ASSESSING PROGRAM QUALITY IN AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS:
A COMPARISON STUDY OF PARENTS’ AND TEACHERS’ EVALUATIONS

A Thesis

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by

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I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

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Department of Child Development
Recent literature on after school programs (ASPs) has begun to examine aspects of program quality and effectiveness. However, very little of this research has considered the perspective of parents. As key stakeholders in ASPs it is important to determine what parents believe about the quality and effectiveness of ASPs. The current study examined parents’ ratings of quality in ASPs and compared those with teacher and researcher ratings of program quality. Parents and program staff completed surveys regarding the quality of the ASP. In addition, an independent observer conducted observations and completed an ASP survey for each site.

Results indicated significant differences in parents’ and observer’s ratings on the ASP survey. The outside observer rated quality items significantly lower than the parents did. There were significant positive associations between observer ratings and parents’ ratings. While the observer may have rated quality lower in all areas, the parents seemed to be observing similar characteristics in quality. The fact that parents and observer ratings are correlated indicates that parents may actually be relatively knowledgeable
observers of ASPs. ASPs should be aware of parents’ perceptions of quality because parents are important stakeholders in ASPs and their observations of quality should be considered in program planning and implementation.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Sheri E. Hembree

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful and very patient husband, Adam Sullivan, who supported me through this journey of completing my Master’s Degree in Child Development.
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I would like to acknowledge many people for their support and encouragement through the process of completing my Master’s Degree and writing this thesis. Listed below are the people who helped me through this journey:

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

After school programs (ASPs) can provide a safe place for working families to send their school age children after school. Such programs also have the potential to support children’s learning and social adjustment (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soule, Womer, & Lu, 2004; Lauer, Akiba, Wilkerson, Apthorp, Snow, & Martin-Glenn, 2006; Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010; Shernoff, 2010; Vandell, Pierce, & Dadisman, 2007).

With the rise in the number of children attending ASPs and the increased funding directed toward sustaining these programs (Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010), it is important to evaluate the efficacy and quality of these program services. Recent literature on after school programs has begun to examine aspects of program quality and effectiveness. Much of this research involves asking for participant (child) or teacher ratings of the program and/or assessments of child outcomes. However, very little research has considered the perspective of parents using these programs (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Therefore, it is important to gain input from parents about their needs, perceptions and assessments of ASPs since they as well as their children are key stakeholders in the ASP (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). The current study addresses this gap in the literature.
ASPs began forming around the late nineteenth century due to changes in laws related to child labor and formal schooling, which resulted in more children attending school regularly (Halpern, 2002). Over the last several decades, ASPs have grown in number of programs and in enrollment due to factors such as changes in the economy, education of women, the need for dual household incomes, and increases in single parent households (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). With widespread growth in ASPs and enrollment, the primary topic in current research on ASPs has been whether and how after school programs make a difference for children and families. Results of these studies have been mixed, possibly due to the wide range of quality in ASPs (Pierce et al., 2010).

After school programs can provide many potential benefits for schools, families and communities. Schools and school districts can benefit from ASPs through student gains in academics as well as social adjustment. For example, children enrolled in an ASP make greater academic gains than peers not enrolled in an ASP (Lauer et al., 2006; Vandell, et al., 2007). Research has also documented improvements in social and emotional outcomes for children attending ASPs (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Mahoney, Parente, & Lord, 2007; Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010). Because youth are more likely to get into trouble or be arrested in the after school hours than at any other time, ASPs can provide important benefits for communities and families, by lowering rates of antisocial behavior in the community (Gottfredson et al., 2004).
While ASPs can be beneficial for participants, schools, families, and communities, simply attending an ASP is not a guarantee that participants and constituents will reap benefits. Therefore, recent research has focused on ASP quality (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010). Traditionally, quality has been indexed by program characteristics such as low staff-child ratios, high staff education, and low center enrollment (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996). More recently however, quality in ASPs has been measured by student outcomes such as academic improvement, self-esteem and behavior issues (Roth, Malone, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). The results of these studies indicate that ASPs can produce many positive outcomes for school-age children (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Gottfredson et al., 2004; Lauer et al., 2006; Riggs et al., 2010; Shernoff, 2010; Vandell et al., 2007).

Because parents are primary recipients of ASP program services, excluding them from a comprehensive study of program quality and outcomes misses potential important information about the program. Furthermore, because parents are responsible for choosing their child’s ASP it is important to understand their choices as well as their level of satisfaction with that choice. ASPs should have a clear understanding of what parents want and need from the program in order to best meet the family’s needs. A comprehensive evaluation of any ASPs quality must therefore include input from parents, teachers, and objective observers. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine parents’ perceptions of ASP quality. Specifically, the study had two aims: (a) to describe
parents’ perceptions of ASP quality and (b) to investigate similarities and differences in parents’ and staff (researcher and teachers) assessments of quality.

Methods

Research Question and Design

This study examined parents’ perceptions of quality in ASPs and compared those perceptions with teacher and researcher ratings of program quality. Parents and program staff completed surveys regarding the quality of the ASP. An independent observer conducted observations and completed an ASP survey for each site.

Participants and Setting

Approximately 1200 parents of children enrolled in a large afterschool program in the Sacramento region were invited to participate in the study. One hundred twenty nine parents chose to participate. Parents were recruited through three main ways: a) flyers posted in the centers, b) an invitation published in each site newsletter, and c) site staff mentioning the survey to the parents. Children enrolled in the targeted afterschool programs were in kindergarten through sixth grade and represented a diverse population with respect to socioeconomic status and ethnicity. The sites were located on local public school campuses. Approximately 240 program staff from the 20 sites was also recruited to participate in the study. Program supervisors for each site were recruited by the
researcher to participate in the study during their regular monthly meeting. The researcher then asked them to recruit any line staff that would be interested as well. Fifty program staff participated in the study.

**Procedures**

The researcher provided the program supervisors at each site with survey packets for staff and parents as well as a secure drop box. The researcher asked that the program staff place the surveys and the drop box near the parent table at each site. The site supervisors were instructed that anyone interested in participating should fill out a survey and place them in the secure drop box at their ASP. The observer conducted an observation at each site and filled out a survey based on each observation. Each observation lasted about one to two hours and consisted of observations of the environment, materials and interactions.

**Measures**

**Demographic Survey.** Parents completed a survey (see Appendix A) that included a series of items to assess demographic variables relevant to describing the sample’s diversity. This section of the survey consisted of questions about education, yearly income, family size, number of children enrolled in the ASP, and age(s) and gender(s) of child(ren) enrolled in the ASP. Staff were not given a separate demographic survey, however they were asked to share their years of experience working in ASPs.
Parent Report of ASP Quality. Parental perceptions of program quality were assessed in the survey in two ways. First, the parents completed four subscales of Likert items: health and safety, program activities, staff interactions, and satisfaction. Second, a series of seven open-ended questions asked parents to write about their perceptions of quality and satisfaction with the program.

Program Staff Report of Quality. Program staff perceptions of quality were assessed in a similar survey (see Appendix B). The staff survey included the same Likert items that the parents answered with the exception of the satisfaction items, as well as four open-ended questions about their thoughts and perceptions of quality on ASPs.

Observer Assessments of Quality. An observer visited each of the 20 sites for approximately one to two hours and completed the Likert items section of the staff ASP survey based on the observations made that day. The observer did not fill out the open-ended section of the staff survey.

Data Analysis

Parents’ and staff responses on open-ended questions were examined through qualitative analyses to identify common themes among responses. Parent, teacher, and observer survey items were aggregated and compared through paired t-tests and correlational analysis using SPSS.
Definition of Terms

One term used in this thesis is *After School Program* (ASP for the purposes of this paper). ASPs generally offer services to school aged children during out-of-school times. For this paper ASPs will be defined as, planned programs offered to school age children before and after school that provide children with a safe place to interact with other children and adults as well as various activities to occupy them while in the program.

Another term used in this thesis is *out-of-school time*. Out-of-school time or OST refers to any time that a child is not in school, including but not limited to summer breaks, holiday breaks, morning hours and afternoon hours.

Another term that should be defined is *program quality*. In this study, quality was operationalized as incorporating three constructs that correspond to the three subsections of the Likert items in the survey: health and safety, program activities, and staff interactions. These constructs are often measured in observational assessments of program quality (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). A quality program would be rated high on all three of these constructs.
Limitations

One limitation of this study was the relatively small and restricted sample. By recruiting only from one agency, the sample includes only those families who have children enrolled in the program run by this agency and the staff who work in the program. Further, this sample is limited because only families and staff members who took the time to participate are being represented. Those parents that participated were mostly college educated with a high socioeconomic status and this does not represent the entire population of families enrolled in this particular program or in the community as a whole. Other families that did not participate in this study may have had different views of the quality of the program. Staff who participated may be the ones who are more knowledgeable about program quality or place more value on it.

This study is also limited because self-report measures were used to collect data. These types of measure have the potential for response bias. With self-report measures, one can only know the answers to the specific questions that parents and staff answered. If respondents left a question blank, there is no way to obtain a response to that question. Also, with self-report there is no way to know if participants read each question thoroughly, gave it thought or understood the question as the researcher intended.

A third limitation to this study is that the survey tool may not be measuring quality in the way in which it was intended to measure it. The survey questions may not
be asking parents or program staff about the topics they are concerned with or consider important.

Another limitation to this study is that the comparisons between groups may not be valid since there were not an equal number of parents and staff that participated in the survey. In addition, there were not an equal number of parents and staff from each site that participated. Further, there was only one outside observer conducting the on-site observations and ratings, and the site visits provided only a relatively short period of observation at each site.

**Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter One has served as an introduction to this study of after school program quality. Chapter Two begins with an introduction to the topic of ASPs followed by an overview of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory and his Bioecological Model, which served as a theoretical framework for the study. Chapter Two then addresses the history of ASPs and increases in ASP enrollment, and the importance and benefits of ASPs for schools, families, and communities. Next, quality in ASPs is discussed, followed by parents’ perceptions of quality in ASPs. Chapter Three provides a description of the study methodology, including procedures and measures used to collect data. Chapter Four presents the results of the analyses. In Chapter Five, the results are discussed and conclusions are drawn. This chapter also describes the study limitations.
and offers suggestions for future research on this topic. Following Chapter Five are the appendices. Appendix A is the Parent ASP Survey and Appendix B is the Staff ASP survey.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of theory and research relevant to the current study addressing parental perceptions of quality in After-School Programs (ASPs). The chapter begins with a discussion of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Systems Model as a theoretical framework for the study. Next, the history and growth of ASPs are discussed as important contexts for understanding these programs today. Finally, research examining quality in ASPs is reviewed, with a particular focus on the importance of parents’ perspectives on quality.

