisations, organisations that involve citizens in local and municipal life, churches and religious committees, and so on.

Why is this report on the UCC website?

The research agreement between the CSO, student and CARL/University states that the results of the study must be made public through the publication of the final research report on the CARL (UCC) website. CARL is committed to open access, and the free and public dissemination of research results.

How do I reference this report?

Author (year) Dissertation/Project Title, [online], Community-Academic Research Links/University College Cork, Ireland, Available from: http://www.ucc.ie/en/scishop/completed/ [Accessed on: date].

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Statement of Academic Integrity:

I declare that this paper is my own work and the thoughts, writings and research of others, where used, have been referenced accordingly.

Abstract

This study is a Community-Academic Research Links (CARL) project managed between Before 5 Family Centre, UCC Applied Social Studies Department and the researcher. The aim of the research is to explore the benefits of afterschool club, focusing on children's social and emotional development. Through a qualitative approach seven interviews were used to examine and analyse parents, staff and school liaisons officer's perspectives of afterschool club. Literature reviewed revealed that children attending afterschool programmes reap multiple benefits; some areas of development include increased academic achievement, developing peer relationships and increased self-confidence. This evidenced-based research study found that children attending afterschool club demonstrated a positive change in their behaviour, formed new peer relationships, emotional competence and increased social development. The foundations and most influencing factor to these benefits are the positive interactions and attachments children have experienced with staff. As a social work student this study recognises that afterschool services have potentially a significant role to play in families, schools and community services. It is essential to adopt policy implementation, to ensure quality, better outcomes and brighter futures for children.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will begin by introducing the research title, background to the study, and the rationale of the research as part of the Community Academic Research Links (CARL). It will then explore the reflexive positioning of the researcher and theoretical perspective related to the research. The overall aims and objective of the study will be outlined. The research questions that formed this study will be presented. This chapter will conclude with a brief outline of individual chapters.

1.2 Research Title:

An exploration of the benefits of the after-school club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development.

1.3 Background:

The After-School Club (ASC) is part of the Before 5 Family Centre, which, is a family based community centre located in Cork city. It provides a broad range of childcare services with particular attention on early interventions and a preventative focus on supporting the families accessing the centre. The afterschool club has been in existence for 18 years. The target group for this research are aged 4 – 11 years. The aim of the ASC is to deliver a multi-dimensional approach to fostering the children's social and emotional development (Before 5 Family Centre, 2011). There are three components to the ASC. The first being homework support; aimed at supporting and supervising children with homework exercises. It provides an arts and craft element to the programme in order to help children to develop their creativity, build self-esteem, and improve confidence. Play and game activities are included to facilitate and encourage positive social interactions (Before 5 Family Centre, 2011).

There is a vast amount of research within the area of child development. This informed the researcher that early childhood social and emotional development has long term effects. Evidence based research nationally, and internationally, identifies that children, unless they achieve a minimal level of socio-emotional competence, are at risk in many important ways for the rest of their lives (Katz cited in Dowling 2010). Drawing from NCCA (2009) it is asserted that children's early learning and development takes place through play, activities, and hands-on experiences. These experiences encourage children to express their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, laying the foundations toward becoming effective communicators and learners (NCCA, 2009 p. 11). In this research the goal is to explore if the ASC in the Before 5 Centre impacts positively on children's development.

The academic literature on ASP is dominated by debates about the benefits of such programmes: whether or not children that participate in these programmes achieve more favourable outcomes compared to non-participating children. There is a growing body of evidence from international literature highlighting that homework support, arts, craft, drama, music, play and game activities benefit childhood development (Cosden et. al, 2004). According to Grossman et al, (2002) students that participate and are committed to ASP experience positive changes in improving social attitudes and behaviour. It improves self-confidence, and can keep students out of trouble. Within ASP children have the opportunity to foster connections with adults, and engage in meaningful activities with peers (Bohnert and Ward, 2012).These experiences are the foundations of building social and emotional development (Halpern, 2000).

In Ireland, there is limited published research on ASC. However, there are reports that have demonstrated the potential value of ASC. This research aims to conclude through evidence based research that there is a need for ASP to help, and encourage, social and emotional development. It is important to note that there exists another side of the coin: there were some negative findings. Research indicates that children who attend ASP show no differences in

academic attainment, but students who were not in the ASP showed a significant decrease in school grades (Tucker et al, 1995).

1.4 Rationale:

This study is part of the Community- Academic Research Links initiative (CARL). CARL is an "...initiative in University College Cork (UCC) to assist Civil Society Organisations in the region with research they would like to carry out" (UCC, 2013, p. 1). The community organisation that suggested the research topic is the Before 5 Family Centre. This study was motivated by the organisation because professionals, parents and children, have verbally advised staff and management that children who are attending the ASC are experiencing positive benefits. The rationale of the organisation to have this research carried out is to have a piece of concrete research as hard evidence to support this anecdotal information.

The researcher has a keen interest in how children develop, and what influences, or compromises their development. Bonel and Lindon (1996:27) explain development as a term used to cover the changes that can be observed in children as they pass through the years from birth to young adulthood. Study of development has included not only what happens, but also how and why it happens. (cited in Holt and Pugh, 2004, p. 7). Having an understanding of child development is a basic prerequisite for a practicing social worker. Drawing from this appropriate knowledge is fundamental to ensure professional judgements and to identify provisions of services. This study will enable the researcher to examine the role of the ASC in children's development, and further her knowledge on early intervention services.

Another influence for the researcher was the appeal of working in collaboration with a community service and doing active research. This was an attractive option at this stage of her professional development. All of social work, to some extent, takes place within communities (Teater, 2014). This research involved the student social worker working directly with community members to acknowledge the benefits of the afterschool club services in a disadvantaged area. In this sense, community work can be a method that the researcher is utilising by working with the community to meet needs and reach future goals in improving service provisions. Community work can be described as, '*a set of approaches*

focused on understanding the individuals as part of a community, and on building the capacity in that community to address the social, economic, or political challenges facing its members' (Healy, 2012, p.169 cited in Teater, 2014, p.221) The research enables the researcher to demonstrate her ability to work in partnership with community services, design, and implement, a research study. Conducting evidence-based research has the potential of supporting the organisation for future funding.

Another factor which acted as a motivator was limited research done on ASP in Ireland. This study could pave the way to new developments, and shed some light on ways to improve the ASP in the future. This research has significant relevance for social work practice; furthermore, it may also highlight the potential of after school clubs as a preventative framework from social work involvement. For all aforementioned reasons, the researcher was highly motivated to carry out this study.

1.5 Researcher Reflexivity:

Reflexivity is concerned with the researchers' subjectivity and bias that they may hold. I understand that the position of my reflexivity will shape the research; therefore, my biases need to be made transparent from the beginning of the research to reinforce credibility of the findings (Mays and Pope, 2000). I have gained valuable experience over the last 10 years on the importance of early life experiences for children's social and emotional development. I acknowledge that the root of my beliefs, and values, stem from my experiences of working in child protection, children in residential care settings, and childcare facilities. These experiences have shaped how I view the world, and my perspective on how services can impact negatively, or positively, on children's development. Throughout the process I participated in self reflection and was aware of my biases. This encouraged me to be open to participants' perspectives; this transparency was extended to my data collection.

1.6 Research Aims and Objectives:

The aim of the research is to explore the benefits of the ASC on the social and emotional development of children. The objective of this research is to share evidence-based research

with educational, social, and statutory agencies in promoting after-school clubs in meeting children's emotional and social development. To explore and investigate, the views and perceptions of stakeholders in ASC's, specifically parents, staff and school liaison officer with a focus on children's social and emotional development. It is hoped that this research will highlight the importance of after-school programmes for disadvantaged areas. This research has the potential to explore if the service supports vulnerable families. It will explore the value of the ASC as a preventative framework from social work involvement.

1.7 Research Questions:

2. What are parent's, staff and school liaison officers experiences/views of their children participating in the After- School Club?

3. What are the factors that influence the social and emotional development of children in the After-School Club?

4. How has participation in After- School Club impacted on children's lives in school and at home?

1.8 Definition of After-School Club

After-School Clubs/Programmes (ASC, ASP) can be described as safe, structured and unstructured programs that offer a variety of adult supervised activities to stimulate growth-enhancing opportunities, which include activities, and experiences, that boost academic, personal, social and recreational development (Harvard Family Research Project, 2008; Durlak et.al 2007; Lauer et al., 2002).

1.9 Conclusion:

This chapter has served its purpose by introducing the reader to the research study. An overview of relevant background information was outlined to demonstrate the importance for this research. The background introduced the Before 5 Family Centre. It identified the significance of child development. It highlighted lack of policy regulation for ASCs in

Ireland. Finally, it showed that there is literature that suggests that children who attend ASC derive multiple benefits. The rationale gives the reader an understanding why this research is being carried out, and it gives insight into the CARL initiative. It also featured the aims, objectives and research questions. The researcher's reflexivity was also outlined.

