

School Age Care Services in Australia

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School Age Care 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; The Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2018). In June 2017, 363,700 Australian children were reported as attending SAC (ABS, 2018). Children who attend are aged between five to twelve years. The services operate before school and after school and during vacation periods. Daily hours of attendance can total 5 hours a day (nearly the same hours as school). Even though services have been operating for more than forty years there has been limited research about the way programs are developed.

All 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, and to deliver the vision of the Early Childhood Development Strategy (ECDS) endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in July 2009, that "by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves, and for the nation". The NQA established the National Quality Framework (NQF), 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 approved learning frameworks *My Time Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011).

The introduction of the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard Rating Scale and in particular *My Time Our Place, Framework for School Age Care Services in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011) states that "school age care educators are responsive to all children's strengths, abilities and interests. They value and build on children's strengths, skills and knowledge to ensure their wellbeing and motivation and engagement in experiences... Responding to children's ideas and play forms an important basis for program decision-making" (p. 14). 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 (DEEWR, 2011). It also recognises that children need time to interact with friends, practice social skills, solve problems, try new activities and learn life skills.

Services are generally hosted on school sites and are provided by a range of organisations including schools, community groups and faith based organisations as well as commercial companies. Generally, services are managed separately to the operation of the school. Staff have assorted vocational or university qualifications ranging from children's services diplomas to degrees in education, psychology, nursing, leisure management. There are no nationally agreed qualification requirements for Australian SAC services. The qualifications vary significantly across the country, for example in Queensland. The child staff ratios are 1 adult to 15 children, and educator must hold or be actively working towards a 2 year qualification; two adults for every 30 children at least one educator must hold or be actively working towards a 2 year qualification.

Policy and Regulations

The Australian Government has commissioned a review of 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 OSHC? (Questions 19)
2. Are the NQF's physical space requirements for school age children suitable for their learning and development, and proportionate to risks for children of this age? (Question 13)

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 5 years. The different operating context of SAC compared to services for children birth to 5 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 My Time, Our Place approved learning framework for school aged children 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 OSHC, however greater space is required per child for OSHC services. This can present issues for the supply of OSHC services oper-

ating in high demand areas where the number of places available is restricted by space requirements. Further space requirements exist for centre-based services in regard to administrative space, and shaded area. 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.

(Members of the WERA IRN EE network contributed information about the physical requirements in services in international countries to contribute to this discussion about space requirements)

Peak Organizations

In Australia there is a National Outside School Hours Services Alliance (NOSHSA) as well as peak associations in each Australian states. These peak organisations 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 which are summarised in the following section:

1. Professional Standards for Educators in outside school hours care
2. Action Research projects as professional development

Professional Standards for Educators in Outside School Hours Care

These Professional Standards for Educators in Outside School Hours Care are based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership and were developed 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 facilitates the improvement of educator quality and contributes positively to the public standing of the profession. The Professional Standards for Educators comprise seven Standards which outline what educators should know and be able to do. The Standards are interconnected, interdependent and overlapping. The Standards are grouped into three domains: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. In practice, the role of the educator in Outside School Hours Care settings draws on aspects of all three domains.

Within each Standard focus areas provide further illustration of educator knowledge, practice and professional engagement. These are then 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 foundations. 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 qualification. The Standards and their descriptors represent an analysis of effective, contemporary practice by educators throughout Australia.

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. These standards 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. QCAN is undertaking an evaluation of the implementation of these standards.

The Evaluation is being informed by Kirkpatrick's Model of Professional Development and will gather information from SAC stakeholders including service leaders, educators, and school principals. It will examine the impact of the implementation of a set of professional standards; and what the associated professional development has on developing a sense of identity for the SAC workforce. The research has been framed by a five level model of evaluation (Guskey, 2016) to provide a systematic evaluation of the learning associated with the professional standards for an emerging workforce. The five layers include

Layer 1: Survey – Educator reaction to professional learning

How will you use the professional standards?

