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The RBC Foundation After-School Programs Evaluation

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Introduction

The aim of evaluating RBC funded after-school programs was to examine the successes and challenges of offering after-school programs in Canada. The evaluation comprised two phases. *Phase 1* entailed a content analysis of annual program evaluation reports submitted to RBC grant managers. Findings from this phase provided a rich description of the **key outcomes and benefits** of after-school programs (see RBC Foundation After-School Programs Evaluation, Preliminary Report August 2010). *Phase 2* utilized data obtained through individual interviews and focus groups held with parents, children and youth, after-school staff and RBC Foundation members and grant managers currently involved with an RBC funded after-school program, to explore their **perspectives of “what works” and what may serve as barriers**.

Following a brief review of the literature, the research procedures and methodological approaches to Phases 1 and 2 are provided. The findings of each phase are discussed in detail, followed by a conclusion and related appendices.

Literature Review

Background

Parents continue to request help in caring for their children as increasingly more women enter the workforce, thus creating a great need for after school adult-supervised activities. Some research suggests that at least 15 percent of youth between the ages of 6 and 12 years are unsupervised after school, and that up to 66 percent of these unsupervised youth are in the low to moderate income bracket. Unsupervised time among youth has been linked to risk-taking behaviours, victimization and poor academic outcomes. Conversely, increased supervision after school is associated with lower levels of delinquent behaviour, risky sexual behaviours and substance abuse. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that juvenile crime peaks between the hours of 2 and 6 pm between Monday and Friday.

Evidence suggests that there are a number of benefits and positive outcomes associated with involvement in after-school programs. Children who participate in after-school programs are more likely to complete their homework, and to help their peers with homework. Moreover, teachers are more likely to expect success from these students. Program participants express greater interest in pursuing post-secondary education and demonstrate success in their academic, social-emotional and healthy lifestyle realms. Specific outcomes include higher grades, lower dropout rates, improved social skills, increased self-confidence, better ability to form secure adult attachments, more positive attitudes towards school and reduced sexual activity and drug use. There is evidence to indicate that these outcomes have long-lasting effects, specifically in the academic achievement realm, with participants having better scores than non-participants for up to five years.

Features of High-Quality Programs

Evidence indicates that successful after-school programs provide activities that meet specific skill objectives and encourage participants to engage in active learning. A common feature of these programs is inclusion of a wide variety of activities with attention to ensure the programs are interesting and developmentally appropriate and that they grow incrementally challenging for the participants. High quality programs foster self-esteem, which in turn tends to increase math and reading scores. The potential for self-esteem enhancement is not limited to the academic realm. For example, a child's athletic competence may be validated through participation in a recreational activity, thus leading to an increase in athletic self-concept.

In general, programs are most successful when both academic and recreational components are included to stimulate active learning and engage the participants. For example, allowing children to wear pajamas during a reading program or teaching measurements during a baking activity include both academic and recreational activities. Research supports the importance of providing a range of activities that include academic, social and recreational components. It is unclear however, which specific components are particularly important. In a study that examined middle school students with Attention Deficit Disorder with Hyperactivity (ADHD), social skills such as initiating conversations and offering compliments to others, along with academic skills such as studying and test-taking strategies were emphasized as important. As the study participants included a specific population of children the findings may not be relevant to the typical child or youth attending an after-school program.

To ensure effectiveness it is recommended that programs be provided 2-3 times per week. While longer participation is generally considered to lead to better outcomes, this may depend on the type of program. It is thought that programs that focus on academics for instance, must run for longer periods to be effective, than programs that focus on behavioral and social skills. Successful programs typically provide a predetermined time for program completion, as well as structured components (e.g., specified academic, athletic and social goals) and high quality instructional support (e.g., providing students tutoring/homework help and the opportunity to practice new skills). Having a low student to staff ratio is beneficial as are engaging staff that have college degrees, ensuring adequate staff training, involving families and using rigorous evaluation to identify effective and ineffective practices. Programs are unlikely to be successful without clear and specified goals and effective educational techniques.

Major challenges include high staff turnover and inadequate training of staff and instructors. The presence of cultural understanding and nonjudgmental and consistent program instructors over an 18-month period significantly decrease first-time drug use, school absenteeism and violent behaviours among youth. Furthermore, high quality programs employ targeted recruitment strategies, particularly aimed at high-risk youth. Such strategies include obtaining program referrals from school staff and family members as well as utilizing street outreach techniques.

Limitations of Impact

Participation in even the most high quality after-school programs may not be sufficient to significantly impact the lives of children and youth, for example influence their academic achievement. Furthermore, it is thought that academic programs need to retain participants for more than one year in order to have the most impact.

Demographic Factors

Although the effects of after-school programs are predominantly positive, these effects differ across various demographic factors. First, elementary and high school students experience programs differently. Elementary school students who participate in after-school programs reported feel safer than elementary school students who do not participate, which was not found among high school students.

The impact an after-school program can have on a child's academic achievement is also associated with age. Younger children are more likely to demonstrate gains in reading achievement whereas high school students are more likely to demonstrate gains in math achievement. Students of different ages value diverse program components. Teenagers respond well to programs that include an unstructured socializing component and programs that help prepare them for exams or teach employment skills. In contrast, younger children value the degree of fun a program offers. With respect to gender, girls tend to be more motivated to participate in after-school activities, and regardless of age tend to enjoy academic activities, whereas boys more typically enjoy outdoor activities. Overall, there is a lack of research examining factors related to cultural or immigration issues.

When implementing an after-school program it is necessary to consider geographic location. Programs that operate in rural areas have vastly different needs than those in urban areas. Consideration for programs operating in rural areas must account for factors such as the likelihood that the work schedules of children's parents may vary with the seasons and the lack of public transportation. Moreover, due to small populations, there is the need for greater flexibility with respect to allowing mixed age groups to participate in one program. In addition, there is often a higher cost associated with running programs in rural versus urban areas. Not only are food and supplies more expensive in rural areas, programs must be marketed constantly. Unless a large number of people are aware of the service there is the risk that the program will be underused. Program administrators in urban areas on the other hand, need to be particularly concerned with keeping the youth safe, and with implementing activities that best serve the needs of diverse cultural groups.

Barriers to Access

A number of barriers to accessing after-school programs have been identified. Lack of transportation to and from programs is a recurring issue. The most significant limitation of many after-school programs appears to be the failure to reach the most vulnerable youth. While students whose parents have higher incomes have greater access to high quality after-school programs, it has been suggested that it is urban, low-income children and youth that benefit the most from these programs. Even if high-risk youth are given the opportunity to participate in an after-school program, they are more likely to stop attending the program prematurely. If this population of youth can be retained, they experience a higher degree of success in the program than those who are low-risk.

Youth who participate for longer periods of time in after-school programs typically are self-motivated, do well in school, and receive encouragement from both parents and teachers, whereas youth who do not possess these qualities and do not experience encouragement are unlikely to want to participate in after-school programs. It is clear that more work is necessary in order to determine and implement effective recruitment strategies, particularly for children and youth who are the most vulnerable.

Links to the Implementation of Full-Day Kindergarten

The increase in full-day kindergarten is a response to a number of factors. First, the continued growth of single-parent and of two-parent families in which both parents work outside the home has created a greater increasing need for accessible childcare. Second, due to the large immigrant population, many young children do not speak English at home and there is significant pressure on educators to ensure that all students meet curriculum objectives in a similar time frame. Furthermore, it is now an identified priority to close the achievement gap between children from disadvantaged and/or ethnic minority homes and middle-class and/or Caucasian homes. Full-day kindergarten has been proposed as a means of decreasing the achievement gap among socioeconomic and ethnic groups, in order to ensure that the students are equally prepared to enter the first grade.

The goals of full-day kindergarten such as creating accessible childcare and decreasing the academic achievement gaps are similar to those of many after-school programs. Indeed, supporters of full-day kindergarten suggest that a lengthened school day increases the students' academic readiness, in addition to offering the societal benefit of easing the childcare burden for working parents. Preliminary results of evaluating a full-day kindergarten program indicate its effectiveness, with research revealing positive effects on student attendance, self-confidence, and ability to work and play with other children. Other potential benefits include academic skill development, improved socialization and peer relations, and increased self-esteem and self-confidence, along with lower childcare costs. By the end of the kindergarten year, students who attended full-day programs performed better on tests of academic achievement than students who attended half-day programs.

Not surprisingly, both the supporters and the skeptics of full-day kindergarten agree that the content and instructional strategies used in the program are critical to its success and impact on participating children. These findings are further echoed with respect to after-school programs whereby the primary contributor to success remains the content and strategies utilized.

School-based initiatives such as full-day kindergarten are often designed and implemented with the aim of improving the academic performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the design or implementation of the full-day kindergarten program however, it is generally not acknowledged that the issue being treated or targeted – poverty-induced low achievement – is chronic. Consequently, the advantages gained by students through such an initiative are likely to fade once the program intended to accelerate or foster their achievement is no longer available. Indeed, in this “fade-out effect,” the advantages gained by economically disadvantaged children decrease within the first two years of elementary school and completely disappear by approximately the third grade. While full-day kindergarten enables all students to start the first grade with similar academic abilities, unless these effects are maintained through ongoing initiatives, the benefits will fade leaving an achievement gap among the students. An appropriately structured and delivered after-school program can help maintain the positive effects gained by kindergarteners programs and can prevent the achievement gap from re-appearing or increasing once again.

Limitations of Available Research

Although a number of studies purport the benefits and positive outcomes of after-school programs, many of these studies are often fraught with methodological flaws. Selection bias may be a common methodological flaw, as there are inherent differences between individuals who choose to participate in after-school programs and those who do not. The methods of tracking time and attendance during the program may also skew the results. For example, an evaluation may track the number of days a participant spends in the program even if the participant leaves shortly after attendance is taken and does not participate in the activities. Most studies do not have a control group, a flaw that is difficult to rectify due to ethical considerations. It may be unethical to obstruct participation in an after-school program to students who wish to attend.

Evaluating After-School Programs

Evaluation is of utmost importance in ensuring continued success of an after-school program. A well-executed evaluation provides evidence of a program’s effectiveness, and is essential in informing ongoing improvement. Evaluations are most beneficial when they are specific (e.g., an academic program focusing on reading skills must assess reading skills) and comprehensive (e.g., the use of varied measures to evaluate success, such as surveys and focus groups). It is recommended that evaluations incorporate discrete stages such as observing the program, collecting data, reviewing/revising goals, and identifying and making changes, and that various programmatic aspects are considered, such as staff performance, student engagement, and effectiveness of the activities.

The inherent challenges in designing an effective design for an after-school program evaluation are numerous. First, the goals for outcomes identified by program administrators are often not conducive to research. Specifically, goals are often too vague (e.g., identity development) or are only minimally or indirectly related to the activities (e.g., decreased pregnancy rates). Second, it is difficult to evaluate a program accurately if participation is sporadic, which is often the case in many after-school programs, particularly if they operate on a drop-in basis. Finally, it is often difficult to ensure that a control group and a treatment group are the same, as random assignment is often unrealistic.

To date, most studies on after-school programs have failed to implement high quality research designs. In a meta-analysis of evaluation methodologies used to assess after-school programs, researchers intended to determine the degree to which the evaluations that were reviewed met the four components of effective evaluation: utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy. The studies were identified as either a formative evaluation (i.e., studied a program within 18 months of its beginning), an implementation evaluation (i.e., conducted to determine how a program was operating), or a summative evaluation (i.e., conducted to determine the impact of an after-school program). Of the formative evaluations 75% of the studies addressed three of the four components of evaluation. Of the implementation evaluations, only 43% addressed three of the four components and only 36% of the summative evaluations addressed three of four components. Thus, it is apparent that there is a lack of high quality evaluations of after-school programs.