1.10 Chapters Overview:

The study is comprised of five chapters which are outlined as follows:

Chapter Two: Methodological Approach

This chapter explores the design of this research project. It will cover the methodology of the research. It will discuss participatory action research, the method of data collection, semi-structure interviews and sampling. It will highlight the limitations and, the challenges, in terms of ethical considerations.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

Chapter three will review secondary research from international and national literature that is relevant to the research study. There will be a comprehensive review of ASCs in an Irish social policy context.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussions

This chapter presents and analyses the research findings through the use of thematic data analysis. These core themes that arise from the interviews are analysed and discussed with reference to academic literature.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter five will summarise the research findings. It will identify the limitations of the study and recommendations for practice based on research findings. The implications for social work practice and a reflective piece on my experience of the research journey will be presented.

Chapter Two: Methodological Approach:

2.1 Introduction

This central aim of this chapter is to explore the steps of the design process. First, the theoretical underpinnings will be outlined; as these subsequently form the building blocks of the methodological approach. There will be a discussion on participatory action research, the method of data collection, the use of semi-structure interviews and purposive sampling. It will also highlight the limitations, and the challenges in terms of ethical considerations.

2.2 Theoretical Positioning.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is guiding this research. This approach states that children's development is influenced by the different types of environmental systems. The environment plays a fundamental role in human development. The ecological systems theory takes into account various factors such as the individual, the family, the community and society as a whole. There are five different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem (Berk, 2013) I approached the research from an ecological system theory standpoint, and from the perspective that the microsystem has the greatest impact on children's development and life. This includes parents and other family members.

ASC fits into the mesosystem which is a key feature in children's development. The target group in the study attend ASC four days a week. This is quite a significant amount of time in a child's life. The ways children experience and interact in this environment affects their development, for example, how they relate to staff and peers. It is suggested that change in one of these systems can cause a change in another (Teater, 2014). The macrosystem which includes the following impacts on the child's life: cultural norms and values, and government policy in areas like education, health and social welfare (William, et al, 2009). Figure 1: shows Brofenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979).

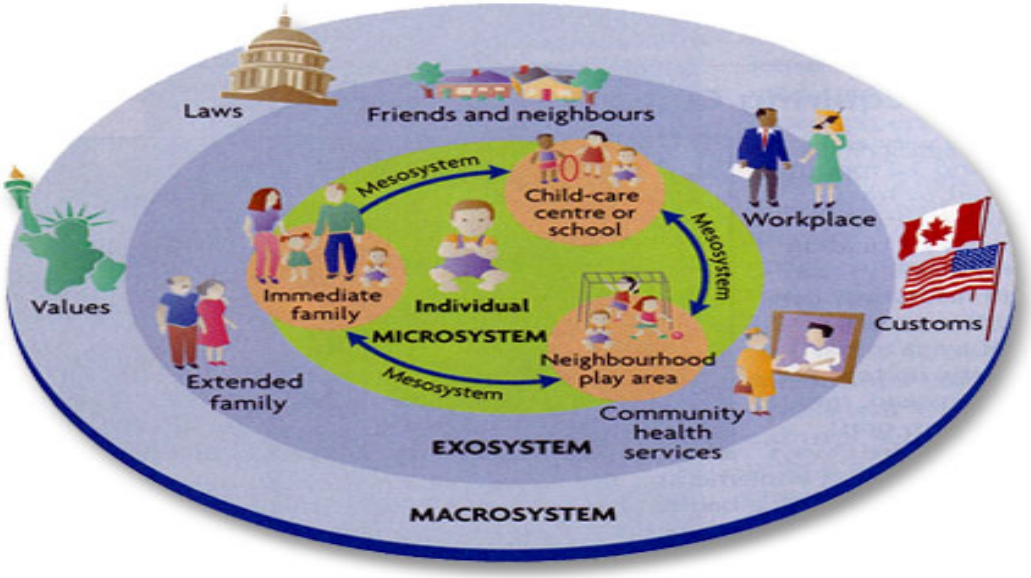


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (in Berk & Roberts, 2009, p. 28)

Social constructivism is also guiding this research study. The central theoretical concept of social constructivism is that it addresses human behaviour, development and how it functions and interplays with individuals social environments. In a nutshell, it examines an individual's reality and how their life experiences have shaped how they view their social world. Knowledge is gained and constructed through interaction with other people (Teater, 2014). Social constructivism is the lens in which the researcher will view the participant's perspectives and experiences of ASC. The researcher acknowledges that learning and development are interconnected with family, communities, and society and government policies.

2.3 Methodological Approach

Four dimensions of the methodological approach form the structure of this research. These dimensions are: ontology, epistemology, methodology and research methods. The four methods, unified together, create a whole research process (Bryman, 2012). The following methodological approaches were chosen with great attention and careful consideration to gain a broader vision within the research questions asked.

2.3.1 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, and what there is to know in the world (Richie, et al, 2013). Idealism is an ontological method this study uses to examine the statements made by individuals providing a particular service. This means that the social world is made up of experiences that are constructed through the meaning created by individuals (Richie, et al, 2013).

2.3.2 Epistemology

Theoretical knowledge is the concern of epistemology. The epistemological problem is comprised of two parts: knowledge *a priori* and knowledge *priori*. Can an individual have knowledge of the world prior to experience *(a priori)*, or is knowledge only the result of experience through the senses (*a posteriori)* For example, pure mathematics would be knowledge gained outside the realm of physical experience; therefore, it is *a priori* (Ritchie et. al, 2013). In the case of this study, data will be analysed from documented interviews. The knowledge apprehended through this research will be from direct experience interpreted through the senses thus making it *a posteriori*. Undertaking an interpretive approach means that I will be, '*exploring and understanding the social world of the people being studied, focusing on their meanings and interpretations'* (Richie et al, 2013). The researcher understands that her own background, knowledge, and experience, will shape how she will interpret the data collected, but it is the views of participants that will validate this piece of research. The researcher will remain bias, but will also be subjective and open to the participants' views through employing a social constructionist approach. The researcher continuously asked for feedback to ensure she understood and had clarity of their views.

2.3.3 Methodology

A qualitative research approach will be undertaken through primary data collection using semi-structured interviews with parents, staff and school liaison officer. "*Qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena within their social worlds*" (Snape and Spencer, 2003 p.23). The reason why the researcher is using interviews is to interpret the participant's

experiences, and to understand if the children are benefiting from the ASC. The researcher adopted a qualitative approach, to access first hand information, and to gain a deeper understanding of the ASC. Using this approach will provide a deeper insight into the benefits of the club. In contrast, to this approach is quantitative research which is used to quantify and examine underlying issues by way of generating numerical data and statistics (Ritchie et al 2013). For the purpose of this small-scale study, it was decided to use a qualitative approach; as, it would be more informative and valuable for this research.



2.4 Methods

2.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews contain a combination of both pre-planned and unstructured questions allowing room for the researcher to respond to participants answers (Carey, 2009). The researcher decided to conduct semi-structured interviews. This method will be influential when analysing themes that may arise and in turn answer the research questions. Semi-structured interviews permit comparisons of participant's responses and efficient data collection. The researcher will compile questions as an interview guide for participants. These will ensure a clear focus in the interview and will alleviate some anxiety when answering questions. The interview guide will be posted to the participants before the interview. The goal is to interview parents, staff, and school liaison officer to obtain their views of afterschool club and asks questions about their perceived benefits of afterschool club.

2.4.2 Sampling

There was a target group identified by the Before 5 Family Centre. The target group were parents of the children who attended the ASC. The children who attended the ASC were from a disadvantaged area. The children that had access to the ASC were considered the most vulnerable and 'needy' in their community and would benefit from extra support after school. The criteria of the sample group were identified. One characteristic of the purposive sampling was: children had to be in the ASC over 3 years, and secondly children were consistent in their engagement with the service. Purposive sampling means the sample was chosen because they fit into the characteristics which will give a more detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and questions that the researcher would like to highlight (Bryman, 2012 cited in Ritchie et al, 2013). This form of sampling is known as purposive sampling; which is literally what the name conveys.

2.4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The research design was discussed with the organisation. The idea behind interviews for this research was to collect data that provided more in depth richness rather than quantity. The researcher has more flexibility when interviewing as they can probe and ask open ended questions to give a more descriptive account of the feelings, experiences, and perspective of all participants. The generated data from the interviews will be interpreted by the researcher. However, the participants are in the position to give their own account of their perceptions of the After- School Club.

