



Barnardos



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School Age Childcare

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School Age Childcare

Editorial

While the school age childcare (SAC) sector in Ireland is one of the fastest growing services provided for school-going children, it has developed in an unregulated and largely ad hoc manner. Having been overlooked for many years, things are beginning to change. Notable developments include the publication of An Action Plan for School Age Childcare in 2017 as well as enactment of policies that ensure that SAC providers register with Tusla and that enable services to avail of the National Childcare Scheme. Forthcoming National Standards for SAC are expected to provide guidance across a range of areas such as ratios, required qualifications for staff and the curriculum.

At the time of publication, Governments across the world are responding to the complexity of the health, economic and social issues associated with COVID 19 and it is impossible to predict the longer-term impacts this will have on services for children and families. Future developments in SAC must, however, ensure that after a long day in school, children have the opportunity to socialise with friends, play, relax, and to participate in a wide range of cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities.

In the first article in this issue of ChildLinks, Drs Mary Moloney and Jennifer Pope from Mary Immaculate College outline findings of a research study visit to Denmark, reflecting on how SAC is organised, governed and supported in Denmark, and proposing recommendations for Irish policy makers on the on-going development of the SAC infrastructure in Ireland. Later in this issue, Dr Jennifer Cartmel of Griffith University in Queensland considers SAC in Australia, acknowledging the emerging cohort of practitioners there who are keen to support the professionalisation of the sector as well as enhanced

communication and governance processes between host schools and services.

In order to strive for quality in SAC we must also be sure to listen to the voice of children themselves to shape and inform regulations and quality standards developed for SAC. In the third article in this issue, Dr Deirdre Horgan from University College Cork examines government consultations with children in Ireland on school age childcare (SAC) against the background of the wider child participation agenda. Following this, an article from Barnardos considers afterschool services in Limerick South and how children and families can be best supported through interagency working.

Finally, Karen Clince of Tigers Childcare considers the opportunities that school age care offers to support children's social and emotional development, leading to better outcomes for children.

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School Age Childcare in Copenhagen

From Leisure to Lessons

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Introduction

The school age childcare (SAC) sector, which includes care before and after school and during school holidays, is one of the fastest growing services provided for school-going children (Cartmel & Griesbar, 2014). While little attention has been paid to SAC in Ireland throughout the past decade and a half, the publication of an *An Action Plan for School Age Childcare* by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) in 2017 has resulted in a renewed focus on developing and supporting this emerging sector. Placing it as a core aspect of the childcare infrastructure, the DCYA/DES suggest that the demand for SAC stems from the need to provide care for children whose parents are working, studying or hoping to re-enter the labour market. In other words, the primary purpose of SAC is to care for children when their parents are unavailable (www.tusla.ie). As policy makers continue to develop comprehensive regulations for SAC in Ireland, it is important to explore how SAC operates elsewhere. This paper examines SAC in Denmark, where a sophisticated model has been in place for some time (Moloney & Pope, 2020). Drawing upon a 2017 research study visit to Copenhagen, we explore and reflect upon how SAC is organised, governed and supported in Denmark, and propose recommendations for Irish policy makers at this critical time in the on-going development of the SAC infrastructure.



Purpose of School Age Childcare

TUSLA, the Child and Family Agency define a school age childcare service as ‘any early years’ service (playgroup, day nursery, crèche, day care) or other similar service [that] caters for children under the age of 15 years old enrolled in a school offering primary or post primary Education’ (www.tusla.ie). SAC also occurs in purpose-built, standalone settings as well as in primary school classrooms. SAC is primarily associated with providing care for children whose parents are working, studying or, hoping to re-enter the labour market (DCYA/DES, 2017). Positive relationships between children and educators are paramount in SAC and it is, therefore, a highly complex profession. It is associated with safe, challenging and fun environments that provide opportunities for children to engage in supervised recreational activities (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016; Horgan, O’Riordan, Martin & O’Sullivan, 2018). While services can offer homework support, the focus must be upon play and recreation as set out in Article 31 of the UNCRC (1989), which upholds a child’s right to relax and play and to participate in, enjoy and benefit from a wide range of cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities. The emphasis upon play and recreation ensures that SAC differs from school (Hirsch, 2011), enabling children to engage in activities that are freely chosen and independent of schoolwork (Kelly, 2009; Moloney & Pope, 2020).

“ *Positive relationships between children and educators are paramount in SAC and it is, therefore, a highly complex profession.* ”

What Do Children Value in School Age Childcare?

A number of researchers have consulted with children regarding their experiences of SAC. Horgan et al. undertook a consultation on behalf of the DCYA in 2016, involving 177 children (81 aged 5-7 years and 96 aged 8-12 years) from across primary schools in Ireland. For both cohorts of children, opportunities to play and to socialise with friends dominated the findings (Horgan et al., 2018). Children also highlighted outdoor play as a preferred activity and, highlighted their dislike of being in a structured environment with rules. Likewise, in Australia, Simonchi, Cartmel and

Young (2015) explored the experiences of children in two State, Canberra and Logan, in a study involving 164 children aged 5-8 years and 9-12 years. These children also identified play as the best aspect of SAC and, in particular, opportunities to play with friends and to socialise. The majority of children (84.1%) reported that SAC provided opportunities that were unavailable elsewhere, with games being the most commonly reported activity. Children disliked programming, and health and safety (i.e., rules and regulations). Simoncini et al. (2015) concluded that SAC services are important contexts for children outside of the school environment where they play and socialise together, enhancing their holistic development in terms of social skills, independence and risk taking. Yet funders and policy makers place increasing pressure on services to demonstrate academic impact (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017), leading to the risk that 'formal learning is consuming the informal experiential learning of [SAC]...And potentially compromising children's need and right to relaxation and play' (Moloney & Pope, 2020, p.85).

Governance and Organisation of School Age Childcare Services in Denmark

In Denmark, the Day-Care Facilities Act (Dagtilbudsloven) regulates early childhood and after-school provision. Responsibility for all services rests with the Ministry of Children and Education (Naumann, McLean, Koslowski, Tisdall & Lloyd, 2013). SAC applies to children from 6-18 years of age. Children are streamed by age, resulting in three conceptually different categories of provision: after-school centres, youth centres and youth clubs (see Figure 1). Interestingly, there is no national regulation concerning child: staff ratios in Danish SAC (Naumann et al., 2013).

School based after-school care

School time facilities located within schools, known as SFOs (skolefritidsordninger), are governed in Denmark by the *General Education Act* and the *Continuation School Act* (Danish Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration, 2012). The local authorities govern these facilities through the public and private schools (Folkeskole). While opening hours differ, SFOs generally open in the morning from 6.30am to 8.00am and in the afternoon from 12.00pm to 5.00pm. Staff are known as pedagogues and hold a professional bachelor's degree, which is awarded after 3½ years of study (210 ECTS) including practical training amounting to 1 year and 3 months (www.ufm.dk/en). The cost of provision varies, ranging from DKK 350 (€47) to DKK 1,000 (€134) per month (Naumann et al., 2013).

While the majority of after-school care is provided in schools (Ibid.) with approximately 84.4% of 6-9 year olds attending a school-based facility (Danish National Statistics, 2012), this has not always been the case. During a research study visit to Copenhagen in 2007, we observed services operating from houses, known as 'the house' and/or 'leisure time' facility (Moloney & Pope, 2007, 2020). We also noted six strengths of the Danish system in 2007, i.e., qualified pedagogues and the strong emphasis on leisure, democracy, holistic development, civic duty and socialisation (Figure 2 on the following page).

However, because of Denmark's poor performance in successive PISA studies¹, tensions and concerns were beginning to emerge about the future of leisure-time facilities, most notably a shift in philosophy/ideology around the education of young children.

Educational reform

In 2014, the Danish Educational Reform introduced a longer school day. Children in grades 0-3 (ages 6-9), for example, have seen an increase of almost nine hours, from 21.1 hours to 30 hours of school each week.