In addition to the lack of high quality designs, evaluators may not be assessing all of the appropriate programmatic features that indicate success. For example, although features such as participation rates and procedural compliance are often measured, more meaningful measures of students' experiences, such as narrative accounts, may be overlooked. It is recommended that more rigorous and more varied measures and modalities of evaluation be utilized to determine the impact of after-school programs.

Conclusion

The current research provides a rich description of how after-school programs began to proliferate, what features are evident in high and low quality programs, limitations of program impact, demographic factors to consider and barriers to accessing after-school programs. Nevertheless, there are limitations to the research performed on after-school programs, particularly pertaining to program evaluation. There is therefore a need for high quality research designs that evaluate after-school programs.

Phase 1 Evaluation: Content Analysis

Introduction

Content analysis is a process of determining the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts, which are examined using one of the basic methods of content analysis: conceptual analysis or relational analysis. Conceptual analysis examines the existence and frequency of concepts. Relational analysis goes one step further by examining the relationships among concepts by determining the meanings that emerge as a result of these groupings. Conceptual analysis begins with identifying research questions and choosing a sample or samples. Once chosen, the text must be coded into manageable content categories, through a selective reduction method. By reducing the text to categories consisting of a word, set of words or phrases, the researcher can focus on, and code for, specific words or patterns that are indicative of the research question.

For the purposes of this evaluation, a conceptual analysis was conducted. This allowed the researchers to identify a concept for examination (e.g., key outcome areas as outlined in the program evaluation forms). The analysis involved quantifying and tallying the concept's presence. This form of content analysis was selected as the most appropriate, based on the data collected through the standard RBC program evaluations, which comprise subjective qualitative responses to key areas deemed important to the RBC Foundation funding framework.

Methodology

The following section outlines the process of the conceptual content analysis on the current 109 English and French after-school program year-end evaluation reports, from September 2008-June 2009, funded by the RBC Foundation. The RBC Foundation was interested in more fully understanding the outcomes elicited through the programs they fund.

The content analysis was performed through Question 13 in the year-end evaluation report each funded organization is required to submit in order to request funding for the following year. The question states: "Tell us the key academic, social and recreational activities the program provided to participants, the outcomes of these activities, and how you measured to determine achievement of desired outcomes." A table was provided for the responses, whereby each row included a benefit (academic, social, recreational), the activities that delivered this benefit (e.g., workshops, sports activities), the outcome (e.g., increased communication with parents, improved self-esteem, better interpersonal skills), and a description of how the outcome was measured (e.g., feedback from parents or schools, evaluations by parents and children, art portfolios). Question 13 is the sole question that elicits outcome oriented responses, and the data provided through this question allow for a conceptual content analysis.

The two research questions in this content analysis are:

1. What are the key outcomes in the after-school programs funded by the RBC Foundation?
2. Do these outcomes measure success as identified in the best practices literature review?

The following coding framework was created to proceed with a conceptual content analysis:

- *Determining the number of concepts to code.* We chose to code using an interactive rather than a pre-determined process in order to uncover data that may be found useful and which may or may not be found in the literature review for best practices.
- *Determining whether to code for frequency or existence.* We chose to code for frequency rather than existence, as this allowed us to determine the importance of certain themes.
- *Distinguishing between concepts.* This refers to deciding on the level of generalization and whether the concepts will be defined by the use of specific terms or by generalizing their meaning. We chose to code words, sets of words and phrases that are all related enough to elicit one concept. For example, under “recreational” benefit, words and phrases such as increased physical activity, increased healthy eating habits, improved health, stress reduction, and increased sleep quality, were all coded for one concept (Healthy Living). This practice allowed for some flexibility in the coding framework.
- *Developing coding rules.* This is the creation of coding rules that were agreed upon by the research assistants conducting the content analysis, including the level of generalization between coded words and phrases. Words and phrases that were similar were grouped together under one concept, whereas coded words or phrases that did not fit under a generalized concept were coded for existence and frequency but were left outside of a generalized concept. It was decided that coding would take place in each of the three realms of benefit (academic, social, recreational) in order to conduct a particular analysis in each of the three sections.
- *Dealing with irrelevant information.* Because we had decided to code all of the information in an interactive rather than a pre-determined conceptual way, we did not have to worry about possible irrelevant information. As discussed in the analysis below however, the concepts that emerged from the text were compared to the themes identified in the best-practice literature review.

Two research assistants, using the above coding framework, coded **Question 13** of the 109 files and populated a table which was divided into the three benefits: academic, social, and recreational. In order to increase the reliability of the analysis we employed a process for intercoder agreement, whereby two other research assistants randomly selected a total of 15 files in order to code them using the same process. While coding between the two sets of research assistants was similar enough to ensure reliability, we recognize that this is a limitation of this study.

Findings

Tables 1, 2 and 3 in Appendix II show the concepts that emerged from the coding of the files. The frequency of words, sets of words, or phrases that are explicitly or implicitly indistinguishable from each other are listed in the table beside each code. Each of the three pre-determined benefits (academic, social, recreational) was analyzed separately.

It is worth noting that two concepts emerged across the three area benefits. The concepts of fostering teamwork and cooperation and self-esteem/self-confidence were found in two or more of the three categories. Although this gives us an indication that these are definite outcomes being met through the programming, we present an argument later on in this report that there is consequently a need for further development of the evaluation tools in order to clarify the benefits.

Recreational

Seven (7) key concepts have been developed from the coding of the words and phrases found in this area of benefit. The three categories with the highest frequencies are *teamwork and cooperation*, *healthy living*, and *athletic development*. The theme, *teamwork and cooperation* was considered the most appropriate concept phrasing for such codes as heightened teamwork (25), increased cooperation (9), increased problem-solving skills (6), and learning to trust and respect others (4), among others. The concept of *healthy living* emerged from codes such as increased physical activity (34), increased healthy eating habits (6), and improved health (4). Finally, the concept *athletic development* emerged through codes such as increased sporting skills (31), increased coordination (6), and motor skill development (3), among others. Other concepts that emerged, albeit less frequently, are *increased self-esteem/self-confidence*, *social skills*, *cultural and community awareness and arts activities*.

Social

Five (5) concepts emerged from the data collected under this realm of benefit. The three most frequent were *socialization and pro-social behaviours*, *teamwork and cooperation*, and *self-esteem/self-expression*. The concept of *socialization and pro-social behaviours* was coded more frequently than any other concept in this section. This concept comprises increased compassion/empathy/acceptance/respect (45), enhanced pro-social behavior (23), and cooperation/conflict-resolution skills (22). *Teamwork and cooperation* was created through three codes: increased levels of teamwork/team-building (18), better communication skills

(13), and leadership skills (10). Finally, the concept *self-esteem/self-expression* was revealed through codes such as increased self-esteem (18), and better self-expression (7). Other concepts that emerged, albeit less frequently were *cultural and community awareness* and *healthy lifestyles*.

Academic

Six (6) concepts emerged from this realm of benefit, particularly *improved academic performance, literacy and language skills*, and *academic motivation/confidence*. The codes that formed the concept *improved academic performance* were improving reading and writing skills (39), vocabulary development (11), and reading enjoyment (8). The concept, *literacy and language skills* was formed through codes such as improving reading and writing skills (39), vocabulary development (11), and reading enjoyment (8). Finally, *academic motivation/confidence* was created through codes such as increased academic confidence (15), and better discipline/work ethic (16).

Discussion

The content analysis is organized by the two research questions:

What are the key outcomes in the after-school programs funded by the RBC Foundation?

The conceptual content analysis of the data collected through the RBC Foundation year-end evaluation report shows that the three benefit areas deemed important to the RBC Foundation are met through key outcomes. For example, **recreational benefits** are seen through the perceived increase in cooperation, teamwork, problem-solving skills, healthy-living lifestyles and self-esteem. **Social benefits** are evident through the perceived increase in pro-social behaviours, teamwork and self-esteem. Finally, **academic benefits** are manifest through the perceived improvement in key areas such as academic performance, skills and motivation.

One of the key findings is worth highlighting. Two of the three benefits elicit clear and distinguishable outcome concepts particular to each benefit. For example, the top three recreational benefits list particular skills and information acquisition related to recreational based learning, such as teamwork, physical activity skill development and skills for healthy lifestyle development. In the academic benefit category, the top three outcome concepts are in improvement of academic performance, literacy and math skills, and through increased academic confidence. The social benefit category however, elicits less distinguishable concepts, which notably are also found in the other two benefit categories (recreation, academic). For example, the most frequent codes found in this category include pro-social behaviours and socialization skills, which are important and particular to this benefit. The second and third concepts of teamwork and cooperation and self-esteem/self-expression however, are found in the other two benefit categories as well.

This finding suggests that the academic and recreational benefits categories have clear outcomes that are particular to these categories and require less definition. The social benefit category however, without a

clearer definition regarding its meaning or the kinds of associated outcomes, elicits concepts that are not unique to “social benefits” and indeed are applicable more generally to all three of the benefit areas, as illustrated in the example above. This finding will be useful for the future development of the RBC program evaluation forms, as it can aid in either more clearly defining what is meant by “social” benefits or by using particular recreational and academic outcomes to show the more macro or overall social benefits of the program.

Do these outcomes measure success as identified in the best practices literature review?

As suggested by in the literature review and the content analysis, the RBC Foundation funded after-school programs offer important benefits to children, youth and their families. In particular, according to the literature review after-school programming improves children and youth’s academic skill development, homework completion, and academic performance and increases their self-confidence which is associated with the pursuit of post-secondary education, and lower dropout rates. As shown in the content analysis, these outcomes are being met through the RBC after-school programs, although certain outcomes such as dropout rates and post-secondary education attainment cannot be established in the evaluation.

In terms of social-emotional benefits, the literature review highlights that successful programs can deliver benefits such as improved social skills, increased self-esteem and self-confidence, more secure adult attachments and decreased sexual activity and drug use. The content analysis shows certain outcomes that correspond to these benefits, including improved social skills and increased self-esteem and confidence. Some outcomes, such as adult attachments or a decrease in risky behaviours cannot be ascertained in the current evaluation, and would require more specific and detailed methods for assessment.

Certain components of successful after-school programs as highlighted in the literature, such as diversity in programming activities and a focus on specific skill development, are evident in the RBC funded programs. For example, it is evident that there is a trend in the funded programs to engage in such diverse programming. In the literature review, it was suggested that a mix of recreational and academic activities has the potential to yield results that surpass skill development by fostering higher self-esteem and confidence.

What is less distinguishable in the content analysis (due to the subjective qualitative data that are yielded in the evaluation reports) are key components of successful after-school programs such as program attendance frequency, type of setting, structure and support, specified programmatic goals and educational techniques, staff education and training and culturally competent staff, family involvement, and targeted recruitment strategies.

By having developed our coding framework in a manner that allowed concepts to emerge from the data in the evaluation (concepts that were not pre-determined), we identified key areas of success that are not

found in the literature review. For example, the concept of teamwork, team building, cooperation and other pro-social behaviours clearly emerged as a perceived benefit of the RBC after-school programs. As important as the individual benefits these behaviours foster, the emphasis on group-level benefits is an interesting component that emerged through this analysis. During childhood development, social skill set-development and teamwork are important components in becoming a member of communities. Moreover, team-building and problem-solving tasks involve the structuring of individual level behaviours and interactions so that dependability and accountability become part of development, and can positively influence a child's self-concept. Individual level behavioural outcomes that lead to group cohesion and a sense of community are compassion / empathy / acceptance / respect, which were frequently found in the evaluation reports.

Phase 2 Evaluation: Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

This phase of the evaluation entailed engaging students, parents, staff, and funders in discussion about their experiences with an RBC funded after-school program. Information collected during these interviews and focus groups illustrates ‘what works’ from the perspective of these stakeholders, and implicitly identifies the potential barriers to providing a successful program. Findings from these individual interviews and focus groups are described below.

