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Stakeholder perceptions of an after-school programme at a no-fee school on the Cape Flats

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Background: Schools in impoverished communities on the Cape Flats experience challenges related to high levels of poverty, crime and gang violence that can adversely affect learners' psycho-social and academic development. After-school programmes (ASPs) represent one form of intervention to address these issues.

Aim: This study explored the perceptions of learners, school staff and personnel from a non-profit organisation (NPO) regarding the benefits and challenges of an ASP at a no-fee-paying school in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats.

Setting: The research was conducted at a no-fee-paying primary school in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats.

Methods: The study employed a case study design located within a qualitative research approach, and interviews and focus groups were used to understand the participants' perceptions and lived experiences. The research was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, and data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Key findings revealed that ASPs have the potential to offer a variety of benefits for learners, such as feelings of safety and opportunities for holistic development. Challenges include resource constraints and the impact of community violence, which can affect the functioning of programmes.

Conclusion: The study enhances understanding of how the various ecological systems are continually at play and offers insights into how learners, NPO staff and school personnel perceived and experienced the transactions between these systems.

Contribution: The research enhances understanding of the role of ASPs in the context of no-fee schools on the Cape Flats and similar disadvantaged communities across South Africa.

Keywords: after-school programmes; no-fee-paying schools; marginalised communities; learner development; gang violence; Cape Flats; South Africa.

Introduction

The social and economic consequences of apartheid remain evident in South Africa, particularly in areas such as the Cape Flats, which is located southeast of the central business district of Cape Town Metropole (Turok, Visagie & Scheba 2021). Under South Africa's apartheid regime, the *Group Areas Act of 1950* enforced the racial separation of suburbs which resulted in the mandatory removal of coloured and black residents from areas classified as 'White' and their resettlement in the Cape Flats (Simpson 2021). As part of the legacy of apartheid policies, residents remain predominantly underprivileged and are exposed to high levels of poverty, unemployment and crime (Hoosen et al. 2022). Unemployment on the Cape Flats mirrors the statistics for South Africa. For example, the Labour Force Survey for the second quarter of 2023 indicated that there were 7.9 million unemployed persons (Statistics South Africa 2023).

According to the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2019), 45.9% of Cape Town's population lives below the upper-bound poverty line. Moreover, a study conducted by the University of Cape Town (2023) revealed that three out of four children under the age of five in the Western Cape go hungry every day, with 45.6% living in income poverty.

Three decades since the dawn of democracy, the legacy of apartheid continues to adversely affect South Africa's education system. According to Soudien, Reddy and Harve (2022), the education system was racially defined and consequently, achievement continues to be associated with race,

socio-economic status and geographical location. As part of its constitutional mandate, the South African government offers free schooling, in the form of no-fee-paying schools, to the poorest communities across the country. These schools enrol children from the most marginalised communities in South Africa and offer learners free education, textbooks and other services such as the National School Nutrition Programme, which aims to provide daily nutritious meals to learners to support and improve their learning (Department of Basic Education n.d.).

However, despite significant resources provided by the state, the academic performance of learners at poor schools is generally lower than those attending affluent schools because of the appointment of less experienced teachers, poorer infrastructure and resources, and larger classes (Mestry 2022). The disparity between no-fee and well-resourced schools widened with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, including substantial learning losses because of school closures and rotational timetables implemented to manage the spread of the virus (Soudien et al. 2022). These consequences predominantly affected poorer schools and learners who were unable to mitigate any potential learning losses because of the lack of access to Wi-Fi connections, data and computers needed for remote learning (Spaull & Van der Berg 2020).

Learners are not only affected by educational factors, but also by crime in their communities. The murder rate in the Western Cape is notably higher than the national average, with 54.5 murders per 100 000 people (Department of Community Safety 2022). Gang-related activity, drugs and interpersonal violence contribute to the high murder rate and other criminal acts, with approximately 130 gangs accounting for 70% of crimes perpetrated in these communities (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo 2021). Children and young people are particularly affected as they are often caught in the crossfire as innocent casualties of gang activities (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo 2021). There have been reports that children as young as 9 years join gangs on the Cape Flats and may view gang membership and the associated peer approval as a source of power and security if they have no hope for access to education or employment (Altbeker, Vernstein & Johnson 2017; Van der Westhuizen & Guwulayo 2021). Venter and Jeffries (2020) studied 360 Grade 6 learners in low socio-economic areas in the Western Cape and found that exposure to community violence and the lack of physical and emotional security result in many children struggling with concentration and preferring truancy instead of attending school or extracurricular activities.

Other detrimental consequences of violence for children, particularly in low socio-economic status communities, include physical and mental health issues, anxiety, depression, conduct disorders such as bullying and aggression towards others, poor academic achievement, feelings of insecurity, and a reduced sense of hope, well-being and quality of life (Hoosen et al. 2022). These consequences highlight the value of interventions such as after-school programmes (ASPs) in mitigating the impact of exposure to community violence on children. After-school programmes are structured comprehensive programmes that operate after school hours during the school year, under the supervision of adults, and may include play and social activities, academic and homework support, sports, arts and crafts, and music (Kremer et al. 2015).