The researcher conducted secondary research. A vast amount of articles, and books, were sieved through to find common themes, advantages, disadvantages and concepts surrounding afterschool clubs internationally and nationally. The literature reviewed paved the way to forming questions for the semi-structured interviews. In collaboration with the organisation we discussed the literature and decided on relevant research questions for this study. In participation with the organisation it was decided to conduct seven interviews that would last approximately one hour. The organisation would purposively pick the participants, and a room was provided in the organisation for interviews. The researcher used a dictaphone to collect the data from the interviews.

The data collected through interviews was transcribed verbatim. The researcher will analyse and examine the data and use a thematic analysis approach to discover, interpret and report patterns of meaning within the data (Ritchie, et. al 2014). The researcher will use colour coding and categorise the themes into different sections this will help identify the themes that will address the research questions, aim and objectives of the study. When analysing data the researcher will be reflective of their biases.

2.5 Participatory Action Research

According to Reason and Bradbury, (2008) within a participatory action research process, "*communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who participate as co-researchers*" (Reason and Bradury, 2008 p. 1). Participatory action research (PAR) will be undertaken for this research. PAR is an approach to research in the community that has an emphasis on participation and action. This research is participatory in nature with the Before 5 Family Centre, CARL and the researcher. The main advantage is the collaboration and participation of ideas between organisation and researcher and this endeavour is to develop the growth of knowledge for the research.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

It is imperative to follow correct ethical procedures in social work practice, and it is vital in the research process. "*Ethical practice is a moral stance that involves conducting research to achieve not just high professional standards of technical procedures, but also respect and protection for the people actively consenting to be studied*" (Payne and Payne, 2004 p.10). When the researcher conducted the interviews, it was fundamental to be self aware and undertake them in a manner that respected dignity and rights of the individual participants. The researcher was particularly conscious of their interactions when interviewing the parents. The researcher outlined to the participants the purpose and aims of the study, in advance of the interviews, to ensure they understood. They were informed of what to expect in the research process. The researcher advised that participation was voluntary. The researcher outlined that participants could withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason. A

consent form was compiled for the participants to sign before the research resumed (Appendix 3).

2.7 Limitations of the Research

The study research is small in nature. It will not provide conclusive insight, but will introduce a topic that requires more data. For ethical reasons, and due to the small-scale study, it was not possible to interview the children themselves. Children are more vulnerable than adults to psychological harm. The views and perceptions of the children would give a greater insight into their perceived benefits of ASC. There is a significant gap in Irish literature for this study; there are some studies that highlight academic attainment, but there is a lack of focus on the benefits of ASCs on children's social and emotional development. It is important to note that all participants interviewed were female this may be perceived as a limitation to the study as there was no perspective from male counterparts.

2.8 Conclusion

The research design has been illustrated in a step by step process. The researcher explained to the reader their theoretical perspective and demonstrated an insight into their view of the social world. The methodological approach which formed the structure of the research process was outlined with particular attention given to the four dimensions that link together these included: Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology and Methods. This chapter concluded with a synopsis of how the researcher collected data and how it was analysed. The essential ethical consideration, confidentially and limitations of the study were presented to inform the reader that all avenues were reflected upon and considered when carrying out the research.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to critically engage with the literature relevant to the Before 5 Family Centre. The concept of afterschool clubs/programmes will be explored through offering a definition of ASC. In Ireland, there are no regulations for School-Age Childcare (SAC) services; this is a key issue for Ireland that will be discussed. The academic literature on ASP is dominated by debates about the benefits of ASP, and whether or not children who participate in these programmes receive better outcomes, compared to non participating children. To gain greater insight into current practice the benefits of ASP will be examined from a national and international perspective.

3.2 Defining Afterschool Clubs/Programmes

In Ireland there is a rising popularity in ASC, and evidence is mounting that where and how children spend their time outside of normal school hours has valuable consequences for their development (Durlak et al, 2007; Halpern 2004). The emerging focus on SAC provision has come to light due to cultural factors, such as an increase in maternal employment (Childlinks, 2003) The terms 'After-school Clubs', 'After-School Programmes', 'After-School Time' are used interchangeable with the term 'after school'.

In Ireland the Quality Development of Out-of-School Services (QDOSS) definition of Out-of-School services is comparable to the Harvard Family Research Project (2007) in America. The QDOSS define Out-of-School services as:

> '*a range of structured programmes, clubs and activities for school-age children and young people (4–18) which take place within supervised environments during the times that they are not in school. As such, Out-of- School activities can take place before school, after school, at weekends, during lunch hours, and during school holidays'* (QDOSS, 2006, p. 2)

According to QDOSS their aim is to improve and develop the field of Out-of-School services to '*influence and enable positive educational outcomes for children and young people, particularly those experiencing educational disadvantage'* (QDOSS, 2006 p. 1). The QDOSS is a network of organisations in Ireland that are involved in education, childcare, youth development, with particular reference to children experiencing educational disadvantage. The QDOSS work to influence policy and practice, and a central focus is on the development of quality out-of -school services.

3.3 Afterschool Clubs in an Irish Social Policy Context

The history of ASC, and School Age Childcare (SAC) services, in Ireland face many controversial debates due to the fact that they are unregulated (Hennessey and Donnelly, 2005). This means that there are no minimum standards of care for school age children (6-18 years) in After-School Programmes (ASP) (DJELR, 2005). In Ireland, it was asserted by Williams and Collin (1998) that 9.6% of children (approximately 46,000), ranging from 6-12 years of age, are attending afterschool care daily. Drawing from literature from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR), in 2005 the Working Group was developed to review provisions. The Working Group identified that there was no official system of registration and no minimum level of staff qualification to work in SAC services. It also highlighted that there is no inspection system in place for SAC services which is in contrast to childcare services 0-6 years who must notify Tusla (Child and Family Agency) if a new service is opening. The service needs to be approved by a registered body, under the Childcare (Preschool) Services Regulations (DJELR, 2005).

The gaps that exist in SAC provisions in Ireland have resulted in a variety of standards across the board and current practice is self-regulated with staff and management following pre-school regulations or adapting international best practice models (Childlinks, 2003; DJELR, 2005). Literature from Ireland and Europe has commented on the impressive standards of childcare that New Zealand and Australia have especially in relation to staff qualifications and quality of services delivered (DJELR, 2005, Plantenga and Remery, 2014). The researcher analysed literature from the DJELR (2005) and it stated that these countries have considerable support and funding allocated to facilitate new SAC projects and support is

given to parents' needs (DJELR, 2005). The Commonwealth Government in Australia published a detailed Handbook in (2000) outlining its requirements for what it terms "Outside School Hours Care", these services are regulated and have a clear focus on programme quality (DJELR, 2005).

The publication of the National Children's Strategy (2000) and The Partnership Agreement, Towards 2016 (see appendices), are relevant Irish policy documents to critically analyse when considering ASP. One of the aims of the Strategy (2000) was to add to Ireland's implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992. Education and learning were pinpointed as key areas that needed to be acknowledged and addressed in the Strategy (2000). As a result of consultations with children and young people, three national aims were developed. One aim highlighted that children '*will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development'* (National Children's Strategy, 2000: 6). It was also outlined that children should have access to play, sports and recreation activities, recognising the importance of such activities to their overall development (Share et al, 2009). The Working Group made similar recommendations as the Strategy (2000) that children should be provided with play opportunities to foster their development. These commitments outlined by the Strategy (2000) have not been acted upon almost a decade and a half later (QDOSS, 2013).

In 2013, the European Commission conducted the first European study of SAC provision in 33 countries. The results presented that Ireland positioned second last in Europe. It was suggested this was due to the absence of qualification requirements to work in school age services. The impact of non regulation standards that addresses adult/child ratios and group size was a factor that considered Ireland on the lower end of the spectrum of quality in Europe (Plantenga and Remery, 2014).

The Better Outcomes Brighter Futures National Policy Framework for children and young people 2014-2020 builds on the National Children's Strategy. The Policy Frameworks key purpose is to identify areas that will possibly improve outcomes for children and young people (0-24 years) (DCYA, 2014). Another commitment is to overhaul the effectiveness of

existing policies, services and resources (DCYA, 2014). There are five national outcomes outlined in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (2014-2020) (appendices 2). In outcome one the government recognises the importance of positive relationships, good mental health and play in children's lives. It stated that children should have access to quality, affordable services. In outcome two which is also relevant to this study, the government recognises that children's well-being is instrumental to their ability to function in society and cope with everyday life. It reports the importance of early interventions and the value of quality early childhood care in supporting children's cognitive, social and emotional development which is considered fundamental for learning (DCYA, 2014). The implementation of this Policy has the potential to pave the way to improved afterschool services for children. It has the potential to enhance the quality and qualification standards in SAC thus moving Ireland from the second last positioning in Europe.