Theoretical Framework

According to Vandell, Pierce, and Dadisman (2005) there are several theoretical frameworks that have been used in the research examining programs serving children’s out of school time. One such theory is Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Vandell et al., 2005). Bronfenbrenner proposed five interconnected systems that describe the child’s environment: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (1979). The microsystem consists of the activities and relationships that the child deals with directly, for example, family, school and peers. The mesosystem represents the relationships between two or more of these microsystems,
for example the relationship between parents and teachers. The exosystem consists of factors that affect the microsystem, for example, the effect that a parents stressful job has on the family. The macrosystem consists of factors such as society and culture and how they influence children’s development. The chronosystem is the effect of time on a child’s development. For example, children today are affected by advances in technology more than children of previous decades are.

More recently, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) proposed the Bioecological Model, which consists of four principal components and the interactive relationships among them. The main component is process, also referred to as proximal process, where interactions between the environment and the individual occur over time and produce human development. The second component is the person. Three characteristics of the person can affect the proximal processes through life; these are dispositions, resources of ability, and demand. The third component is context, which refers to the environment that interacts with the person. The fourth component is time, the period in which the proximal processes take place.

When using the Bioecological Model to examine ASPs, there are several components, which can influence children’s development. The first is proximal process, which is the interaction between the child and the ASP. The individual characteristics of the child as well as the environment of the ASP are important to this proximal process that influences the child’s development. Another important factor is time. The longer that a child interacts with the environment the more that interaction influences the child’s
development, whether positive or negative. For example, children who attend ASPs can have positive or negative interactions with the ASP depending on various factors such as the overall quality of the ASP, the activities provided by the ASP, the quality of the staff, the child’s personality traits, and even things that happened to the child that day at home or at school. Studies have shown that children who attend quality ASPs are more likely to have higher academic scores and better social outcomes than children who attend lower quality ASPs (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Lauer et al., 2006; Shernoff, 2010; and Vandell et al., 2007). If children are regularly attending high quality ASPs, the proximal process that occurs between program and child on a daily basis is likely to have a positive effect on their development. These studies show that the environment and the amount of time the child spends in the environment are important for children’s development. The children’s characteristics are also important to proximal process and the development of the child, unfortunately there are no studies of ASP programs that have looked at the individual differences of children as a factor.

The relationship between the ASP and the parents is an example of the mesosystem. The mesosystem is important because interactions and connections between the microsystems can affect the child. If the relationship between the parent and the ASP is positive, it is more likely that the child will have a positive attitude toward the ASP. Sanderson and Richards (2010) surveyed parents and children about their satisfaction with their current ASP, the importance of ASPs, preferred program characteristics, and barriers to participation. The results showed that both the parents and
the children were moderately satisfied with their ASP. Further, 94.8% of the parents reported ASPs as somewhat to very important with over 60% of parents rating ASPs as very important. These findings are likely related to one another. Parents that are satisfied with their child’s ASP are more likely to think that ASPs are important and are likely to pass these messages on to their children and influence the child’s opinion.

The exosystem as applied to the study of ASPs can be illustrated by considering the impact that a parent’s work has on the family and the child. Studies have shown that parents rated childcare needs due to work obligations as an important reason for enrolling their children in ASPs (Garey, 2002; Wu & Van Egeren, 2010). These families may put their children in a program out of necessity but may not have the resources that allow them to choose the program, resulting in children attending after school programs simply because they are convenient. Other families may have the resources to choose a quality program that suits their needs as well as their child’s needs. It is important to know whether parents’ are happy with their child’s ASP or if they are simply dealing with their only alternative, because this exosystem can have an impact on the child’s development. Further, poor quality care from the ASP may create extra stress for the parent, which may affect the parent-child relationship (Garey, 2002).
History of After-School Programs

The ASPs of today typically serve children from 5 to 18 years of age, during out
of school hours, and have a curriculum that often includes snack, homework assistance
and various recreational activities (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert & Parente, 2010).
However, this is not how ASPs have always been structured. According to Halpern
(2002), ASPs originated around the late nineteenth century, due to changes in laws
related to child labor and formal schooling, which resulted in more children attending
school regularly. These first ASPs, which were housed in churches and storefronts, were
mainly unstructured clubs that allowed boys to socialize after school. ASPs were a place
for children to go after school to relax and have fun after a demanding day at school that
focused on timeliness, efficiency and schedules. After school programs were also a way
to keep children safe and off the streets.

By the late 1890’s, ASPs began implementing classes such as singing, writing,
and wrestling (Halpern, 2002). Although most programs operated after school only,
some also took place during the summer months. By 1910 most ASPs were serving both
boys and girls and were staffed by part-time workers and volunteers. During these early
days, ASPs had a focus on allowing children to play because school was so rigid and play
was considered very important for children. From 1930 to 1950 ASP’s became even
more popular and often began to serve a childcare function as fathers went to war and
mothers went to work (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). From 1950 to 1970, with the increase
in crime and the resulting perception that urban neighborhoods were unsafe, ASPs were thought of as a secure place for children (Bodilly & Beckett).

Over the last several decades, ASP’s have grown in number of programs and in enrollment due to factors such as changes in the economy, education of women, the need for dual household incomes, and single parenting. ASP have evolved from a small room in a church where boys go to play games after school to large youth organizations that provide structured activities, government funding, and accountability (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Currently, many ASPs are required to hold a state license. In California, the state licensing agency ensures that after school programs meet the basic requirements such as, (a) meeting legally defined adult-child ratios (1:14), (b) ensuring that staff have appropriate education, (at least 12 units of core early childhood education courses to be teacher qualified) and (c) ensuring that the environment is safe (medications locked up, sanitary food preparation, etc.).

Enrollment of school age children in ASPs has been increasing over the last two decades. The federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers and California’s Proposition 49, which increased state funding for after school programs, are two examples of the push to make afterschool programs part of the educational system and are two reasons for the increase in ASP enrollment (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010). The increase in ASP enrollment and funding has put a spotlight on ASPs. Federal, state, and local agencies that fund ASPs are pushing for programs to provide evidence that ASPs improve academic performance and help close the achievement gap
for low-income youth (Pierce, Bolt, & Vandell, 2010). These government agencies have developed policies that dedicate money to support ASPs, which are now being held responsible for providing academic support as well as evidence of benefits and positive outcomes to justify those funds (Sheldon, Arbetron, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010).

**Benefits of After School Programs**

After school programs are valued in part because they promote several kinds of positive outcomes for children and families, whether academic, personal, or social (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). With widespread growth in after school programs and enrollment, the primary question addressed in current research on ASPs is whether such programs provide benefits for children and families, and whether they make a difference in children’s development.

**Benefits for Families, Schools and Communities**

The increase in single parent families and the economic need for dual-income families has led to an increased need for ASPs serving school-aged children (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005). Over 60% of parents in one study rated after school programs as very important (Sanderson, & Richards, 2010). According to Garey (2002), while parents want many different things out of an ASP they mainly want a safe place for their children to be after school.
Concerns about delinquency during after school hours have been a factor in community support for ASP’s (Gottfredson et al., 2004). Due to lower levels of adult supervision young people are more likely to get into trouble and be arrested in the after school hours than at any other time (Gottfredson et al., 2004). Gottfredson et al. (2004) looked at the impact of ASPs on reducing delinquency. A total of 417 elementary and middle school students were assigned to a treatment group where they attended an ASP while 408 elementary and middle school students were assigned to the control group that did not attend an ASP. Students from the treatment and control groups completed pre and posttest surveys about themselves in regards to their rebellious and delinquent behaviors, their attitudes about drug use and peer relationships, and their after school activities. The results from these surveys indicated that middle school children that attended ASPs showed reduced delinquent behavior and attitudes on the posttests. Further, students that attended an ASP that emphasized social skills and character development showed greater reductions in delinquent behaviors and attitudes (Gottfredson et al., 2004).

Not only is it there a community concern that unsupervised children will commit crimes during the hours after school. An equally serious concern is that they could become victims of crimes themselves. Children from low-income neighborhoods are at risk for becoming involved in crime, becoming victims of crime, and failing out of school due to the unsafe neighborhoods in which they live (Lauer et al., 2006). In their meta-analysis of at-risk students Lauer et al., (2006) focused mainly on academics. However
they also noted that because the neighborhoods of low-income children are less safe, there is a need for structured ASPs to provide a safe place with adult supervision.

**ASPs and Academic Achievement and Social Adjustment**

ASPs do not just provide childcare for working families; they can also produce positive influences on many areas of children’s development. For instance, children who participate in ASPs have a better chance of avoiding obesity (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). Further, ASP participation can help improve daily school attendance (Roth, Malone, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Results from studies looking at academic and social outcomes of children enrolled in ASPs have been mixed, possibly due to the wide range of quality in ASPs (Pierce et al., 2010). However, studies show that children who attend after school programs are more likely to have improved academic scores (Lauer et al., 2006; Shernoff, 2010; Vandell, et al., 2007); lower levels of delinquency (Gottfredson, et al., 2004; Vandell, et al., 2007); and greater personal well-being (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Riggs, et al., 2010; Shernoff, 2010; Vandell, et al., 2007).

Lauer et al. (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 35 studies on out of school time programs that were assisting students who were at risk in reading and or mathematics. To be included studies had to sample children from grades Kindergarten through twelve, and had to be published or reported after 1985. Studies included direct assessment of academic achievement in reading, mathematics or both, and studies had to examine the effectiveness of the OST program for students at risk for school failure. Students were
classified as at risk based on low academic performance or low SES. Results of the meta-analysis showed that reading and math scores were higher for at risk children enrolled in after school programs. Lauer et al. also found that OST programs could have positive impacts on the achievement of at risk students regardless of whether the program had an academic focus or an academic and social focus. This result suggests that programs do not need to focus on academics alone in order to have positive impacts on student achievement.

While many studies have addressed academic achievement as an outcome of ASPs, social skills and social adjustment have also been examined. Shernoff (2010) looked at involvement in after school programs as a predictor of social competence as well as academic performance. Middle school students who participated in ASPs for one academic year were found to have higher English grades than non-participants at the end of the year as well as higher social competence as self-reported on a social competence scale (Shernoff, 2010).