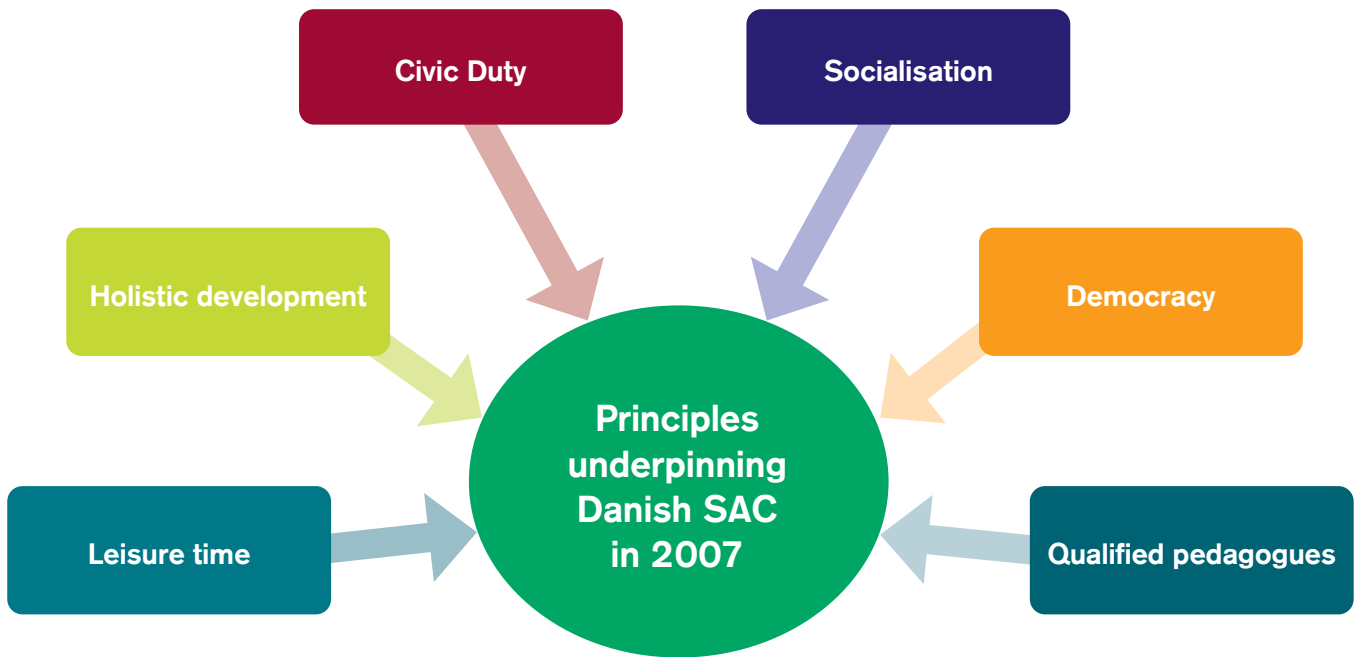
Figure 1. Overview of Danish SAC Provision (adapted from: www.kk.dk)



¹ PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges.



Figure 2. Strengths of the Danish SAC System 2007



Also, children have more hours in Danish and maths, and there has been a stronger focus on foreign languages, with English introduced in first grade rather than third (Danish Govt., 2014). While the purpose is to strengthen the performance of Danish schools, this educational reform has significantly altered the way that SAC is organised.

As well as working within school time facilities, pedagogues must also carry out defined teaching tasks with grade one to grade nine or ten children (Danish Ministry for Children and Social Affairs, 2016). Worryingly, the ideology/philosophy of school time facilities (skolefritidsordninger) in particular may not be conducive to the traditional principles of Danish SAC, standing in contrast to the values and beliefs of pedagogues, and compromising children’s experiences within settings (Moloney & Pope, 2020).

The Study

Conscious of the emerging tensions in Denmark in 2007, the 2014 Danish Educational Reforms and the publication of *An Action Plan for School Age Childcare* in Ireland (DES/DCYA, 2017), we returned to Copenhagen in 2017 with two objectives in mind.

1. To build on our previous 2007 research and,
2. To further examine the SAC policy trajectory in Ireland and Copenhagen since 2007

The remainder of this paper draws upon interviews undertaken with union representatives (two participants), university lecturers who train SAC pedagogues (two participants), representatives from an Educational Research Institute (ERI) (three participants), a government representative (one participant) and a social pedagogue (one participant).

Findings

It was evident that Danish Educational Reform (2014) had resulted in the rationalisation of SAC, with the Education Research Institute (ERI) noting that only ‘4-6% of free-time houses’ remained. Agnes², a SAC provider for 20 years within the lowest socio economic area, explained that, prior to 2014, she had five leisure time houses located within proximity to the school. Under educational reform, these five houses were reduced to three houses working with the school, and ‘in about a year, one place is closing, we will need to share with the school...[it is now] policy that we have to share’. She claimed that reform occurred quickly, ‘the collapsing of the houses, and working within the school premises all happened in three months’. Both Agnes and the union representatives saw rationalising as ‘a cost saving measure’. Accordingly, union representatives stated that the Danish Government was concerned with ‘how can we do it cheaper?’, arguing that because there are ‘bigger groups of children in institutions...it now costs less than before’.

2 Pseudonyms are used throughout

Impact of educational reform

As mentioned earlier, educational reform altered the focus and approach to leisure time in Copenhagen. Drawing upon our research data, Table 1 provides an overview of the differences in focus between 2007 and 2017.

The integration of leisure time into schools has resulted in a more formal approach to SAC that diminishes the traditional emphasis upon leisure time. Frederick, a policy maker, noted how ‘with the new school reform, the focus is on kids learning’. Acknowledging that SAC is ‘is now part of education’, union representatives stated ‘Pedagogues must support the curriculum, set learning plans...goals to match what happens in schools’.

Worryingly, educational reform ‘is prolonging the school day [and reducing the] amount of time children have for leisure time in the evenings in schools’ (Agnes). Union representatives explained ‘now there is schoolification, a big slide from play to instruction, to formal learning... but they forgot about the child, leisure time is becoming more and more like school’.

There is concern that the longer school day is negatively affecting children. Agnes felt that children were tired and aggressive, ‘it is a long day..., they are tired and sad [and she has noticed] conflicts between them’. According to Frederick, ‘leisure time is all too scheduled now, all about time, like a factory’. In the words of a union representative, ‘there is something gone; lost, moving leisure time into schools’.

What is being lost?

There is no doubt about what is being lost. The difference between the relaxing home-from-home environment

provided within individual leisure time houses prior to educational reform and that provided within schools post reform is stark (see Table 1 above). Participants agreed that ‘school environments are more limited’ (ERI). For example, while Agnes described the outdoor space as ‘clean and structured’, union representatives described it as ‘limited’ although they acknowledged that children can access ‘local parks and school sports facilities’. However, they added, it is ‘sad when they don’t have their own space, children need a change of environment’.

Indoor environments were also challenging. According to union representatives, school classrooms created tensions for pedagogues with ‘packing things away’. Furthermore, ‘school structures are having an impact’ on how the environment is organised and used, and on how pedagogues work with children. The element of choice and flexibility that has traditionally characterised leisure time is overshadowed by large group sizes typical of school-based provision. Children ‘are always in large groups with limited opportunities for individual or quiet time’ (Agnes). Frederick, union representatives and the ERI all criticised the absence of ‘national standards for ratios etc.’ (ERI), with a union representative remarking that there could be ‘100 children in a group, there are no standards’. Agnes agreed, noting that these large groupings reduced parental choice. ‘There is less choice for parents who in the past were free to choose whichever free-time house best suited their child’s needs. Now there are 70/80 children to 4 pedagogues...parents are not able to choose now...’

2007 (Pre Educational Reform)	2017 (Post Educational Reform)
♦ Leisure time focus	♦ Prolonged school day ♦ Activities more aligned to school goals
♦ Holistic development supported by staff	♦ Schoolification ♦ Tensions between pedagogues and teachers
♦ Challenging fun environments	♦ Classrooms, more limited environment.
♦ ‘The house’ – home-from-home	♦ Often school premises or significantly increased number of children in purpose built settings
♦ Stimulating outdoor environments with risk (climbing, building a tree house etc.)	♦ Limited outdoor environment often in school premises
♦ Focus on holistic development, democratic approach promoting active citizenship	♦ Less opportunities, choice and flexibility

Table 1. Overview of How Educational Reform Altered the Focus and Approach to Leisure Time



Tensions between pedagogues and teachers

Educational reform requires pedagogues to work in school together with classroom teachers as well as in after-school services, thus creating 'full-time employment for pedagogues' (union representative) where they 'share hours between school and leisure time. They have maybe 37 hrs instead of 25 hours' (Frederick). Agnes highlighted the significance of sharing time, noting that 'no one can live on 25 hours per week. In-school hours gives full time 37 hours week...'