3.4 Benefits of Afterschool Clubs

For the purpose of this research the benefits of ASC will focus on children's social and emotional development. However, it is important to note there is an ocean of literature on children benefiting academically from attending ASC. The literature has revealed controversial results with regards to this. Lauer et al (2006) reviewed 35 studies and they revealed that children from low-income, at risk young people improved in reading and maths. In contrast, research has stated that there are inconsistencies in academic outcomes for children attending ASP (Vandell et.al 2004, Zief, Lauver and Mayanrd, 2004 cited in Durlak et al. 2007).

3.4.1 Children benefit from adult contact in afterschool programmes:

An American study was conducted by Cosden et al (2001). It consisted of 10 studies with a central focus on children that were receiving poor grades, low-income families and were high risk of early school leaving. The structured ASP in the study offered homework support and other activities to the children. The literature reveals that the children's academic performance increased and it is noted that positive adult contact impacted on the children's self-esteem and confidence. The teachers' perceptions regarding the effort and capabilities of the student influenced social and emotional development (Cosden et al, 2001). Drawing from

further research in America, both Beck (1999) and Halpern (1992) agree with Cosden et al (2001) that participation in ASP impact on students self confidence, it shines a light on their abilities and helps build trusting relationships and attachments with adults (cited in Cosden et al, 2001).

A report done in Ireland, commissioned by the Children's Research Centre (2009) asserted that young people benefitted socially from attending ASC and the survey resulted in children improving in education (Share et al, 2009). It also showed that children developed positive relationships with staff and peers. These findings suggest similarities with American research although it is important to be mindful that data collection in evaluation in different counties may be different.

3.4.2 Peer Relationships:

Drawing from Bailey and Thompson's evaluation of a UK ASP that engaged in a diverse range of extracurricular activities for children and young people aged 6-18 (Bailey & Thompson, 2008). The young people who participated in the programme reported that after-school activities gave them the opportunity to develop friendships. The children stated that they have become more self-confident and aware of the importance of peer relationships (Share et al, 2009). According to Best Play (2000) helping children make, establish and maintain friendships is instrumental to social and emotional development. Linking with the Before 5 Family Centre the opportunity to play games in the ASC facilitates and encourages positive social interactions among peers (Before 5 Nursery and Family Centre, 2011).

In America, Posner and Vandell (1994) analysed children who participated in ASP compared to children who were in care of their mothers, informal adult supervision or children that self-cared. The survey concluded that low-income children that participated in formal ASP had major positive effects. These included better conduct in school, better peer relationships, better work habits and emotional adjustment (Posner and Vandell, 1994). It was highlighted by Posner and Vandell (1994) that the children in ASP were exposed to more learning

opportunities than the other children. Children unsupervised after school is concerning as research shows that after school time shows a rise in delinquent behaviours.

3.4.5 Art benefits children in afterschool programmes:

In the UK, ASP for example incorporated 'Learning by Art' programmes which included art workshops for infants and sixth class students. The key focus was on art but it created an opportunity to observe the children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. According to Matarasso (1997) the teachers assessed the children's development in language, creativity, observational skills, social skills development and imagination. The results highlighted that the arts activities promoted positive educational impact on the majority of the children. It was noted by the teachers that there was an increased level of confidence that became apparent with the sense of achievement from having done something that was of importance and value. The results demonstrated a higher degree of concentration among children and an increased effort of preparing for the art activities. It was observed that there was a change in group dynamics which outlined that collective success in their art pieces gave children pride and enjoyment in having made something of their own (Matarasso, 1997)

3.4.6 Quality of Afterschool Programmes

The literature reviewed has skimmed on the impact of ASP on children's social and emotional development. In 2007 Durlark et al acknowledged the gap in the research and conducted a meta-analysis of 73 existing studies. The results that were deemed most important were that the young people who participated in ASP improved significantly in three areas: '*feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioural adjustment and school performance'* (Durlark et al, 2007 p.7). Conclusively the results highlighted multiple benefits that pertain to young peoples' personal, social and academic life (Durlark et al, 2007; Afterschool Alliance, 2008)

The second important finding in Durlark et al (2007) study was that '*it was possible to identify effective programmes: Programmes that used evidence-based skill training approaches were consistently successful in producing multiple benefits for youth, while those that did not use such procedures were not successful in any outcome area'* (Durlark et al,

2007 p.7) The key argument is that evidence-based practice skills training was fundamental in ASP success. This means ASP should use:

Evidenced-Based Practice Skills:

- **Sequenced**: sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives
- **Active:** active forms of learning
- **Focus:** focused on developing personal or social skills
- **Explicit**: Focused on specific skills (Afterschool Alliance, 2011 p.8)

The authors analysed the 73 studies, 39 programmes incorporated all four approaches outlined above and 27 programmes did not. The results were compared and an evident theme emerged. The theory and research highlighted that skills training of children indicate that learning is more likely to occur when evidence-based training approaches are used (Durlark et al, 2007).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter critically engage with the literature relevant to the Before 5 Family ASC. The definitions of ASC were presented. In Ireland SAC services are unregulated; the outcome of no regulation has resulted in varied standards of quality in Ireland and the need for new policies to be implemented. This chapter highlighted current practice and benefits of ASP from a national and international perspective. The research revealed that children benefit from peer relationships, adult contact and learning through art in ASP. The importance of programme quality was outlined. It is evident that there is limited research in considering negative outcomes for children that attend ASC's.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses the research findings through the use of thematic data analysis. The core themes that arose from the interviews were analysed and discussed with reference to academic literature reviewed. The findings that emerged from the interviews are: Theme 1: The importance of positive interactions from staff on children's social and emotional development. Theme 2: Engaging in meaningful activities with peers and building friendships. Theme 3: The significant role of arts and crafts in the ASC. Theme 4: The impact of the environment on children's social and emotional development. Theme 5: Did teachers see a difference in children's development? The researcher will also use quotes from the participants to illuminate their perspectives and experiences of ASC.

STAFF	N=3
PARENTS	N=3
SCHOOL LIASION OFFICER	N=1

The participants will be listed from P1- P7 to ensure anonymity.

4.2 Theme 1: The importance of positive interactions from staff on children's social and emotional development.

4.2 Positive interaction

Positive interaction from staff was deemed the most significant theme that arose out of the interviews. It was reported by P3 that: *"the positive interaction and encouragement children get in afterschool club benefit them in life. From positive interaction the children start to believe in what they can do and if they were not getting this encouragement they wouldn't believe they could do it*"

All participants (7 out of 7) stated that positive interactions from staff benefited the children in ASC. The majority of the participants reported more than three times that staff were influential in the children's social and emotional development. P 3: "*I have seen a big difference in children in their social and emotional development especially one particular child they were very shy and would keep their head down and not talk to people and now they are completely opposite. I think the most important thing that helped this child develop socially and emotionally was the positive affirmations from staff, building on their confidence, helping them to believe in themselves, highlighting to them what they do is right and even if they get it wrong it is ok to make mistakes*".

Literature is supportive of these perspectives that children learn and develop from positive interactions from adults. Bandura's social learning (1960) "approach suggested that children learn new behaviours through the process of modelling- adults showing through their behaviour what is wanted" (cited in Lindon, 2005 p.29). *P2: Some children could be very negative or they have no confidence or they feel they do not get encouragement. It takes time in the afterschool club, you have to take things slowly with each child, you help build into them belief in themselves, to say to them that they are important, what you do is important and we are here to help you, listen to you and to guide you".* According to Bandura (1960) when these positive reinforcements are present after an action it increases the likelihood of that action. The children are developing confidence and belief in themselves from adults supporting them and believing in them thus children are learning and accepting who they are (cited in Lindon, 2005 p. 29).