Methodology

Beginning in 2010, following ethics approval from the University of Toronto Health Sciences Research Ethics Board, a research team working with Professor Faye Mishna, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, interviewed key stakeholders involved with RBC funded after-school programs. In total, 39 individuals participated in individual interviews or focus groups, including parents (9), children and youth (9), program staff (15), and RBC foundation members and grant managers (6). The semi-structured interview included questions such as: “How do after-school programs meet academic needs?”, “How would you describe a successful after-school program?”, and “What do you value most about the after-school program?”, and garnered in-depth information about key features of the after-school programs from the perspectives of the participants. Parents, children, youth, and program staff were drawn from current after-school programs in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia, and Nova Scotia. Participating RBC Foundation members and grant managers represent programs operating in Alberta, the three Territories (Nunavut, Yukon and The Northwest Territories), Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Northern Ontario, and Quebec. Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in order to remain as close to the participants’ intended meanings and explanations about after-school programs. The research team from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto examined the transcripts systematically to explore themes and concepts that emerged in the interviews. The findings of the interview and focus group analysis resulted in identification of the most promising core features of the RBC after-school programs, from the perspectives of the participants.

Findings: Participant Perspectives

Results of the in-depth interviews and focus groups echoed the findings of the content analysis which identified academics, recreation, and socialization as central features of after-school programs. Analysis of the interviews and focus groups revealed three additional areas considered important for high quality after-school programming. By comparing and contrasting all participant interview and focus group data, five main themes emerged illustrating important features of RBC funded after-school programs:

1. Academics
2. Recreation
3. Socialization
4. Tailored programming
5. Evaluation

Academics

All of the stakeholders identified academics as a highly important feature of after-school programs. Based on the depth and breadth of participant perspectives related to academics, this theme represents a central finding of Phase 2 of the evaluation. Specific findings related to academics are detailed below including: 1) homework and skill mastery; 2) varied learning tasks; 3) English language learning; and 4) multi-cultural programming.

Homework and Skill Mastery

Homework completion and skill mastery were the most frequently cited core concepts by participants related to student needs within an after-school program. In fact, an RBC Foundation member described academics as the central component of after-school programming, stating: *“emphasis is definitely on homework and literacy - and then physical education, different cultural activities, and art activities.”* This sentiment was echoed by parents and youth as well as the staff involved in after-school programs:

“Every day of the week we have homework and sometimes my parents are not always able to help us because we have other siblings too. In the after-school program every day of the week, they help us with our homework.” – Youth

“They bring homework home and I can’t help them. You’re finished work, you’re tired. It’s different from our times - and so - they help you.” – Parent

“I think some kids need the extra help, basically one-on-one coaching in reading and math skills. They get some of that in class with the teacher, but teachers are overworked too, and they can’t do the one-on-one stuff to the extent that we can.” – After-school staff

Varied Learning Tasks

A common theme that emerged was that attending to homework and other academic tasks can be greatly enriched by incorporating a wide variety of activities and learning tasks. Creating multiple options for completing learning tasks was highly valued by students, parents, and staff. Participants talked about the importance of utilizing a range of strategies to engage students in learning using such methods as 1) dramatic arts, 2) peer-led discussion and cooperative learning, 3) creative arts and crafting, 4) math and reading worksheets, 5) video-based and technology based learning (e.g., computers), and 6) experiential learning through cooking, music, and dance.

Offering options in learning activities when possible was another important theme that was expressed by students, parents, and staff. A number of participants underscored the importance of programs creating balance by offering flexibility of choice within a structured agenda. For example, as suggested by staff members:

“Offer diversity - everybody ends up involved and they have options. Whereas when they’re in school everything is so structured, for the most part, so when they come here they have their free time. Then when they go into the structured kind of programming they still have a choice in what they’re doing. Nothing is forced on them in a mandatory sense.”

“We try to encourage every child to try something at least once, even if they say that they don’t like it, and they already know that they don’t like it. We really try to encourage that they try it with a new group, or try it with friends that they’ve made, because maybe they’ll feel differently about it if they try it a second time.”

English Language Learning

RBC Foundation members and staff expressed the importance of including language learning and literacy activities in all after-school programming.

“Another thing I’ve been noticing, especially in the larger sectors, is whether they have an ESL component to their program. Because a lot of new Canadians are in bigger centres [cities] and there is the homework help but the literacy issue is a factor, that English is their second language.” – RBC Foundation member

Multi-Cultural Programming

Attending to the unique social, cultural, and spiritual identities of students and families was a consistent theme across participant groups. As described by a youth participant, *“Growing up in life, you’re going to meet a lot of different people and you want to know how to address them the ‘right way’”*. Participants suggested learning about the social, cultural, and spiritual identities of the students and families in the community and neighbourhoods served by after-school programs.

Recreation

Similar to the importance attributed to academics, recreation and physical activity emerged as key ingredients to successful after-school programs. The majority of parents, youth, and staff identified recreation activities such as outdoor play, gym, physical activity, and physical health to be essential in the curricular development of after-school programs. It is striking that there were no dissenting opinions or disagreement about the critical importance of recreational activities, regardless of whether the activities contained an associated learning component. Participants highly valued the opportunity for children and youth to be physically active.

“One of the other things that is absolutely mandatory is physical health, and they must have at least 45 minutes of physical activity a day.” – After-school program staff

“I like going outside and playing games - I don’t know why - but I like outside, and gym, it’s where we get to run around most of the time.” – Youth participant

Socialization

The concept of socialization or social skill development was a key component across participant responses. While perhaps not considered to be as ‘fundamental’ as academic or recreational components, offering different ways of socializing was nonetheless depicted as a ‘value-added’ feature of after-school programs. The findings suggest socialization occurred most often during peer-learning opportunities, peer-led activities, activity choices, recreational activities, and free-time. Through these various activities students are afforded space, opportunity, and structure which is considered uniquely different from classroom social activities. Participants described students feeling stimulated to learn in different ways and commented that they looked forward to interacting with their friends and peers in a way that was more ‘fun’ and perhaps more engaging than other learning environments, such as the classroom.

Parents especially viewed after-school programs as providing a ‘break’ from the routine of classroom learning. The notion of friendship and developing cooperative relationships with staff was considered an important catalyst across academic, recreation, and socialization activities. For example, parents described the opportunity to be with staff and volunteers as contributing to the development of trust, pride, and self-worth, all important social skills and feelings students can develop through participation in after-school programs:

“Apart from the social aspect, I think they come back to see the teachers because they develop trust. Yeah trust in them and they develop the friendship. Like coming back to see an old teacher, you want to show her that you’ve been able to achieve something.” - Parent

“They’re very proud to be here. Pride in coming back to tell them [staff] they really helped them. They’ve done a good job. They’ve invested a lot in them and they’re doing good.” – Parent

Acknowledge Bullying

Attending to the phenomenon of bullying was described as an important function of these programs. Staff stated that a stance towards and responses to bullying should be explicit and consistent throughout the school year.

“I think it’s very important to talk to the kids about bullying before the bullying actually happens. We don’t have a lot of bullying going on in this program, but I think it’s still okay to talk about bullying, and to talk about if you have been bullied, or have you bullied someone, and why bullying is not okay. And, I think bringing those issues to the surface and allowing the kids to give their opinions on them, is extremely important.” – After-school staff

“Our kids and our parents understand the [conduct] rules. They’re given a contract at the beginning of the program. We meet with parents at the beginning of the school year, and at the middle, and at the end of the school year, to let them know how the children have been doing, how they’ve been behaving in the program. So I think we set rules and guidelines that even the youngest child understands” – After-school staff

Tailored Programming

In analyzing the interviews and focus groups an important theme emerged that was prevalent across stakeholder groups: the need to tailor programs based on the needs and resources of the particular community in which the program operates. Participants described the importance of considering certain factors including 1) the program location, 2) community and neighbourhood context, 3) registration, 4) staff and volunteers, 5) fees, and 6) nutrition.

Location

Co-location of after-school programs within schools was consistently cited as vital to the success of the program. Participants concurred that when co-location was not feasible, the closer after-school programs are to schools and other centrally located community services (e.g., school bus routes, community transit, and other ‘daycare’ options) the more feasible and successful the program would be in attracting and retaining students and their families. According to some participants, programs that are not in close proximity to school and/or home pose a potential barrier to service.

“The students who live on the outskirts of the zoned area for this particular school cannot participate, because if the parents aren’t going to pick them up, they can’t walk home.” – After-school program staff

Community and Neighbourhood Context

Findings suggest that in a general sense after-school programs are considered part of the educational system and a significant part of community and neighbourhood programs. A number of participants stressed the need to have after-school programs in as many locations as possible, in both rural and urban settings. After-school programs were depicted as contributing to community safety and security. Several parents and youth described the safety children/youth feel when attending after-school programs:

“They have a safe place that they can go to and they can learn something” – Parent

“You have somewhere to go so you know you feel safe, enjoy it and have fun.” – Youth

Participants highlighted the importance of ‘knowing’ the community. Examples include the dietary or spiritual needs of families attending the program, the ‘problems’ in the community, and the community resources. It is important that programs tailor their curriculum, activities, expectations, and resources beyond the typical educational standards in order to represent the culture of communities and neighbourhoods.

Registration

Participants clearly valued the notion of having to register for programs such as the RBC after-school program. As one parent stated, *“know who comes in and know them well.”* Participants suggested that having a thorough registration system allows staff to build rapport with children and track important information such as immunization, allergies, pick up/drop-off details, and so on. In addition, registration was thought to create a sense of program effectiveness and belonging for families who utilize the service, eliminating the perception that the program is a ‘drop-in’ service.

“If there’s registration, it might be a little bit more structured. There might be better communication, because the staff knows the children that are coming there. Drop-in based, I don’t know how well that would really run, actually.” - Parent

Staff and Volunteers

A strong theme that emerged was the importance of staff stability of both paid staff and volunteer staff, for relationship building and trust between staff and students.

“I think it [inconsistency] could have a very negative impact on kids’ social skills in general. I think having good, solid relationships helps children to develop...so I could see how that [inconsistency] could interfere with them, continually having that change all the time.” - Parent

All participants described the importance of having volunteers involved in the operation of after-school programs. For many programs, volunteers increase the likelihood of students receiving one-on-one attention in academic and recreational activities.

“We’ve got a lot of students who could really benefit from one-on-one attention, even if it’s just for 10 to 15 minutes per day to talk about the school day and how it went. I think that’s really important, and unfortunately we just don’t have the number of staff to be able to do that with every child on a daily basis.”

Differences emerged however, with respect to volunteers in after-school programs. According to some participants, primarily those who were paid program staff, unanticipated challenges emerged which were associated with volunteers working in the after-school programs, such as inconsistent attendance, high turnover, lack of dedication, and over-reliance on unpaid versus paid staff to implement the curriculum.

Fees

Differences emerged regarding program fees. Program staff and RBC foundation members considered fees necessary in some cases for pragmatic reasons such as operating the program and maintaining a structured program. Some parents described fees as directly contributing to their utilization of after-school programs.

“A lot of programs do charge fees because frankly, if they’re not getting donations, how else are they to get their funding? And when we see fees, we [RBC] aren’t as likely to give funding to them. So it’s a tough situation but for a lot of these organizations, that’s the only way they can have their program running.” – RBC Foundation member

“With fees, they [parents] take it more seriously. If it’s just free a lot of them will think they’re entitled and just throw the kids in there, not show up, show up late, you know, whenever. But, right now I think having a structure and a fee, which is negotiated and agreed upon with parents, is the best way to do it.” – After-school staff

“Well, for myself, obviously that made me sign up immediately. I rushed to sign up, it’s free...this is really a working class community, so I would figure that most people would benefit from this type of program.” - Parent

Other participants however, considered fees both unnecessary and a possible deterrent and barrier for families with economic challenges. Some parents and staff explained that fees could be “devastating” for families, and could prevent some from being able to utilize the program. A number of parents believed that attaching a fee to participation does not necessarily correlate with improved attendance, consistency, or achievement. An interesting finding is that some parents and staff were not certain about whether fees were necessary or unnecessary, as in their view it depends on the needs, resources, and context of the

particular after-school program. Individually, these parents and staff held both viewpoints simultaneously when considering fees and did not have a definitive stance about the benefit of fees in after-school programs. Program staff seemed most likely to consider fees essential to delivering after-school programs, while parents were more likely to believe it was necessary to negotiate fees on a family-by-family, or program-by-program basis.