However, tensions in working relationships between pedagogues and teachers were evident, resulting from 'different teacher and pedagogical approaches to working with children...schools and teachers are very rigid, difficult to work together'. Pedagogues have 'special skills' associated with 'joyful, playful learning, physical activities [they were] invited in to transform the school' (ERI). They 'are more focused on the individual child and making changes to the environment to support children. This is to do with their education and training' (Frederick). From a Government perspective, Frederick indicated that 'working together is very positive for teachers - to learn from the pedagogues

so that the teacher adopts less formalised teaching methodologies and is more open to informal learning opportunities'. He claimed that the current model is a good example of how teachers and pedagogues can work together, and may lead to 'a new professionalism, recognising both as equal with a shared understanding of the children'. However, there was little support for his optimism. Lecturers felt that 'teacher education is trickling down to curriculum for pedagogues...[who] must always focus on supporting the curriculum in school, doing homework...'

Crisis of identity

Claiming that there is an 'identity crisis' for leisure time centres, the ERI asked 'what is special about after school now...there is a blurred border now between school and leisure time. Equally, union representatives asked 'Is it still leisure time?' They questioned the point of leisure time when pedagogues are 'shaped, informed by the school environments? ...we have to fight for the leisure time to have its own value'. They reiterated the need to remember the 'value of leisure time', which is central to children's enjoyment of after-school care.



Conclusion and Recommendations

As Ireland considers how best to support the ongoing development of SAC, there is much to learn from the Danish experience. It would seem that National Standards that provide guidance on the purpose of SAC, the curriculum, adult: child ratios and qualifications are essential.

Within an Irish context, since the publication of the Action Plan, two seminal pieces of legislation have been enacted. The first, the *Childcare Support Act 2018 (Commencement) Order 201* enables SAC providers to avail of the National Childcare Scheme while the second, the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Registration of School Age Services) Regulations 2018*, places a mandatory requirement on services to register with Tusla from February 18th 2019. In addition, a registered SAC provider must ensure 'there is a minimum ratio of 1 adult to 12 children at all times while the service is operating' (Govt. Ireland, 2018, p.10) and this is heartening to note.

Nonetheless, while pedagogues in Denmark undertake a 3½-year professional bachelor degree, specialising in SAC, there is currently no qualification requirement for those working with school-going children in Ireland.

Pobal (2019) reports that staff working in SAC tend to have the lowest qualification levels, with 23.5% not having any relevant formal qualification, although 67.6% have either an NFQ Level 5 or 6 award.

Drawing upon the findings of this study, a child's right to play and recreation in SAC must be protected and maintained. As with Denmark, children in Ireland spend a long day in school and they need and deserve time to relax and unwind, socialise with friends, play, read or simply be, in their time after school. This is particularly important in light of proposals within the *Action Plan for School Age Childcare* (DCYA/DES, 2017) to use school premises for SAC, where possible. Although there is no suggestion that SAC will be incorporated into the school day, careful consideration must be given to the suitability of primary schools for the provision of SAC. Given Government proposals to use school premises, and in light of the tensions identified in this study with regard to the use of school premises and contradictory philosophical stances between teachers and pedagogues, we suggest that a paradigm shift in school culture is required to facilitate the informal learning, flexibility, choice and child autonomy that is characteristic of SAC provision.

“As with Denmark, children in Ireland spend a long day in school and they need and deserve time to relax and unwind, socialise with friends, play, read or simply be, in their time after school.”

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Interagency Working in the Early Bird and Afterschool Services in Limerick South

Paula Kett, Project Coordinator, Barnardos



Background

Limerick City has been ranked as the second most disadvantaged local authority area in Ireland since 1991 (Humphreys, McCafferty & Higgins, 2011). A 2011 study analysing the quality of children's lives in areas of Limerick City, *How Are Our Kids? Experiences and Needs of Children and Families in Limerick City with a Particular Emphasis on Limerick's Regeneration Areas*' (Humphreys et al., 2011), led to the development of the Southside Education Campus, Roxboro Rd. Limerick, where the Early Bird Service and Afterschool Services are delivered.

The Southside Education Campus incorporates two DEIS¹ schools (Le Cheile National School and Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy) and a Child and Family Centre operated by Limerick Social Services Council, which, when fully operational, will provide a range of multi-disciplinary services and responses to meet the needs of the children and families in the area it serves. Examples of these services include speech and language, psychological services, and occupational therapy. The whole campus approach aims to maximise the contributions of all the stakeholders, which includes Department of Education and Skills funding through the schools, and social support through agencies primarily funded by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.



Barnardos Limerick South Family Support Service was asked by Tusla to be the lead agency to co-ordinate the delivery of the Early Bird Service (Breakfast Club) and the Afterschool Service in Southside Educational Campus utilising the staff and resources of a number of partners. The partners are Barnardos, Southill School Completion Programme, both with funding from Tusla and Pobal (through Le Cheile National School) and Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy, working together with the shared aim of

optimising positive outcomes for children attending the Early Bird Service and the Afterschool.

The campus is based on an extended school service model and Barnardos' role is to co-ordinate the delivery of the Early Bird Service (breakfast club) to the children attending Le Cheile National School and Gaelscoil Sheoirse Clancy and an Afterschool Service to the children attending Le Cheile National School. An extended school service or 'full service school':

...provides services before, during and after the normal school day to help nursery, primary, secondary and special school children achieve their full potential. They also support their parents, families and the local community. These services include breakfast and homework clubs, after-schools' activities, classes and support for learning.

(Northern Ireland Direct Government Services, n.d.)

Extended services aim to raise standards of achievement and allow children to realise their full potential in an environment where education is valued.

Aims of the Early Bird Service and the Afterschool Services

The overall aims of the Early Bird Service and the Afterschool Services are to provide children with nutritious meals, and to support their social, emotional and educational development. The Early Bird Service and the Afterschool Services have three overarching goals for children:

1. Improved social and emotional wellbeing
2. Improved capacity for learning and development
3. School readiness

Delivered to children ranging in age from 4-12 year olds, the Early Bird and Afterschool Services strive to support children in their social, emotional and educational development through activities that enhance their skills. The groups encourage children to have a voice, to feel valued and included, and to learn while having fun. The services aims to achieve academic, practical, social and emotional outcomes and social benefits for the children.

¹ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, launched in May 2005, sets out the vision for future intervention in the critical area of social inclusion in education policy and remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years).



Academic outcomes

- ◆ Engagement with formal school
- ◆ Homework completion
 - » Homework support
 - » Early intervention
 - » Enhanced educational attainment

Practical outcomes

- ◆ Safe and secure environment
- ◆ Hot nutritious meals
- ◆ Consistency experienced in their group
- ◆ Support the transfer/transition between primary/post primary school

Social and emotional outcomes

- ◆ Increase in self-confidence
- ◆ Reduced isolation
- ◆ Improved communication skills
- ◆ Enhanced self-esteem

Social benefits

- ◆ Friendships with peers
- ◆ Positive behaviour
- ◆ Conflict resolution

Student Placements

Throughout the year, the services support student placements; these students come from a variety of disciplines – Social Care, Psychology, Education, Physiotherapy etc. Students gain valuable experience while working in the services as part of their practice placements. Regardless of their chosen area of study, each student has an opportunity to learn how to plan, deliver and review a group, and how to support individual children who require specific interventions or plans.

One student of Psychology from the University Of Limerick captured their sense of the placement as follows:

Outside of the over-arching benefits of the Early Bird Service (EBS) and Afterschool Service, the compassion and care for each child attending and the impact it has on them is immeasurable. It is very rare for a child to come through the front door of either of these services and leave without having their day improved, even just a little. Children who come in upset, angry or just fed up with the day are met with caring staff, who are always willing to listen to them – no issue is considered too small or unimportant to be heard, and it is this mentality, that every child gets a voice, that makes this service so special.

Every child in EBS leaves with a full tummy, warm and comfortable, in a stable routine – while it might not fix every problem they are facing, it allows them a moment to enjoy being carefree children, gives them a platform to talk about how they feel and establishes a foundation for them to grow into healthy adults. Some mornings can be hectic, which makes it hard to remember the good the service does for the children who come – but I can guarantee that every staff member has more stories than they can count of a child being distressed or in need, where they have intervened and helped that child feel happy and safe again.

The Afterschool Service has the exact same impact – the children know they have staff members who care about their wellbeing, and feel safe and comfortable enough to talk about their problems, and share both the good and bad in their lives. Each room has its own dynamics, that the staff know so well – that in itself is a feat, that you are all so in-tune with your group that you can predict their behaviour and reactions. Children are guaranteed to get support with their homework, and the older groups all leave having had a healthy, filling dinner – this kind of structure and engagement is so important for their development.

Each staff member is so compassionate and genuinely cares about the wellbeing of the children in the service. In a way, the two services form a non-conventional family – built on trust and care.

