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# The value of after school clubs for disadvantaged children

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This project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, investigates how participation in out of school activities varies for children from different backgrounds and how this relates to outcomes at age 11. The study includes analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study as well as case studies in primary schools to explore the relationship between engagement in out of school activities and attainment. In this research brief, we highlight the importance of after school clubs for increasing disadvantaged children's access to activities and explore what it is about how these clubs are structured and delivered that helps to engage less affluent families.



- By age 11, participation in after school clubs did not vary by economic disadvantage; 31% of both disadvantaged and more affluent children attended after school clubs at least weekly.
- In comparison, disadvantaged children were less likely to participate in other activities outside school - sports activities (61% to 78% among more affluent children) extra tuition (18% to 24%) and music lessons (7% compared to 29%).
- Facilitators to take-up of after school clubs included low cost, ease of access, flexibility, familiarity with the environment, choice and variety of activities and positive relationships with club staff.
- Barriers to take-up included limited availability, provision that did not meet the needs of children with SEN and a perception that some parents' own negative experiences of school may discourage them from engaging with after school clubs or perceiving there to be any value in participating.
- Taking part in after school clubs was thought to have a range of positive benefits. These included providing access to enriching new experiences, providing opportunities for children to succeed, fostering self-esteem and confidence, supporting the academic curriculum, improving fitness, providing opportunities to socialise, as well as opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment.

## Introduction to the study

This project is funded by the Nuffield Foundation and carried out in collaboration by NatCen Social Research, Newcastle University and ASK Research. This is the third research brief from the study which investigates the link between children's participation in out of school activities and outcomes at age 11.

One of the first stages of the project was to map out how primary school children spend their time outside school. To do this, we analysed data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) which follows the lives of 19,000 children born in 2000/01, collecting information at key points in their childhood. The first research brief outlined children's engagement in out of school activities at ages 5, 7 and 11<sup>1</sup>.

In our second research brief, we developed a typology of children based on their engagement in out of school activities, and reported a strong link between economic disadvantage and lower participation in out of school activities<sup>2</sup>.

In this research brief we focus on after school clubs. We use MCS data from 2006-2012 to look at the characteristics of those who attend them and report findings from qualitative case studies in ten schools in the South East and North East of England. The case studies (carried out in 2015) included interviews with school staff, activity providers and parents, as well as focus groups with pupils. They explored the facilitators and barriers to take-up of after school clubs, the types of activities that take place in them, and the impacts of participation.

## Who attends after school clubs?

A key finding from the MCS analysis was that after school clubs stood out as being the only organised activity in which participation did not vary by economic disadvantage. At age 11, 31% of both disadvantaged and more affluent children attended after school clubs at least weekly.

Take-up was, however, higher among more affluent children at younger ages. At age 7, 23% of more affluent children and 16% of disadvantaged children attended after school clubs and at age 5, the figures were 13% and 6%.

Children with SEN (including additional needs) were less likely to attend after school clubs at age 11 (27% compared to 31% of children without SEN).

Despite there being no difference in take-up of after school clubs at age 11, disadvantaged children

were less likely to participate in other activities - sports activities (61% to 78% of more affluent children) extra tuition (18% to 24%) and music lessons (7% compared to 29%).

The evidence suggests that after school clubs provide an important route for children to engage in activities outside of schools.

## What are the facilitators and barriers to take-up?

In the case study interviews with school staff, pupils and parents, we explored the factors that may explain how after school clubs have overcome barriers to take-up for disadvantaged pupils:

- **Cost**

Parents and pupils identified after school clubs that were either free or very low cost as a key facilitator to take-up, and compared these low cost options favourably to other out of school activities, e.g. music instrument tuition and sports activities, that had higher costs associated. In some instances after school clubs were free, while in others, fees were waived for the most disadvantaged pupils, or schools subsidised costs to keep fees as low as possible.

To provide this low cost provision, schools described using a range of funding streams including the Pupil Premium, the PE Premium, school budgets, charitable grants and partnerships. Schools also depended on staff giving up their time for free to run after school clubs in addition to using paid staff, volunteers and parents.

- **Ease of access**

Parents and pupils spoke positively of the convenience of attending after school clubs on the school site, avoiding the time and costs associated with travelling to activities. This was particularly valued by parents whose circumstances made the logistics and costs of taking their children to out of school activities difficult (e.g. as a result of working patterns, other caring commitments, limited access to transport, health difficulties and low incomes).

*They're much more convenient for people who might not ordinarily take their children to a club because of either the cost of it or the time.. It does take up a lot of your time to take children to clubs especially if you've got more than one.*

*(Parent, North East)*

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/563012/out-of-school-resbr1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/563160/out-of-school-resbr2.pdf>

Parents appreciated flexibility in after school club provision. Examples included provision that was 'pay as you go' or did not require sign-up for a full term because children were free to try a range of activities until they found something they enjoyed. This was contrasted with out of school activities beyond the school gates which were felt to require a higher level of commitment and associated cost.