- Individualised improvement strategies
- Share the knowledge with team members
- Embed the standards in existing management practices
- Whole of service approaches to improvement

Layer 2: Individual interviews – Educator learning (knowledge, skills & attitudes)

- How have standards been implemented?
- What successes have been experienced?
- Organisational barriers and facilitators

Layer 3: Individual interviews – Organisation support and change

Evaluation of Layer 4: Educator practice and Layer 5: Outcomes for children are yet to be planned and it will depend on the knowledge and understandings gained in the evaluation of Layers 1-3.

Action Research Projects

Peak organisations for OSHC services are supporting services and educators to undertake Action Research Projects. There are a number of examples of action research project initiatives that have occurred. The National Outside School Hours Services Association (NOSH-SA) in a partnership with an Australian Government initiative sought to contribute under-

standings about flexibility of services, to improve access to out of school hours care and to help build a sustainable and responsive OSHC sector (NOSHSA, 2013).

The Queensland Workforce Council and Queensland Children's Activities Network have also been active in gathering educators together to undertake action research projects that contribute to knowledge about the characteristics and practices within the sector. During 2014-2015 QCAN supported 6 projects that involved 12 educators (QCAN, 2015); in 2019 there are more than 12 projects being undertaken. Disseminating the findings of projects has become a regular feature of the annual QCAN conference as well as publications in "grass roots" and peer reviewed academic publications. These action research projects lead to a deepening of knowledge that contributes to the use of more effective practices, which lead to higher quality service delivery and better outcomes for children and families.

The methodology of action research was chosen as it provided opportunities for upskilling of OSHC educators consistent with workforce development strategies, thereby increasing professionalism in the sector and enhancing the role of the educator. The intention was to uncover deeper understandings and solve "real world" problems in participatory and collaborative ways (O'Leary, 2014, p. 1666). The intentions were to produce changes in practice and knowledge in an integrated fashion through a cyclical process. It is deemed to be an effective strategy for individuals of all levels of research expertise and experience to use (Hart, 1996; Townsend, 2014). West (2011) states that it is a particular approach that educators value as it empowers them to consider their own practice, circumstances and environments and work collaboratively with all stakeholders to examine potential for change.

The action research is a strategy of collaborating to organize social research uses a variety of research methodologies. Action research may not have some of the features of conventional social research however it has social value in its capacity to meet the demands of emerging fields of research that are grounded 'in real world contexts in front of knowledgeable stakeholders' (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 18) such as school age care services.

The following projects will be reported at the QCAN Annual conference to be held in August, 2019.

- How does Outside School Hours Care prepare pre service teachers?
- How do you foster resilience in an OSHC setting?
- What are the perceptions of rough and tumble play in a multi age setting?
- Can we improve service quality by investing in staff well-being?
- Is there an increasing responsibility for OSHC to provide quality outdoor experiences?
- How do we enrich the OSHC experience for older children?
- Does a multi-tiered leadership model enhance an OSHC educator's job satisfaction?
- What are the Importance/ Benefits of Community Engagement?
- How can we foster children's creativity and exploration of play to encourage them to provide input into the program and promote independence while upholding the rights of the child?
- What are the stakeholder perceptions of quality in OSHC?
- How can we structure our environment to encourage children to meaningfully and effectively utilize their indoor and outdoor spaces?
- How do we incorporate and promote life skills into our program for all age groups of children?

Higher Degree Research Initiatives

One of the areas in which there has been growing interest is encouraging individuals to undertake higher degree research studies. These studies as well as inspiring other researchers are providing an important evidence base about the school age care sector.

In 2017, Dr Bruce Hurst completed his doctoral study—“*Eat, play, go, repeat*”: *Researching with older primary-age children to re-theorise School Age Care*. Bruce’s research has provided new ways of understanding the experiences of older primary children in Outside School Hours Care. He has a deep commitment to children’s rights to speak, be heard and have excellence in their play and leisure settings. Children worked as co-researchers with him to complete his study. His work draws on postmodern theories of power and knowledge to provoke educators to re-think how they think about, and work with children.

Bruce is one of the few Australian academic researchers who specialises in these important settings for school-age children. Other research higher degree students are working on projects including the evaluation of “Talking Circles” used to capture children’s conversations and decision-making in school age care services and another is gathering children’s perceptions of what is regarded as “learning” in school age care services.

Conclusion

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, 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 are an emerging cohort of academic researchers and 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.

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