Other studies have examined the impacts of ASPs on other aspects of social behavior. For example, Vandell et al. (2007) found that middle school students who regularly participated in ASPs demonstrated significant gains on standardized math test scores and showed reductions in misconduct and use of drugs and alcohol. Similarly, Gottfredson et al. (2004) looked at ASPs and their impact on reducing delinquency. Data from the Gottfredson et al. study came from an evaluation of Maryland’s After School Community Grant Programs. The 14 programs were designed to reduce unsupervised
time after school, as well as change students’ attitudes towards substance use and illegal behaviors, while improving peer social bonding, academic performance and social skills. Each program served between 22 and 45 children in grades four through eight. The programs offered academic assistance, social skills training, and recreational activities. Students completed a survey about themselves at the beginning and end of the school year. Results from the study indicated that participation in the ASPs reduced delinquent behavior for middle school but not elementary school youth. This result was likely due to the fact that the younger students were not yet participating in the dangerous delinquent behaviors more typical in older students. In addition, impacts on delinquent behaviors were stronger in the programs, which emphasized social skills and character development.

Participation in ASPs has also been linked to improved personal social skills. For example, Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 75 reports evaluating 69 different programs, looking at the influence of ASPs on personal and social skills. Inclusion criteria for this meta analysis were studies of ASPs that served children between the ages of 5 and 18, operated during at least part of the school year outside of normal school hours, were supervised by adults, and where at least one of the goals was the development of one or more personal or social skills. Results from the meta-analysis indicated that the ASPs had an overall positive and statistically significant impact on the youth in the programs. Specifically, youths’ showed increases in self-perceptions,
bonding to school, positive social behaviors, as well as school grades and achievement test scores.

Riggs et al. (2010) looked at the benefits of ASPs for Latino youth in terms of identity and self-worth. The researcher conducted two pilot studies with Latino youth from the ages of 12 to 18 years. In the first pilot study, 46 participants in the ASP completed surveys on ethnic identity and self-worth, as well as surveys regarding the amount of time they attended and their perceptions of the quality of the program. Results indicated that participants who spent more time at the ASP and perceived it to be a safe place were more likely to report increased self-worth. In the second pilot study, Riggs et al. looked at 118 Latino students from six to 12 years old who had low academic performance, poor classroom conduct, and/or low parent participation. The students attended a program that offered Latino cultural activities such as lessons in traditional Mexican music, dance, and Mexican meals, along with English lessons. The teachers at the after school program as well as the regular school teachers filled out surveys on social and academic functioning for the students attending the program. The results of the second pilot study indicated that Latino students who were less skilled at concentration and emotion regulation at the beginning of the study showed improvements in end of the study when they spent more time at the ASP.

The results of these several studies confirm an association between participation in ASPs and several academic and social adjustment outcomes. However, recent research
has focused not just on a student’s participation in an ASP but on the quality of these programs, which was the focus of the current study.

**Quality in After-School Programs**

While ASPs are beneficial for participants, schools, families, and communities, simply attending an ASP is not a guarantee that participants and constituents will reap benefits. Therefore, current research has focused on defining and assessing quality in ASPs in order to improve programs and child, family and community outcomes (Hirsch et al., 2010).

Studies suggest that high quality programs seem to make a difference. Vandell et al. (2007) looked at relations between high quality ASPs and desired academic and behavioral outcomes for low-income middle school students. Programs were considered high quality when they consisted of a mix of activities, nurtured positive relationships, engaged the students, offered age appropriate learning opportunities, and had trained program staff. Students who regularly participated in ASPs with low youth to staff ratios demonstrated significant gains in standardized math test scores. These students also showed reductions in misconduct and reduced use of drugs and alcohol (Vandell et al.).

Other research indicates that implementation of high quality ASPs can produce positive outcomes for school-age children in low performing schools (Cross et al., 2010). Cross et al. (2010) created an ASP in five low performing middle schools. Fifty students
from each school were randomly assigned to the intervention group while 50 students were randomly assigned to a control group. The intervention group participated in the ASP while the control group was invited to attend a fun activity at the program once a month. The program was offered three days a week for three hours after school. One and a half hours of the program per week consisted of an All Stars prevention curriculum designed to delay and prevent high-risk behaviors. Student research assistants performed program observations that focused on program management, climate, and student engagement as measures of quality. Data were also collected from student attendance records, staff employment records, and a youth self-report. The results showed that higher levels of staff training and education were related to higher quality experiences by youth. However, high program attendance did not always yield the best outcomes; at one site, youths reported fewer positive outcomes despite having the second highest attendance. The qualitative data indicated that the sites with the highest ratings by youth and observers regarding a positive atmosphere also had the highest youth and observer ratings for staff quality. Furthermore, Cross et al. found that high quality staff was a predictor of a high quality ASP.

**Staff Quality**

One of the most important aspects of ASP program quality examined by researchers is quality of staff, including factors such as number of staff, education level and child-staff relationships. Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) examined 30 school-aged
child-care programs serving third through fifth grade students. A total of 180 children provided their perceptions of the ASPs. Observers also visited each program, rating staff-child interactions, curriculum, staff-child ratios and number of children in attendance. Parents were interviewed over the phone. Directors reported on the number of staff employed, staff education, and the type of program activities available. The results indicated that child-staff ratio, center size, and staff education were important predictors of quality. Negative staff-child interactions were more frequent in programs with higher staff-child ratios and lower levels of formal education for staff. Another important finding was that staff-child interactions were more frequent and positive when there were a greater variety of activities offered. Parental reports about the programs showed an association with child reports of program climate and the observed staff-child ratios. When children reported positive program assessments parents were more likely to report that the program was meeting their child’s needs. When child-staff ratios were smaller parents were more positive in their ratings of the program.

Similarly, Smith et al. (2010) did a meta-analysis that investigated the quality of after school programs at the point of service, focusing on relations between staff practices and youth experiences. The researchers used observational data from 599 after school sites within 165 different organizations in 6 states. Quality of staff practices were assessed by a one to two hour observation by an outside rater. Staff were rated on welcoming atmosphere, inclusion practices, support for active learning, support for group participation, opportunities for youth planning, opportunities for youth to make choices,
and opportunities for youth to reflect. The results showed that there are three broad styles of staff practices (a) Positive Youth Development (b) Staff Centered and (c) Low Quality. The Positive Youth Development style was found to offer choice, planning, and reflection to the youth in the program unlike the Staff Centered and Low Quality Styles. Smith et al., (2010) point out that programs should strive for the Positive Youth Development style as the primary staff teaching style as this would be a higher quality program for youth.

Staff training is also an important feature of quality. Staff training is important because positive interactions between staff and participants are conducive to engagement and thus quality programs (Smith et al., 2010). In the ASP field, staff training typically consists of a one-time introduction to program materials that rarely makes a lasting impact (Sheldon, et al., 2010). However, studies indicate that training ASP staff can lead to more positive outcomes for program participants. For instance, Sheldon et al. (2010) trained after school staff using targeted training sessions throughout the year, as well as on-site observations and coaching. The researchers assessed the impact of the training by measuring changes in students’ reading scores. The results showed that academically at risk children who were taught by the targeted trained staff showed reading gains of 0.45 in a year compared to children taught by traditionally trained staff, who showed reading gains of 0.22 in a year.

Because staff quality is consistently linked to overall ASP program quality, ratings of staff quality were included in the current study. Both parents and observers
completed subsections sections concerning staff interactions with children and parents as part of the survey examining overall program quality.

**Other Quality Indicators**

Recent literature has identified additional characteristics and outcomes as measures of ASP quality. For example, student engagement is an important indicator of program quality because it shows how involved the participants are in the activities that the program provides. Shernoff and Vandell examined the relationship between students’ engagement in ASP activities and participants’ ratings of the quality of the experience (2010). They defined engagement as concentration on an activity that is interesting and enjoyable. Data were collected from 165 eighth grade students who were participating in an after school program. The students wore digital wristwatches preprogrammed to beep five times a day during non-school hours. Each time the watch beeped, the students had to record what they were doing, who they were with and how interesting the activity was. The results showed that students reported higher engagement for activities such as sports and arts and lower engagement for activities such as homework and snacks. More importantly, participants in highly engaging ASPs demonstrated higher levels of social competence and had higher English grades (Shernoff et al.).

In another study of engagement in ASPs, Mohoney et al. (2007) examined links between engagement, child competence, and program quality. Participants in the study included 141 first through third grade children who were part of a larger longitudinal
study on after school time. Classroom teachers filled out surveys on the participating students’ social and academic competence in the classroom in the fall and in the spring. Outside observers assessed a number of factors of the ASP including student engagement, process quality, and content of the program. The results indicated that student engagement in the ASP was associated with higher teacher ratings on classroom social competence. Furthermore, programs that were rated as more engaging were also rated significantly higher in organization, social climate, and skill building. In these ASPs, students spent more time on enrichment and skill building activities than on homework and non-skill building activities.

Staffing, developmental outcomes, and engagement are not the only factors that index quality in ASPs. Other factors such as program characteristics and implementation, and government policies are also important to consider in assessing quality in ASPs (Hirsch, et al., 2010). Program characteristics and implementation are especially important depending upon the age groups or ethnicities represented in the participants (Riggs, et al., 2010; Gottfredson et al, 2004; Cross et al., 2010). For example, Latino students in an ASP that focused on things like culture, and stereotypes, reported higher levels of self worth and ethnic identity (Riggs, et al., 2010). In addition, programs that serve older youth are more effective at preventing delinquent behaviors (Gottfredson et al., 2004; Cross et al., 2010).
Parents’ Perspectives About After School Programs

In assessing the quality and efficacy of ASPs, it is important to gain input from parents about their needs and perceptions since they as well as their children are key recipients of ASP services (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Among other things, parents need and want ASPs for their children to be safe (Garey, 2002). However, very little of the research on ASPs has included input from parents (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Therefore, it is important to find out what else parents want from their child’s ASP program, as well as what parents believe constitutes quality in an ASP.

Some studies have examined parents’ expectations and needs for services for their school age children. For example, Garey (2002) interviewed parents of school age children about what they need in an ASP. She found that parents reported they needed ASPs because they wanted a safe place for their children to be after school. Some parents wanted their children to have the opportunity to work on their homework, some wanted their children to engage in free play, and others even wanted their children to be provided with extracurricular activities such as dance or music. These findings suggest that parents may have diverse reasons for enrolling their child in after school care, and may therefore have different ideas about what constitutes quality care.