4.2.1 Attachment:

A sub-theme emerged in this section it was evident that children that attended ASC formed positive attachments with staff. Attachment is a bond, affectionate tie between important people in children's lives which gives them a sense of security when they interact with these important people it gives them pleasure and they feel comforted in times of stress (Lindon, 2005; Berk, 2013). Positive adult attachments are crucial for healthy development. Reflecting on Bronfenbrenner's systems model (1979; 1989), it is important to note that different relationships have a role in encouraging the child's development (French, 2007). All parents noted in their own way the importance of staff relationships for their children's development. P4 stated that "*They have brilliant relationships with the staff; it's more like a little family rather that a teacher relationship, I can see a change in my child, they respect and adore [staff name]",* Similarly P5 commented: *"It is respectful, and the staff will guide the children within the afterschool boundaries in a positive way. It is definitely more relaxed and a family vibe, the children are happy around the staff".* It also emerged that "*some children would come in timid or some children would come in hyper-active. Over time you can see that they settle on both scales the timid child and the hyper-active child. The child would become more settled in themselves and they would start to form trusting relationships with staff and be happy in themselves. They are being accepted and not judged"* (P7) and it was stated "*they would see adults in a different way from their own experiences with adults".*

The ASC have children attending from junior infant to fourth and fifth class. This is a total of six years in their lives. The majority of the participant's view that the "*children are on a journey of self discovery and building trust with staff is a process, when children are with you that long they do eventually build that trust with you"* (P5) and another participant stated *it "helps my child and helps me through my child because I can see he is being shaped properly through afterschool club as well the staff".*

4.2.2 Discussion:

The findings collectively demonstrate the value of staff's involvement in children's social and emotional development. These findings are similar to the literature reviewed in America and Ireland on ASC. Reflecting back there were numerous American studies stating that

children's academic performance increased from receiving homework support from adults in ASC (Cosden et. al, 2001). Comparable to this research, Beck (1999) and Halpern (1992) emphasised in their qualitative evidence based research the importance of adult contact and the impact of positive adult interactions on children's self esteem and confidence. In an Irish review of Community Afterschool Projects (CASPr) in Dublin's North East Inner City conducted by Ivers et al (2010) it was asserted in their review that children rated their ASP with high regard due to their positive relationships and interactions with staff.

In relation to attachment no participant stated the word 'attachment' the researcher is interpreting the data collected and the researcher's interpretation is that children do share affectionate bonds with the staff. The findings demonstrate strong connections between staff and children in relation to trust and security. The researcher understands that attachment is difficult to prove as it is about feelings, but it appears that attachment between staff and children are present in this study. It is evident that children are displaying self-esteem, confidence, trusting relationships these are signs of healthy development and attachment. According to Lindon (2005) children thrive in environments that foster attachment through consistent positive interactions, care and showing children that you are interested in them.

4.3 Theme 2: Engagement in meaningful activities with peers and building friendships

4.3.1 The importance of play and activities on children's social and emotional development:

One of the main focuses of the Before 5 Family Centre is giving children the space and opportunity to play. All participants reported that the ASC gave children a chance to play, socialise and these opportunities have had a positive impact on children's development. ASC supports the value of play in a child's life. The ASC provides these activities to encourage and facilitate positive peer relationships and enhance children's social competence. P6 supports the beliefs of the ASC's aims "*There is supervised play here and I think that stands for them (children) to the way they play here they learn how to play properly and deal and work with other children. It definitely stands to them now and will in the future'*

Another participant reported the benefits of the ASC on children building social skills by interacting in team activities and being accepted as a team member "*The different games that they play like basketball and soccer, they are part of a team and this helps them feel part of a team and this develops their confidence and self-esteem'* (P7). Linking with the two previous views another participant discussed how "*The children participated in plays and they put on a show for staff and parents. They are developing courage and determination by learning to stand up in front of people and present their plays. The children have come up to me afterwards and said how great they felt afterwards.* (P2). It was mentioned that ASC was a better alternative than going home, to watch television, ipads and computers. This point of view was expressed by 5 of the participants. P1 reported "*kids continue their socialization rather than going home and sitting in front of a TV and computers. They get to chat and to play here".*

4.3.2 Friendship and building positive relationships:

All participants reported on children having the opportunity to develop new friendships outside of school. It was mentioned numerous times that the children in ASC mixed with children of different ages and this was believed to have impacted on the children's social and emotional development. P4 described her experience of the afterschool programme *"It is really lovely, it is not limited to just their own class it gives them more opportunities to met different children and form new friendships from varied age groups. He definitely has more friends and he wouldn't have had those friends only for he comes to afterschool club".* Another participant (P7) echoed a similar view: "*Some children wouldn't have that experience of having an older child looking out for them. It works very well. They interact and are more assured of themselves from having secured friendships. I would see a big difference over time due to participation in ASC from when the children start until they finish".* It was noted and acknowledged by P5 that "*the interaction with other children is important. He has interaction with older children which helps him learn and develop more skills and language. He is learning to take turns, be patient with each other and share".*

It emerged in the research how children developed emotionally through positive peer relationships P6 stated "*I suppose they have friends and that makes them feel good*" and

another participant reported P4*: my child has really benefitted from ASC because he had awful difficult problems socialising and being around children his own age. The afterschool club has really brought him out of his shell".*

4.3.3 Change in children's behaviour since participating in afterschool club:

All participants apart from 1 have stated that they have noticed changes in children's behaviour since attending ASC. The participants reported children becoming more engaged in play and more sociable. P4 stated "*I would see major changes since they started afterschool club especially in ****. He is more open and chatty about his experiences and he is more willing to talk*" A similar perspective was shared by P6: *"**** was very withdrawn. He has come out of himself an awful lot. I'd say it's the staff including him and then probably including him with other kids to do things, because he is kind of gone very social".* The trend continues with another participant P3 reporting: "*I so am happy with the service and the children have come a long way from where they were at previous"* It is evident from these findings that children attending the ASC are developing social skills by demonstrating that they are more 'chatty' and 'come out an awful lot'

4.4.4 Discussion:

It is evident from the research findings that children depict social and emotional development in ASC. It is clear from the participant's views that children are learning and changing over time as a result of attending the ASC. Reflecting on the theoretical perspective this is a good example of social constructivism; the children's behaviour is constructed from interacting and functioning in their social environments. The literature reviewed supports the evidenced-based findings in this research study. A meta-analysis study was conducted in America named Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning- CASEL (2007). The findings from CASEL are comparable to this study. Both studies found that young people who participate in ASC progress in attitudes and feelings and signs of behavioural adjustment become apparent. (Afterschool Alliance, 2011). Similarly, in a UK evaluation of ASC, the young people who participated in afterschool activities stated that they had the opportunity to develop friendships, become more confident and realised the importance of peer relationships (Bailey and Thompson, 2008, Share et. al 2009). These

findings correspond to the findings collected in this research. It is argued in Vandell et al (2006) study that children that do not attend afterschool and are left to their own devices are more likely to bend to peer pressures and engage in antisocial behaviour.

4.4 Theme 3: The significant role of Arts and Crafts in children's development.

4.4.1 Opportunity to express their emotions and feelings through art and crafts:

The majority of the participants placed a high regard of the role of art and crafts in children's lives. Participants swapped stories and scenarios with the researcher on how the children have progressed and advanced in their development in their emotional competence, social skills, language development and pride in their work and creativity. The researcher was advised that the children would not have experienced art and craft previous to their involvement in ASC and the children had no interest in it at home. P7: stated "*children get a chance to express themselves through art ya know, even we would pick up on how they are feeling, the way the things they do, the colours they use, this is very important for the children because they wouldn't get that chance outside of their art class*". Most participants perceived that the children developed emotional competence through art, P3 reported: "*They are developing their language skills by talking about what they made or did and if there is something that they made outside of home that might give them positive memories and they can talk about their experiences with the different things that they made. They are connecting with their feelings and exploring memories"*

Many participants suggested that children who attended ASC and participated in art and craft are reaping benefits such as positive self- regard, self- esteem and pride. P2 reported "*Children build confidence by accepting what they have made or created as worthy. Some children cannot accept a complement; they find it so hard. Eventually one day you say to them that's great what you did there, and for them in return say "yeah it is, I did a good job". For some children it takes a while, depending on the individual child to accept a complement"*. Comparable to this participants view, another interviewee stated: *"When they*

come home with their art the children talk about their art and say things like I did this all by myself" (P5)

One participant was particularly pleased with how their child has developed through the use of art and crafts. P6 **** *used to paint with grey and black and I used to say crikey we used to see films with children like that, drawing just grey and black. I used to say that he had no interest in that and now he comes home with colours and drawings that he loves. He would say mum look at this I've drawn rainbows and stuff and I think that the arts and crafts just makes them really happy in themselves you know. They are mad to hang up what they've done in their bedrooms and stuff then they really proud of what they have done. This might sound silly but I was really happy because he was able to match the colours himself and he accomplished something, he had put a lot of thought in it. It was a big step for him to have all the colours right".* This piece of research shows this individual child has learned through art, it appears that he has developed cognitively, developed concentration skills, takes pride in his accomplishments and he is happy in himself. These experiences lead to healthier development.