The revised White Paper on Families in South Africa acknowledges the role of ASPs as non-academic measures that promote family well-being, because they have the potential to assist families with mitigating the burden of care in the hours after schools close (Department of Social Development 2021). The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) also acknowledges the vital role that ASPs can provide as spaces where opportunities exist for learners to develop skills and interests in a safe and supervised environment (Ndlovu & Simba 2021). Olivier (2021) proposes that ASPs can redress educational inequalities and promote social justice because of the sector existing outside the formal education context with the freedom to innovate while remaining closely connected to the school system.

The challenges encountered by ASPs have been related to the assessment of the quality of programmes. Frazier et al. (2021) found that after-school staff reported fewer behavioural issues when beneficiaries and parents were satisfied with the programme (Frazier et al. 2021). Lower staff turnover rates and staff with higher levels of education are associated with high-quality programmes contributing to overall feelings of job satisfaction (Hurd & Deutsch 2017). Further challenges include over-involvement in extracurricular activities with limited free time, learning deviant behaviour from peers and the lack of support from programme staff (Christensen et al. 2023).

After-school programmes and their role in the lives of children and youth in marginalised communities remain under-researched (Christensen et al. 2023). There is also limited research on the views of service users such as school personnel and children regarding these programmes and challenges experienced by organisations providing these services. Faldet and Nes (2021) argue that the inclusion of children's voices in research essentially attributes value to their perspectives; children are represented and not simply viewed as passive participants within their circumstances, but instead are viewed as having agency. The study therefore aimed to explore perceptions of the benefits and challenges of an ASP at a no-fee-paying school in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats from the perspective of the service users (a no-fee primary school's staff and learners) and the non-profit organisation (NPO) providing the service.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical lens framing the study was Bronfenbrenner and Evans's (2000) Ecological Theory, which focusses on five environmental levels that influence the development of

every person. The *microsystem* is the immediate environment where the person plays a direct role and has experiences (Onwuegbuzie, Collins & Frels 2013). The microsystem in the study included the school, which forms part of the children's routine or pattern of activities in a specified setting (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000). The *mesosystem* denotes the social interactions between two or more settings, in which the individual actively participates (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000; Mbedzi 2019); therefore, this study specifically included children who attend both school and an ASP because these represent two settings interacting within the mesosystem. The *exosystem* comprises events that influence and affect the individual but in which they do not actively participate and essentially refers to the individual's social setting (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2013). Schools and NPOs work within the legislative, departmental and donor frameworks that govern them, and although children do not actively participate in these frameworks, they are affected by them. Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) state that the *macrosystem* refers to the cultural context or ideologies directly influencing the individual. Crawford (2020) notes that macrosystems can evolve over time; hence, Bonteheuwel is a community that has developed high levels of poverty and gang violence that affect children residing in the area. Lastly, the *chronosystem* refers to the changes over time within the individual and the environment in which they exist, such as normative and non-normative life transitions (Crawford 2020). The community of Bonteheuwel was established because of apartheid legislation, and there have been lasting consequences for the community that have affected the psycho-social development of individuals who currently reside there (Drew 2022).

Interactions between each of the ecosystem levels comprise various components of the system as a whole, illustrating the fact that the multitude of relationships and systems in children's lives do not exist separately, but rather that the systems are integrated and, therefore, all affect the development of the child (Mbedzi 2019). As such, this study viewed service users as active rather than passive participants in the ASP because their experiences within this programme were likely to affect other areas of their lives, such as home, school and community interactions. This factor is further highlighted by a fundamental principle of ecosystems theory which states that change in one part of the system is affected by and can cause change in another area of the system (Mbedzi 2019).

Theoretical concepts underpinning ecological theory include the social environment, transactions and interactions between systems, the interface between people and their environment, and interdependence or mutual reliance of each person on other persons in the social environment (Mbedzi 2019). Bronfenbrenner and Evans's (2000) ecological systems theory was deemed suitable for this study because it provides an opportunity for various systems to be thoroughly explored while simultaneously reviewing how the systems interact with each other.

Research methods and design

The study was designed to answer the research question: What are the perceived benefits and challenges of an ASP at a no-fee-paying school in Bonteheuwel on the Cape Flats from the perspectives of service users (school staff and learners) and the NPO providing the service? Research objectives were to examine: (1) descriptions of the ASP from learners, school staff and the NPO personnel; (2) relationships and transactions between the ecological systems of the learners, the school and the NPO personnel with respect to the ASP; (3) views of learners, school staff and the NPO personnel on the benefits of the ASP; and (4) views of learners, school staff and the NPO personnel on the challenges associated with the ASP.

A qualitative approach, located within the interpretivist paradigm, was employed whereby the voices and narratives of participants were central to the study. This approach was considered suitable to achieve the objectives of the study because it allowed for important contextual information to be shared, including insights from the experiences and perspectives of research participants, needed to answer the research question. Within this approach, the research design selected was a descriptive case study as this design allows one to describe an intervention or phenomenon (in this case the ASP at a no-fee primary school in the community of Bonteheuwel) and the real-life context in which it occurs (Silverman 2020).