Wu and Van Egeren (2010) also investigated parents’ reasons for enrollment in an ASP by surveying parents of children enrolled in a 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) program in Michigan. The 21st CCLC program is the largest ASP
initiative in the United States that was brought on by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002; the 21st CCLC program is designed to provide academic enrichment to students in high poverty and low performing schools. The results of the study indicated that parents were more likely to enroll younger children for childcare reasons. Parents who viewed the ASP as a learning environment reported both academics and childcare as reasons for enrolling their children. Interestingly, parents who reported that the program spent the right amount of time on academics were more likely to enroll their children for academic reasons while parents who thought they program spent the right amount of time on recreation were more likely to enroll their children for childcare reasons. When programs had stricter attendance policies, parents were more likely to report academic and childcare reasons for enrollment.

Other studies have reported that parents view programming and activities as important components of an ASP. Sanderson and Richards (2010) surveyed 225 parents of children ages nine to 14 on report card pickup day at their child’s school. The results showed that 94.8% of parents rated ASP programming as “somewhat” to “very important”. Parents nominated computers, tutoring, music, arts & crafts, and mentoring as the top five activities they wanted in an ASP. Parents also reported homework help and academics as most important to them. Among families not currently using the ASP, parents reported that the reason/s their child was not enrolled included parents not knowing what activities were available, cost of the program, and/or lack of availability.
In a similar study, Dodd and Bowen (2011) examined the 21st CCLC program that is geared toward developing academic and social skills in children from kindergarten through 12th grade. For this study a sample of 20 parents, 20 students, and 20 teachers filled out surveys to identify the needs and expectations of parents and children for the 21st CCLC program, as well as to assess their perceptions about the existing after school program. Results of the pre-test identified a need for an academic component in the after school program. Based on the pre-tests an intervention was put in place that consisted of in-service interventions, which included the development of a new curriculum as well as staff trainings, student incentives, and parent luncheons. The post-test survey was administered to a sample of the original pre-test participants and it contained 10 of the original items from the pre-test. The results showed that students agreed that the new curriculum enhanced student knowledge however students’ responses on all other questions were neutral. Further, teacher responses on survey items were also neutral. The results showed that parents did not change their perceptions much from the pre-test to the post-test. The only significant change was that parents saw an improvement in staff communication. Parents still felt that there was a need for a new curriculum even though a new curriculum was put into place. Perhaps the curriculum change was not effective, or had not been in effect long enough, or parents were not made aware of the changes that took place. This is why it is important for ASPs to communicate with families and make sure that they are involved in the ASP as much as possible.
The Current Study

Since the late nineteenth century ASPs have been an important part of educational and child care services for children and families, and thus it is important to study them (Halpern, 2002). ASPs can promote a variety of positive outcomes for children, families and communities such as academic improvement, personal well-being, and social skills (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). However, simply attending an ASP is not a guarantee that participants and constituents will reap these benefits; therefore current research has been focused on defining and assessing quality in ASPs in order to improve programs and participant outcomes (Hirsch et al., 2010). One gap in this research has been a focus on parental perceptions of ASPs including most importantly, program quality. The majority of research on ASPs that has included parents has addressed what parents need or want in a program. Unfortunately, there have been no studies that look at parents perceptions of quality. In order to address this lack in the research in this area, this thesis examined the beliefs of parents in regards to ASP quality by (a) describing parents’ perceptions of quality in ASPs and (b) examining whether parent perceptions of ASP quality were associated with teacher and researcher observations of quality.
Chapter 3

METHOD

Research Questions and Design

This quantitative descriptive and correlational study attempted to (a) describe parents’ perceptions of quality in ASPs and to (b) test whether parent perceptions of ASP quality were associated with teacher and researcher observations of quality. Parents completed a survey packet consisting of a demographic survey, and an after school program survey. At least one program staff from each site completed a staff version of the ASP survey. In addition, an independent observer conducted observations at each site and completed the staff version of the ASP survey based on that observation. The parents’ survey responses were then compared to the independent observers’ responses as well as the program staff responses.

Setting, Recruitment, and Participants

Setting

The ASP examined in the current study is a licensed before and after school childcare program run by a public agency. The program operates 21 sites located at different school campuses across three different public school districts. The site at which
the researcher works was excluded from the study, leaving a total of 20 remaining sites that were included in this study. Children enrolled in the program were in kindergarten through sixth grade and represented a diverse population with respect to socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Parents pay for the program through monthly fees or receive subsidized funding through a state agency or through the ASP program itself.

Recruitment

The pool of possible participants for the study included the parents of approximately 1,200 children enrolled in a large afterschool program in the Sacramento region. Parents were recruited through three main ways: a) flyers posted in the centers, b) an invitation published in each site newsletter, and c) site staff mentioning the survey to the parents. Approximately 240 program staff from the 20 sites was also recruited to participate in the study. Program supervisors for each site were recruited by the researcher to participate in the study during their regular monthly meeting. The researcher then asked them to recruit any line staff that would be interested as well.

Participants

Parents and Children. One hundred twenty-nine parents chose to fill out the parent surveys for this study. The demographics for the parents that participated were 96 mothers (74%) and 19 fathers (15%). Six respondents reported themselves as other, and eight did not report their relationship to the target child. The mean number of children
reported living in the household was 1.75 (ranging from 1 to 5 children). The mean number of adults living in the household was 1.85 (ranging from 1 to 4 adults).

The survey also asked parents to provide information about their children and the time they spent in the program. The mean number of children living in the household who attended the program was 1.28. There were 31 kindergartners, 30 first graders, 26 second graders, 22 third graders, 24 fourth graders, 14 fifth graders, and 13 sixth graders. There were 74 girls (45%) and 90 boys (55%) for a total of 164 children. The reported mean for amount of time in the program was 3.21 years with a range of less than a year to 14 years. The reported mean for hours of monthly attendance was 5.03 where five represents attending 50 to 65 hours per month and six represents attending 35 to 50 hours per month.

Parents reported their education levels ranging from less than a high school diploma to an MA or PHD degree, with a mean education level of 3.86, with a 3 being some college and a 4 being a BA degree. Families’ reported annual gross household income ranged from “$0 to $20,000” to “$100,000 or more” with the mean of 7.43 representing $70,001 to $90,000. The highest frequency was $100,000 or more with 55 parents (28%) in that category. The current study did not ask parents for any information regarding parents or child ethnicity.

**Staff.** Approximately 240 program staff across the 20 sites were recruited to participate in the study. Program supervisors for each site were recruited by the researcher during one of their regular monthly meetings. The researcher then asked the
supervisors to assist in recruiting staff from each site. A total of 50 program staff participated in the survey with a range of one to 15 participating from each site. Program staff were asked about their years of experience working in ASPs. They were given ranges to choose from. Staff reported a mean of 3.12, which represents the four to six year range of experience.

**Outside Observer.** The researcher served as the outside observer in this study, completing a one to two hour observation as well as the ASP survey for each of the 20 participating sites. The researcher has 7 years experience working at the School-Aged Child Care Program site, which was excluded from this study, and 14 total years working in ASPs.

**Procedures**

Packets including a cover/recruitment letter, a demographic survey, and an ASP survey were available at all sites for interested parents. After parents filled out the surveys, they were instructed to place them in a secure drop box at the ASP. Staff members were provided with packets containing a cover/recruitment letter as well as the staff ASP survey. Staff members were also asked to return the completed survey to the secure drop box at their ASP. The researcher conducted a one to two hour observation at each site. The researcher took notes during the observations. Based on these observations, the researcher filled out the staff ASP survey for each site.
Measures

Demographic Survey

Parents were asked to complete a survey to assess demographic variables relevant to describing the sample’s diversity. The survey consisted of questions about parent education, family yearly income, family size, number of children enrolled in the ASP, as well as age(s) and gender(s) of child(ren) enrolled in the ASP. The complete survey is included in Appendix A.

Parent Survey of ASP Quality

The parent survey of ASP program quality (see Appendix A) was comprised of two sections. In the first section, parents completed 27 Likert items regarding program quality (e.g., There is enough indoor space for children to do activities) and four Likert items regarding their satisfaction with the program (e.g., Please rate your overall satisfaction with the program).

The 27 Likert items regarding program quality on were modeled on items and program areas used in the School Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS) (Harms, Jacobs, & White, 1996). The SACERS is a well-known instrument with a target age range of kindergarten through sixth grade. Its primary purposes are for program improvement, monitoring and accrediting programs, as well as research and evaluation of programs (Yohalem & Ahlstrom, 2010).
The parent ASP quality survey was comprised of three subscales. The first subscale, *health and safety*, consisted of eight items; an example item is, “There are safety practices in place (e.g. medicine and hazardous materials are locked up, emergency procedures are posted)”. The second subscale, *activities*, consisted of nine items; an example from this subscale is, “Arts and crafts activates and materials are available (e.g. markers, crayons, paper, projects)”. The third subscale, *staff quality*, consisted of 10 items. An example item is, “The staff interact with children in a positive manner”.

For each item in the three subscales, parents were asked to provide a Likert Scale rating from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Items were worded so that a higher rating for an item indicated a higher rating for quality. Parent survey responses were aggregated by taking the mean of all items for each subscale. Each of the subscales were found to be internally consistent. The safety subscale had a Cronbach alpha of .85, the activities subscale had a Cronbach alpha of .93, and the staff subscale had a Cronbach alpha of .96.

The second section of the survey consisted of open-ended questions that asked the parents to report their perceptions of quality and satisfaction with the program. For example, these questions asked parents why they chose the program, what they think makes a quality after school program, what they think about the quality of the program, their satisfaction with the program and if they had anything else to add.
Teacher Survey of ASP Quality

The program staff who chose to participate in the study each filled out a staff ASP survey that paralleled the parent survey. The staff survey consisted of the same 27 items of ASP quality as the parent ASP survey. The staff ASP survey also included one question asking staff how long they had worked in ASPs as well as three open-ended questions regarding their experiences and perceptions of quality in ASPs. These questions asked staff about the quality of their program, what they think makes a high quality after school program, and if they had anything else to add. See Appendix B for this measure.

Staff responses to the Likert survey items were aggregated by taking the mean of all items for each subscale. All of the subscales on the staff survey were found to be internally consistent, with Cronbach alphas of .76, .86, and .88 for the safety, activity, and staff subscales respectively.

