

Evaluation of CATZ Clubs and Schoolfriend

Final Report – December 2004

CATZ Clubs provide after-school care for children in areas that have high levels of deprivation. The clubs have clear policies and procedures and aim to reflect and meet the needs of the local community, incorporating equal opportunities in all areas. The clubs operate within an ethos that aims to enable children and adults to flourish in an environment in which everyone knows what is expected of them and where children are free to develop their play and learning without fear of being hurt or hindered by anyone else. The development of self-esteem and mutual respect are encouraged and adults are expected to provide a positive role model to children. There are procedures for dealing with inappropriate behaviour and parents are given clear documentation so that they are aware of the aims and objectives of the clubs. Staff training is robust and support is given to workers and managers at a national and regional level.

Catz Clubs provide an educational tool in the form of software called Schoolfriend. Schoolfriend aims to improve children's academic achievement in literacy and mathematics through skills based activities presented as a web-based tool. The software enables pupils to engage in literacy and mathematical activities, linked to the National Curriculum and offers immediate feedback to pupils on performance. CATZ Clubs and other initiatives of this sort are generally known as out of school hours learning (OSHL). This refers to any school-linked activity that takes place outside of normal school hours. A central feature of OSHL is that participation is voluntary and the benefits that distinguish OSHL from compulsory schooling may derive from this key difference.

This evaluation was commissioned to consider the impact of Schoolfriend in improving educational performance and the impact more generally of the Catz Clubs on children.

The pupils attending Catz Clubs and using Schoolfriend have made significant gains in reading and aspects of mathematics. It may be suggested that this is as a result of the use of the software in itself, in conjunction with effective pedagogical interactions by staff. Technical support for Schoolfriend has also been effective so that staff are able to engage with pupils at a higher level.

Higher order pedagogical interactions can only be demonstrated by staff when there is a clear structure for the operation of the club. Whilst it is important to provide an environment that is different from classroom experiences, planning is important. Best practice was observed in the clubs where there were clear plans and where children felt secure and able to understand structures in place. In these clubs pupils were engaged in sustained interactions with adults and were able to be more autonomous. The balance between pedagogical and social interactions was good where staff had understood their role clearly and shared the aims and objectives of Catz Clubs

The improvements in the running and operation of the clubs was observed over the research period, despite difficulties with staff retention and recruitment. The support systems and policies provided by the Catz Clubs are clearly effective, especially of the sort provided by the National Childcare Operations Manager at the time issues occurred in the clubs. The clubs that had consistency of staff improved the most and tended to have better relationships with the school. Recruitment and retention is clearly an issue and the recruiting from existing support staff within school may be solution to this. The club where staff had been recruited from support staff had solved initial difficulties and had successfully negotiated for more space. However, it is acknowledged that recruitment and retention problems are not readily solved, despite the best efforts of all concerned.

Most importantly, children enjoy attending the clubs and mix with different age pupils. In the school environment, this is rare, and there are benefits to all children as older pupils can peer tutor younger pupils and provide role models. Younger pupils also have an opportunity to learn from older pupils and not from adults, which can sometimes have more of an impact. Again, staff are critical in enabling this to occur and allowing children to be autonomous. Currently, none of the clubs have a quiet space for the completion of homework and this may be an aspect that could be explored in some of the clubs.

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