Interagency Working

As outlined above, the services operate on an interagency basis. Interagency working or collaboration may be defined as more than one agency working together in a planned, coordinated, formal way towards shared and agreed goals (Statham, 2011). Combining the staff and resources of the agencies involved enables the services to provide for more children than any one agency could deliver on their own.

There is a lot involved in undertaking an interagency approach to delivering a service and this has been such a learning experience. Interagency working by its very concept can deliver a unique and quality service to those it serves. However, challenges can present. These challenges arise for everyone involved in the process and conflicts and tensions are inevitable, for example, there may be cultural differences between organisations, competing demands or limitations within each individual organisation. Before undertaking this type of service delivery, therefore, it is imperative that agencies consider a variety of issues and, most importantly, try to reach agreement on these during the planning phase.

Our learning, together with our partners, is set out below.

1. Protocols

- ◆ It is helpful to have a **clear vision** for the service that captures the views of the service users, stakeholders and all agencies involved. This should be the starting point. If everybody reaches an agreement, then people and organisations are much more open to set about achieving this in a cohesive, transparent and respectful way.
- ◆ Ensure that there are **agreed policies and procedures** in place in relation to child protection, child/adult ratios, practice, behaviour management etc.
- ◆ In order to ensure the smooth planning and running of the service it is important that all agencies advise of what **funding and resources** they are contributing from the outset, and each year this is agreed for the year ahead.
- ◆ It is advisable that **insurance** is clarified regarding insurance for staff/children, public liability, equipment etc.

2. Management/Governance

Governance refers to how organisations are run, directed and controlled (HIQA, 2012).

- ◆ When undertaking an interagency approach it is advisable to have a **clear line management structure** for all staff involved, and mechanisms in place to support staff and staff practice.
- ◆ It is advisable that agencies:
 - » Ensure that a structure is in place for the service, with **adequate staffing** that is compliant with legislation;
 - » **Manage budgets and finances** for the service to meet the children's needs;
 - » Ensure that all staff have a **clear understanding of their role and responsibilities**.
- ◆ It is recommended that **bi-annual reviews** are held with managers from each partner organisation to review service and any other issues that may arise.

3. Staffing

- ◆ Frontline staff are the people meeting the needs of children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. It is important that **staff have the appropriate competencies** to respond positively to the children's needs.
- ◆ It is inevitable that a service will experience staff absences when the service is operational, and this can impact dramatically on the service and

the children attending. It is important to **have a contingency plan**, for example can each agency provide adequate cover for their staff, or does it mean that a group or part of the service have to be cancelled or closed when there are absences? Is there a panel of staff that each agency can access when necessary? It is important that partners agree how this is going to be managed.

- ◆ It is important that **frontline staff are supported to attend training, planning sessions, reviews** etc. Allowing staff to participate in reviews, planning etc. is key to observing and supporting children's development and well-being, and is central to the successful implementation of the service goals.

4. Environment

The physical environment of the service is an important element and it needs to be safe, warm and welcoming. The following should be considered in order to ensure a high quality service is achieved:

- ◆ **Adequate space** to allow for designated areas for meals etc. and that they are compliant with regulations and legislation.
- ◆ **Outside area** that allows children engage in outdoor activities to support their health and fitness.
- ◆ **Equipment and furniture to accommodate different age groups** in order to allow children complete their homework, eat their dinner and to engage in activities comfortably.
- ◆ **Easily accessible toilet facilities** for all children and staff, particularly those with physical disabilities.
- ◆ **Materials and storage facilities** - consideration should be given to the range of resources and how they can be stored safely and accessibly for the day-to-day running of the service, particularly when the space maybe used for other purposes throughout the day.
- ◆ It is important also to **consider maintenance, bins, cleaning, key holders etc.** These are crucial to the effective running of a service.

“ *Frontline staff are the people meeting the needs of children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. It is important that staff have the appropriate competencies to respond positively to the children's needs.* ”



This approach to service delivery on this scale and capacity has been a journey and one that was new to Barnardos and the other partners involved. This approach has evolved and developed since its inception, and has seen many changes as a result of responding to children’s needs, end of year evaluations with the children, parents and the schools, and also reviews with staff and agencies.

When all the protocols and effective channels of communication are functioning, the resulting service is of a high quality and standard. It has been a privilege to be a part of this endeavour as it has resulted in significant outcomes for children and their families.

Investing in Children Membership Award™

In adopting this approach, the Afterschool Group applied for and was awarded the Investing in Children Award, supported by Tusla Regional Participation Officer Jacqueline Concannon.



In November 2017, staff in the afterschool service from the partner organisations and a member of Barnardos advocacy team worked with the children attending this service to identify what is the best thing about being a child, and what would make it better. Their views and voices were captured on a video to mark Universal Children’s Day. The children spoke about the communities they live in, for example the impact of anti-social behaviour, the lack of a safe place to play and their environment. They showed a keen interest in improving and reforming their area through local advocacy.

Following on from this, the children show-cased their work at the 3rd National Tusla Child and Youth Participation Conference ‘Where to from here?’ on the 26th April

2018 in Athlone. Four of the children represented the afterschool service proudly, and participated in the exhibition of their work. The children were presented with the ‘Investing in Children Membership Award’ on the day by Tusla COO, Jim Gibson.

These discussions with the children promoted their independent thinking, negotiation skills and a sense that their voices were being listened to. In addition, the award recognised how the service includes children.

“ *The children spoke about the communities they live in, for example the impact of anti-social behaviour, the lack of a safe place to play and their environment. They showed a keen interest in improving and reforming their area through local advocacy.* ”

Conclusion

Including children’s voices is fundamental to our work in Barnardos, and each week in the Early Bird Service (Breakfast Club) and the Afterschool Service the children are given an opportunity to plan for the following week, and to address any issues they may be having within their group. This serves to develop an ownership of their group and to develop empathy towards each other as they are supported to discuss how their behaviours affects each other, and how they might respond to each other in a respectful and meaningful way. Children’s needs are addressed on an individual basis within the group context, and keyworkers liaise regularly with the parents and teachers to ensure they are being supported appropriately.

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School Age Childcare

Listening to what children want

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Introduction

This article examines government consultations with children in Ireland on school age childcare (SAC) against the background of the wider child participation agenda, presents some of the key findings from the consultations in relation to children's likes, dislikes and preferences for SAC, and considers these in light of recent SAC policy initiatives.





School Age Childcare

SAC services have become important contexts of childhood, particularly as they can constitute the main locations outside school where children play and socialise (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). SAC is defined as:

Childcare which encompasses a wide range of non-scholastic, safe, structured programme offerings for school-going children aged 4–12 years, whether provided by childminders or in formal settings. The service operates outside of normal school hours, i.e. before school, after school and during school holidays, excluding the weekends. The same children attend the service on a regular basis and access to the service is clearly defined by agreement with parents and guardians. The main purpose of the service is to promote children’s holistic development and to care for children where their parents are unavailable.

(Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA] and Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2017, p.11)

SAC has been the Cinderella of childcare services internationally (Strandell, 2013). In Ireland, SAC has developed in an ad hoc and unregulated manner, often provided informally by extended family and friends, private childminders or, in the formal sector, absorbed into already existing early years/childcare facilities, and through breakfast and homework clubs offered by organisations such as the School Completion Programmes and youth services, which are predominately linked to DEIS schools¹. The overall number of children availing of SAC is unknown as is the number of schools, community or youth services offering SAC. However, Pobal (2019) estimate that 40, 588 or 20.5% of all children enrolled in childcare services in 2018/19 are in SAC.

“ *The goal of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives.* ”

Children’s Participation

The child participation agenda essentially promotes children’s inclusion as participants rather than ‘apprentice adults’ in society (Alanen, 2001). In particular, Article 12 of the UNCRC, commonly known as the ‘Participation Article’, is widely recognised as the basis for the child participation agenda in recent decades along with childhood studies perspectives on children as social actors, and more recent conceptualisations of the spatial-relational nature of children’s lives (Horgan, Forde, Martin & Parkes, 2017). These have all been catalysts for developing policy and practice-based participatory initiatives with children internationally (Percy-Smith, 2010).

Following ratification of the UNCRC, various countries established mechanisms facilitating children’s participation at multiple governmental levels from local and regional to key government departments through child and youth councils, advisory boards, summits etc. (Perry-Hazan, 2016). In the Irish context, a Citizen Participation Unit, established within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2011, has been key to the development of participatory mechanisms and initiatives for children and young people, culminating in the publication of the *National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making* (DCYA, 2015) - the first of its kind in Europe.