The sample used in the study consisted of: (1) learners aged between 9 years and 12 years attending a no-fee primary school in Bonteheuwel, and the ASP provided by the NPO; (2) school staff employed by the no-fee primary school; and (3) ASP staff employed by the NPO. Non-probability purposive sampling techniques were employed to identify participants for this study. The following inclusion criteria were used to select the research participants. Participants needed to be involved with the NPO providing the ASP in some form, either as learner participants, facilitators or school staff members. All those who were approached agreed to participate with no refusals.

The sample of child participants included seven children (six females and one male) aged 9 years–12 years with an average age of 10 years. All the children lived in Bonteheuwel, and their parents identified them as coloured,[1] which was representative of the ASP learners at the school as well as the demographics for the area. The NPO sample consisted of five adults ranging in age from 20–29 years to 50–59 years; with two males and three females. In terms of position, there were three facilitators, one manager and one coordinator of the ASP. The sample of school staff comprised of five adults ranging in age from 30–39 years to 60–79 years. There were four females and one male which aligned with the gender split of the school. Their roles included three educators, a principal and one member of the support staff.

1.For purposes of monitoring transformation, the South African government categorises the population as Black African, White, Coloured and Indian/Asian.

In terms of the location of the study, the suburb of Bonteheuwel is a predominantly Afrikaans and English-speaking community situated in the Cape Town Metropole. According to the 2022 census, the population of Cape Town is 4 772 846 with 42.4% identifying as 'Coloured', 38.0% as black Africans, 15.7% as white, 1.4% as Asian or Indian and 1.4% as other. Almost a third (35.0%) are aged 15–34 years and 35.6% have a Grade 12 education (City of Cape Town 2023). At least 50.0% of dwellings in the area have two rooms or fewer, and minimal free-standing houses have been built in the community, impacting security, privacy and a child-friendly environment (Esau 2008). There are 15 schools in the Bonteheuwel area, 12 of which are no-fee primary schools (Department of Basic Education n.d.). Backyard dwellers are commonplace with high levels of substance abuse, gangsterism and crime in the community.

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured face-to-face interviews based on a pre-constructed interview schedule, and focus groups using a focus group guide. All interviews and the focus group were administered by the first author as part of the requirements for a Master's degree. They were conducted in person, with participants code-switching between English and Afrikaans, and were voice-recorded, and extensive field notes were taken after each interview and the focus group. The rationale for using the focus group as a form of data collection is that it allowed for extensive data collection during a single setting (Babbie 2020). Moreover, it provided a safe space for children to engage and feel comfortable answering questions and sharing their experiences alongside their peers. However, group settings may leave some participants hesitant to share and speak openly and, therefore, may feel uncomfortable because they are in the presence of their peers and friends (Groenland & Dana 2019). As a result of learners arriving late, two focus groups were facilitated.

Two focus groups facilitated with the children were also conducted on the school's premises, and the group met in a classroom at the start of the ASP during non-school hours. Before the session started, peanut butter sandwiches were offered to the children, who were then seated in a circle. The location of the venue made it quite noisy and prone to interruptions, which made the process of keeping learners engaged in the group challenging at times. The second group arrived towards the end of the first session and briefly waited outside until it was their turn. The first group of four learners was younger in age, while the second group of three learners was older.

There was one interview schedule for the staff of the NPO and one for the school personnel, while the learners had a separate focus group guide. However, all questions covered the same sections and objectives, including:

- The ASP (example for NPO: What kind of programmes do you offer learners?).
- Relationships between ecosystems (example for children: How do you get on with the facilitator?).

- Benefits of the ASP (example for children: What do you like most about attending the ASP?).
- Challenges of the ASP (example for school: What challenges does the ASP face at the school?).

All the instruments were pretested with persons who met the sample selection criteria, that is, a Grade 2 primary school learner attending a different ASP, a lady employed as an educator and a staff member of the NPO who is employed as an after-school administrator. The pretest revealed that a few questions were confusing and needed to be rephrased, especially for the children as the words were unsuitable for primary school-level learners.

The study's trustworthiness was established using Schwandt, Lincoln and Guba's (2007) criteria. *Credibility* was enhanced by pretesting the research instruments, triangulation of data sources including children, school staff and the NPO personnel, as well as triangulation of data collection methods which included a focus group and semi-structured interviews. *Dependability* was ensured by keeping an audit trail of the interviews, the focus group and field notes. *Confirmability* was achieved through correspondence checking whereby the categorisation of themes was checked with the study supervisors. *Transferability* was enhanced through the provision of thick descriptions of the research site.