Observer Assessments of Quality

The researcher visited each site for approximately one to two hours to observe site quality. The researcher conducted the visits when the majority of the children were in attendance. A few sites were observed in the morning starting around 8:00 am, however most sites were observed in the afternoon hours around 4:00 pm. During the observation, the researcher focused on observing the indoor and outdoor environment as well as the activities, taking notes relevant to the survey items. The researcher also paid attention to
interactions between staff, children and parents. The researcher asked questions of staff and children when needed. Based on the observations made that day, the observer completed the staff ASP survey (see Appendix B) for each site. The observer did not have prior access to the staff and parent assessments at the time of her assessment.

**Data Analysis**

Parent and staff responses to the open-ended questions were examined through qualitative analyses to identify common themes among the responses. The demographic and Likert survey items from the parent, staff and observer surveys were analyzed using SPSS. First, the researcher computed descriptive and frequency statistics for demographic items. Next, an aggregate score was created for each of the three quality subscales for each parent, staff and observer survey: health and safety, activities and staff. Finally, in order to compare perceptions of quality between parents, staff, and the observer, paired samples t-tests and Pearson correlations were computed. These results can be found in Chapter Four.
Correlation Analysis

Several preliminary analyses were conducted. First, Pearson Correlations were conducted to test whether there were associations between reported parent and child demographics and parent scores of ASP quality. Parent education level was negatively associated with satisfaction with activities ($r (121) = -.199, p < .05$). Mean comparisons used to test for differences in scores as a function of child gender and attendance group revealed no significant differences.

Correlations were also computed to test for associations between the parent health and safety, activity, and staff quality composites, and parent satisfaction ratings. As shown in Table 1, parent satisfaction ratings were significantly correlated with ratings of quality. Parent overall satisfaction was significantly correlated with activities ($r (123) = .75, p<.001$). Parent overall satisfaction was also significantly correlated with staff quality ($r (123) =.54, p<.05$). There were also significant intercorrelations between the subscales.
Table 1

*Inter-Correlations among Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<td>2) Activities</td>
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<td>3) Staff Quality</td>
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<td>.71**</td>
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<td>4) Overall Satisfaction</td>
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<td><strong>Observer Ratings</strong></td>
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<td>6) Activities</td>
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<td>.62**</td>
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<td>7) Staff Quality</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Staff Ratings</strong></td>
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<td>9) Activities</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>.78***</td>
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<td>10) Staff Quality</td>
<td>.49*</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.48*</td>
<td>.45*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 (2-tailed)  ** p < .01 (2-tailed)  *** p < .001 (2-tailed)
Comparisons Between Groups

Parents and Outside Observer

A series of paired sample t-tests and Pearson correlations were conducted to compare parents’ ratings with observer ratings on the survey subscales. As shown in Table 2, t-tests revealed that the observer rated health and safety items significantly lower than the parents did, \( t(18) = 5.41, p=.0001 \). Similarly, the observer rated activities significantly lower than the parents did, \( t(18) = 6.47, p=.0001 \). Finally, the results showed that the observer rated staff significantly lower than the parents did, \( t(18) = 3.90, p=.001 \). As shown in table 2, Pearson correlations showed that there was a significant positive relationship between parent and observer ratings for activities \( r(19) = .62, p<.01 \) and staff \( r(19) = .5, p<.05 \), however not for health and safety.
Table 2

*Parent-Observer Comparisons*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Parent Mean (Std)</th>
<th>Observer Mean (Std)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.65 (.401)</td>
<td>4.66 (.881)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.41***</td>
<td>.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>5.46 (.490)</td>
<td>4.72 (.617)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.47****</td>
<td>.62**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>6.19 (.468)</td>
<td>5.35 (1.05)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.90***</td>
<td>.50*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05  **p<.01  ***p<.001  ****p<.0001

**Parents and Staff**

A second series of paired samples t-tests and correlations were conducted to compare parents’ ratings with staff ratings on the survey items. As shown in Table 3, t-tests revealed no significant differences between parent and staff ratings on any of the subscales. Pearson correlations showed that there were no significant associations between parent and staff ratings on health, activities, or staff quality.
Table 3

*Parent-Staff Comparisons*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Parent Mean (Std)</th>
<th>Observer Mean (Std)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.65 (.401)</td>
<td>5.78 (.615)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-.850</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>5.46 (.490)</td>
<td>5.46 (.631)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>6.19 (.468)</td>
<td>6.23 (.508)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-.274</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05   **p<.01   ***p<.001   ****p<.0001

**Staff and Outside Observer**

A third series of paired samples t-tests and correlations were conducted to compare staff ratings with observer ratings on survey items. As shown in Table 4, t-tests revealed that the observer made significantly lower ratings than staff did for health and safety items ($t(19) = -5.03, p=.0001$), activities ($t(19) = -4.43, p=.0001$), and staff quality ($t(19) = -4.42, p=.001$). Pearson correlations showed no significant associations between the staff and observer ratings for any of the subscales.
Table 4

*Staff-Observer Comparisons*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Staff Mean (Std)</th>
<th>Observer Mean (Std)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.81 (.617)</td>
<td>4.67 (.859)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-5.03****</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>5.46 (.614)</td>
<td>4.75 (.619)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-4.43****</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>6.25 (.485)</td>
<td>5.33 (1.00)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-4.15***</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05   **p<.01   ***p<.001   ****p<.0001

**Qualitative Data**

Both the parent and staff surveys included open-ended questions about their opinions of the program and ASP’s in general. The data from these open-ended questions were analyzed using qualitative methods to identify common themes among the responses.

**Parent Responses about Why They Chose the Program**

Parents were asked to share their opinions and insights regarding the program in the open-ended section of the ASP survey. Of the 128 parents participating in the survey,
128 answered at least one of the open-ended questions. The first question asked parents, “Why did you choose this program as your child’s after school program?” The main reason that parents indicated that they chose this program was convenience. An example is parent # 29 who said, “Convenience and safety of program being located on the school campus, no need to arrange special transportation.” Another example is parent # 128 who said, “It’s on campus of the school kids attend. It’s very convenient and an established program.” Other top reasons that parents reported for why they chose the program were price, staff, and reputation of quality. One example is parent # 7 who said, “The staff have helped my son through some tough situations, i.e. communication issues. Very supportive and friendly staff.” Another example is parent # 32 who said, “Recommended by others and cost effective”. Parent # 41 said, “We chose this program based on location, reputation and cost.”

**Parents Responses about What Makes for a High Quality ASP**

The second question the parents were asked was, “What do you think makes for a high quality after school program?” The parent responses to this item were similar to those given by staff. There were four main themes that emerged from the responses to this question. The first theme was staff. Parents reported that a high quality program should have high quality staff with good communication. They were also concerned with the interactions between the staff and the children as well as a low staff-child ratio. Some examples are parent # 1 who said, “People committed to providing a safe, interactive,
positive environment for kids”, and parent # 31 who said, “Staff-child ratio. Staff who like working with kids. Organized, structured, and flexible.” Another example is parent # 63 who said, “Caring, intelligent staff members who work extremely well with the children.” Another example is parent # 91 who said, “Responsible staff, interaction with the kids, respectful and caring environment, safety, great communication between parents and staff.”

The second theme was activities. The parents thought a high quality ASP should have outdoor play, choices for children, homework and continuing education opportunities. Parents also stated that a high quality ASP should be fun and allow children to play. For example, parent # 15 said, “A program where my kids can stay active and safe and can continue to learn and better themselves.” Another example is parent # 29 who said, “Continuation of the learning environment but with less structure than school, balance between crafts, homework and other focused time and active play time, acknowledges difference in interests in activity levels between boys and girls and between age groups.” Another example is parent # 74 who said, “Continue learning in a fun non-stressful way. Lots of fun activities.”

The third theme was a need for health and safety. Parents stated that a high quality ASP should be clean and should have a safe environment. One example is parent # 65 who said, “Safety and happy children”. Another example is parent # 123 who said, “Safe & healthy environment, positive discipline, good communication between staff and children and their families, cleanliness and plenty of materials provided”. 
The fourth theme was organization. Parents’ comments concurred with staff comments that a high quality ASP should have an organized leadership. Parents also thought the program should be structured, have a variety of resources, be affordable, and convenient. An example is parent # 10, who said, “Structured programs and consistent rules.” Another example is parent #23 who said, “Consistency, improved employee selection, surprise site visits by director or district officer, employee training on cultural sensitivity, high standards of care, educated staff, providing activities, strict dress code, etc.” Another example is parent # 75 who said, “A safe, wholesome, developmentally appropriate program with educated, non judgmental staff who know how to teach and foster interpersonal skills and character/social development, available and regular care hours, flexible usage categories/payment options, supportive philosophy that compliments the school/educational focus.”

**Parent Responses about Program Quality**

The third question parents were asked was, “What are your thoughts about the quality of this program?” There were many positive comments. The majority of the parents thought the quality was good or great. A few even said that the program was excellent. Many parents said they loved the program. For example, parent # 15 said, “I love the program. My son loves the staff and I like talking and spending time watching the projects.” Another example is parent # 60 who said, “I am relieved that this program exists. Without it, I don’t know what we would do for childcare. This program doesn’t
just watch our kids but it provides additional enrichment to their lives and education.
This is a great program.”

Many parents gave specific reasons for their positive views of the program’s quality. Reasons ranged from their child is happy to good staff to fun activities. For example, parent # 54 said, “Our thoughts of the quality of the program are very high. The children learn to interact with others, as well as in group activities and alone time. We think the staff monitors the children appropriately allowing them to be themselves, but also reinforcing structure.” Another example is parent # 87 who said, “Love all the activities and trips. Staff are all very welcoming and great to my children. Very positive staff.” Another example is parent # 115 who said, “We love it. Our child is happy and well cared for; sometimes he would rather stay at the program then come home. He loves it!”

There were also some negative thoughts and opinions as well. Many parents pointed out that the sites needed more space, materials, and resources. For example, parent # 24 said, “Overall the program is great; however I would like to see more space and furnishings available to the children.” Another example is parent # 36 who said, “I feel that it is very good considering the size of the enrollment and the space limitations. They do very good with what is available.” Parent # 61 said, “Go back to the program of the 1980’s. More trips, fun choice play, higher quality crafts.” Another example is parents # 65 who said, “Have been getting worse, and thinking funding is an issue. Staff
see uptight. But the managers/supervisors are great listeners and are able and ready to help when approached.”

A few parents also stated that the program staff might benefit from more training. For example, parent # 34 said, “It is a good quality program. Some staff need to be better qualified.” Parent # 128 said, “It is good. However, staff training is lacking. Courses in child development, social skills, relationship building, child discipline, are very important and would benefit line staff.”