The strategy is rooted in Article 12 of the UNCRC and informed by Laura Lundy’s non-hierarchical, rights-based model of participation, emphasising space, voice, audience and influence elements to involving children in decision-making (Lundy, 2009). The goal of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people have a voice in their individual and collective everyday lives. The strategy prioritises key spaces and places where children are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives in their local communities, in early education, schools and wider education systems, in the health and social services delivered to them, and in the courts and legal system. A key objective of the strategy is central to the focus of this article, namely, ‘mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research’ (DCYA, 2015, p. 4).

The Irish government has conducted numerous consultations with children since the early 2000s on a range of policy issues. The DCYA claims that it ‘provides opportunities for children and young people to contribute their views on issues of national and personal importance’

¹ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) the Action Plan for Educational Inclusion, launched in May 2005, sets out the vision for future intervention in the critical area of social inclusion in education policy and remains the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage. The action plan focuses on addressing and prioritising the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education (3 to 18 years).

(DCYA, n.d.). However, some of the critical literature on child participation asserts that mainstream attempts to 'involve youth' in public affairs may sometimes be top-down, tokenistic and in some cases patronising (Head, 2011; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Critical analysis is essential, then, so that initiatives are more than a tick box exercise fulfilling government commitments to consult with children.

School Age Childcare Consultations with Children

Following commitments made in *A Programme for Partnership Government* (Department of the Taoiseach, 2016) regarding the introduction of a new system to support and expand quality afterschool care for school age children, consultations were conducted with a number of key stakeholders including children. These informed the *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Department of Education and Skills in 2017.

A total of 177 children, comprising 81 five to seven year olds and 96 eight to 12 year olds, were recruited by the DCYA through primary schools around the country. The consultations with older children were held as one-off events lasting approximately three hours in a number of neutral settings. Consultations with the younger children were conducted in their schools to enable smaller group work in a more familiar environment and were shorter in duration. The aims were to identify what children like and dislike about their current after-school care arrangements and the places where children would most like to be cared for after school. Methods encompassed a variety of age appropriate, child-centred group and individual activities that children are thought to generally enjoy. They were strengths-based consultative approaches that allowed children to identify and explore issues based on what they know and experience in their everyday lives and on what they would like to change or improve on those issues.

The consultations consisted of Ice-breaker games; a 'Post-it' activity to identify where the participating children were cared for after school; a Placemat exercise where children were asked to draw/write what they do and what they like to do after school on specially designed large floormats; a Timeline activity with children asked to design their ideal after-school experience on rectangular mats with clouds depicting stages of the day after school; and Voting exercises using a ballot box where younger children were asked to draw/write what they don't like about their day after school and older children were asked to vote on where they would most like to be cared for after school. The consultations were subject to the

standard ethical guidance and procedures for research with children (DCYA, 2017). All of the DCYA facilitators were very skilled and experienced in participatory work with children, and were police vetted. Members of our team observed these consultations and, thereafter, analysed the research materials and produced a report on children's perspectives on school age childcare (DYCA, 2017).

Consultation Findings

The findings from the consultations with children commissioned for the *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* indicate that children want to be able to relax and feel comfortable after school. A home-like environment was preferred, with outdoor and indoor play identified as a priority of the after-school experience by children of all ages. Relationships with family, extended family, friends, childminders and other carers were noted as being very important to children. Eating and cooking were also identified as important activities for children after school. Children expressed a dislike of being in structured environments with rules. Other dislikes included not being treated appropriately for their age along with lack of food choice.





For both cohorts of children involved in the consultations (5 to 7 years and 8 to 12 years), the issue of play emerged as being of paramount importance. It was identified as a category in and of itself and was incorporated into other activities the children prioritised such as being with friends, going on outings, relaxing, being on their own, and at friend's or relatives' houses. Furthermore, when asked to design their ideal or imagined after-school care, play was by far the most frequently mentioned category of activity. While children discussed all types of play, three key areas of play were identified through analysis of the consultation data:

- ◆ **Outdoor play and activities** – All children, but especially the younger children, aged between five and seven years, placed an emphasis on outdoor play. This could include going on outings and participating in structured and unstructured outdoor activities.
- ◆ **Relational and peer play** - Children in both groups discussed the importance of playing with others, especially family and friends. The older children, aged eight to 12 years, emphasised the importance of opportunities to socialise with their friends and identified spending time in their houses or friends' houses as an important part of this peer interaction.
- ◆ **Technological play** - Children mentioned a range of forms of tech play in their responses, although it was more frequently mentioned by boys than girls and older children rather than younger children.

The younger children were asked to vote on 'anything about your day after school that you don't like?' Homework was the thing they liked least about their after-school experience with a general complaint about having to do homework, homework being overly long or having to do homework at a specific time. Children in both age cohorts seemed resigned to the fact that homework was something that had to be done. It was referred to mostly in a negative light as boring and an inconvenience, with children indicating that they like to get homework out of the way. For some older children in group SAC settings, help with homework was identified as a positive factor. Younger children disliked having to do their homework because they did not get appropriate help or the setting was too loud.

'Rules' in relation to after-school clubs/crèche and childminders, but more frequently in relation to home, was the next most frequently mentioned dislike about their after-school experience. The third most significant dislike for younger children was 'other people' (both staff and children) in after-school clubs/crèche and childminders and 'inappropriate and limited choice of toys and activities' both in after-school clubs and crèche. This was closely followed by conflict with older 'siblings' or annoyance with younger siblings.

Older children in group SAC settings mentioned a larger number of issues which they disliked compared to children in any other SAC environments. They expressed a dislike of being in structured environments with rules, of not being treated appropriately for their age along with lack of food choice. Children were critical of being in settings that they felt they had outgrown and the limited range of activities and equipment available to them in some SAC settings. Examples they gave included seats that were too small for them, inappropriate and broken toys and equipment, being with children who were younger than them, being unable to play outside, and having to follow similar and very predictable patterns of activities. Some also disliked the ways they were treated by some of the staff in these settings. They were critical of staff who they perceived as being 'bossy' or 'not nice' and who they felt did not listen to them.

Finally, the older children voted for where they would like to be cared for after school from a list of settings identified by themselves. Overwhelmingly the children voted for home as the place they would most like to be cared for after school (57%). This was followed by friends' houses, relative's, after-school club, childminder and crèche.

Action Plan on School Age Childcare

Despite the flurry of child participatory activity in recent years with innovative approaches and skilful facilitation, Shier, Hernandez Mendez, Centeno, Arroliga & Gonzalez (2014, p. 1) argue 'there is less evidence that children and young people's actions are having real influence on the policy-makers whose decisions affect their life-chances and well-being'. Similarly, Byrne and Lundy (2015) found little evidence of particular examples where children's views had informed a final policy. There is a lack of empirical evidence of the discernible impact of children and young people's general involvement in the policy process. Consequently, there is much need for analysis of how children's participation in the policy process can be meaningful, impactful and effective in bringing about change.

The children's consultation report (DCYA, 2017) was extensively referred to in the *Action Plan on School Age Childcare* (DCYA/DES, 2017) and impacted on it in a number of ways. In terms of overall approach, the Action Plan states that the school age childcare model developed recognises the rights of children under the UNCRC and that the voice of children is critical to informing policy in this area. The *Programme for Government, 2016* had committed to support and expand quality after-school care based on utilising existing primary school buildings.

While perhaps addressing issues related to locality and costs, this clearly would not address the limitations of such a direction as identified by children. The Action Plan, while still committed to maximising the use of schools and existing community facilities that have suitable environments available for SAC, does acknowledge that a homelike environment was preferred by many of the children consulted. It goes on to say that

If children's preference is to go home after school and enjoy certain patterns and activities, and it is not possible to facilitate this, then the system of SAC must seek to reproduce their preferences in a variety of settings, other than their home.

(DCYA & DES, 2017, p. 62)

This includes exploring the potential role of the youth sector and ensuring quality standards in the physical environment, adult/child ratios, the provision of appropriate food and nutrition, access to outdoor play, inclusion, and the health, well-being and protection of the child in all settings used. Some important children's views did not find their way into the Action Plan. For example, while homework emerged strongly in the children's consultations and reflects the reality of children's educational experiences and the practice of homework in the Irish education system, this is not dealt with in the Action Plan on SAC.

Developments in School Age Childcare Access, Provision and Quality Standards

There has been much recent activity and attention from government on School Age Childcare. Since February 2019, childcare services providing care to school age children must register with TUSLA and comply with the *Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Registration of School Age Services) Regulations 2018*. Also, the Draft National Quality Standards (2019) developed by the National Working Group on School Age Childcare have been published by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. This is a key strategic commitment of government under the Action Plan in 2017. Furthermore,

the capital programme for 2019 invested €2,203,457 in the creation of new school-age childcare places. Also, it is expected that the families of more than 21,000 school going children will benefit from subsidies through the recently introduced National Childcare Scheme.