*I think you need to respond to what the children want.. Once they know that they've asked for it and they see that you're responding, you know you've got their respect. They've got your respect. It's sort of a mutual, you know.. they have ownership of it. It's their after school club.*

*(School staff, South East)*

- **Familiarity and trust**

Schools, parents and pupils highlighted the importance of familiarity with the staff and school setting as a key facilitator to take-up of after school clubs. Pupils described feeling 'comfortable' and 'relaxed' on school premises with familiar staff. Parents highlighted the importance of trust in staff and confidence in the safety of the environment. This was viewed as a key facilitator for parents who may lack the confidence to take their children to other activities:

*I think.. some parents maybe aren't confident enough to take their children along to a club because they might feel as if they're not sure how to go about it or what to do, whereas here because it's after school it's a familiar environment to just say, 'Yes, go into that club there and I'll pick you up later on'. I think a lot of the things here maybe the children wouldn't get the opportunities to do if they weren't doing it after school.*

*(Parent, North East)*

Attending after school clubs with school friends was also thought to reduce the anxiety and nervousness some children felt about trying something new.

Beyond initial take-up of after school clubs, a number of factors were thought to contribute to continued engagement:

- **Choice and variety**

Providing a wide range of activities that were engaging and fun was viewed as key to on-going take-up. Provision that was responsive to the interests and requests of pupils was viewed as a key facilitator:

After school club provision in case study schools was typically characterised by a wide range of activities and a focus on inclusivity and participation. Activities were reviewed regularly and unpopular activities discontinued and replaced with alternatives.

- **Relationships with after school club staff**

Pupils in particular appreciated building relationships with school staff in a more informal setting.

*Like when.. you go to after school club and your teachers are there they're not really there to be bossing you around.. they can still have a laugh and be who they really are.'*

*(KS1 pupil group, South East)*

Positive relationships between pupils and staff providing activities were therefore viewed as critical by school staff and activity providers for ongoing engagement and take-up. Staff also stressed the importance of building positive relationships with parents to encourage participation.

Despite these facilitators to take-up however, only a minority of pupils at age 11 are participating in after school clubs (31%), suggesting that a number of barriers to take-up remain. In light of the potential benefits of participation, it is important to consider what factors might be contributing to this:

- **Availability**

Pupils described waiting lists for popular clubs and limits placed on the number of clubs pupils could attend each week and the length of time they could attend as a means of rationing the provision available. Schools acknowledged that they did not always have the capacity to meet the demand, both in terms of staffing and the space required.

Age limits and the perception that there was generally less provision available for younger children in KS1 was highlighted as a barrier, and may go some way to explaining the lower levels of take-up of after school clubs for children aged 5 and 7 in the MCS data (although this may also reflect an increase in after school provision over the period of study (2006-2012)).

Some parents whose children were not participating in after school clubs also reflected that the range of activities available was limited and did not match the interests of their child.

- **Provision for children with Special Educational Needs**

MCS analysis indicated that children with SEN were less likely to attend after school clubs at age 11 compared to children without. This finding was supported by feedback from case study parents, some of whom voiced concerns about the capacity of after school clubs to meet the needs of their children. In one case for example, a parent expressed their concerns that after school clubs were not set up to meet the needs of their child with autism:

*I think there's been a bit of ignorance as well from the government on that side of it for like children with special needs.. I think after school clubs, if there was a bit more focus on it from the government to actually provide different classes to tune to what they're into, I think that'd be more beneficial.*

*(Parent, North East)*

- **Parent attitudes to school and after school clubs**

School staff reflected that in some instances, parents' own negative experiences of school may discourage them from engaging with after school clubs with their children. It was also thought that some parents may not perceive there to be any value in participating, and schools needed to work hard to overcome this attitudinal barrier and engage with parents.

Parents also voiced some concerns over children doing 'too much' and needing unstructured time. For younger children in particular, there were concerns expressed that after school clubs were too tiring.

A limitation of the MCS data is that we have no information on what the children are doing when they attend after school clubs. Case study data offers insights into the types of activities on offer but further research is needed to identify which activities may have the most beneficial impacts.

