Before and after school: Literature review about Australian School Age Child Care.

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One in three Australian children use school age child care services. School Age Care (SAC) services have increased to meet the growing need for children to have somewhere safe to go before and after school while their parents work. SAC services have continued to grow in size and demand, but are still considered a 'care' service, rather than education. This literature review highlights some current features of Australian SAC child care services. Key features that are detailed include growth in service usage and management types that characterise the sector. Other themes identified relate to parent expectations, venues, workforce and children's wellbeing. It advocates for more research about the SAC sector.

Key Words: school age childcare, SAC, working parents, policies.

Introduction

School age care (SAC) is the fastest growing sector of childcare services in Australia and has the greatest proportion of children attending services (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2013). One in three school age children attend (Baxter, Hand, & Sweid, 2014). SAC services have become important contexts of childhood; particularly as they sometimes constitute the main locations outside of school where children play and socialise (Bell, 2013; Hurst, 2013). SAC, also referred to as outside school hours care, includes before school care, afterschool care and vacation care, and provides school-aged children (5 – 12 years) with supervised and planned recreational activities in a safe environment (DEEWR, 2012) while their caregivers are working or studying.

The numbers of children attending Australian SAC services has been steadily climbing since the mid 1990s and show no signs of declining. The number of children using approved outside school hours care in the 2012 September quarter was 315,220, an increase of almost 80,000 from September quarter 2004 (DEEWR, 2013). The number of families using SAC has increased from 61,450 to 225,780 for the same time frame (DEEWR, 2013). Using a systematic literature review, this paper highlights some of the features of SAC services and the limited empirical research that has been undertaken. It recommends that more research about the sector is

required.

Methodology

A review of literature provided a holistic overview of the key issues and themes with regard to Australian School Age Care. The review was guided by the following research questions:

How are School Age Care services described in the literature? What are the policy, practice and service recommendations? What are the key issues described in the literature?

The search methods were not restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, but also incorporated grey literature such as news articles and government reports. The academic databases to search for relevant literature included Proquest, Springerlink, Health Reference Center Academic Infotrac, Informit, Cinahl Plus, Web of Science, A+ Education, ERIC, Wiley Online Library, Scopus and Australian/New Zealand Reference Centre. Furthermore, Griffith University library database provided further literature on the topic of focus. Literature sourced from key contacts and professionals in the SAC field were also used. The authors undertook a process of citation tracking to find literature pertinent to the key research questions. However, due to limited sources the search was expanded to include some literature from Britain, Canada and the United States as these countries operate SAC services with similar priorities and outcomes.

The keywords used to search for relevant literature included school, children, child care. These were also grouped using Boolean operators to include terms as “school age care” OR “outside school hours care” OR “after school hours childcare”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Initially, literature was excluded if it was older than 12 years; however, due to limited results, the search was expanded to include literature from the late 90s and early 2000s. Literature was screened via abstract. If the abstract contained information relevant to the key research questions, it was imported and read in full-text.

Publications were not excluded based on the country or context, however literature was excluded if it was not written in English. Moreover, literature was excluded if it was not available in full-text. As a result of these search restrictions, 43 pieces of literature were deemed suitable for this review. More than two thirds of the literature pertained to the Australian context and the majority of these used a mixture of research methodologies to report about the circumstances of school age care services.

Seven items were categorized as grey literature and all were government reports.

An analysis of the content of the literature revealed some significant themes. Most notably were descriptions about the growth of the sector and characteristics of the management/service types. Four additional themes were identified that were particularly relevant to the purpose of this review were parent expectations, venues, workforce and children's wellbeing. [L]
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Findings

Growth of the sector

The SAC sector has grown considerably over the past century, and continues to grow to meet the need of society (Mullan, 2012; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Thompson, Cooper, Flanagan, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006). These SAC services began as recreational programmes for children and often operated in community playgrounds (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). However, the recreational activities moved to community halls and schools, where care and education was demanded, rather than just recreational- based programmes (Cartmel, 2007; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). In the 1980s SAC services further expanded as women's participation in the workforce exponentially increased (Brennan, 1998; Elliot, 1998; Gifford, 1991, 1992; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Moyle, Meyer, & Evans, 1997; OECD, 2001). The main function of SAC services during this time was to offer care for children while their parents were working (Cartmel, 2007; Hyams, 2005).