Discussion and Lessons for Policy

Drawing on the views of the children in these consultations, the development of accessible school age childcare environments that provide outdoor play opportunities, incorporate a range of activities and age appropriate equipment, recognise children's interest in choice, and include spaces for some privacy would be advisable. It is also important to note that levels of choice intersect with the environments in which children are cared for, the original purposes of these environments, and the adults present in those contexts who are caring for them (Strandell, 2013; King and Howard, 2014).

More generally, in considering play in the lives of children, the preferences they have expressed in where, when and how they like to spend this free time has important implications for the formation of SAC policy and incorporation of opportunities for play that reflect and respond to their views and can be mapped onto the structure of their lives. Any such policy must ensure that the spaces that children inhabit in SAC are conducive to the play opportunities they value.

Lundy's checklist of children's participation, developed for the *National Strategy of Children and Young Peoples Participation in Decision-making* (DCYA, 2015), asks organisations working with children to consider a number of things in relation to all four elements – space, voice, audience and influence. Acknowledging that *influence* is the least developed of these in practice, we must ask 'were children's views considered and taken seriously by those with the power to effect change?' (DCYA, 2015). Responding to child 'voice' and including the results from children's consultations in policy is challenging. This is evident from the tensions between the need to develop the SAC infrastructure (including group care provision) nationally and children's stated desire for less structured family-like environments. Nonetheless, there is considerable potential for child participatory policy development by embedding consultations of the kind discussed in this article as an integral part of policymaking,

“ Drawing on the views of the children in these consultations, the development of accessible school age childcare environments that provide outdoor play opportunities, incorporate a range of activities and age appropriate equipment, recognise children's interest in choice, and include spaces for some privacy would be advisable. ”



along with built in assessments of the long-term impact such views have on government delivery for children.

A detailed consultation on the development of regulations and a quality framework for school-age childcare took place during 2019, and the final report is due to be published shortly. Any such framework must act on the views and concerns of children - on issues such

as transitions from school to SAC, the physical space, choice in terms of eating (what and when), activities, and homework. SAC services which forefront play and 'home from home' environments must become the norm. The findings from children's consultations must shape and inform the Regulations and quality standards developed for SAC.

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The Role of School Age Childcare in Supporting a Child's Development

Karen Clince, CEO, Tigers Childcare

'If children feel safe, they can take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, learn to trust, share their feelings, and grow.'

Alfie Kohn





Introduction

School age childcare has been the long-forgotten category of care in our childcare industry. There has almost been a sense that learning is in the classroom and school age children just need some supervision once their school day is done. Although there is truth in their need for freedom, there is a real opportunity for supporting development in this space.

We now live in a world where our economy survives on two parent working families. Where it has become the norm that a large number of children below the age of 15 need care after their school day. In Ireland, just over 40% of families have to avail of some form of childcare for their school going children (Department of Children and Youth Affairs & Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Traditionally, this care has taken place in informal ways, through informal childcare arrangements with family, friends or neighbours, or through more formal arrangements but ones where children are attending settings with environments set up for sessional preschool children.

The Government has long acknowledged that there is a need for further investment in this area of the childcare industry. However, with the commitment of funding comes a need for regulation and quality standards.



How Best to Support Children

Tigers Childcare was established in 2002. It was the first school age private setting on a school campus in Ireland. In the 18 years we have been operating we have learned many things. However, the standout lesson has been that school age childcare offers us an opportunity. We have the opportunity to support the child's development both socially and emotionally, which, in turn, leads to better outcomes for the children we care for. So how do we develop environments that foster child-led learning and how do we get ready for what is coming down the track with regard to school age regulation?

- ◆ **It's not school:** Children need time for relaxation after the school day. The school age childcare environment should reflect this and should be designed with this purpose in mind. The room should be re-flowing with plenty of choice. Desks should be limited. There should be a mixture of age appropriate materials. Areas of interest should be set up, including areas for relaxation. Outdoor and physical play should make up a large part of the day.
- ◆ **Choice, choice and more choice:** Children need to have as much choice as possible in their day in what they do and in when they do it. We have found that children need to be able to choose their interests and activities. Tracking the children's interests and development aids in this as it allows the practitioner to offer activities to build on their natural interest and learning. Where activities are offered by the practitioner, children should have a choice whether to take part or not. We have found that a moveable timetable helps. The timetable is hung up on the wall and the children can stick up the activities they would like to do throughout the week. Children's voices should be evident, and they should have their opinions taken onboard. We have found a need for choice in the food offered so options at dinner time are a must.
- ◆ **Relationships and interactions:** In afterschool we have a real opportunity when it comes to our interactions and attachment/relationship building with the children. Where ratios are in line with the recommendations (1:11) there is a real opportunity for one-on-one time. Interactions should be collaborative, and adults should give guidance and assistance to children while also allowing them time to critically think of solutions themselves. Questions like 'what do you think?' are vitally important. The childcare professional should be a facilitator of play.
- ◆ **Behaviour and self-regulation:** Again, having time and small numbers allows us an opportunity to support self-regulation and appropriate behaviours. We have found that before any behaviour management can take place we have to calm and support. Children of school going age are still developing their skills of communication and resolving conflict. Before a child will listen or learn we need to calm them and make sure there are not distressed or upset. We have found the HighScope conflict resolution model helpful. It allows the child to express their opinion with the aid of the adult and work through appropriate solutions. Children at this age have a real sense of justice and so they must be involved in rule making and sanctions for inappropriate behaviour. It is good to track behaviour so that any patterns or arising issues can be explored.

- ◆ **Confidence building and exploring talents:** It is accepted that not all children shine academically in a classroom space and some find school difficult. Afterschool gives an opportunity for those children to shine among their peers. Whether this is with art, technology, sport or a wonderful imagination, the afterschool setting can be a space to build confidence, which, in turn, will aid the child's wellbeing. Celebrate their talents.
- ◆ **Supporting homework:** Children who are in afterschool for a long day should be supported with an appropriate space for homework. An understanding should be in place that homework is a review of a child's knowledge of what they have learned in the school day. If a child does not understand an exercise they should not be overly stressed, and this should be relayed to a parent to inform the teacher. There should also be an understanding that some homework, such as aided reading for young children, is a special time for parents and so should be saved for home. Homework time should be optional for families and should be opt in or out in your service.
- ◆ **Parents as partners:** It is important that we respect parents as the primary educator of their child. Their views, opinions and concerns should be taken on board. Your centre should have an open-door policy and time should be given to parents at drop off and collection. Feedback is important to parents. They want to hear about their child's day. We need to also support parents and understand the pressures that may exist for them. Supporting parents leads to better outcomes for children and so we should be a listening ear.
- ◆ **Child protection:** All staff should have training in child protection. A designated person should be in charge of child protection as per the Children First¹ guidelines. Reporting should take place as required. Again, we should support parents in understanding appropriate behaviours and our legal requirement to report any suspected abuse. We should, however, also support parents when needed to help them make better choices.
- ◆ **Staff training and continuous professional development:** Staff should be trained in working with children and have covered modules in child development. Although there is minimal training in

the area of afterschool, other qualifications such as early years or youth work/social care may be appropriate. As we found in early years, quality comes from professionals having appropriate qualifications and school age childcare should maintain similar standards.

- ◆ **Ready for regulation:** As we are aware, regulation for school age childcare is on its way. With regulation comes inspection. It is expected that similar rules will be put in place as those in regard to standards in preschools. Forming good policy documents will not only help you with regulation but also aid you in the safe running of your service and maintaining standards. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs are currently working on a policy document that will aid providers in looking at standards and regulation going forward.

Conclusion

As an industry, I see regulation in school age childcare as a positive. Where you have standards, you will see improvements in quality, and you will also see funding and government support. All this leads to better outcomes for the children we care for.

The introduction of the affordable childcare scheme brought school age childcare into the funding model for the first time. It gives access to all children regardless of family income with tiered supports. This is such a strong move forward, meaning those most vulnerable at a young age can now access after school childcare.

At Tigers Childcare we have seen that holistic care in the primary schools has led to improvements in the lives of the children we have cared for. We have seen quiet children learn to be more confident and children with behaviour problems learn to self-regulate and communicate more appropriately. We have seen the knock-on effect in these children's schooling. We have also seen that when we support families who are struggling, the children's lives improve.