In case study schools after school club provision fell into two broad categories:

- **Structured activity-based after school clubs**

Schools described providing a wide range of structured activity-based after school clubs. These clubs typically ran for an hour at the end of the school day, were usually short in duration (half a term or a term) and changed regularly. The emphasis was on providing a wide range of activities to maximise participation with a focus on enriching life experiences. As a result, it is likely that children's experiences of after school clubs is broad and varied rather than focused and in depth. These activities included:

- Sports including football, basketball, tennis, hockey, cricket, netball, martial arts as well as dance and yoga. Sports were often changed seasonally, although some popular clubs e.g. football would run all year round.
- Arts, crafts and hobbies including textiles, jewellery making, messy art, pottery, film, gardening, cooking, chess, Lego and drama.
- Music including individual instrument tuition, school bands and choirs.
- ICT including coding, computing and web surfing.
- Academic clubs including academic booster classes, homework clubs, and creative writing clubs. There were also examples of some clubs that combined maths and literacy interventions with sports.
- Languages

- **Free play, less structured provision**

Running in parallel to the structured activity focused after school clubs, schools also provided more unstructured provision primarily to meet the childcare needs of working parents. While this provision would also offer a range of activities children could participate in, it was typically less directed and children were free to select from a range of activities. While structured activity clubs tended to run for an hour, this provision was longer in length to meet

## What activities take place in after school clubs?

the childcare needs of parents. In some schools, arrangements were made for children to participate in structured after school clubs for the first hour before moving on to this free play childcare provision.

## What do school staff, parents and children see as the value of after school clubs?

School staff, parents and children listed a whole range of ways in which they felt that participation in out of school activities could have an impact on children and families. In some cases, a direct link was made with children's attainment, and in others, interviewees felt that the impact centred around the emotional and social impacts that might be associated with effective learning, and the link with attainment was less clear cut. Impacts were often described as interlinked. School staff told us of the impacts they felt were most likely for children taking part:

- **Opportunities to succeed**

With the emphasis on academic attainment during the school day, out of school activities were seen as a way to enable children who were not high achievers academically, to find something that they were good at and that they could achieve in. This was seen to enable children to experience success, become more positive about themselves and, for some children, enhance their confidence to participate in the classroom:

*If you've taken part in some horse riding, or you've worked in the farm and think, actually, 'I love doing that, and I'm quite good at it', your self-esteem is better, and if children find something that they're good at there's a knock on effect across other areas of their life.*

(Head teacher, North East)

- **Improved self-esteem**

Enabling children to discover new activities that they could enjoy and fully participate in, was believed by school staff to raise children's self-esteem. In the instances where children increased their skills, challenged themselves or achieved success in these activities, children displayed a sense of pride in themselves and gained a sense of belief in themselves. The children we spoke to told us that they were proud of themselves when they did well in their out of school activities.

- **New experiences**

School staff told us that many of the children they worked with came from disadvantaged backgrounds where access to opportunities to see different places, and encounter new situations and experiences was limited. Indeed, some parents told us that this was the case for them. By taking part in out of school activities children could broaden their horizons and learn more about the world. This was seen as vital in enabling children to be able to participate in learning activity in the classroom in terms of having experiences to talk and write about, and being able to contextualise what they were reading.

*They're much harder if you haven't got a lot of experience to draw upon that for your writing. I think it's also about a confidence that it gives children, and that kind of almost social credibility with their peers, that if, if you just haven't experienced anything it's quite hard to join in discussions, and to feel part of what's going on.*

(Head teacher, South East)

- **Valuing school**

Taking part in after school or breakfast clubs enables children to see school in a different light. School staff told us that children were able to see school as a place for fun and enjoyment, in addition to learning, and feel a closer bond with school, generating a sense of belonging. They also told us that clubs could establish a different relationship between school staff and pupils, which in some cases, enabled children to be more confident to ask questions and talk to the teacher during school time, and enabled school staff to see their pupils in a different light.

- **Confidence**

Having opportunities to try new things, and find activities children were good at, or even learning that it is ok to lose occasionally, was seen to instil confidence in children. School staff told us that this boost in confidence manifested in children being more likely to take part in class discussion, or put their hand up, and being more likely to ask questions during class, thus enabling them to engage with learning more effectively. The confidence that children gained from participating in out of school activities was also seen by parents as a key benefit for their children.

- **Physical health and development**

General fitness was seen by school staff as a vital part of enabling children to be in a good state to learn. Being active, rather than playing on games consoles or computers was seen to be a positive effect of clubs.

Like school staff, parents told us that they valued the impact that out of school activities could have on children's confidence, and their physical health and development, and felt that the opportunity given to children for new experiences widened their horizons.

*I'm not entirely sure what impact it has on their education, but like I say, it does have a massive impact on their confidence, which may impact on their education*

*(Parent, North East)*

Parents were less likely than school staff to talk about the impacts of clubs in terms of children's achievement, but tended to talk about the social and emotional effects for their children, which also impacted upon families:

- **Socialising and friendships**

The ability to socialise with friends and make new friends was seen by parents as the major benefit for children attending out of school activities. Parents valued the opportunities that arose for children to mix with children of different ages, and from different cultures. This was felt to increase children's happiness, and widen their experiences.