Nutrition

Participants considered access to food and nutrition a highly-valued component of after-school programs. RBC Foundation managers stated that they *“make sure that snacks is one of the things they [programs] offer and if they don’t, if they’re successful in their funding, we make sure that they use some of the funding to buy snacks.”*

A staff member depicts the benefits of offering snacks or meals: *“We know that nutrition is tied very closely with the social development and academic development. That’s part of our model, we feed our kids.”*

Evaluation

Every participant stated that ongoing evaluation was necessary to measure program performance in order to continually make improvements to after-school curricula and delivery. The stakeholders identified various outcome measures and indicators of success. The majority of participants considered academic achievement as the primary indicator of a successful program. Additional indicators of success are described below.

Indicators of success

Both parents and students reported that the reason they return to after-school programs year-after-year is because they achieve something tangible – academically or socially.

“What do I think keeps us returning to the after-school program year after year? Because every year it improves. Every year they [parents] see that they’re [programs] helping their children because when I first went my grades weren’t that great. And after I started attending I’ve been getting more help and getting better in school as well.” - Youth

Participants identified the following factors as potential areas of evaluation related to program effectiveness:

- Student factors
 - academic improvement/confidence/achievement
 - skill mastery
 - positive changes in behaviour and/or social skills
 - satisfaction

- Program factors
 - staff retention
 - volunteer recruitment and retention
 - attendance and participation (or dropout rates)

Finally, participants described the following tools and methods as means of collecting program evaluation data:

- Student evaluation of self-progress and program
- Parent evaluation of student progress and program
- Staff evaluation of student progress and program
- Grades: track pre-program and post-program changes over time

Discussion

“Without RBC I don’t think our program could be run the way we are running it”
–After-school program staff

Across the participant groups, a positive view emerged of RBC funded after-school programs and their impact on the participating students and families. Of the 39 participants, none expressed dissatisfaction or displeasure with these programs.

The strongest theme that emerged during this phase of the evaluation is related to academics and homework completion. The participants overwhelmingly viewed after-school programs as improving students’ academic achievement through homework completion, literacy initiatives, experiential and varied learning opportunities, and one-on-one time with staff and volunteers.

Especially among children and youth, recreational activities and the opportunity to socialize with peers were described as beneficial and key components of after-school programs, in addition to academics. The opportunity to be physically active was strongly endorsed by students, staff, parents, and funders.

In keeping with the primary aim of this phase - to examine “what works” in after-school programs - participants described features which highlight the need to tailor programs based on the specific needs and resources of the particular community in which the after-school program operates. This tailoring includes determining the possibilities and challenges associated with a particular location, proximity to school and home, cultural context, registration, fee negotiation, and the student and family nutritional needs.

Finally, the importance of ongoing evaluation to determine program effectiveness and student achievement was mentioned throughout interviews. Several variables to determine success beyond grades and academic achievement were suggested, including student and parent satisfaction, improved behaviour and social

conduct, and academic confidence. These variables can be collected through various means including student self-report, parent report, staff report, and if applicable, classroom teacher reports.

Limits of evaluation

There are limitations to Phases 1 (content analysis) and 2 (individual interviews and focus groups) of this evaluation. First, the findings cannot be generalized to all after-school programs given the exploratory and targeted nature of this project. The findings are meant to provide information on after-school programs funded by the RBC foundation and thus are not generalizable. Second, all participants in Phase 2 of the evaluation opted to voluntarily participate in an interview or focus group. Self-selection bias can skew findings, either negatively or positively. In the case of this evaluation, self-selection bias may have positively skewed the findings.

Discussion of Overall Evaluation (Phases 1 & 2)

Findings of both phases of the evaluation reveal important key elements, barriers, and outcome evaluation needs of RBC funded after-school programs.

Key Elements of a Successful Program

The most valued elements of an after-school program that emerged in this evaluation and that have been described in detail in the findings of Phases 1 and 2 are:

- Academics
- Recreation
- Socialization
- Tailored programming
- Evaluation

Barriers

Findings revealed a few possible barriers related to program location and fees.

Program location

A main barrier to fully participating in an after-school program relates to the proximity of after-school programs to home and school. Stakeholders identified greater distance between after-school programs and home or school as potentially impeding accessibility and attendance. In most cases, the participants emphasized the importance of co-locating programs within schools in order to minimize this barrier. The participants recommended that rural programs carefully consider how to manage issues of proximity and connection to schools, community, and neighbourhoods. A key element of a successful program – tailored programming – may offer some guidance in this respect.

Fees

The implications of fees as a component of after-school programs are detailed in the Phase 2 findings. While there is no clear agreement among participants about the effect of program fees, the economic barrier fees may pose to families and communities should be considered by after-school programs. The inclusion of even a nominal fee may prevent some students and families from participating in an after-school program. The need to tailor programs based on the demographic profile (e.g., economic, cultural, spiritual, social, and educational resources) of a community emerged as critical when determining the impact and appropriateness of implementing a fee for service.

Measuring impact and success

Students, parents, staff, and funders contemplated how programs could be evaluated in the future. A number of suggestions related to measuring program success were offered including: academic improvement; academic confidence; academic achievement; skill mastery; behavior and social skill development; and satisfaction. Participants offered a number of methods to tap these outcomes including grades, student self-report, and parent and staff report.

With respect to measuring impact and success, it is important to note that lacking pre-program individual level data on objective measures such as self-esteem or healthy lifestyle behaviours, makes it impossible to determine whether the outcomes identified in the evaluations are due to the after-school programs. There is therefore an emphasis in the discussion of the analyses on *perceived* or apparent benefits of the after-school programs among the children and youth who participate. Nevertheless, the identified outcomes represent important social, psychological and behavioural benefits for the young people who participate in these programs.

For future reference, Appendix III provides a short description on how to plan evaluation efforts that will elicit pre-and post- test data in order to more empirically provide evidence of a program's effectiveness.

Conclusion of Overall Evaluation (Phases 1 & 2)

RBC funded after-school programs are uniquely positioned to positively influence students academically, recreationally, and socially. Taken together, the findings of Phases 1 and 2 indicate how beneficial and important RBC funded after-school programs are considered in meeting the educational and social needs of students, their families, and communities.