The following ethical principles were adhered to when conducting the research: written informed consent from the adults and written assent from child participants; voluntary participation; non-maleficence and a distress protocol. No identifying details were included in the research report. Although confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups, participants were urged to respect the confidential responses of other participants. In addition, children who participated in the study received a free meal.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) six step method of thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data, namely becoming familiar with the data, initial generation of codes, searching for themes, reviewing the potential themes, defining the themes, and producing the report. *Familiarisation* involved listening to the recordings and reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the data. *Generating initial codes* occurred through inserting comments in the side margins and highlighting areas of text. An example of an initial code was 'communication'. *Generating themes* referred to the process of combining codes, for example, combining 'descriptions of the programme' with 'expectations of the programme'. *Reviewing potential themes* involved restructuring themes by adding or removing themes, for example, adding 'lack of collaboration' to 'communication issues'. *Defining and naming themes* included amending the names of themes, for example, referring to 'the parental ecosystem' instead of 'the parents', in line with ecosystems theory. *Producing the report* incorporated decisions about separating the Results and Discussion sections, and the ordering of themes, for example, inserting the theme on 'crime, violence and poverty in the community' as the first theme

under Challenges as it was mentioned most frequently and with particular emphasis by participants.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Humanities Research Ethics Committee, University of Johannesburg (No. REC-02-239-2022). Approval to conduct the study was also obtained from the Western Cape Education Department.

Results

Results are presented in line with the four objectives that guided the research.

Description of the after-school programme from the perspectives of child learners, school staff and non-profit organisation personnel

Both school and NPO staff were asked to share their understanding of the purpose of the ASP and the mission of the NPO, and learners were asked why they attended the programme. While participants shared broadly and specifically about the organisation and the ASP, there seemed to be mixed feedback pertaining to the alignment of stakeholder priorities and expectations. Hence, the main theme was a holistic ASP with differing expectations from stakeholders.

Theme 1: A holistic after-school programme with differing expectations of the after-school programme

Participants provided a comprehensive list of activities ranging from sports, academic support, excursions and the arts that are offered to learners attending the programme. A participant, who is a school employee, encapsulated the holistic offering when she said:

> 'In the sense of developing our learners holistically, with regards to the dance programmes that they had, drama that they had then, I'm now speaking besides the theoretical part which is especially the reading, assisting us with reading and mathematics, taking our children out on day trips, exposing them to the world outside.' (S2)

However, despite participants' appreciation of the holistic nature of the ASP, there appeared to be a lack of consensus between the school and the NPO expectations and a lack of clarity about the purpose of the programme, as expressed by a school employee:

> 'My expectations would be that the programme is going to benefit the child academically like holistically. Like if it's going to be on the school grounds then the integration should be better. If parents come to us and ask about the [NPO], we gonna refer that to someone else because I know I wouldn't be able to answer "cause I don't know what's happening there."' (S3)

Adult participants attached various meanings associated with the programme. For example, S1, a school staff member, shared that academic support was the rationale for the programme: 'I believe the purpose is to help the children with reading and writing'. However, NPO employees had a broader understanding of their mission:

> 'We want to ensure that in whatever our learners doing they excel to the highest level.'(NPO2).

Learners collectively shared that the ASP was a place for them to learn and be kept occupied, as expressed by a participant:

> 'You get also to learn stuff. It also keeping us out of danger.'(C5)

Relationships and transactions between the ecological systems of the learners, the school, the non-profit organisation personnel and parents with respect to the after-school programme

Participants were asked a series of questions to explore the relationships and interactions between the various ecological systems associated with the ASP. Themes included communication issues and the lack of a collaborative partnership between the school and the NPO; mixed views on parental engagement; and stakeholder management relations.

Theme 1: Communication issues and the lack of collaboration between school and non-profit organisation ecosystems

Participants described their varying experiences with communication. One school employee, commented:

> 'There's open communication. X is now attaching my email address to the ones that she sends to school so then I'm also up to date, instead of everything just coming to school and they don't forward it to me.' (S2)

A participant also shared similar sentiments:

> 'We have regular communication. I would meet up with the coordinator, ask them how are you guys doing, what's the totals, what do you want the school to do? Must I send out another letter, must I announce on the intercom there's after-school project at school the [NPO] is gonna do this or that.' (S5)

A school employee, emphasised that transparency between the stakeholders was needed:

> 'I would expect a more transparent approach. Also, with regard to the appointments of the after-care people, at the end of the day it's about assisting our learners to read, to be critical thinkers, to be able to function optimally in class. So, they are an extension to what happens in the classroom.' (S1)

However, NPO employees described a willingness to communicate with the school:

> 'I would speak to the class teacher and I would say, does she have any children that are not so good in reading or is struggling with reading. Then she would tell me, "Aunty X for now I can't see but give me a week or two then I will send them to you."' (NPO4)

Four participants from the school and three from the NPO expressed the view that the school and the NPO lacked a collaborative partnership. For example, one participant reflected:

'You see this school they never support the [NPO]. There's always a problem. Just a few weeks back, the netball coach wanted to use the poles and the principal came and he was like "sorry you can't use our stuff." Why? It's your children on the school, help them.' (S4)

Staff from the NPO described the difficulties they had experienced in securing classrooms at the school to facilitate their ASPs:

'We have a challenge with the teachers. Sometimes they don't want their classes to be used for the ASP because they feel that their areas are going to be invaded and they can get stuff lost but that is not the case.' (NPO2)

Learners also shared their perceptions of disunity between the school and the ASP. C1 exclaimed, 'No he doesn't want us to play with the netball poles and stuff like that. I get so upset, cause it's my favourite sport'. C5 reiterated the point by expressing her frustration: 'For me it's (the school), can you play or not play. If you want to play in the park then they say you can't play in the park'.