4.4.2 Social Aspect of Art:

The participants stated a clear benefit of art and crafts on the children's social development, decision- making skills and creativity. P2: stated "*the children sit there and chat, laughing and joking and that is what is suppose to be about, it's suppose to be fun which in turn helps them to develop self esteem and confidence in group scenarios*". It was also reported by P2: "*You can see the children developing socially over time you can see their demeanour by the way they are relaxed and they don't show nervousness in their body language, they are not tense".*

4.4.3 Discussion:

International and national literature came to similar conclusions as this study; children learn and develop through art and craft. In the UK, ASC incorporated 'learning by art' programmes which included art workshops for children. The findings from this programme reaped

benefits in children developments. The significant developments included language development, creativity, observational skills and social development. The assessments conducted by the teachers stated that children were more confident and the children displayed pride in their art work (Matarasso, 1997). An evaluation of an ArtLink Project in Dublin has reported that children and young people have improved outcomes from participating in the community project. Some of the benefits outlined in this evaluation include: increased self-esteem, improved cognitive development, problem-solving skills, progression in communication skills and language and greater understanding to use art as a tool of self expression (Tweedie, 2007 cited in Share et. al 2009). Linking the reviewed literature and the evidence of findings it appears that there are significant social and emotional benefits for children attending the ASC.

4.5 Theme 4: The significant value of the environment in afterschool club.

Another strong theme that arose from analysing the data was the importance of the afterschool clubs environment and its value in the child's life.

4.5.1 Safety:

It emerged that safety was a key factor for participants, 5 out 7 participants stated that ASC was a safe place for the children to go. P7 reported "*we would have children that would be living on a main road and they wouldn't have the opportunity to go out and play. They may not live in a safe area"*. Another participant echoed this view of safety and opportunity for children. P5 stated: *School is different it is more strict, it is more relaxed here and they play and take them out and we live in an area where I wouldn't be happy to leave him out. The cars would fly around and I wouldn't be happy to let him out"*. Similar to the other two participants experiences P3 acknowledged "*we have outside play, a lot of children do not have experience of outside play where they live, they may not have a safe place to play"* There are shared ideas that ASC creates space and freedom for children to play in a safe and supervised environment. It was suggested if ASC was not an option for these children they would be missing out on many developmental experiences. P1 reported *"it is keeping the*

children off the street, so they can be in the after school club, be safe and be off the streets but then there are other kids that will be left on street all day long".

4.5.2 Atmosphere and Welcoming:

Some participants highlighted the fundamental value of welcoming the children. It was reported that it was important to have a good vibe and a pleasant atmosphere when the children arrive to the ASC. This creates an atmosphere where they feel comfortable and enjoy themselves P7: reported "*I think one of the most important things for the children is the welcome that they get when they come in. I am always at the door with another member of staff to greet them, this is something small but it means a lot to the children*". Another participant (P3) stated "*the afterschool club is a nice and warm environment for them to be in and for them to know that they are accepted for who they are and if they do get it wrong they are not judged for it and then we will encourage and guide them to do it right"*

4.5.3 Discussion:

According to research conducted by French (2007) which was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) it was asserted that children's environments are very important for improving healthy growth and development. Indoor and outdoor areas should entice young children's development (Finch, 1996 cited in French, 2007). The literature links with the findings whereby children should be in an environment that is safe, welcoming and warm (French, 2004). The literature explains further that environments should be clean, accessible and offer children opportunities to engage in decision-making and voice their opinions. This study has reflected that the children's environment in ASC has enhanced their development. It is evident from the perspectives of participants that children have been given opportunities to engage positively, participate in activities and explore ideas and thoughts through art and plays. According to French (2007) *"The physical environment is especially critical for stimulating children's communication and play*" (2007, p 39).

4.6 Theme 5: Did Teachers see a difference in children who attended ASC?

All participants were asked if they believed teachers saw a difference or change in children's development since they started attending ASC. The data collected from the 7 participants concluded: 4 participants stated that teachers did see a difference 2 participant's stated they did not know and 1 participant reported no, teachers could not see a difference. P7 viewed that teachers were: "*Very positive, they would see a huge difference in the children once they have started coming to the afterschool club. The children having their homework done where they wouldn't have done it before, not all of the children only some of them wouldn't have it done. The teachers have seen the children become more sociable in school. The children talk more in class. The children are more confident over time; it doesn't happen in a week or two"*. Another participant echoed this positive feedback from the teachers in school P6 reported "*in our last parent teacher meeting, [name of teacher], stated that he was shy but he is coming out of himself a lot, she did notice a difference with him, communicating. She said he is not as shy and he's not as restless at his table, he is kinda calming down a bit now. Maybe they are settling him here (ASC) like while he is doing the homework"*.

In contrast to these perspectives another participant stated that the teacher reported 'no'. It was reported that the teacher could not say there is a difference in their social and emotional development. P1 advised "*afterschool club obviously has its value and its place but it is very hard to say that it's creating a difference in their social or emotional development"*. P1 also stated "*that social and emotional literacy is difficult gauge or quantify it"*. P1 advised "*from a teacher's point of view she was saying that she couldn't say the homework club was definitely going to make a difference to a child's social and emotional development. There's so much else going on and involved in a child's life, I suppose that's where she was coming from*".

4.6.1 Discussion:

An Irish report commissioned by the Children's Research Centre (2009) resulted in teachers reporting that children who attended ASC benefited socially and psychologically. Teachers did not directly associate participation in ASP with increased academic achievements (Share

et al, 2009 p.12). It is evident that this study shows that two sides of the coin exist, 4 of the participants are stated that teachers have seen a difference this potentially means the skills, learning and development children have gained in ASC has transferred into their school lives. On the other hand it was suggested that teachers have not seen a difference and it was difficult to gauge if children had developed socially and emotionally from attending ASC. To clarify this uncertainty, it would be beneficial to get first hand information from teachers.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has served its purpose by outlining the key findings that have emerged from thematic analyses. The researcher compared and discussed these themes with academic international and national literature. The findings have outlined that children have become more sociable, improved self-esteem, enhanced confidence in themselves and have developed and maintained positive relationships.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will summarise the key findings from the research. It will identify the limitations of the study and recommendations for practice based on research findings. The implications for social work practice and a reflective piece of my research journey will be highlighted.

This primary research study was lead by theoretical frameworks. These concepts directed the researcher to seek answers for the following research questions. The researcher explored the research in obtaining its aims and goals through the lens of the following theoretical perspectives; social constructivism, ecological systems theory and interpretivism. A qualitative approach was used to gather valuable information from participants. The study consisted of 7 interviews which were transcribed and the key findings were analysed thematically.

5.2 Research Questions:

Question 1:

What are parents, staff and school liaison officers experiences/views of children participating in the ASC?

Question 2:

What are the factors that influence the social and emotional development of children in the ASC?

Question 3:

How has participation in ASC impacted on children's lives in school and at home?

5.3 Key findings that emerged from analysis:

- The parents, staff and school liaison officer all stated that ASC benefitted children socially and emotionally.
- All participants viewed that positive interactions with staff was a significant factor that influenced children's social and emotional development. Some areas of development that were suggested by the participants included: children that attend ASC developed confidence, increased self-esteem, learned to receive complements and make decisions. These foundations are essential for socialisation and emotional development.
- The formation of attachment is fundamental for children's emotional and social development. The participants in the study stated that children have formed trusting relationships with staff which have encouraged children to flourish developmentally.
- Key strengths of the ASC included: children's ability to build new friendships; interact with varied age groups and play multiple activities. These opportunities enhanced children's social skills, communication, team building, decision making, develop courage and emotional competence.
- Some participants noted children who participated in ASC had changed over time. These positive changes transferred into their home environment. For, example children were more social, happy, competent, calmer and better work habits at home.
- This study emphasised the importance of art and crafts for the children who attend ASC. The study highlighted children expressed themselves through art. They had the opportunity to connect with their feelings within art. Participants stated that children developed their language skills, patience, turn taking, sharing, creativity; children developed a sense of pride and self worth in finishing projects.
- Participants placed value on the environment of the ASC. ASC was considered a safe place for the children. The importance of the physical environment was highlighted to enhance children's development for example: children having choices and their voices being heard, the atmosphere being happy, fun and warm and having different activities to stimulate the children's social and emotional development.

- A difference in opinion emerged in relation to children displaying improvements/differences in their social and emotional development in school.
- Even though the research was critically analysed the researcher found it difficult to find potential negative outcomes in relation to children's social and emotional development in the ASC.

In addition, other influential findings arose while participating in this study. The researcher critically analysed the data and it was found that all of the participants named the afterschool club- 'homework club' on numerous occasions. The findings suggest that this service is much more than a 'homework club'. The findings speak for themselves, children attending ASC benefit physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially. The ASC presents as a holistic service that focuses on learning, stimulation, community, family support and home engagement services, to name but a few. Secondly, the fact that the co-ordinator of the ASC engages with the family in their home is significant and plays a huge role in fostering strong connections with the children, school and families. It is evident that the ASC embraces all areas of development and views the whole context of the child. The following are statements made about home visits:

"*I would get to know the family which I have done over time". And I would build trust with them so that whatever difficulties arise I help the family"*

"They are with me in the after-school club they know I am in their home life as well".