Appendix I

Tables & Figures Showing Results of RBC After-School Programs

Figure 1

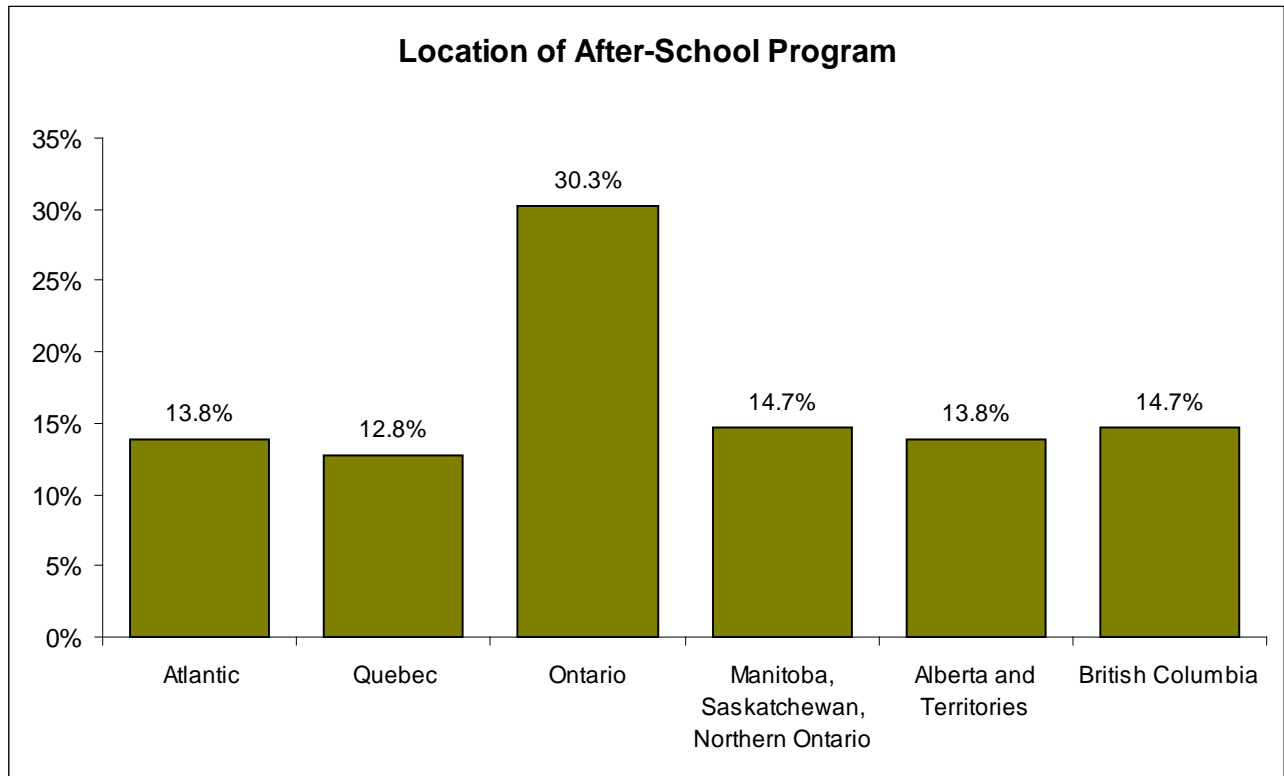


Figure 2

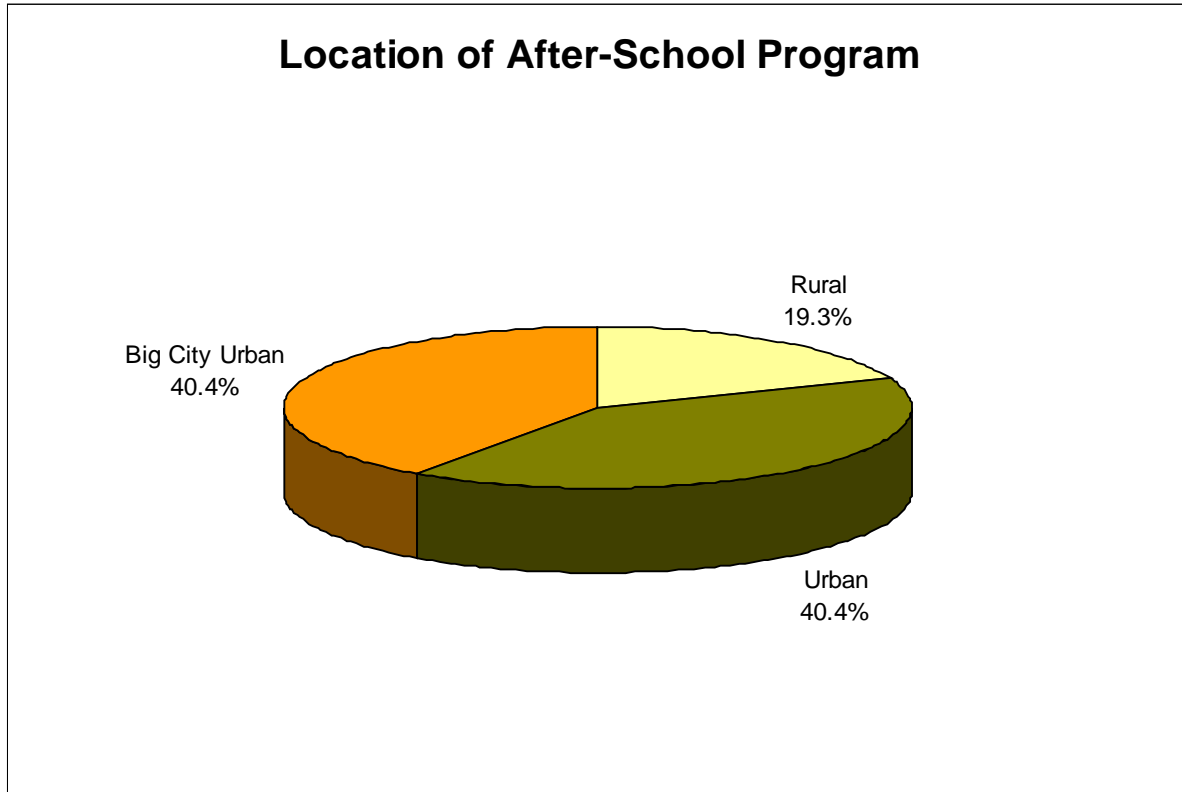


Figure 3

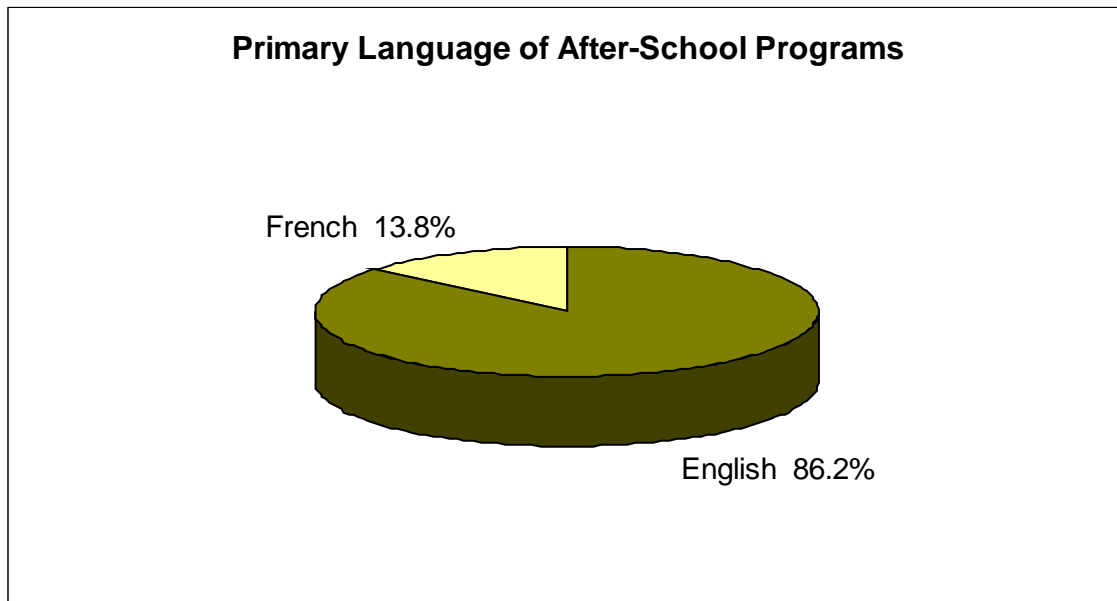


Figure 4

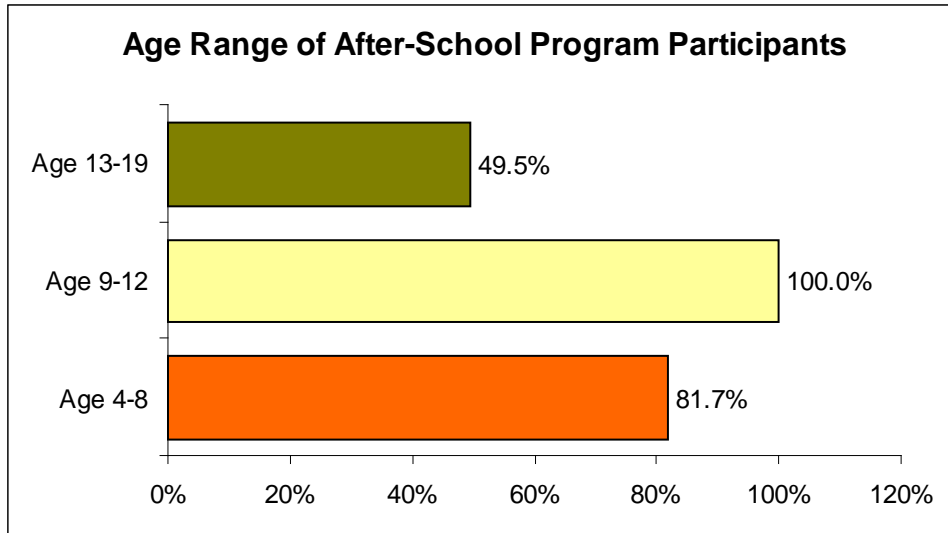


Figure 5

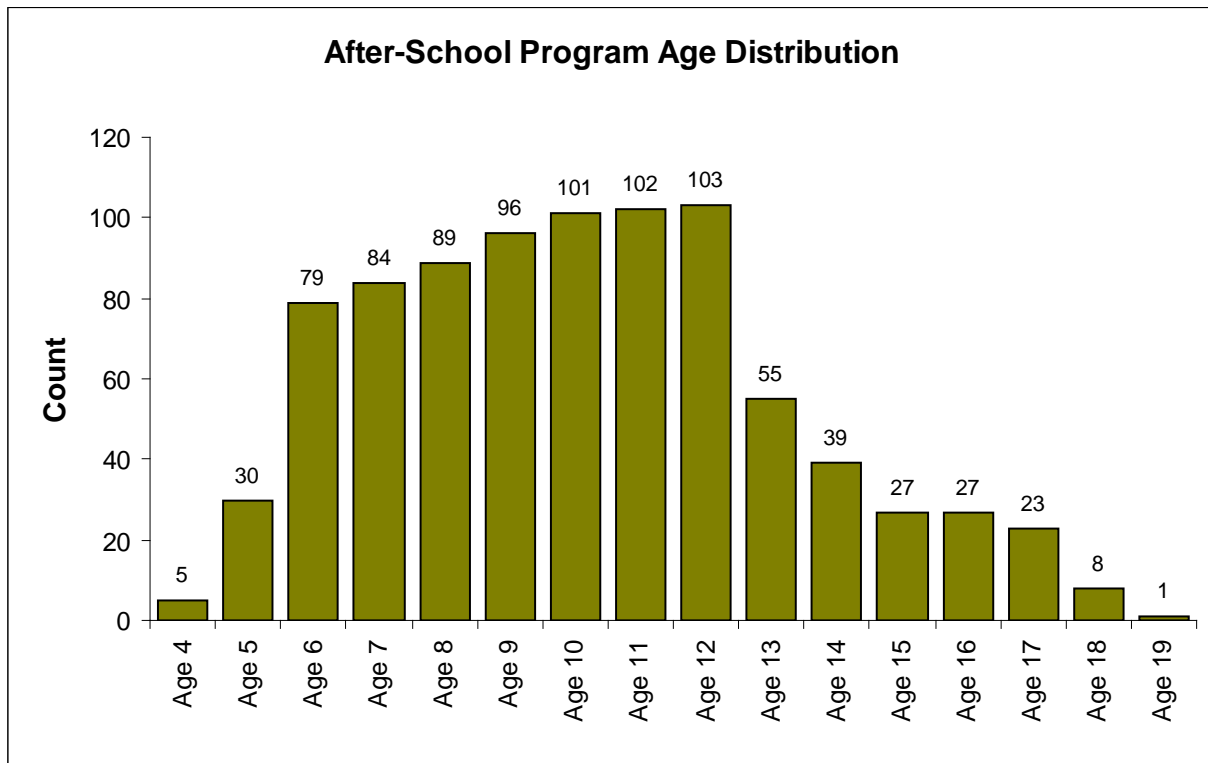


Figure 6

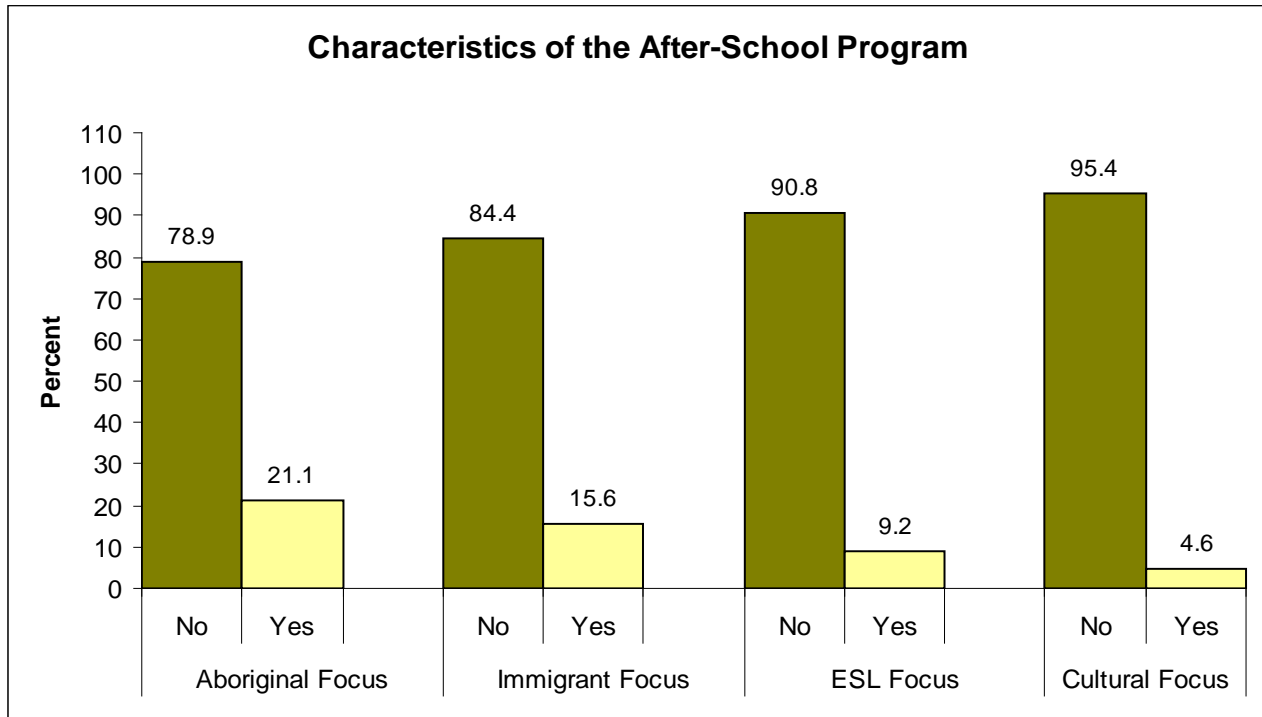


Figure 7

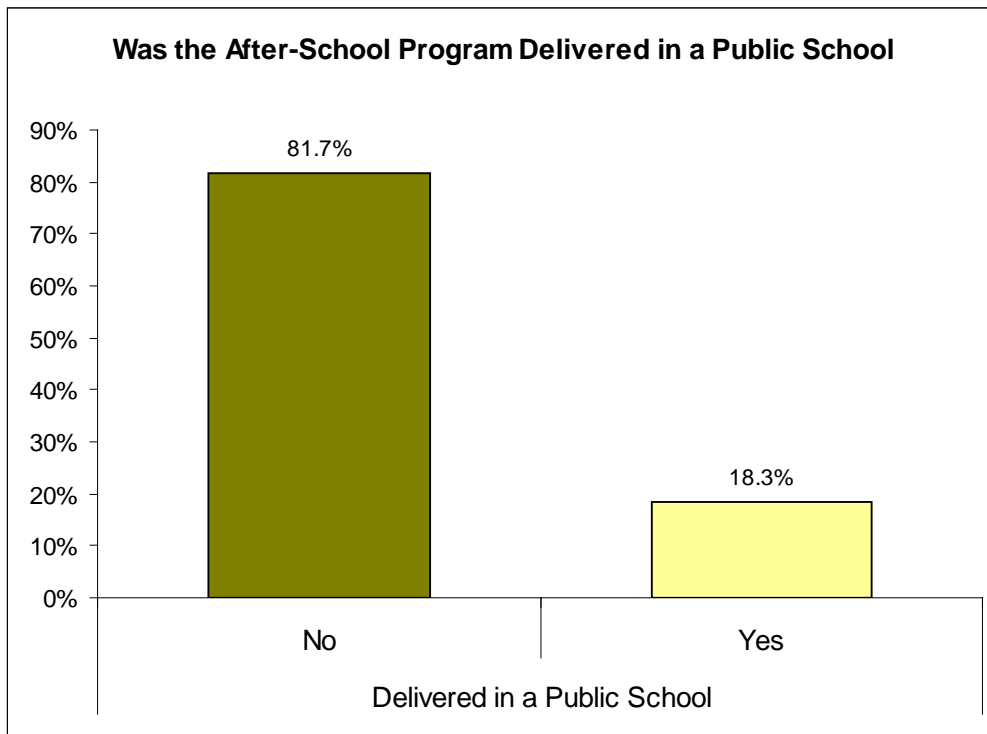


Figure 8

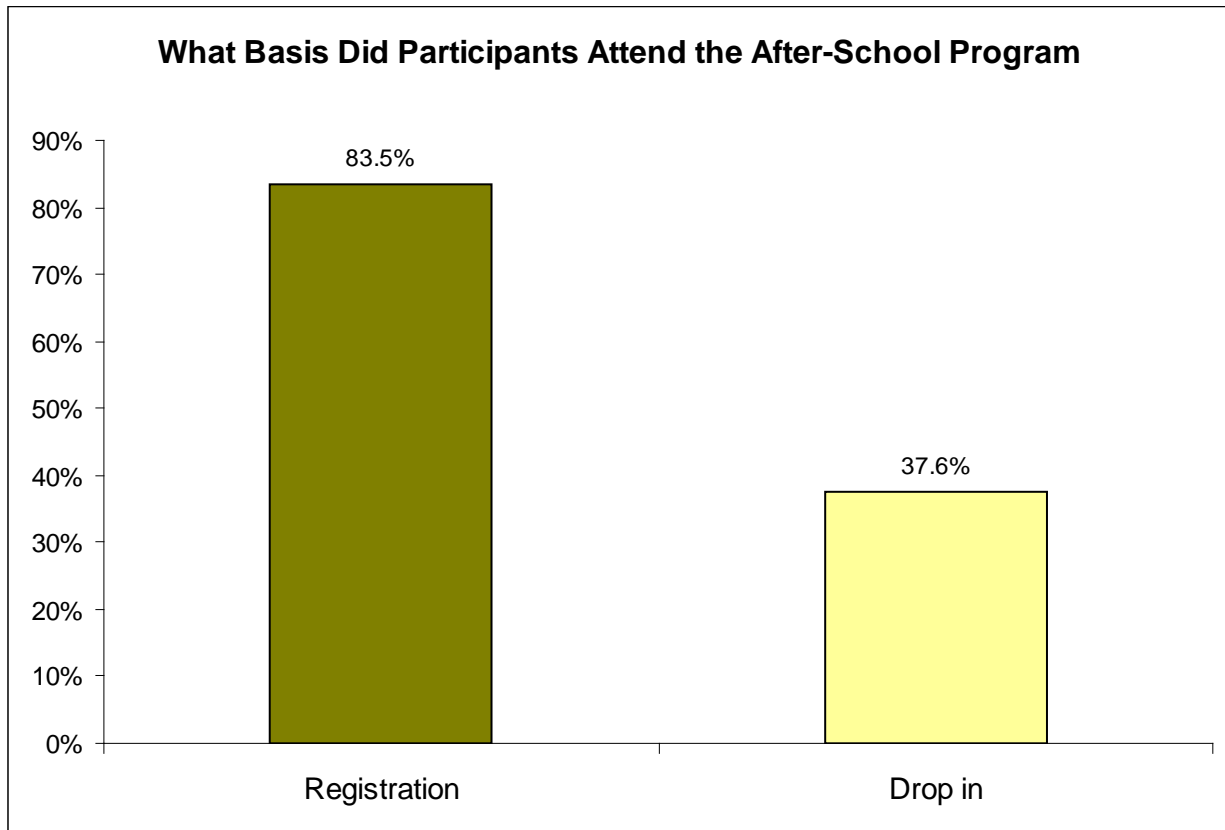