Theme 2: Mixed views on engagement of the parental ecosystem

There were mixed responses regarding how involved parents were with the programme. Three participants perceived parental engagement positively, such as S5, a school employee, who commented: 'Our parents, some of them even walk their kids to programme because they know they get the necessary help'. NPO4 said they often encourage parents to get involved with the programme:

'Parents always come to ask what is the programme about? What do kids do, and so on. Then I explain to them and then it's fine. Okay the child can come.' (NPO4)

However, three participants from the NPO felt that parental engagement was a challenge. For example:

'One thing I can touch on is the parents. That is a challenge within the community where we are coming to them and say look this is what we do it will benefit your kid but they are not playing hand in hand with us.' (NPO1)

A school employee shared that the level of involvement was low at the school:

'Well that itself is a problem at school. The social economic culture in a community has an impact on parental involvement. So, you get your 40% parental involvement and it's quite sad.' (S1)

Theme 3: Stakeholder management relations

While all 10 adult participants recognised the ASP as being beneficial to learners, 6 participants acknowledged that issues existed in the relationship:

'Anything that's broken at the school, it's (NPO) always gets blamed' (NPO5).

A participant elaborated on this theme:

'So I think the schools have to be supportive to the programmes that are rendered by the after-school organisations. They should not be looking at us as competitors because sometimes we find

out the schools will look for anything to blame on our side.' (NPO2)

Three learners also shared that, on occasion, learners were disrespectful to facilitators. Learner C4 shared that 'Sometimes there's children that's rude to the facilitators'.

Furthermore, the role and level of experience of facilitators involved with the ASP were causes for concern for four participants from the school. A school employee wanted more transparency from the NPO regarding facilitators:

'I would want a more transparent approach. Also, with regard to the appointments of the after-care assistants, at the end of the day it's about assisting our learners to read to be critical thinkers, to be able to function optimally in class. So, they are an extension to what happens in the classroom.' (S1)

Another participant expected more integration of facilitators because she did not know enough about the programme:

'Like if it's going to be on the school grounds then you need to be more involved with, the integration should be better.' (S3)

There was also a wish for the facilitators to be trained:

'I mean you have people from the community that really tried their best but for the [*name of NPO*] to have trained facilitators doing things for the [*name of NPO*].' (S5)

However, five participants contradicted the above-stated finding by sharing that the NPO's facilitators received regular professional development:

'We ensure that we capacitate our facilitators. There are constant trainings' (NPO2).

Seven participants viewed the stakeholder relationship as having positive elements. For example, S2 from the school shared, 'To my knowledge, there's a mutual respect relationship, amicable and there's open communication'. A participant emphasised that communication with the principal was improving:

'So now at the moment communication is much better. He just wants to know what is happening. If there's a programme, tell us what's happening and not just do your own thing.' (NPO3)

One participant contended that both groups of stakeholders fundamentally respected each other:

'It's a marriage, definitely and it's a good relationship. You see the one feed off the other.' (S1)

Views of child learners, school staff and non-profit organisation personnel on the benefits of the after-school programme

Two broad themes were identified as the benefits of the ASP, namely, learner development and the provision of a safe haven.

Theme 1: Learner development

The holistic programme offering was mentioned by four participants, including a school employee:

'They basically have sports, the children have skills in certain dancing, netball, football. So, I personally over the years found out from the [*NPO*] to develop the children in certain skills that they lack.' (S1)

A school employee explained:

'The ways the programme supports learners' development, like they have dancing which the children love. They have a nice arts programme. They have another programme where they go on hiking trips and take the children onto sight-seeing like museums during school holidays.' (S3)

A learner, revealed how she was able to share what she learned at the ASP with her family:

'I tell my cousins, here's children that I watch them dance then I will go home and then I'll say to my aunty, "Kom ek gaan nou vir jou kinners n dans leer" [*Come I'm going to teach your children a dance*] and then I dance with my cousins also.' (C4)

Nine participants, including two school employees, one NPO employee and six child learners, also indicated that the ASP provides structure and discipline. Specifically, learner participants shared that they have rules that must be followed for them to attend: 'Here's always rules like you may not bring anything like weapons here and if you do, you go and if you did something wrong you get suspended' (C5, learner). Another shared a few of the rules: 'You can't swear, you can't fight' (C3); while learner C7 added: 'You have to raise your hand, if you want to speak', which reinforces the fact that children enrolled in the programme experienced it as one that was structured.