Afterschool is not a childcare afterthought; it is a unique opportunity. For the industry, for parents and for those that matter the most - the children.

For information on Tigers Childcare see
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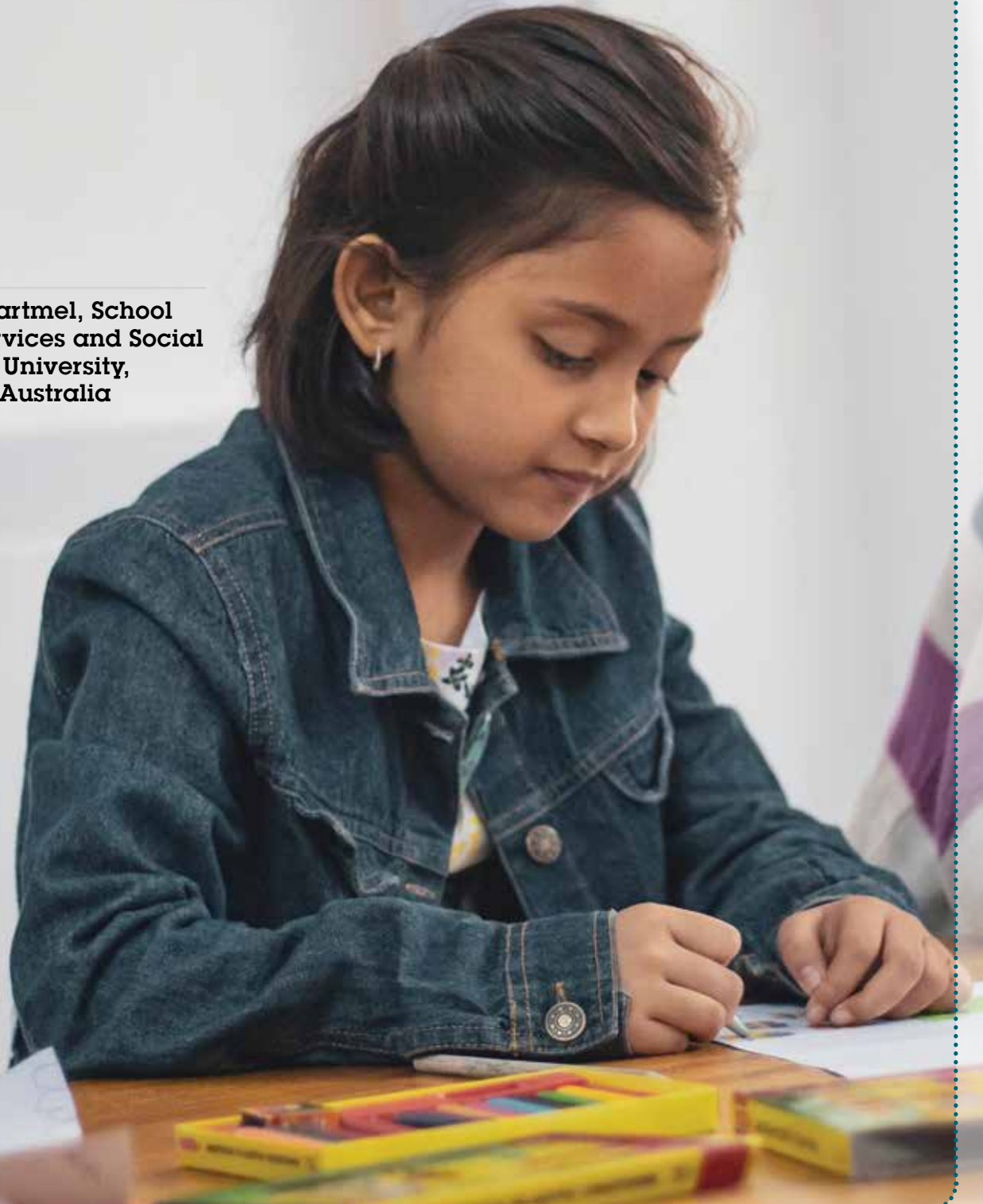
¹ The term 'Children First' was originally used in relation to Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children, first published in 1999 and reviewed and updated on a number of occasions since then, most recently in 2017. Since the enactment of the Children First Act 2015, the term is now a generic term used to encompass the guidance, the legislation and the implementation of both in Ireland.

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School Age Care Services in Australia

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School Age Care (SAC) services in Australia are regarded as the fastest growing children care sector. The changes in family circumstances such as longer working hours, families with both parents in full-time employment, single-parent families, changing community and inter-familial care-giving dynamics mean that SAC services are increasingly becoming a vital conduit between home-life and school-life (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). In June 2017, 363,700 Australian children were reported as attending SAC (ABS, 2018). Children who attend are aged between five and 12 years. The services operate before school and after school and during vacation periods. Daily hours of attendance can total more than five hours a day (nearly the same hours as school). Even though services have been operating for more than 40 years, there has been limited Australian research about the way programmes are developed. There is contestation about whether services such as schools and SAC services are family or community responsibilities.

Development of School Age Care Services

During the 1970s, a groundswell of pressure from women's lobby groups demanded that all women should have the opportunity to work. According to Brennan (1998), the advocacy of child care lobby groups forced the Australian government to plan a National Child Care strategy that included subsidising a number of places in SAC (Cartmel, 2007). Since the mid-1980s, there have been further increases in the number of subsidised places for children in SAC (Brennan, 1998, 2004) for parents who needed child care for school age children for work related reasons. The hasty response to provide SAC in schools was initiated usually by volunteer committees sponsored by an assortment of non-profit community-based organisations. The SAC services were predominantly managed by the voluntary services of parents and other community-minded citizens. This form of management made SAC services quite different from other forms of child care such as long day care (Cartmel, 2007). It also impacted on the status and profile of SAC services.

In the 1990s, the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training decided that schools would not take responsibility for SAC services though they would be supportive of external organisations operating on their sites (Gifford, 1992). The report *Early Childhood in Australian Schools: Future Directions* recommended to the Schools Council that child care is not the responsibility of the schools (Gifford, 1992). Since that time, SAC has been linked to the early childhood agenda even though it caters for primary school age children.

Early SAC services were often staffed by volunteers and operated on shoestring budgets (Arnold, 2002), and the majority of services were sited on school premises. Circumstances were quite uncomfortable for co-ordinators as, unable to afford rent, they "made do" with whatever space was available.

The majority of services continue to be hosted on school sites and are administered by a range of organisations including schools, community groups and faith-based organisations as well as commercial companies. The fractured approach to the delivery of SAC services has contributed to the lack of consolidated information about the circumstances. Prior to the introduction of licensing of SAC services (*Child Care Act 2002*) and the national accreditation of SAC, the arrangements for the operation of SAC were ad hoc (Cartmel, 2007). In 2009, Australian governments developed The National Quality Agenda (NQA) for Early Childhood Education and Care with the express goal of creating a national quality strategy for the early years, to ensure the wellbeing of children throughout their lives. The NQA established the National Quality Framework (NQF) (ACECQA, 2020a, 2020b), which has implemented a regulatory approach underpinned by the importance of learning and development opportunities for all Australian children. School Age Child Care services are included in this National Quality Agenda even though they provide services for children for older age groups of children. The NQF consists of the National Law and National Regulations, National Quality Standard, assessment and quality rating process, and the approved learning framework *My Time Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia (MTOF)* (ACECQA, 2020a).

The national accreditation, quality assurance and legislative requirements have placed increasing pressure on the relationship between SAC services and schools, particularly for SAC co-ordinators and school principals. Previously, services did not pay rent, maintenance or cleaning costs however this has changed. There are now complex relationships where SAC pay significant rent to the school for use of buildings. Generally, services are managed separately to the operation of the school.

The introduction of the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard Rating Scale and in particular *MTOF, Framework* (ACECQA, 2020a) means that school age care educators are required to be responsive to all children's strengths, abilities and interests. The Framework includes principles and practices that state that educators should value and build on children's strengths, skills and knowledge to ensure their wellbeing and motivation, and engagement in experiences. They should respond to children's ideas and ensure that play forms an important basis for programme decision-making. The Framework acknowledges that children need a place to engage in



a range of play and leisure experiences that allow them to feel happy, safe and relaxed (ACECQA, 2020a). It also recognises that children need time to interact with friends, practise social skills, solve problems, try new activities and learn life skills.

The format for SAC, i.e. that it operates before and after school, masks the actual total operating hours of SAC services, which are usually at least five hours per day over the two sessions. The operating hours before and after school combined with vacations and pupil-free days mean that SAC services operate for an equivalent amount of time as their host schools. The perception that SAC has limited operational hours has contributed to the low priority placed on this form of care (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). The lack of focus and status of the SAC sector has perpetuated concerns about tenancy and high staff turnover (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016; Hurst, 2017).