Table 1
Number of After-School Program Participants, Program Leaders and Volunteers Per Week

	# Student Participants	# Program Leaders	# Volunteers
Mean	42.27	4.08	4.01
Median	28	3	2
Std. Deviation	41.186	4.134	10.083
Minimum	7	1	0
Maximum	300	40	100
Missing	1	3	3
N	108	106	106

Figure 9

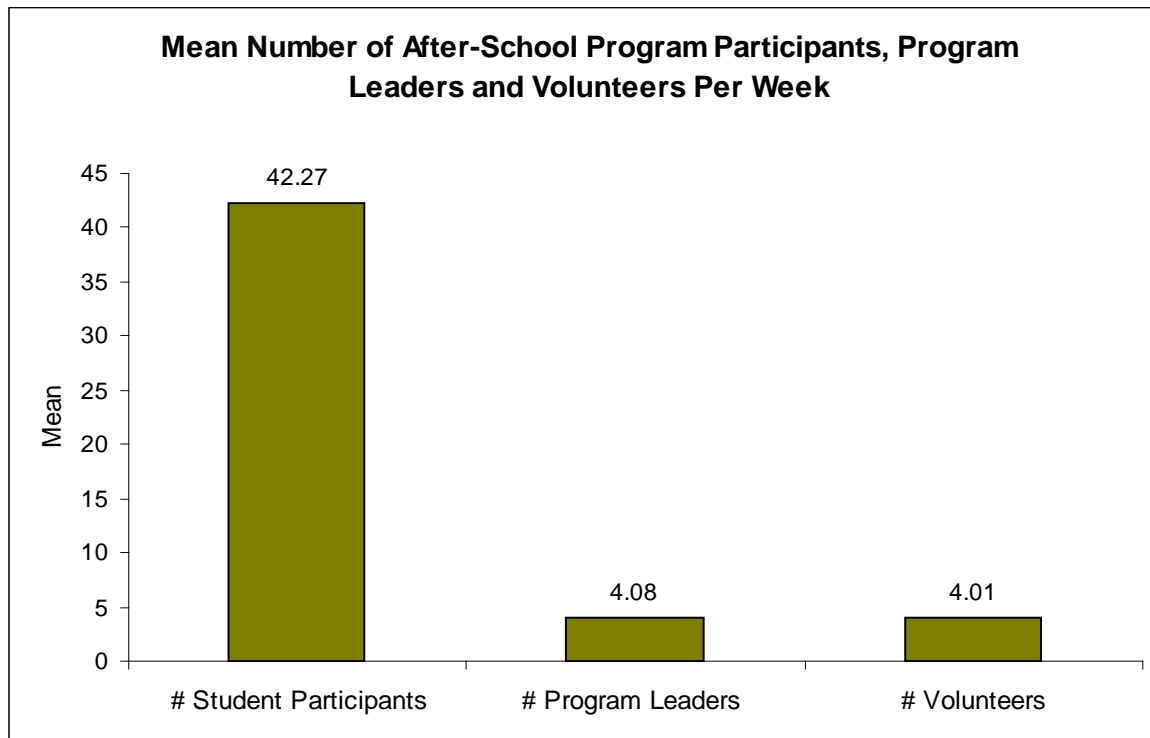


Table 2
Ratio of Students to Staff

Ratio of Students to Staff	
Mean	6.17
Median	5.71
Std. Deviation	3.35
Minimum	0.7
Maximum	25
Missing	1
N	108