The structure and discipline provided by the programme also had the potential to change learner behaviours:

'I saw children that when I see them, I'm actually proud of them. Wow, you turned out to be much better than what I thought. And maybe the child was there and the child wasn't so reckless or if I see change in behaviour that's a wow for me, because we struggle with that also.' (NPO5)

One participant, however, perceived the ASP as not well administered:

'Because I think our children can benefit from those extra classes if implemented in a structured way. I think if it's better managed as well and supervised as well, then more teachers will be inclined to participate.' (S3)

Theme 2: A safe haven

Eight participants, including three school employees, two NPO employees and three learners, found that the ASP provided learners with a sanctuary during the hours after school. Considering the community's high crime levels, one participant maintained:

'The benefit is when you come to the NGO you in a safe space. You learn something out of the school, you can be creative, you can be yourself.' (S5)

Another participant commented:

'It's like it's a safe haven. We keep the children from the road especially now with the holiday programme, lots of children are just strolling around and we invite them to come here so we can keep them busy.' (NPO5)

Four participants, including two school employees and two learners, felt that the space gave learners a sense of belonging:

'They provide them with that love and care.' (S5)

S2 described the learners' excitement as an indicator of their sense of belonging:

'And that already tells me no, that child has a sense of belonging. He likes what is happening here at the school. So yes, the children's excitement of wanting to be here is what tells me what's happening at the.' (NPO)

A learner, C5, added, 'We have a feeling we wanna stay more but can't'. At the same time, another child, C1, shared that the NPO's facilitators provide support and care: 'And if we like need something, then aunty X said the door is always open for us', while learner C4 fondly said that their facilitators 'spend time with us' and another, C3, disclosed that 'they take care of us, they teach us more'.

Views of child learners, school staff and non-profit organisation personnel on challenges associated with the after-school programme

Three broad themes were identified as the challenges of the ASP, including concerns regarding crime, violence and poverty in the community; the lack of financial support and resources; and decline in learner enrolments.

Theme 1: Crime, violence and poverty in the community

A common theme of crime and violence in Bonteheuwel was identified, such as school employee, who shared:

'But here personally at school having to throw your children down on the ground when in class busy teaching or you outside then you have to run in with your children because currently (the school) is between two gangs so they would be shooting from this side and that side.' (S2)

A learner also shared her experience of living in the community:

'Not that nice, all the shooting, running around, the gangs.' (C6)

The reality of gang violence experienced by participants, particularly the learners, was also encapsulated by learner:

'Then they did shoot there at the back, but it was close to school.' (C3)

'Like come in Bonteheuwel you'll like get a bullet in your head.' (C1)

Another common factor participants shared was the poverty experienced by residents, which five participants discussed. For example:

'A lot of parents lost their jobs during COVID and so we invite them here. We don't know how the situation is at home, and they come here they will have something to eat, and then the

next day you will just see there's more children because they will like tell the other children at home "come we getting this there and we doing this there."' (NPO5)

A participant also shared her experience with the poverty of the families in Bonteheuwel:

'But the kids mostly come you when they don't have anything to eat at home and they would literally ask, "Can I have bread to take home to my mommy, there's nothing to eat." Oh my heart, so the ones see I give and then the other ones see and then you know it's about 10 of them and I'm like guys I can't give all of you.' (S4)

A learner, indicated that there were negative influences in the community that drove children to participate in harmful activities:

'Because if you there at home then you play with your friends, they teach you wrong stuff to do. If they now smoke and then you don't smoke then they tell you "My bru kom trek a skuif" [*My friend, come take a puff*] or my mommy say I mustn't play in the road I must rather come to [*name of ASP*] cause here I learn a lot.' (C2)

Regardless of the challenges encountered by the community, four participants felt that there was reason to be positive about the community. For example, school employee commented:

'In our community you'll find a lot of soup kitchens, people handing out food during the day, a lot of pensioners' clubs that go out into schools assisting schools with reading with everything. So, the community can be such a nice good community if you get rid of the crime element.' (S5)

Theme 2: Lack of financial support and resources
Participants described their experiences regarding resources for maintaining the ASPs as being insufficient:

'The only thing that is going down is like resources, and children don't want to come because of that.' (NPO5)

Another participant also indicated that more resources were required to fully implement programmes:

'We have a difficult time when it comes to equipment and it's difficult to work with one ball. For example, when it comes to sports and we have about 40 kids and we are busy with 10 and the others can't sit still so and we don't have equipment to keep them busy.' (NPO1)

This concern with the lack of resources was supported by a learner, who shared:

'I wish there were more balls like for everyone to play with.' (C1)

Concerns for funding the ASPs were shared by five participants:

'We don't have enough funds, but at the same time we are charging nothing from the parents because we know how poor they are, how difficult the situation is, more especially after COVID. So, we are struggling but we are trying to ensure that we are doing our work as we promise the parents that we are going to do the services free-of-charge.' (NPO2)

A school employee, also recognised that without funding, the ASP would not be sustainable: 'Funds play a major role in sustaining a programme like this. If the (NPO) don't get funds, then the programme don't run'. These sentiments were shared by a participant:

'I think it was after COVID then people just didn't want to donate anymore. So, I think we're having a hard time to get funding so that we can continue doing what we are doing.' (NPO1)

A participant also indicated that there was negligible support from government departments:

'Sometimes we lack classes. We don't have enough playing grounds. We don't get enough support from the government. Out of the five centres that we have, only one centre is getting support from the DSD [*Department of Social Development*], that grant. We depend on our donations from our sponsors.' (NPO2)

Three NPO employees maintained that as a result of these funding and resource limitations, fundraising was imperative for their programmes:

'We have a department that does fundraising so our task is to ensure that we keep the relationship that we have with the donors positive so that they don't run away.' (NPO2)

Theme 3: Decline in learner enrolments
Participants discussed the decline in learner attendance. Three participants expressed the view that this development was related to the level of criminality in the community:

'When I started, we had a lot of learners. But with the crime in the area, people tend to keep the kids indoors.' (NPO5)

Participant S5 elaborated on this point, 'The totals are dropping because of the crime. The other day we had to close because of the shootings at the back of the school'. Two participants related the waning numbers to weather conditions. 'Winter especially our totals go down.' (S4). A participant also noted that a combination of weather factors and crime in the community affected the programme:

'Also, when the weather starts to rain and if I see it's not going to stop then I let the group go. Just for those learners to be safe cause we don't allow one learner to walk home alone, so they're normally in groups.' (NPO3)

Discussion
All participants were able to communicate a general understanding of the programme's aims and activities. In this regard, a study by Fukkink and Boogaard (2020) noted the importance of stakeholders being able to clearly define the goals relating to an ASP. Moreover, the fact that participants shared a range of goals of the ASP is consistent with Kremer et al.'s (2015) finding that perceptions of the goals of ASPs often vary among stakeholders. However, what was not anticipated was that participants had opposing expectations of the programme. Specifically, school staff wanted more academic intervention, while NPO staff saw the programme as offering more than just academic support.

It is, therefore, crucial that the most suitable *interface* is identified and implemented to efficiently address the learners' challenges from the perspectives of both school and NPO staff (Mbedzi 2019). The study showed that school staff did not perceive the ASP to be designed and implemented in a way most suitable for their learners' academic development. Nevertheless, the views of learners and NPO staff participants suggested that learners were developing holistically. The finding regarding differing expectations confirms a study conducted by Parenzee (2018) that found that the sharing and understanding of information is essential for the sector to be recognised as professional. Awareness of relevant policies can also provide insights into effective ASP implementation within South Africa and can broaden the criteria used to determine whether programmes are effective and worth funding.

It was anticipated that the relationships and transactions between the various systems would demonstrate *interdependence*, which Mbedzi (2019) describes as the mutual reliance that systems have on each other. This assumption was affirmed by all 17 participants in this study who articulated the view that they were all interlinked within the Bonteheuwel community. The findings regarding poverty and food insecurity of learners are understandable given the fact that the school is categorised as a quintile 1 school with parents having low levels of income. Moreover, the narratives of shootouts were not surprising considering the high rate of violence and gangsterism characterising the Cape Flats (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo 2021). Participants also acknowledged the important role that the ASPs play in the community. Although participants perceived the programme as valuable, the dependency of the ASP on the school's facilities and the NPO's ability to utilise these facilities seemed to present a contested terrain for stakeholders.

This study found that the relationships and communication between school staff and NPO staff did not suggest a collaborative partnership. Participants expressed the view that using the school's facilities had caused communication problems between the school and NPO staff. This mistrust has resulted in the ASP not having fixed classrooms available for their programmes, which contrasts with Ndlovu and Simba's (2021) finding that ownership of facilities did not significantly influence ASP delivery. Furthermore, it emerged that learners were aware of and affected by the fluctuating relationships between the school and NPO staff, which is aligned with the concept of *transactions* in ecological systems theory which states that transactions may be positive or negative (Crawford 2020; Mbedzi 2019). Furthermore, this finding supports a fundamental principle underpinning ecosystems theory that a change in one part of the system is likely to cause an adjustment in another area (Mbedzi 2019). In essence, if learners are aware of disputes, it can cause tension for them, and it may ultimately feel as if they have to choose sides – their teachers or their facilitators.

Participants shared mixed feedback regarding parental engagement. Learners shared that their parents had positive feelings about the ASP, often reporting that parents were eager for their children to attend the programme. However, school staff reported negligible parental involvement with the school. This finding is supported by Leonard's (2011) study which found that inconsistent relationships between school staff, parents and facilitators in the mesosystem constrained the development of reciprocal trust, harmony and balance of power that is normally associated with collaborative work at the mesosystem level (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000). This finding could also possibly be explained by Christian and Sayed's (2023) finding that some parents with low levels of education may not attach value to educational programmes.