A few parents were not happy with the main office staff and stated that they were unorganized and hard to reach. For example, parent # 17 said, “I like the onsite program but the main office is very disorganized. I have had checks lost more than once and the cost continues to go up even though the economy and my wages have not increased.” Another example is parent # 19 who said, “I don’t like the people I deal with in the office who handle my subsidized paperwork. They are never around when I try to contact them. So very poor.”

Parent Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction with the Program

The fourth question the parents were asked was, “How satisfied are you with this program?” The majority of parent responses were favorable and noted how satisfied they were with the program and why. The main reasons parents gave for their satisfaction were the staff and activities as well as their child being happy. For example, parent # 10 said, “I am satisfied with the program. I believe that they (the staff) work hard to keep
the children in line, and I feel that my son is treated well.” Another example is parent #28 who said, “I am satisfied. My child has fun and always prefers to go to the program given the option and opportunity to do so, as they offer interaction with students from her school and fun activities for the kids.” Another example is parent #64 who said, “Very. Center staff treats our family as if we were part of theirs. Makes it easy to know that the boys are safe when I leave them.”

Parents also stated that they are satisfied with the program because it is convenient, safe, and structured. For example, parent #11 said, “Convenient location on campus is critical. I have confidence that my child is safe and receives adequate oversight, guidance and attention.” Another example is parent #31 who said, “Very satisfied. Location, staff, organization, affordable.” Another example is parent #109 who said, “Very satisfied. The caregivers greet my child by name and with kindness every day. There is a clear schedule of events and activities. My child does not want to leave at pick up.”

There were also some negative statements made by parents regarding their satisfaction with the program. Some parents shared that they were frustrated with the young untrained staff. For example, parent #61 said, “Sometimes the young adults can play favorites & mean spiritedness towards kids who don’t abide by the rules at all times. Need more patience, more ECE training.” A couple of parents stated that they would like healthier snacks. For example, parent #3 said, “I think the program could be improved by providing healthier snacks. Too much sweet stuff is given to the children.” There
were also some parents of older children who reported that their child gets bored. For example, parent # 112 said, “First year-ecstatic- 4th grade. Second year-still pleased but feeling that more structure and separate activities need to be instituted for older kids -5th grade. 3rd year-the quality of care is still good but for 6th graders not age appropriate. Now I have to insist that he attends, he does not want to go.”

There were also parents that were satisfied with the site but had problems with the main office and fees. A few parents complained about the new fee schedule and how they did not like the increase in their fees. For example, parent # 117 said, “I do not like the categories for the rate based upon number of hours. It seems the less hours you use the more you pay. I dislike having to keep track every month how many hours my child attends to ensure not going over the number of hours I paid. In addition, trying to calculate each month for the following month is a huge hassle especially if you switch categories back and forth to account for holidays, vacations, etc.” There were also a few parents that stated that the main office is disorganized and loses payment checks. For example, parent # 28 said, “Not happy with the accounting and billing department. My payments are not credited to my account, over charged, etc.”

Other Parent Comments

The final question the parents were asked was, “Is there anything you would like to add?” Many of these comments were repeating sentiments that were previously shared. Most were positive, saying things like thank you, great staff, and the program is great.
For example, parent # 1 said, “I think we have a very competent and caring staff. We feel very lucky.”

There were also parents that made suggestions. One suggestion was that parents should be asked to participate more, to make donations and help out with clean up and special activities. An example of this is parent # 41 who said, “The site should offer a “parent clean-up day to disinfect, clean and do repairs. I am happy to pay for quality care for my child, but as we all know, the costs don’t always include maintenance and upkeep of the facility.” Another suggestion made by parents was that the program should include 7th and 8th graders. An example is the comment made by parent # 24, who said, “Yes, they should change the structure of the program to include 7th and 8th grade after school students. It is hard to believe that 13 and 14 year olds are deemed mature enough to not warrant an after school program. A special junior counselor program could be available for 7th and 8th grade students who could have greater responsibility for helping in the program.”

Parents also shared that the program needs more money. For example, parent # 58 said, “More money needs to be invested in this program because families depend on them.” Parents also said that the program needs more indoor space. For example, parent #79 said, “More space. I think for the amount of kids the building is somewhat small.” Parents also wanted more communication with staff on how their child is doing. For example, parent # 126 said, “Having maybe a quarterly report on my child’s behavior.”
Parents also had some complaints. One was that the fees are too high. For example, parent # 7 said, “To make it more affordable. I just got a raise from my employer, Sutter and that put me over the limit for receiving subsidy from the state.” Another example is parent # 17 who said, “Please lower the cost. There are a lot of single parents out there who need help.” The other complaint parents made was concerning the new billing system. For example, parent # 116 said, “I really dislike the new billing system! I understand there may be economics of scale of centralized billing, but the new attendance categories are frustrating. The lag time between when we pay and when potential adjustments must be made is way too long. I have not encountered problems with this yet; I just have this sense that we are treated as problems and not partners. This was never an issue of the former billing system and certainly never the vibe when billing was local. The new system seems far less efficient. How can staffing be accurate when we don’t even indicate which days our kids will need care?”

**Staff Responses on the Quality of the Program**

Fifty staff participated in the ASP survey. Forty-four of those participants provided written responses to at least one of the three open-ended questions in the staff ASP survey. The first question they were asked was, “What are your thoughts about the quality of this program?” Most staff responses to this question were positive, for example, staff person # 2 said, “The program is good quality. This program has kids who are energetic and outgoing.” Staff person #18 said, “The quality of this program is very
good. We are a large site and it works very well.” Similarly, staff person # 45 said, “This program offers quality supervision and recreation. The children enjoy coming here. If I had a child I would send them to this program.”

There were several different reasons listed by staff for why they believed that the program was high quality. One reason was that it provided a need for families. For example, staff person #8 said, “I think this program is great. Most parents need a place for their kids to go after school and what’s better than a program that has staff working on homework with kids and providing indoor and outdoor activities to better each child.” Likewise, staff person #21 said, “I like the program, it is very helpful to families who don’t have enough time in the day to feed, help their child with homework and keep them active.”

Two other reasons cited by staff as indicative of high quality were program activities and supervision. For example, staff person # 25 said, “I believe we provide a high quality of supervision, guidance and activities.” Staff # 27 said, “I think this program is great for the kids and families. It offers help on homework, arts and crafts, a summer program, open during breaks and positive interaction with staff and the children.” There was also many staff that mentioned the structure and organization of the program. Staff person # 50 said, “The organization and structure of the program are what make it stand out from others and really add to the overall quality.” Some staff also stated that the program was a safe place for kids that offered many opportunities for children to learn and interact with others. For example, staff person # 28 said, “I believe
this program is an outstanding after school program where kids have a lot of fun and at the same time learn and interact with children their age.”

Despite the many positive comments made by the staff there were also some negative responses about the program. Some staff were concerned that there was a lack of communication between line staff and supervisors. One example of this is the comment made by staff person #12: “Very good at times, sometimes staff aren’t informed on some things, special events, schedule changes, etc.” Other comments reflected concerns about lack of organization and high staff turnover. For example, staff person #13 commented, “I have worked here for almost 6 years now and have gone through 4 supervisors and a variety of styles of what this program should be. I believe that overall this is an adequate program, but due to multiple changes it has been somewhat disorganized. I also believe that we could use better communication between staff, poor communication behind the scenes greatly affects the program, and is often overlooked.”

Other staff comments reflected concern for limited resources. Many staff also stated that the program needed more indoor space and money. For example, staff person #5 said, “More money needs to be spent on supplies to round out the programs.” Staff person #17 said, “Good quality, the room needs to be bigger or another room available (not just auditorium).” Another example is the comment by staff person #34: “I think it is a great before and after school program. It would be nice to have more funding for field trips and for newer appliances.” Staff person #35 said, “There are too many children enrolled in the program for the amount of indoor space we have.”
Staff Responses on Characteristics of High Quality

The second question the staff were asked was, “What do you think makes for a high quality after school program?” Staff responses to this question focused on four main themes that paralleled those reported by the parents. The most common indicator cited was staff quality. Most of the staff agreed that a high quality ASP had high quality staff. They felt staff should be nurturing and should encourage parent support and involvement. Some examples are staff # 1 who said, “Creativity by staff, engaging in and with children in activities.” Another example is staff person # 17 who said, “1st is STAFF!” Staff person # 27 said, “Having a great staff that you can count on being a positive role model for your child.”

A second important indicator cited by staff was quality of activities. Many staff felt that a high quality ASP should have a variety of high quality activities. They thought that activities should keep the kids engaged and provide opportunities for social and academic improvement. They also thought that children should have the opportunity to choose their activities. Staff also thought homework help was an important activity for a high quality ASP. One example is staff person # 2 who said, “Lots of activities that are fun and keeping the kids involved in different activities.” Another example is staff person # 19 who said, “Diverse set of materials, offer a variety of choices children can make on activities, provide books, games, and technology to allow children to interact and grow both socially and intellectually.”
The third quality theme was health and safety. Staff stated that a high quality ASP focused on safety. They also thought cleanliness was important for a high quality program. One example is staff person #3’s comment: “All the topics covered in this survey, plus adequate cleaning procedures.” Another example is staff person #30 who said, “Safety is huge, the more the staff pay attention and are aware the better care the kids are under.” Another example is staff person #39 who said, “I consider programs that put a high priority on children’s safety to be high quality.”

The final theme was the overall organization of the program. The staff felt that a high quality ASP would have good leadership that is organized, structured, and consisted of a good budget to support the program. An example is staff person #4’s comment: “I think a high quality after school program has a lot of structure and tutoring help with homework.” Another example is staff person #26 who said, “The grand amount of thought and organization that is put into creating the daily schedules so kids can enjoy it.” Another example is staff #9 who said, “If the bosses have clear expectations and follow through then it helps run a tight ship.”

Other Staff Comments

The final question asked of the program staff was, “Is there anything you would like to add?” Several staff stated that the program is a great place for kids and that they liked their job. For example, staff person #8 said, “This program helps so many parents and children. Without it so many families would struggle to find a safe place for their
children to stay while the parents work.” Staff # 38 said, “I truly enjoy working for the program.” Staff # 39 said, “I believe this program is a great place for school age children to be and I enjoy working here.”