Figure 10

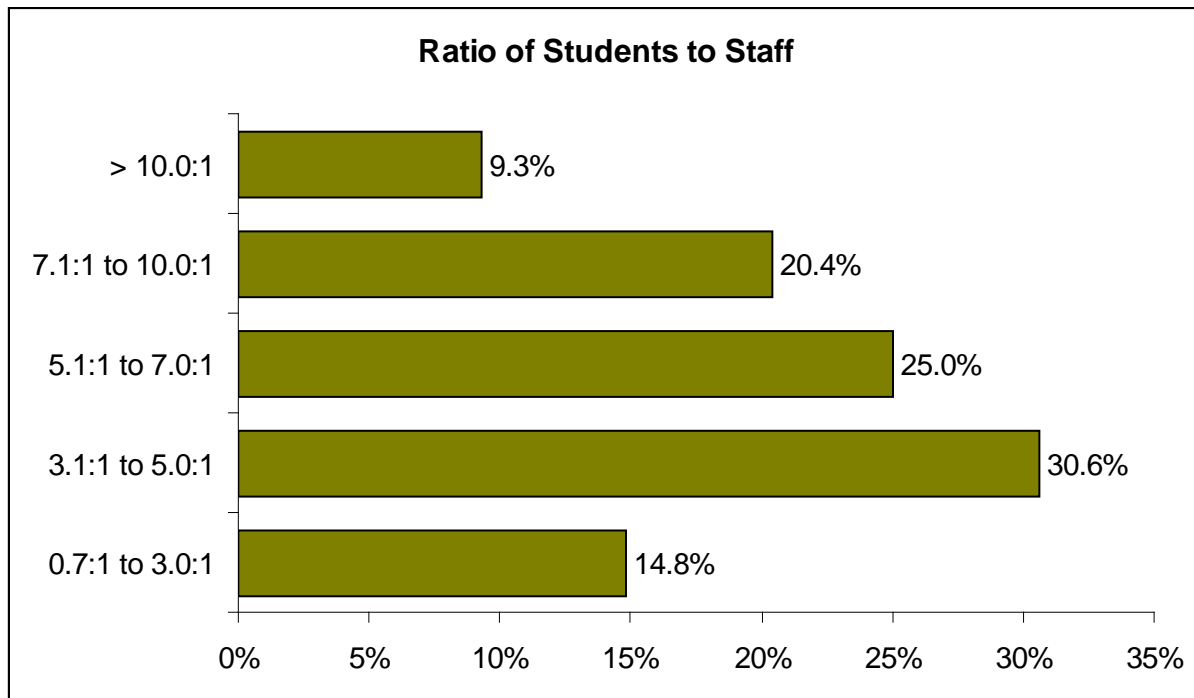


Figure 11

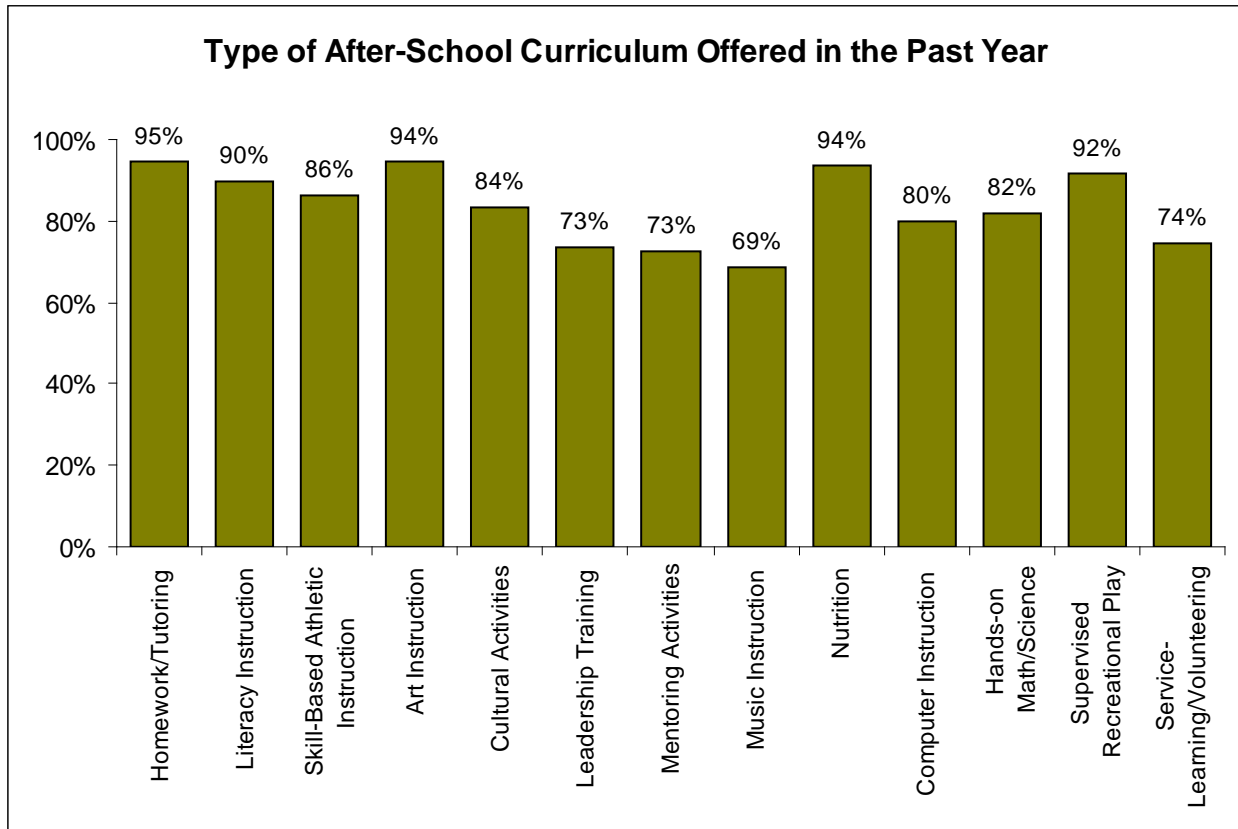


Figure 12

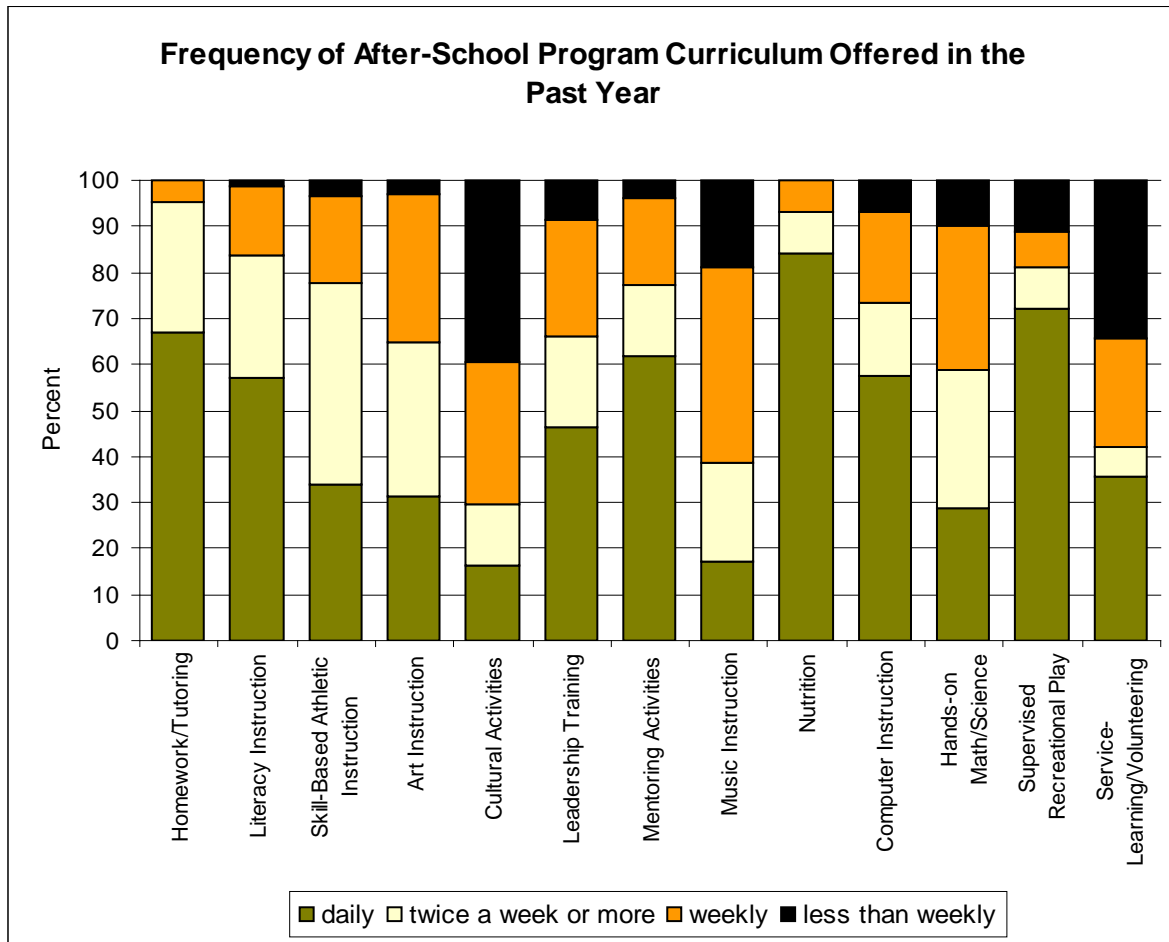


Table 3
Number of Community and Stakeholders Involved in After-School Programs in the Past Year

	Parents/ Guardians	Teachers	Schools	Local Social Services/Child Welfare Agencies	Other Local Non-Profit Agencies	Local Law Enforcement	Local Secondary & Post Secondary Students	Local RBC Employees	Local Businesses
Mean	24.61	8.67	4.57	2.34	8.17	0.99	15.12	2.1	8.48
Median	15	6	4	2	3	1	5	1	3
Std. Deviation	33.70	14.00	4.23	2.82	23.33	0.89	32.61	4.79	16.24
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum	235	125	24	21	229	5	250	30	100
Missing	9	7	6	6	6	6	6	8	6
N	100	102	103	103	103	103	103	101	103

Figure 13

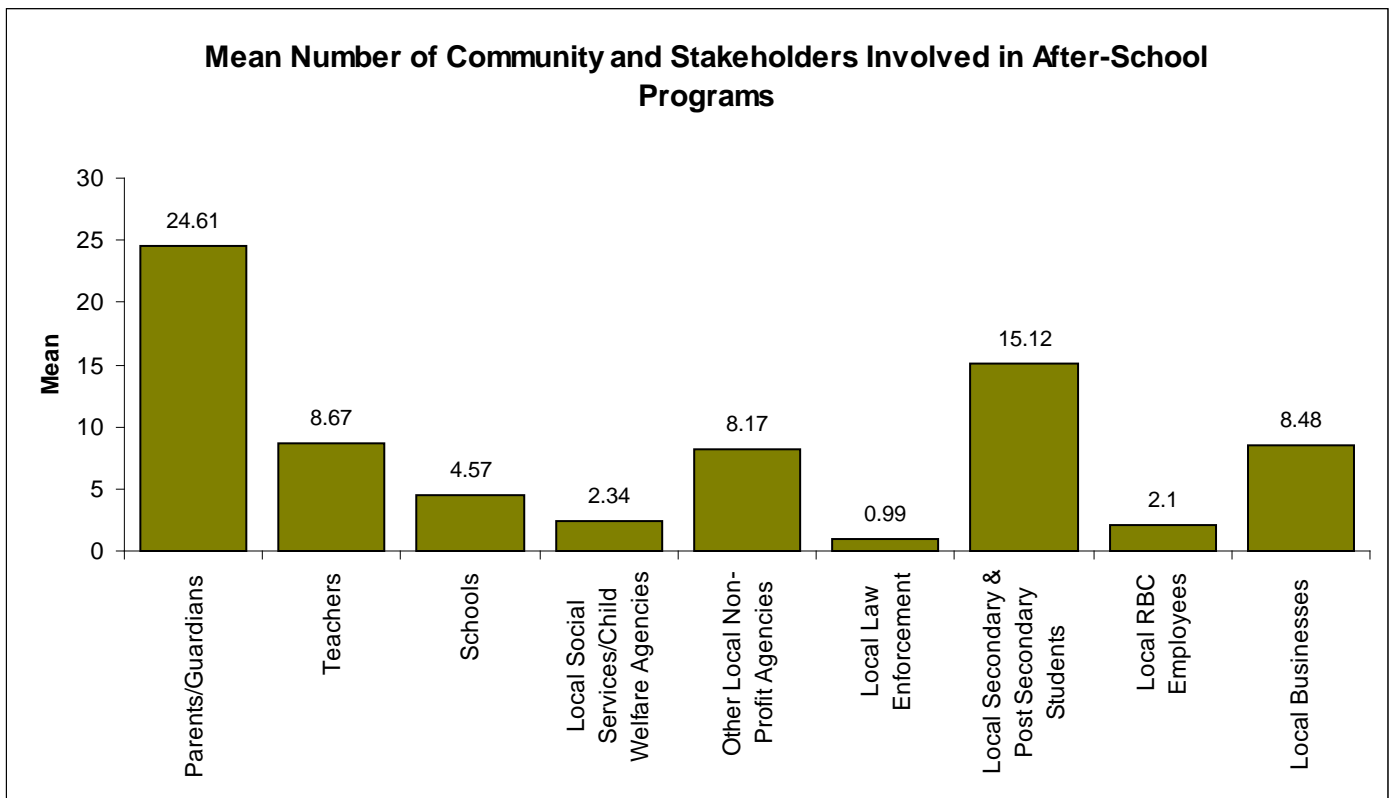


Table 4**RBC After-School Grant and Total of all Funding Sources**

	RBC After-School Grant	Total of all funding sources
Mean	\$29,129.58	\$77,459.67
Median	\$28,400.00	\$59,841.50
Std. Deviation	\$8,589.66	\$62,963.47
Minimum	\$14,000.00	\$15,000.00
Maximum	\$40,000.00	\$449,975.00
	1	1
N	108	108