*She makes different social circles which I think is really important to have different social circles because you get different things from those people, different ideas*

*(Parent, South East)*

- **Relaxation**

Parents told us that taking part in out of school activities enabled their children to be active and let off steam, so that they could ultimately arrive home in a relaxed and calm state. Activities were seen to tire children out, and parents told us that children slept better when they had participated in a club. This had a positive effect on families, as the atmosphere at home was calm. One parent, however, did worry about how tired her daughter became when taking

part in after school clubs on top of the school day, and felt that this could detract from her study.

- **Happiness and enjoyment**

Parents felt taking part made children happy, resulting in them having a positive frame of mind, and feeling good about themselves. This made for a happier atmosphere at home too, and motivated the children.

*If it makes them happy, it makes me happy'*

*(Parent, North East)*

Children, like their parents, told us that the feeling they got from enjoying clubs and having fun was the main benefit they saw for themselves.

*If it makes you happy then you be better in your studies and you'll have like a better feeling that you can do well instead of just being angry and stressed at school and not doing well*

*(KS2 pupil group, South East)*

*When you're happy you, like, you feel like you can do anything*

*(KS2 pupil group, North East)*

- **Direct link to the curriculum**

When asked whether they felt that out of school activities could help with schoolwork, children tended to make the link in terms of activities they did that were directly linked to the curriculum. Sports clubs, for example, were cited as helping children during their PE classes, as they knew what to do.

*I go to like this Maths and English club, and it makes you better at school: it helps you, it really helps you at school*

*(KS2 pupil group, South East)*

- **Physical health and development**

Children told us that they needed to be fit and healthy in order to learn and enjoy life, and that out of school activities enabled them to stay fit.

*If you don't be healthy that means that sometimes you'll be not well or, or you won't be able to go to school*

*(KS1 pupil group, North East)*

## What does this mean for schools?

This project set out to explore whether out of school activities have particular benefits for disadvantaged children. One aspect of this is the extent to which disadvantaged children access activities of this kind, and the findings show that they are less likely than other children to access many out of school activities including sports clubs, extra tuition and music lessons.

After school clubs are the exception to this, with MCS analysis showing that by age 11, there is no difference in take-up between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children. This finding suggests that schools have had some success in overcoming the barriers to participation that prevent disadvantaged children taking up other out of school activities.

Teachers, parents and children identified a range of positive outcomes from participation in after school clubs, including increases in confidence, self-esteem and fitness, as well as providing opportunities for new experiences, socialising and enjoyment. The next stage of the project will investigate the association between out of school activities and outcomes in more detail, with a particular focus on attainment outcomes at age 11. It is hoped that this analysis will shed further light

on the role out of school activities may have in narrowing the attainment gap, and provide some indication of whether schools should consider investing in after school clubs to improve academic outcomes for disadvantaged children.

## Methodology

The findings presented here are based on qualitative case studies in 10 primary schools (four in the North East and six in the South East of England) carried out in 2015 by the University of Newcastle and NatCen Social Research.

Case study schools were selected to achieve diversity in terms of size, location and FSM eligibility. Across the case study schools forty-nine interviews and 15 focus groups were carried out:

- 12 interviews with school staff
- 9 interviews with activity providers
- 28 interviews with parents
- 8 focus groups with pupils in Key Stage 1
- 7 focus groups with pupils in Key Stage 2

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All quotes are drawn from case study data and are reported verbatim.

The brief also draws on analysis by NatCen Social Research of Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) data from sweeps 3, 4 and 5 (spanning 2006 to 2012) downloaded from the UK Data Service<sup>1</sup>.

## More about the study

This study has multiple strands and is conducted by NatCen Social Research, in collaboration with co-principal investigator Professor Liz Todd and Karen Laing at [Newcastle University](#), and with Amy Skipp at [ASK Research](#).

To find out more about the study and to read the other research briefs, visit our project webpage <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/out-of-school-activities/>. You can also let us know what you think on our message board <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/blog/from-latch-key-kids-to-pushy-parents-out-of-school-activities-and-the-education-gap>. For more information contact project director Dr Emily Tanner ([Emily.Tanner@NatCen.ac.uk](mailto:Emily.Tanner@NatCen.ac.uk)).

<sup>1</sup> University of London. Institute of Education. Centre for Longitudinal Studies, *Millennium Cohort Study: Third Survey, 2006* [computer file]. 6th Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], December 2012. SN: 5795 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5795-3>; *Millennium Cohort Study: Fourth Survey, 2008* [computer file]. 4th Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], December 2012. SN: 6411 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6411-3>; *Millennium Cohort Study: Fifth Survey, 2012* [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], February 2014. SN: 7464 , <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7464-1>

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