It improves their home lives because if there is an issue they would bring that up, which I have experienced. I can then work with them and guide them to the next step of what they may need. The children have said they have noticed a difference at home when I have visited and they had a chance to talk. It is because I accept them and I am not there to judge anyone"

Drawing from the findings in this study, it is clear that the research questions have been answered. It is evident that children that attended ASC reap many social and emotional developments; these have been illustrated in the key findings above. It has become apparent that there is very limited research that demonstrates negative outcomes for children that attend ASC. However, there has been a broad debate about the level of quality of out of

school care which children receive; this depends on staff training, funding and lack of regulation and policy addressing ASC.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

The study research is small in nature. It will not provide conclusive insight, but will introduce a topic that requires more data. For ethical reasons and due to the small-scale study it was not possible to interview the children themselves. Children are more vulnerable than adults to psychological harm. The views of the children would have given a greater insight into their perceived benefits of after ASC. There is a significant gap in published Irish literature for this study. There are some studies that highlight academic attainment but there is a lack of focus on the benefits of ASC's on children's social and emotional development. It is important to note that all participants interviewed were female this limits the study as there is no perspective from male counterparts. It would have been beneficial to get the perspective of the teachers in school to compare their opinions of the children's perceived benefits.

5.5 Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the research conducted:

1. **Recommendation 1: Staff Training**

   Research has revealed that there is varying quality within the SAC services. The staff are reliant on community employment schemes. As P7 recommended "*It would be better if the staff could stay, there would be more continuity. We have lost staff that we would have loved to have kept on, it's a pity. If there was continuity with the staff it would benefit the children and the staff team*". Literature reveals that some staff are not being appropriately qualified (DCYA, 2015). The importance of staff quality resonates with many studies in America and Ireland and one study in particular, implied that the use of structured, evidence-based skills training are instrumental to the success of ASP (Durlark et al, 2007). Government have a role in addressing the quality of service provision (DCYA, 2015). The quality of staff is essential, to ensure children are safeguarded and they develop to their full potential.

2. Recommendation 2: Policy Regulation

Brighter Futures Better Outcomes National Policy 2014-2020 to be implemented, future initiatives and legislation needs to addressed to regulate the ASC. P2 stated: "*for us I think it would be a positive for the club to be regulated because it would also show, what we are doing is important but also it would ensure that the club would be run properly, safely and that the people working there are vetted, educated and trained with working with children"* If this sector is to develop it is necessary to adopt a prevention and early intervention framework for children and young people. The findings have demonstrated the importance and potential benefits of ASC in disadvantaged areas, it's time to embrace change and for Ireland to catch up with Europe and New Zealand's standards.

3. Recommendation 3: No charge for disadvantage children

It was recommended by one of the participants that the fees be removed. Historically, there was no charge and it was reported that the focus has changed. P1 stated: "*there was no charge for the Homework Club the school would have referred on all of the most targeted children. The most needy children, whatever way you want to put it, but that doesn't necessarily work anymore because the parents won't pay the fee or aren't in a position to pay the fee"*. This highlights that children that are in most need of the service are falling through the cracks. When there was no charge P1 stated: *"the kids that most needed the service got the service. Whereas, we can't guarantee that anymore"*. The researcher recommends that some options that may be considered for the future to ensure that children that are the most vulnerable are not falling through the cracks by getting support from the social work department or community welfare officers.

4. Recommendation 4: Study of children's perspective

This research study did not receive the views of the children attending the ASC. The perspectives of the children would have given a deeper insight into the potential benefits or negatives from attending ASC. Looking to the future, a study with these views would significantly contribute to a holistic view of the service.

5.6 Implications for Social Work Practice: (ASC is a preventative service from social work involvement).

This research study is important for social work practice as it identifies gaps in ASC for disadvantaged areas. The gaps that are arsing from the literature reviewed and the research findings are the lack of policy regulations for ASC in Ireland. This research encouraged working in collaboration with community services. This is central to building positive relationships which promotes high professional standards across all disciplines. Learning about the service, meeting parents, staff and school liaison officer was beneficial for future endeavours in respect to potential referrals of child protection concerns. It was discussed with participants if they perceived the service as a preventive service from social work involvement P7: stated "*children that were on borderline may have been in contact with social work but we might be able to prevent it before that, like an early intervention before social work involvement"*.

The opportunity for children to attend ASC ensures that they are adult supervised and have access to activities that they may not have at home. The children have a safe environment which they can learn new skills, build positive relationships, attachments and creates a support network for parents. P2: stated: "*We are on the ground and I am working with the child day in and day out and it is on me as an adult to guide and help the child that if something does come up that I am able to talk to the child and act on any concerns that may come up and pass on the information"*.

This preventative framework enlightens my social work practice. As a social work practitioner my role is to ensure that children's rights are being adhered to. ASC are unregulated and there are no guidelines for practice can anyone be sure that children's rights are being addressed? By providing this research to the Before 5 Family Centre I am acting as an advocate and demonstrating that ASC are important and are indeed a benefit for children that are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The research study has given me great insight to the lack of research in Irish society with regards to ASP. I have acknowledged and learned that the community service provided by the Before 5 Family Centre is a preventative and early intervention service that is holistic in delivery for children, families and community. Social workers working in partnership with communities can have an impact on influencing policy and practice for disadvantaged young

people and families. Community work is underpinned by social work values particularly social justice, empowerment and anti-oppressive practice (Teater, 2010).

From an ecological systems perspective, development occurs through complex process of interactions and as a social work professional it is significant to understand academic-related differences between disadvantaged children and their more affluent counterparts (Mahoney et al. 2005). When working with children attending ASP it is essential to look at the broader picture and analyse the structural causes of disadvantage and consider wider social support networks. This kind of social work practice can empower individuals, parents and communities (Stepney and Ford, 2000).

5.7 Reflective Piece

Through my journey of the research process I feel I have further grasped the concept of reflective practice and the importance it has on my future practice. The thought of conducting research was a task I considered very daunting. I decided to take a leap of faith and do a CARL project as I wanted to challenge myself, and have the opportunity to work in partnership with a community services. The process of collaboratively designing and implementing the research with the Before 5 Family Centre was a valuable experience. From a professional perspective I have learned to build professional relationships, work in collaboration to meet a common goal and conduct active research.

The experience of social work research has cemented a personal and a professional knowledge base that I would not have acquired without participating in this process. The reflective learning process has been fundamental in analysing and evaluating: what the organisation wanted? What I wanted? Where the focus of the research was going? I continuously reflecting in my research journal and any questions that arose I brought them to the organisation, we would brainstorm and devise a plan. This enhanced my ability to take a step back and question myself and my thinking. This process has enhanced my decision making skills, organisational skills, working in partnership and to examine information analytically.

An influential component of reflection in social work is the application and examination of theories in practice (Trevethick, 2012). Reflective practice has helped me to improve the quality of services I can provide for services users by linking theory to practice. Theoretical

frameworks are like building blocks the more I am exposed to the greater my knowledge. I have recognised that the knowledge is transferable to other experiences. I have explored the fruitful relationship between theory and practice and it is an essential partnership for best social work practice. I feel that this has led to a path of self discovery personally and professionally.

I have a deeper knowledge of child development and this is basic prerequisite for a practicing social worker. Drawing from this appropriate knowledge is fundamental to make professional judgements and to identify provisions of services. This research has enabled me to examine the role of the afterschool programme in children's development, and further my knowledge on early intervention services.

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5.9 Appendices

Appendix One:

The Partnership Agreement, *Towards 2016* consists of a section on education and training which set out goals to be accomplished over a 10 year time frame (Department of An Taoiseach, 2006). This Agreement focused on establishing initiatives to prevent early school leaving and to enhance academic attainment. According to Mahoney and Cairns (1997) that participation even in one extracurricular after-school activity is associated with a reduction in rates of early school leaving especially with disadvantaged children (cited in The Children's Research, Centre, 2009).

Appendix two:



Appendix Three:

INFORMATION SHEET

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Caring for Children & Community

Before 5 Family Centre
Churchfield Hill, Cork.
Tel: 021 4303561
Fax: 021 4307863
Email: before5centre@gmail.com
Web: www.before5familycentre.ie

Purpose of the Study.

As part of the requirements for The Masters in Social Work at UCC, I have to carry out a research study. This study is connected with the Community- Academic Research Links initiative (CARL) which is located within University College Cork. The Community- Academic Research Links project is working in conjunction with The Before 5 Family Centre. The purpose of the study is to explore the benefits of the Afterschool Club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development. I would like to get the views of the staff, parents and school liaison officer of their perceived benefits of the after school club.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve an interview with staff, parents and school liaison officer. The interviews will last approximately 50 minutes per interview. The interview will be held in the Before 5 Family Centre. Research will take the form of a semi-structured interview regarding your child's participation in the Afterschool club and your perception of the benefits gained because of this attendance

The interviews will start the last week in February 2016.