Figure 14

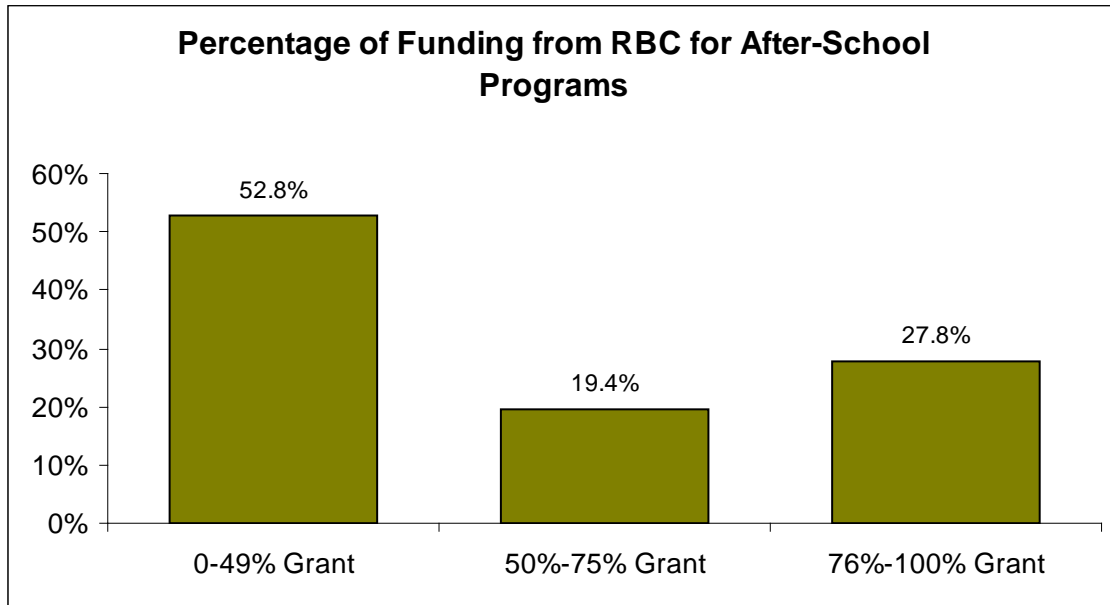


Figure 14 – Alternate figure

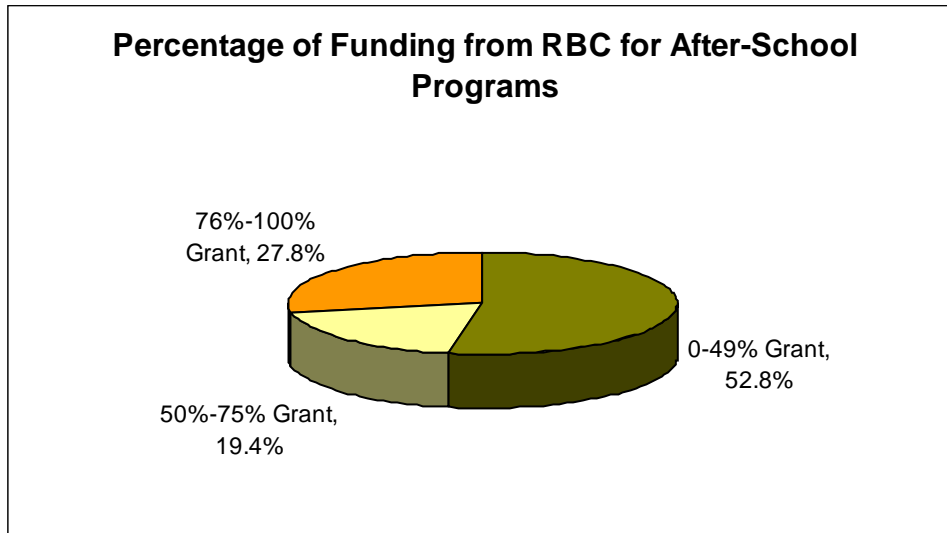


Table 5
Fees and Subsidies Available in After-School Programs

	No	Yes
Participants Charged a Fee to Participate in the Program	63.3%	39.7%
Subsidies Available for Participants	69.7%	30.3%

Table 6
Average Yearly Fee Charged to Participate in the After-School Program

	Fee to Participate per year
Mean	200.95
Median	120
Std. Deviation	207.13
Minimum	5
Maximum	860
	70
N	39

Figure 15

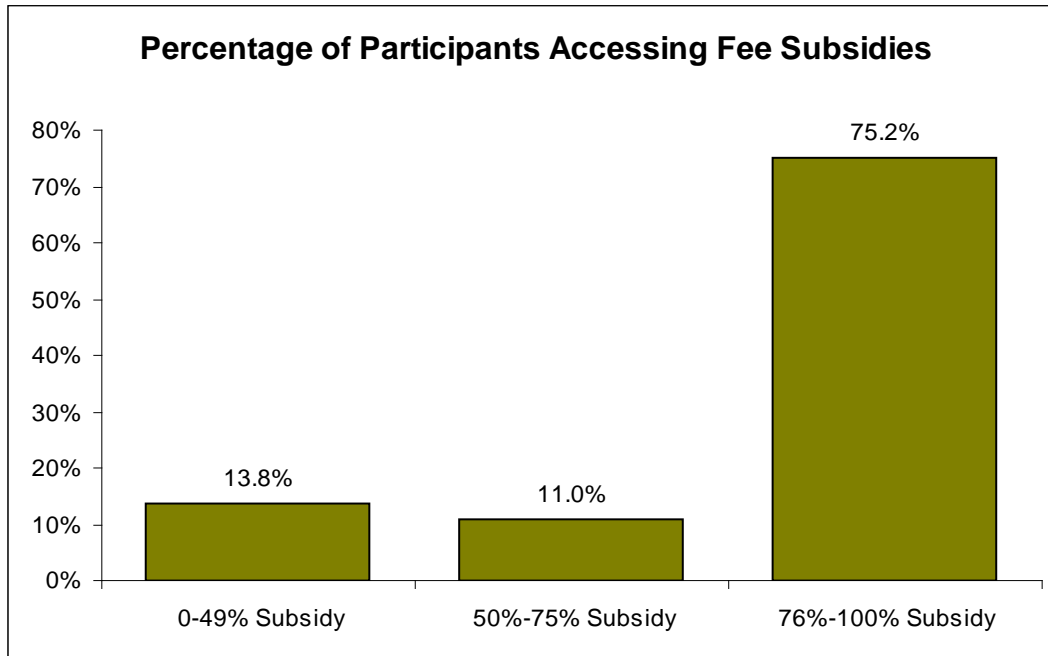
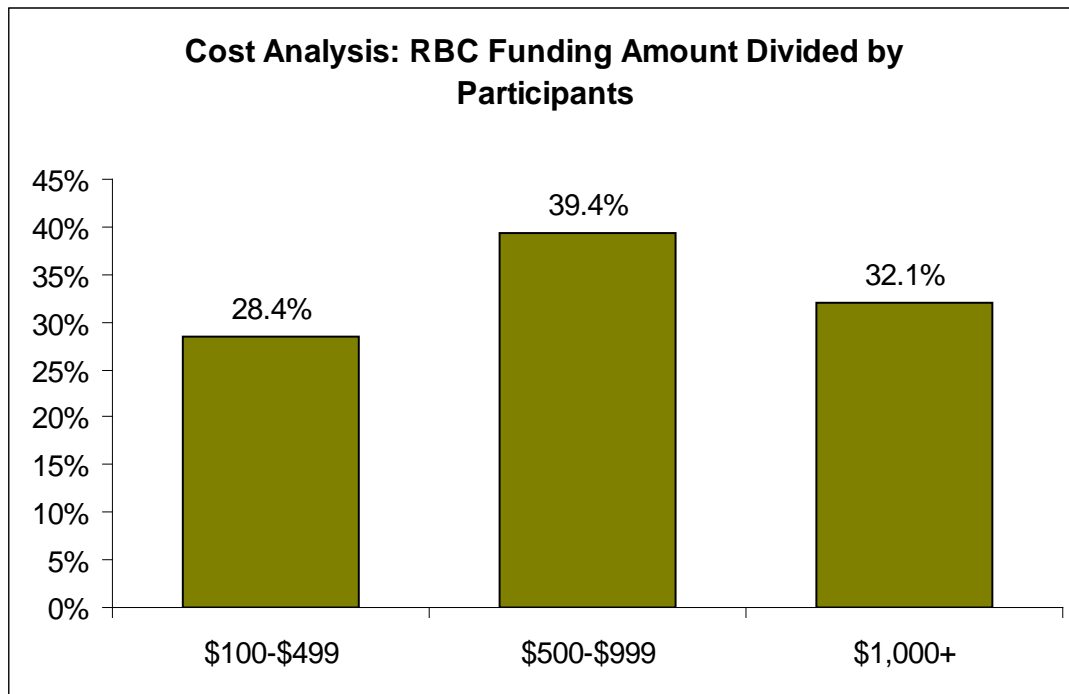


Table 7
Cost Analysis: RBC Funding Amount Divided by Participants

RBC Cost/Participant	
Mean	\$830.44
Median	\$766.67
Std. Deviation	\$515.54
Minimum	\$117
Maximum	\$3,077
N	109

Figure 16



Appendix II

RBC Foundation After-School Program Evaluation

Table 1: Recreational Benefits

Concept	Codes (frequency)
<i>1. Teamwork and cooperation</i>	Heightened teamwork (25) Increased cooperation (9) Gained leadership skills (6) Increased problem solving skills(6) Learning to respect/trust others (4) Better sportsmanship (4) Team creation (1)
<i>2. Healthy Living</i>	Increased physical activity (34) Increased healthy eating habits (6) Improved health (4) Stress reduction (2) Increase in sleep quality (1)
<i>3. Athletic Development</i>	Increased sporting skills (31) Increased coordination (6) Motor skill development (3) Increased dexterity (2) Increased strength (2) Increased flexibility (2) Increased endurance (1)
<i>4. Social skills</i>	Socialization skills (8) Formed relationships (4) Learning to share/take turns (3) Empathy for peers (2) Increased patience (1)
<i>5. Self-esteem/self-confidence</i>	Heightened self-confidence (5) Heightened self-esteem (7)
<i>6, Arts Activities</i>	Increased art skills (7) Increased appreciation for art/music (4)
<i>7. Cultural and Community Awareness</i>	Increased knowledge of cultural diversity (5) Increased awareness of community resources (4)

Table 2: Social Benefits

Concept	Codes (frequency)
<i>1. Socialization and Pro-social behaviours</i>	Increased compassion/empathy/acceptance/respect (45) Enhanced pro-social behavior (23) Cooperation/conflict-resolution skills (22) Better at following rules (15) Understanding bullying behaviours (11) Increased volunteering (9)
<i>2. Teamwork and cooperation</i>	Increased levels of teamwork/team-building (18) Better communication skills (13) Leadership skills (10) Sense of Belonging (7)
<i>3. Self-esteem/self-expression</i>	Increased self-esteem (18) Better self-expression (7)
<i>4. Fostering healthy lifestyles</i>	Awareness of nutrition (5) Healthy cooking skills (5) Informed lifestyle choices (4)
<i>5. Culture/community awareness</i>	Community organization (4) Cultural diversity acceptance (4)

Table 3: Academic Benefits

Concept	Codes (frequency)
<i>1. Improved academic performance</i>	Improved grades (30) Homework completion (26) Increased study skills (13)
<i>2. Literacy and language skills</i>	Improving reading and writing skills (39) Vocabulary development (11) Reading enjoyment (8)
<i>3. Academic motivation/confidence</i>	Increased academic confidence (15) Better discipline/work ethic (16)
<i>4. Science and math skills</i>	Math skills (14) Science (16)
<i>5. Computer/research skills</i>	Computer skills (18) Research/gathering information (4)
<i>6. World education</i>	Learning about history/cultures (12) Learning about the environment (2)

Appendix III

RBC Foundation After-School Evaluation

Possible Evaluation Plan

One of the more efficient ways of evaluating recreational type programs is to use a pre/post test design. A pre-post test design approach commonly involves administering a test before the program begins which gauges certain variables that the program is hoping to address (such as self-esteem, healthy lifestyle choices, academic performance, etc.). The program is then administered, which is followed by a post-test of the same variables to identify changes, if any. The pre/post testing can be accomplished either by self-reporting objective scale of measures (such as cognitive tests) or by participant observation of behavioural measures, both yielding objective and independent results. There are several methodological issues however, that may impede pre/post test evaluations in after-school programs. For example sampling biases may occur such as inconsistent participation, attrition, age differences within after-school program sites, and different programming across sites, which are all aspects that would challenge pre/post test evaluation design.

Within the after-school evaluation literature, several evaluation methods are highlighted that take into consideration these methodological issues. For example, reports that some of the more successful after-school program evaluations focussed on how programs were run (in other words program quality), instead of on specific outcomes, as certain programmatic components have strong associations with positive outcomes, such as diverse programming content or consistent participation as examples. In another multi-site after-school evaluation, randomly selected sites for evaluation, and implemented more rigorous evaluations that included program observations, attendance records and surveys to test for program effectiveness.

A specific evaluation plan can be created and implemented for the RBC Foundation's after-school programs that take into account these methodological issues and other considerations.

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