The rest of the comments centered on the theme of money. Several staff suggested that the program lower their fees so that more kids could attend. Many staff said that more money was needed for the site budget and more indoor space was needed for the site. Many staff also thought that there should be a pay increase for the staff. One example is staff person# 6, who said, “Although it is very expensive children love it, we should lower prices so more can afford to be involved in all this FUN!” Another example is staff person#18 who said, “After school programs need more finances in order to keep well maintained programs.”
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Current research on ASPs does not include much input from parents (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Because parental involvement can be critical to program success, looking at parents’ perceptions of quality is important (Dodd & Bowen, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to examine parent perceptions of ASP quality. Specifically, the study had two aims: (a) to describe parents’ perceptions of ASP quality and (b) to investigate similarities and differences in parents, staff and outside observer assessments of quality.

Comparisons of Parent, Staff, and Observer Ratings

There were significant differences in parents’ and observer’s ratings on all three subscales of the ASP survey, with the outside observer rating items significantly lower than the parents did. At the same time, observer ratings demonstrated a significant positive correlation with parents’ ratings. While the observer may have rated quality lower in all areas, the parents seemed to be observing similar characteristics.

The fact that the observer’s ratings were lower than parents may indicate that the observer has higher standards for quality and more knowledge of the factors related to ASP quality than parents do, as well as more experience in comparing programs of
differing quality. It is also possible that the observer was more objective because she was not invested in the program the way parents are. Parents, unlike the observer, need the ASP for childcare purposes as well as enrichment and therefore may be more invested in it (Garey, 2002; Sanderson & Richards, 2010; Wu & Van Egeren, 2010). Parents may be rating the program higher because they are focusing on the positives of the program and ignoring the negatives. They may not want to send their child to a program with which they are not happy. This conclusion is supported by the fact that staff ratings were similar to parent ratings. Like parents, the staff are invested in the program and may be likely to rate the ASP higher than an outside observer. It is also possible that parents are more forgiving of slips in quality because they are generally satisfied with the overall program, that is, their satisfaction is driving their ratings of quality. This is consistent with the strong correlation found between parents ratings of quality and satisfaction.

The fact that parents and observer ratings are correlated, however, indicates that parents may actually be relatively knowledgeable observers of ASPs. Parents were able to observe their child’s ASP and report whether it is providing the things they find important, and that they believe makes a quality program. This idea is similar to the findings in Garey (2002), in which parents wanted many different things from programs, however they mainly wanted an environment where their children could be safe and happy. If children are coming home happy from the ASP, this is a good indicator to the parents that the ASP is a safe happy place for their children.
Results also indicated significant positive correlations between staff and parents’ ratings. The idea that parents and staff would have similar ratings is a good example of Bronfenbrenner and Morris’ Bioecological Model (2006) and the impact that the mesosystem can have on the child. If parents and staff agree on the quality of the program then it is likely they also have consistent opinions regarding what is important for the children. If both the parents and ASP staff are consistent in regards to childcare than the child is more likely to have positive outcomes in terms of development. Of course, other factors come into play such as individual characteristics of the child as well as characteristics of the environment and time. Further, a connection between staff and parent ratings is important because research has shown that staff quality is very important to the overall quality of the program as well as to the perceptions of the parents in regards to the quality of the program. Smith et al., (2010), found that children from centers with high quality staff practices in all areas showed more positive developmental outcomes and rated the program quality higher.

Qualitative Assessments

The open-ended data in this study suggest that both the parents and staff are happy with the program overall. While there were some complaints or suggested areas of improvement, the consensus was that the program is a positive for children, families, and communities. This finding coincides with the quantitative data that showed that both
parents and staff rated the program high and had similar ratings. In the qualitative responses, parents and staff both reported four main areas that make up a quality ASP. Those areas were, staff, activities, health and safety, and structure or organization of the program. Three of these four areas were included as subscales in the survey used in this study. The fourth area, structure and organization of the program was not a subtopic in the survey, although there were some aspects of it touched upon in a few of the items. For example, one of the items on the survey was, “The program is structured and organized.” These four areas that parents and staff cited as related to quality coincide with factors reported in previous studies of what parents want or need in an ASP (Garey, 2002; Sanderson & Richards, 2010; Wu & Van Egeren, 2010). Health and safety was important to parents in Garey’s (2002) study. Program activities were very important to the parents surveyed in the Sanderson & Richards (2010) study. Structure and organization of the program was associated with parents enrolling their children in an ASP in the study done by Wu & Van Egeren, (2010).

While previous research has not looked at parents’ perceptions of staff quality, quality of staff is one of the most important aspects of ASP quality identified by researchers in previous studies (Rosenthal and Vandell 1996; Sheldon, et al., 2010; Smith et al. 2010). In the current study, staff quality was one of the most important aspects to parents. While parents may want many different things from an ASP, they may find that a few areas are more important to the overall quality of the program. In the open-ended section of the current study parents reported that they were happy with the program
overall and that they felt it was a quality program. One of the main reasons that parents listed as to why the program was high quality was the staff. Previous studies have found that factors such as staff education and ratios are important to children’s experiences in ASPs as well as parent satisfaction (Rosenthal & Vandell, 1996). Research has also indicated that staff practices in terms of activities and program process are also very important to ASP quality (Smith et al., 2010). These two previous findings were reflected in the current study, with parents reporting that they found the interactions and involvement of staff with their children to be one of the most important aspects of the quality of this program.

Program activities were also listed by parents as one of the important indicators of ASP quality. Parents wanted their children to be involved and engaged while at the ASP. Engagement is an area that has been looked at in previous studies and results show that children in ASPs who were involved in group activities such as sports or arts and crafts were more engaged than those who simply ate snack and did homework. They also had higher reported levels of happiness and social competence (Mahoney et al., 2007; Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Furthermore, engaging programs have been typically rated as significantly higher in organization, social climate, and skill building where children spend more time on enrichment and skill building activities than on homework and non-skill building activities. Health and safety factors have not been a focus of previous studies on ASPs; however, some aspects such as staff-child ratios have been included. For example, Rosenthal and Vandell (2007) found that parents rated programs more
positively when child-staff ratios were smaller. Structure and organization have received more attention than health and safety as a factor in quality ASPs; however, structure and organization are still not a major area of research. Cross et al., (2010) found that ASPs with well-trained, educated staff were better able to offer programs with a structured environment. These limited examples along with the results of the current study point to the idea that health and safety as well as structure and organization should be considered in future studies of ASP quality.

**Limitations and Future Research**

While the current study has revealed important aspects of parental perceptions of ASP quality, there are several limitations that should be noted that might be rectified in future research. One limitation of this study was the small and relatively restricted sample. By recruiting only from one ASP program, the participants represent only those families who have children enrolled in this specific program. It would be beneficial for future research to recruit a larger more varied sample of participants from different ASPs with different goals and different structures. Further, the respondents in the current study were mainly from two parent households with a relatively high SES. Future research would benefit from a wider diversity of respondents in terms of SES and family structure. Perhaps future researchers could offer an incentive for participating in the study.
An additional limitation of this study was the use of self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias. Parents that responded to this survey may not represent a variable group, instead they may be those parents who support the ASP and want to help them get a favorable review. Instead of just relying on these report measures, future researchers might visit ASPs to conduct on site interviews with a larger number of parents. By doing interviews, researchers may be able to get valuable information from parents who would not normally fill out a survey. Some parents do not want to take the time to fill out a survey but would prefer to answer verbal questions instead. Such data may reveal aspects of afterschool programs and parental concerns not captured by report measures used in the current study.

A third limitation to this study is that the survey tool may not be measuring quality the way it is supposed to. The survey questions may not be asking parents or program staff about the topics they are concerned with or consider important. It would be a good idea for future research to test and further develop this tool to be sure it is valid.

Another limitation to this study involves the methodology used to obtain participants’ scores. The fact that there was not an equal amount of staff reports from each site is a drawback. In some cases the staff score was derived from a single respondent; in other cases, it was an average from several staff at the site. The same is true of parent scores. Because parent participation varied, several of the site scores were derived from just a few parents. Because the staff and parent scores were combined to reflect one total staff or parent score from each site, the scores from sites with limited
participation are limited in reliability. It would have been better if each site that participated in the study were represented more or less equally with many scores making up each site score.

It would also have been beneficial to take into account staff education level or years of experience in evaluating staff scores. By splitting the staff up by education level and or years of experience, we could compare the ratings of highly educated and experienced staff with the lower educated and less experienced staff to see if they had differing opinions on quality. Higher educated and more experienced staff might be better at observing and rating quality, and have greater experience with the features of program quality.

Further, the fact that only one outside observer rated the sites is also a limitation to this study. If an observer is having an especially good or bad day, his/her emotions could affect their ratings. It would have been better if multiple outside observers had rated each site so that the ratings could have been compared and evaluated for reliability. Future research should keep this in mind and be sure that there is an equal amount of staff reporting from each site as well as more than one outside observer.

Future research might also include ratings of program quality from the children. Children’s perceptions of quality are also important, as they are the ones that attend the program each day and will reap the most benefits from a quality program. Previous studies such as Rosenthal and Vandell (1996) found that parent reports on ASPs were associated with their children’s reports of the ASP climate. In their study Rosenthal and
Vandell looked at 30 school-age child care programs and measured quality based on total enrollment, child-staff ratio, staff education, as well as independent observations about the staff-child interactions, children’s perceptions of the environment, and parents’ perceptions of the program. This study found that parents reported poorer program climate when child-staff ratios were higher and when children reported poorer program climate (Rosenthal & Vandell). It would have been interesting to look at the children’s perceptions of the program in the current study to see how they compared with parent and staff perceptions. The current study found that parent and observer ratings were correlated, which indicates that parents might be knowledgeable observers of ASP quality. This idea should be investigated further in future research. Specifically, are parents truly knowledgeable observers of quality in ASPs or are they biased due to their needs for childcare? This is an important idea to investigate since parents have typically not been considered in the majority of ASP studies because they are not considered to be knowledgeable about what makes a quality ASP (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). Most studies have only looked at parent satisfaction or childcare needs with programs and have only given parent responses minimal consideration. In order to understand parents’ perspectives, future studies might use different methodological strategies, such as surveys, interviews, and observations. Research that combines all three of these methodologies and possibly more would likely bring the most complete results.