STAFF: Monday 15/03/2016 time allocated: _____

I will send an interview guide and a consent form to each participant by post. The interview guide is a set of 10-12 questions that I will ask in the interview. The reason why I am using the method of interviewing is to collect detailed information for the purpose of the research.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked because your child has attended the service for two or more years. Mary has identified you as a participant as she believes that you are most suited to the study.

Do you have to take part?

No, your participation is completely voluntary. If after reading the information provided in this pack and you feel you would like to participate you can send the signed consent form in the stamped envelope provided. Mary or myself will contact you with regards dates and times of the interview. If for any reason you decide you do not want to be involved, you have the option of withdrawing your consent. If this occurs after the interview has taken place you can withdraw consent up to two weeks after the interview. In this case all your information will be destroyed.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. I will ensure that no clues to your identity appear in the thesis. To ensure this, all identifying components will be replaced with pseudonyms this includes names, age et

cetera. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be entirely anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give?

The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study, available only to me and my research supervisor. It will be securely stored on my UCC drive that only I will have access to. I will also save the data on an encrypted laptop with access codes. On completion of the research, the data will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed. I will use audio-recording in the interview. This information will be transcribed into a word document that will then be stored on the secure UCC drive. After transcribing the audio recording will be deleted.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner. The thesis may be read by future students on the course. The study may be published in a research journal. The research may also be used by The Before 5 Family Centre as a tool to show funding organization of the importance of the Afterschool Club.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. However, if in case, talking about your experiences causes you any distress I will advise you of relevant support services.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the procedure, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and how you are feeling.

Who has reviewed this study?

Approval will be given by the Social Research Ethics Committee of UCC before studies like this can take place.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me:

Name: Terri Lacey

Contact: 021 4303561 (Before 5 Family Centre)

Email: 114221125@umail.ucc.ie

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form over leaf.

CONSENT FORM

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Caring for Children & Community

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I……agree to participate in Terri Lacey's research study,

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

My participation in this project is entirely voluntary.

I give permission for my interview with Terri Lacey to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity and my child's identity. I also understand that I maintain this confidentiality in respect of other participants in the project.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and used by The Before 5 Family Centre and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐

I agree to participate in the research project at the Before 5 Family Centre Afterschool Club.I accept and agree with the conditions outlined above.

Signed: …… Date: ……

PRINT NAME: ……





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Interview Guideline for Parents:

Title: An exploration of the benefits of the Afterschool Club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development.

Semi-structured interviews with parents whose children attend the Afterschool club for more than two years.

• Begin recording

• Thanks for participation in the study

• Explanation of consent form

• Ensure person is comfortable with participation

• Brief outline of number of questions

• Begin asking questions.

Question 1:

a) How many days per week does your child attend after school club?

b) Is your child male or female?

c) What age is your child?

d) Do you have more than one child in the service?

Question 2:

Can you tell me why you use the service here?

Question 3:

a) What aspects of the service do you believe are beneficial for your child?

b) What specific benefits have you seen from your child attending after-school club?

c) How do you know this?

d) Can you give me an example?

Question 4:

Has your child formed peer relationships from after school club?

Question 5:

What activities does your child talk about the most?

Probing questions: What activities do you think they like the most?

Question 6:

a) Do you think these activities enhance your child's development?

b) How?

Question 7:

a) In your opinion, what relationships do the children have with the staff?

b) Do you think the child has benefitted from staff guidance?

c) How?

d) Can you give me an example please.

Question 8:

Have you or your child experienced any difficulties/problems when using the after-school club?

If so, could you tell me a little more about this?

Question 9:

What do you believe would enhance or improve your child's social and emotional development in after-school club?

Question 10:

Overall would you say the service has been beneficial?

Question 11:

In your opinion what impact does the service have on your life?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel would aid this research?

Many Thanks

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
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before5
Caring for Children & Community

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Interview Guidelines for Staff:

Title: An exploration of the benefits of the Afterschool Club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development.

Semi-structured interviews with parents whose children attend the Afterschool club for more than two years.

• Begin recording

• Thanks for participation in the study

• Explanation of consent form

• Ensure person is comfortable with participation

• Brief outline of number of questions

• Begin asking questions.

Question 1:

What do you think are the most important aspects of your work with the children in after school club?

Question2:

a) Do you think the children who attend after-school club benefit from interactions with the staff?

b) How?

Question 3:

How do you build trust and rapport with the children in afterschool club?

Question 4:

a) What activities help foster the children's social development?

b) How do you know this?

Question 5:

a) What activities help foster the children's emotional development?

b) How do you know this?

Question 6:

What are the strengths of the afterschool club?

Question 7:

What are the challenges of the afterschool club?

Question 8:

To run a programme such as this effectively, what is most important?

Communication

Policy and Procedures

Reviews

Team work

Training Other (please specify)....

Question 9:

a) Do you have contact with the school liaison officer?

b) If so, how do you work together?

c) What is the nature of your work together?

d)How often do you have contact?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel would aid this research?

Many Thanks

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7th January 2016

To Whom It May Concern,

The Before 5 Family Centre is delighted to be chosen as part of the CARL research programme in UCC.

We are glad that Terri Lacey will work on the research project aimed at identifying the benefits on children's social and emotional development through their attendance at the Afterchool Club at the Before5 Family Centre.

We will work in partnership with Terri and look forward to the outcome of this research project. Our aim is to have some research measure on the anecdotal feedback we have consistently received from service users about their children's positive involvement in the Afterschool club.

Yours sincerely,

_____

Mary Barry – Childcare Manager.

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

before5
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Interview Guidelines for School Liaison Officer:

Title: An exploration of the benefits of the Afterschool Club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development.

Semi-structured interviews with parents whose children attend the Afterschool club for more than two years.

• Begin recording

• Thanks for participation in the study

• Explanation of consent form

• Ensure person is comfortable with participation

• Brief outline of number of questions

• Begin asking questions.

Question 1:

What is your role in relation to the After-School Club?

Question 2:

How do children become involved the after school club?

Probing questions:

Is there a waiting list for services users?

Who makes the decisions on who gets a place in the afterschool club?

Are there referrals made by other professionals? If so, by whom?

Who would make the most referrals?

Question 3:

a) Do you work with the parent's as well?

b) Do you work with the staff in the after-school club?

Question 4:

In your opinion do you think afterschool-club is beneficial for children?

a) Yes or No

b) If yes please state your reasons

Question 5:

Do you think there is a difference in children's social and emotional development who attend after-school club compared to children that do not attend?

a) Yes or No

b) If yes please specify differences

Question 6:

Have teachers reported to you any differences in the children's social development since attending after-school club?

a) No difference

b) Improvement

c) Other please specify

Question 7:

Have teachers reported to you a difference in children's emotional development since attending after-school club?

a)No differences at all

b) Self-esteem.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

c) Challenging Behaviours.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

d) Confidence.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

e) Trust.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

f) Talk about feelings.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

g) Expressive.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

h) Building peer relationships.....Same [ ]..... Improved [ ]

Questions 8:

Overall what do you think are the benefits of after-school club?

Question 9:

What are the strengths of the afterschool club?

Question 10:

What are the challenges of the afterschool club?

Questions 8:

Do you believe the service is a preventative service for social work intervention?

Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel would aid this research?

Many Thanks

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

before5
Caring for Children & Community

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Churchfield Hill, Cork.
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Email: before5centre@gmail.com
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9th March 2016

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Terri Lacey and I am a student in the Masters of Social Work currently in second year of my studies in University College Cork (UCC). As part of my studies I am undertaking a research project which explores the benefits of the after-school club for children, focusing on their emotional and social development. This piece of research will be conducted in partnership with the Before 5 Family Centre.

I have personally picked this piece of research as I am interested in doing research that may have a positive impact on a local community project. This research is part of the Community Academic Research Links in UCC whereby students link with a community group and they compile research questions in relation to their service. It is intended that the research will identify benefits of the service and to find ways of improving the service in the future.

The aim of the study is to gather information through semi-structure interviews. For the purpose of this research I would like to get the views of the staff, parents and school liaison officers of their perceived benefits of the after-school club. The interview will take no longer than an hour maximum. The interview will take place in the Before 5 Family Centre.

If you are willing to participate in this study can you please send your signed consent form in the stamped addressed envelope provided **before Monday 14th March 2016 please (or give the consent form to Mary in the centre)** I hope to conduct interviews from the 15th February 2016.

This research will be composed by participatory research where your knowledge and perspective will form the basis for research and planning. Your participation and time will be greatly appreciated. I have enclosed more information inside. If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

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Terri Lacey