Staff in SAC services have assorted vocational or university qualifications ranging from children's services diplomas to degrees in education, psychology, nursing and leisure management. There are no nationally agreed qualification requirements for Australian SAC services. The qualifications vary significantly across the Australian states. The child staff ratios are one adult to 15 children, and the educator must hold or be actively working towards a two-year qualification; or two adults for every 30 children with at least one educator holding or actively working towards a two-year qualification.

Information about Australian SAC services has tended to focus on the systemic and administrative arrangements. However, Dockett and Perry (2014) examined strategies to help the transition for children and families between schools and SAC services and Hurst (2017) collaborated with older children in SAC to examine their perspectives. There is a need for more research about the sector.

Policy and Regulations Review

The Australian Government has commissioned a review of the National Quality Agenda - 2019 National Quality Framework Review. This review will consider the ongoing effectiveness and sustainability of the NQF in light of the continuing evolution of the early childhood education and care sector, and whether the regulatory framework enables contemporary best practice regulation. For School Age Care services there are two key standard out aspects that are under review.

1. How can the requirements of the NQF better reflect the unique operating context of SAC?
2. Are the NQFs physical space requirements for school age children suitable for their learning and development, and proportionate to risks for children of this age?



These two questions are linked. The different operating context of SAC services requires consideration of whether they should operate as a separate service type under the National Law, rather than be considered in the same way as a service for children birth to five years. The different operating context of SAC compared to services for children birth to five years needs to be taken into consideration. Specific regulatory requirements for SAC services are generally at jurisdictional level, including programming expectations, exemptions from some physical environment requirements and educator qualification requirements. Further SAC services are unique in offering learning through play and leisure under the approved learning framework (MTOF- ACECQA, 2020) and often utilising school premises where they have limited control of the physical environment.

Indoor and outdoor space requirements of service premises are specified in the National Regulations. The question is whether space requirements should be different depending on the age of children in attendance. Currently, the space available for school children during school hours may be less than space required for SAC. However, greater space is required per child for SAC services to be able to undertake play and leisure-based activities. This can present issues for the supply of SAC services operating in high demand areas where the number of places available is restricted by space requirements. Access to outside environments, adequate ventilation and natural light are important for developmental outcomes for children in education and care. Clarification of definitions such as natural light and ventilation may be needed. This is especially relevant given the increase in services operating in multi-storey facilities. Further services need access to administrative space, storage and outdoor shaded areas. SAC have not been consistently been provided with security of tenure.

For SAC services operating in schools, there are also contested arrangements in relation to the use of buildings and equipment. The rules for use of space change depending on whether the space is being used for school or SAC activities. Because quality standards and licensing require certain building and programming standards to be attained by SAC services, the issues have become increasingly pronounced since the introduction of legislated processes. The standards applying to the care of children at school do not apply to those same students when in SAC. This leads to contradictions and complexities, for example, the “sandpit and playground equipment” deemed

unsuitable for SAC services by regulations are used by children during the school day (Tayler, Willis, Hayden & Wilson, 2006, p. 37). An additional issue linked to the issue of insecure tenancy is the difficulty of achieving quality in each of the seven standards of the National Quality Framework in circumstances when the SAC venue is constantly relocated (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016) or when there are differing expectations regarding the use of equipment and school spaces.

Advocacy and Professional Development

In Australia, there is a National Outside School Hours Services Alliance (NOSHSA) as well as peak associations (interest or advocacy groups) in each Australian state that provide support and advocacy for School Age Care services. In Queensland, the Queensland Children’s Activities Network (QCAN) is very active in developing the professional status for the sector. The organisation has two particular initiatives:

- ◆ Professional Standards for Educators in outside school hours care
- ◆ Action Research projects as professional development

These two initiatives are significant to developing the status of the sector and the professionalisation of the workforce.

The *Professional Standards for Educators in Outside School Hours Care* (QCAN, 2018) are based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and were compiled by Queensland Children’s Activities Network (QCAN) to support educators working in out of school hours care settings. These Professional Standards for educators guide professional learning, practice and engagement. They facilitate the improvement of educator quality and contribute positively to the public standing of the profession. The Standards outline what educators should know and be able to do. They are grouped into three domains: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. Further, they are separated into descriptors at four professional career stages: Foundation, Developing, Proficient and Lead. The language used to describe each of the career stages has been thoughtfully approached. As many educators in SAC do not hold formal qualifications when they begin their career in SAC, the Standards articulate the essential knowledge, practice and engagement in the

“ Access to outside environments, adequate ventilation and natural light are important for developmental outcomes for children ”



Foundation level. The next level describes educator's progress as Developing and complements the formal qualifications that educators may be working towards. At the Proficient and Lead levels, educators may have completed and obtained a relevant tertiary qualification. The Standards and their descriptors represent an analysis of effective, contemporary practice by educators throughout Australia. The process of their development included a synthesis of the descriptions of educators' knowledge, practice and professional engagement used by accreditation and training authorities, employers and professional associations.

These Professional Standards define the work of educators and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective provision in quality services that will contribute to enhancing outcomes for children. They present a common understanding and language for discourse between educators, educational leaders, nominated supervisors, governing organisations, professional associations and the public. They inform the development of professional learning goals, provide a framework by which educators can judge the success of their work and assist self-reflection and self-assessment. Educators can use the Standards to recognise their current and developing capabilities, professional aspirations and achievements.

It is intended that these Standards contribute to the professionalisation of SAC and raise the status of the profession. Currently, QCAN is undertaking an evaluation of the implementation of these Standards.

In conjunction with the implementation of the Professional Standards, QCAN has an *Action Research Project* initiative that is a professional development programme for service teams. Topics being examined include programming formats and content, use of digital technology and leadership models. The action research projects are contributing to an evidence base for the SAC sector in Australia.

School Age Care services have become an important context of Australian childhood and family life. On the surface they appear as a physical and social space to hold children waiting for their parents, but simultaneously they are developing as what could be described as a business unit, and as a space contributing to school age children's learning, development and wellbeing. There is an emerging cohort of practitioners in Australia who are keen to support the professionalisation of the sector as well as enhanced communication and governance processes between the host schools and services.

POSTSCRIPT

At the time of writing there is upheaval in the Australian School Age Child Care sector as Government policies and funding models respond to the complexity of the health, economic and social issues associated with COVID 19. It is difficult to predict the impact of these 'temporary' changes on the lives of children and families and on School Age Child Care Services post COVID 19.

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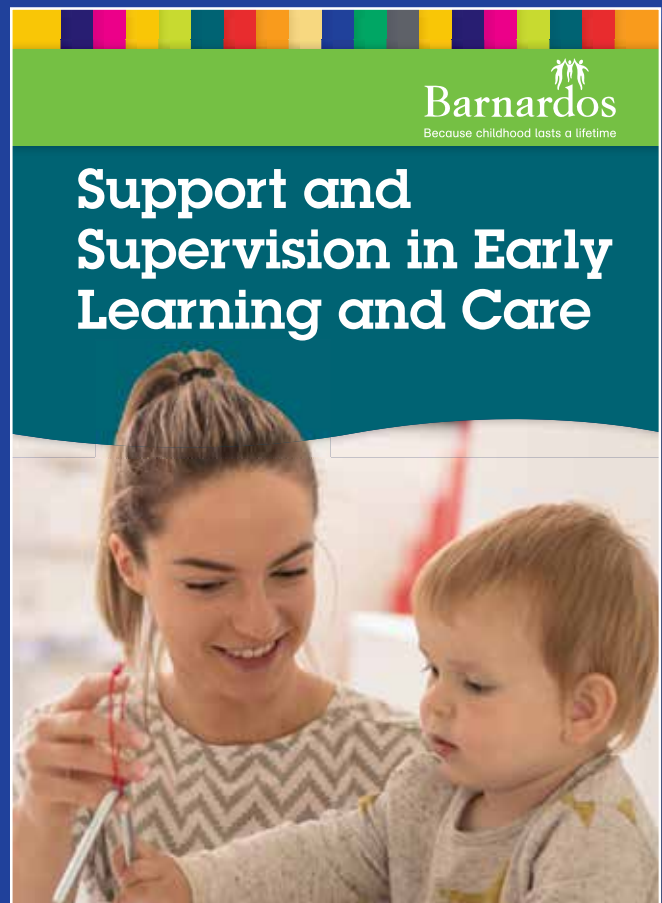
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