In the current study, parents and staff both focused on four main areas of quality in the open-ended section of the survey. These four areas, staff, activities, health and
safety, and organization and structure, are areas that should be examined in more depth in future research. Although previous studies have looked at staff and activities, very few have focused on health and safety as well as structure and organization. Future research should be sure to consider all four of these areas in surveys, interviews, and observations as measures of quality in ASP environments.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings from the current study are potentially important for ASP staff and directors in terms of practice. Program directors and staff should be aware of parents’ perceptions of quality in ASPs. Parents are important stakeholders in ASPs and what they think should be considered in program planning and implementation. Because the findings in this study suggest that parents are likely knowledgeable observers of ASP quality, all programs should take the time to find out what parents involved in the program think about the quality of the ASP. At the very minimum programs should be informally talking to the families on a daily or semi-daily basis to find out their opinions and questions. If programs and staff are open then parents will be more willing to share their comments or concerns. While this informal sharing is valuable, it is also important to offer a more anonymous way for parents to share their opinions and thoughts with programs. For example, programs could offer a comment box where parents can drop in comments about the program on a daily basis and staff can read them daily, or weekly or
even monthly to address any issues or concerns that parents may have. While these two fairly informal ways of collecting information are valuable it would be even more beneficial for ASPs to collect regular data regarding quality of the program through a yearly or bi-yearly survey that allows families the opportunity to be completely honest and yet anonymous if they wish. A survey with consistent items, such as that used in the current study, would allow the program to look at how trends have improved or gotten worse over time.

It is also important for ASPs to gather information regarding the program from staff as well as the children. Findings in the current study showed that staff ratings were similar to those of parents, which suggests that they too have important opinions to take into account. One recommendation would be for programs to schedule a monthly meeting where staff can reflect on what worked or did not work as well as ideas for improvement for the month ahead. Programs could also use the comment box to allow staff to share their opinions and concerns about the program in an anonymous way. A yearly or bi-yearly survey is also a good idea for program staff as well as they may be more willing to share in an anonymous survey and the program can track the trends and changes over time.

Although the current study did not include the children in the ASP, it is important for ASPs to consider the children and what they think. It would be beneficial to ask the children what they think of the program from time to time, as well as paying attention on a daily basis to children’s engagement and interest in activities. In addition, particularly
for older children it would be a good idea to allow them to participate in the comment box. Programs would not necessarily have to do a yearly or bi-yearly survey of the children, since many of them may not be able to fill out a survey yet, but perhaps they could do occasional interviews with some or all of the children in the program.

The results of the current study would also suggest that ASP directors and staff consider the four main areas found to be important factors of quality in ASPs. ASP staff should consider the four factors, staff, activities, health and safety, and organization and structure when planning the program. When directors are hiring staff, they should be sure to look for well-educated, trained individuals. Programs should make it a goal to provide training and opportunities for furthering education for the staff. Assessment tools such as that used in the current study may prove useful for training and evaluation for staff and program development.

The present study has provided insight into the perceptions of parents and staff in regard to ASP program quality. Although results suggested that parents are mostly satisfied with the program quality in their child’s ASP, parents and staff provided useful suggestions for change and improvement. Future research should continue to study quality in ASP programs, including parent, staff and children’s perspectives. Such research will help to improve ASP programs as well as promote positive outcomes for the many children enrolled in ASPs.
Appendices
November 2011
Dear Parent/Guardian:

Hello, my name is Lisa Sullivan and I am a student at California State University, Sacramento in the Masters program for Child Development. As part of the graduation requirements for the program I am doing a thesis. My thesis is looking at parents’ perceptions of quality in after school programs. I am asking you to take some time to review and complete the attached surveys and return them to your site drop box by **Friday, November 18, 2011**. Upon completion of my thesis I will provide each site with a summary of the results. As a employee, it is my hope that the results will help improve program quality.

Your participation in the study is voluntary and anonymous. Please do not put your name or your child(ren)’s name(s) on any of the materials. If you should have any questions/concerns about this research or the survey please feel free to contact me by e-mail at or by phone at (916) 433-6320, or my thesis sponsor, Dr. Sheri Hembree at hembrees@csus.edu. Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this survey.

Sincerely,

Lisa Sullivan
Masters Student
California State University, Sacramento
Demographic Survey

Please respond to the following 6 questions for demographic purposes. Again, your responses are completely anonymous.

1. **Person Completing this survey:** (Circle One)
   - Mother
   - Father
   - Other (Specify): _______________________

2. **What is the highest level of education you have completed?** (Circle one)
   1. Less than high school diploma
   2. High school diploma/GED
   3. Some College (Certificate/AA/AS)
   4. College Degree (BA/BS)
   5. Advanced College Degree (MA, PHD)

3. **How many adults (18 years and over) live in your household, including yourself?**
   ________

4. **How many children (under 18 years) live in your household?**
   ________

5. **What is your annual household income (before taxes)?**
   Circle One:
   1. 0-$20,000
   2. $20,001-$30,000
   3. $30,001-$40,000
   4. $40,001-$50,000
   5. $50,001-$60,000
   6. $60,001-$70,000
   7. $70,001-$80,000
   8. $80,001-$90,000
   9. $90,001-$100,000
   10. More than $100,000

6. **Please list the gender and grade of each child enrolled in the program.**
   
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Section I. We are interested in your perceptions of the [underline] program. Please rate the following items concerning your child(ren)’s experiences in the program using the scale below. Circle one number between 1 and 7 that best describes your perception for each item.

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1) There is enough indoor space for children to do activities. (e.g., homework, art, free play)

2) There is enough outdoor space for children to do activities. (e.g. play structure, grass area, black top)

3) There are enough furnishings for the children in the program.

4) The furnishings are in good repair.

5) There are health practices in place for children who are injured or sick. (e.g., parents are notified if child is ill or injured, ill children are separated from other children)

6) There are safety practices in place. (e.g. medicine and hazardous materials locked up, emergency procedures posted)

7) Nutritious snacks are offered.

8) Snacks are handled appropriately (e.g. Staff wash hands before serving)
9) **Arts and crafts** activities and materials are available. (e.g. markers, crayons, paper, projects)

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11) **Building and construction** activities and materials are available. (e.g., blocks, legos, space to build)

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14) **Math and reasoning** activities and materials are available. (e.g. legos, Monopoly, Chess)

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18) Parents and children are greeted at drop off and pick up times.

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<td>19) The staff interact with children in a positive manner.</td>
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<td>20) Staff - child communication is frequent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21) Staff -child communication is positive.</td>
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<td>22) Children are supervised by staff.</td>
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<td>23) Staff use appropriate positive discipline techniques with children.</td>
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<td>24) Staff –parent communication is positive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25) Staff –parent communication is frequent.</td>
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<td>26) The program is structured and organized. (e.g., daily schedule, planned indoor and outdoor activities)</td>
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<td>27) Community resources are used when available. (e.g., field trips, public parks, guest speakers, special activities planned occasionally)</td>
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<td>28) Please rate your overall satisfaction with the program.</td>
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<td>29) Please rate your satisfaction with program safety.</td>
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<td>30) Please rate your satisfaction with program activities.</td>
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<td>31) Please rate your satisfaction with program staff.</td>
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Section II. Please respond to the following questions by writing in the space below. You may use the back to elaborate on any of the questions.

1) How long have you had at least one child enrolled in the program?

2) What attendance category does (do) your child(ren) use the majority of the time (how many hours per month)?
   Circle One:
   A) $565 Prearranged usage of greater than 125 hours and above
   B) $500 Prearranged usage of greater than 100 hours and up to 125 hours
   C) $450 Prearranged usage of greater than 80 hours and up to 100 hours
   D) $375 Prearranged usage of greater than 65 hours and up to 80 hours
   E) $335 Prearranged usage of greater than 50 hours and up to 65 hours
   F) $295 Prearranged usage of greater than 35 hours and up to 50 hours
   G) $250 Prearranged usage of more than 25 hours and up to 35 hours
   H) $175 Prearranged usage of more than 15 hours and up to 25 hours
   I) $125 Prearranged usage of more than 9 hours and up to 15 hours
   J) $50 Prearranged usage of more than 15 minutes and up to 9 hours

3) Why did you choose the 4th as your child’s after school program?

4) What do you think makes for a high quality after-school program?
5) What are your thoughts about the quality of the program?

6) How satisfied are you with this program? Please elaborate on the reasons for your satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

7) Is there anything you would like to add?
APPENDIX B

STAFF ASP SURVEY
November 2011

Dear Fellow Staff Member:

My name is Lisa Sullivan and I am the Program Developer at [redacted]. I am also a student at California State University, Sacramento in the Masters program for Child Development. As part of the graduation requirements for the program, I am doing a thesis. My thesis compares parent and staff perceptions of quality in after school programs. I am asking you to take some time to review and complete the attached surveys and return them to your 4th “R” site drop box by Friday, November 18, 2011.

I want to assure you that your participation in the survey is voluntary. Staff surveys are anonymous and will not be given or shown to any other 4th “R” or city employees. Your answers will only be used for the purpose of my thesis. Upon completion of my thesis, I will provide the 4th “R” with aggregate results of the findings and I will present these findings at a staff meeting. If you should have any questions/concerns about this research or the survey please feel free to contact me by e-mail at lsullivan@cityofsacramento.org or by phone at (916) 433-6320, or my thesis sponsor, Dr. Sheri Hembree at hembrees@csus.edu. Thank you in advance for your participation and support.

Sincerely,

Lisa Sullivan
Masters Student
California State University, Sacramento
After School Program (ASP) Survey

Section I. We are interested in your perceptions of the [_____] program. Please rate the following items concerning your current perceptions of the program at your site.

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2) There is enough outdoor space for children to do activities. (e.g. play structure, grass area, black top)

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3) There are enough furnishings for the children in the program.

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4) The furnishings are in good repair.

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7) Nutritious snacks are offered.

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8) Snacks are handled appropriately (e.g. Staff wash hands before serving)

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<td>19) The staff interact with children in a positive manner.</td>
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<td>20) Staff–child communication is frequent.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21) Staff–child communication is positive.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>22) Children are supervised by staff.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23) Staff use appropriate positive discipline techniques with children.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24) Staff–parent communication is positive.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25) Staff–parent communication is frequent.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>26) The program is structured and organized. (e.g., daily schedule, planned indoor and outdoor activities)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27) Community resources are used when available. (e.g., field trips, public parks, guest speakers, special activities planned occasionally)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section II. Please respond to the following questions by writing in the space below. You may use the back to elaborate on any of the questions.

1) How long have you worked in after school programs?
   Circle One:
   a) Less than a year
   b) 1-3 years
   c) 4-6 years
   d) 7-9 years
   e) 10 years or more

2) What are your thoughts about the quality of this program?

3) What do you think makes for a high quality after-school program?

4) Is there anything you would like to add?
REFERENCES