In terms of benefits, participants perceived the ASP as a safe haven, which is consistent with the finding by De Oliveira Major, Cristina Palos and Silva (2023) that parents enrolled their children in ASPs mostly for reasons of safety. A further benefit was enhancing learner development by providing opportunities that the school itself did not offer. This finding aligns with those of Ndlovu and Simba (2021), who found that ASPs exist predominantly outside of the education system in South Africa, and therefore afford opportunities for innovation within the sector. This finding is important as the research conducted by De Wet and Osman (2019) found that children from low socio-economic circumstances are more likely to repeat grades, suggesting that children need more than schools and resources to progress. However, it is important to note that this study did not delve into the pedagogical quality of the programme and, therefore, cannot draw any definitive conclusions regarding its quality in terms of promoting learner development, which is consistent with the findings by Fukkink and Boogaard (2020) that research into the pedagogical overall quality of ASPs is limited. It would also have been difficult to establish such a cause-effect relationship within a qualitative research design.

In terms of challenges, it was anticipated that the macrosystem would play a significant role in the children's lives. This assumption was supported as participants shared in detail how gang violence and poverty in the community, which characterised the *social environment* in Bonteheuwel, influenced them. Participants reported experiencing regular gang-related violence within their community which affected attendance at school and the ASP. This finding is understandable given the fact that youth living in communities on the Cape Flats are exposed to an established gang culture (Van der Westhuizen & Gawulayo 2021). However, challenges in the social environment also provide an opportunity for ASP facilitators to intervene and support learners, which Mbedzi (2019) believes can improve the relationship between individuals and their environment. Therefore, it would seem that important nuances of conditions within the Bonteheuwel social environment impact learners' ability to access support at school and the ASP both negatively and positively.

In addition, events such as COVID-19 have affected the donations that the NPO has received. Learner participants expressed their appreciation for the excursions arranged by

the NPO and wished there were more resources available for them to utilise. The adult participants also described a decline in the availability of resources. This finding supports Ndlovu and Simba's (2021) assertion that sustainable funding is a critical factor in any efforts to upscale programmes. The funding issue is important considering that high-quality and well-resourced programmes can potentially contribute to closing the learning opportunity divide that exists in different socio-economic communities (Mestry 2022).

Limitations

In interpreting these findings, it is important to acknowledge some limitations inherent in the research design and methodology. Firstly, the study only focussed on one primary school in a single community (Bonteheuwel) on the Cape Flats, within the Western Cape province. Therefore, it may not represent the experiences of all participants attending no-fee-paying schools and ASPs in communities across the Cape Flats. Secondly, the learner sample was smaller than anticipated, with only seven children, which could also affect the way in which the results can be interpreted. Thirdly, the research focussed only on the perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the programme and did not evaluate the programme's effects on behavioural, academic or psycho-social outcomes. A further limitation was that the study did not include the views of parents on their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of ASPs which could have provided an additional layer of information related to the research topic. Regardless of these limitations, this study yielded important conclusions.

Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that the initial assumption underpinning the study, namely, that children would experience the programme favourably and see it as beneficial, was confirmed. It was also assumed that the NPO might experience financial challenges with funding the ASP, which was confirmed. However, the assumption that interactions between the school and the NPO would be positive and that boundaries would be clearly defined and maintained was not supported by the findings. Instead, there appeared to be a misalignment between stakeholders in terms of the programme goals and objectives that were not anticipated.

In terms of contributions of the study, extant literature has generally explored ASPs in the Global North, with insufficient insight into the South African context. The current study reduces this lacuna by enhancing the understanding of the role of ASPs in the context of no-fee schools on the Cape Flats and similar disadvantaged communities across South Africa. It also builds on Ndlovu and Simba's (2021) research on the qualities of well-performing ASPs in the Western Cape by including the perspectives of key stakeholders, namely, children, ASP personnel and school staff. However, the findings also illustrated that efficient stakeholder communication and alignment are required to ensure successful programme implementation. This study provides a starting place for the identification of practical solutions that can be implemented by the school and the NPO, thus offering a path for meaningful adaptations for all stakeholders.

Grounding this study in Bronfenbrenner and Evans's (2000) Ecological Theory was crucial to understanding the inter-relational dynamics that existed between the various systems. The study demonstrated that the systems coexisted and consequently, had the potential to influence the learners' development because they were active participants in the programme. Specifically, at the *micro*system level, learners attended the ASP at their school. At the *meso*system level, there was meaningful engagement between learners and facilitators, while the transactions between school staff and NPO personnel were strained. At the *macro*system level, Bonteheuwel experiences elevated gang violence and poverty, which form part of the broader ecological context of crime, violence and poverty in South Africa, and globally. These ecological factors influenced learner attendance and the NPO's access to resources since COVID-19. In essence, the study contributes to our understanding of how these systems are continually at play and offers insights into how participants perceived and experienced the transactions between these systems.

In terms of recommendations, research needs to be conducted to evaluate the impact of attendance at an ASP on learners' academic performance. There is also a need to explore parents' perceptions of the ASP. Moreover, there is an opportunity for the provincial education department to become more involved with ASPs and if necessary, develop a policy for service providers.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and the original dissertation.

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