As services changed focus and grew considerably in size, systems and regulations pertaining to these services altered. In 1998 the Commonwealth of Australia introduced Outside School Hours reforms, which provided subsidies for programme costs for parents (Cartmel, 2007). In 2002, a National Quality Assurance process was introduced. Prior to the introduction of formal quality assurances, services could operate independently from their host location, but the regulatory changes meant SAC services were now required to negotiate and communicate about space in shared venues (Cartmel, 2007). In 2006, the uncapping of the child care benefit was approved in the Federal budget to increase places available in SAC services (Cartmel, 2007). The 2009 National Early Childhood Development Strategy, Investing in the Early Years; the 2011 My Time, Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia (MTOPE) (DEEWR, 2011); and the 2012 National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2012) have all placed increasing demands on quality service delivery for SAC services in Australia, changing the focus from care to education and development (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 2014). The SAC sector

has seen considerable growth in both its use by society, and its development in policy and regulation.

Management/Service Types

There are many organisation types that administer and manage SAC services. These include church organisations, community groups, Family Day Care services, Long Day Care services, local schools, and not-for-profit community organisations such as the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) (Department of Education, 2012; Kennedy & Stonehouse; 2007; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Depending on the management type of the SAC service, the structure of administration, service delivery and support can differ (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). For example, in schools, SAC coordinators (who deliver the services) often receive support from principals and administrative staff within the school (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). However, interactions between school principals and SAC coordinators can be problematic due to power-based imperatives (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014). Misunderstandings can occur when principals and school staff position themselves as more important to the SAC workforce, resulting in negative consequences in the operation of the SAC service and the SAC workforce's feelings of efficacy in the children's lives (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014). To avoid this, equitable communication and interactions between SAC workforce and school staff is essential. This includes being open and non-judgmental, and engaging in generative listening to consider each other's perspectives (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014).

Throughout Australia there are state-based peak organisations to support SAC services. For example, Network of Community Activities in New South Wales has been involved with SAC for more than 60 years (Finlason, 2004), and in Queensland, support, professional development and networking opportunities for SAC workforce are available from the Queensland Children's Activity Network (QCAN) (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). . The support (from both the management body and QCAN) is essential for coordinators of SAC services to have more time to plan quality care programmes, rather than focusing on administration and meeting accreditation or quality standards (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). The advocacy of the peak organisations have supported services to respond to systemic challenges associated with the growth of the sector.

SAC services are viewed as critical to the children and families who use them (Simoncini, Caltabiano, & Lasen, 2012; Winefield, et al, 2011), however, SAC has a much lower profile than other types of childcare and school. SAC has been considered the 'poor relative' in childcare (Cartmel, 2007) and the "Cinderella of

services” (Gammage, 2003). Early childhood services are considered to offer both care and education for young children, whereas school age children are thought to be educated at school, and cared for at SAC until their parents collect them (Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS), 2005; Elliot, 1998). The perception that SAC has limited operational hours has contributed to the low standing of this type of care (Cartmel, 2007). The split sessions of before and after school disguise the actual operating hours of SAC services, which comprise five hours per day. If these sessions are combined with school holidays and pupil-free days, some SAC services operate for nearly the same amount of time as schools. Over the course of the school years, the time spent in SAC has the potential to make up a sizable portion of children’s lives and, as such, most probably influence their development (Dockett & Perry, 2014).

Perhaps it is the continued use of “care” perpetuates the low opinion of SAC. Traditionally in Australia, SAC has not been regarded as making any instructional, developmental or social capital contributions to a child (Gifford, 1991). Rather it is viewed as child-minding, fulfilling a parental need rather than considered as being of benefit to children. This is in direct contrast to the United States (US), where the hours out of school are recognised as a context for social, cognitive and physical development (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2010; Vandell & Posner, 1999). Researchers, policy makers and governments in the US have become increasingly interested in how out-of-school time can be used as an opportunity for children and adolescents to learn and develop competencies (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Over the last decade the US research investigating afterschool programmes has increased exponentially compared to previous decades (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010). An Australian initiative to guide practice in SAC services is *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011). The Framework builds on the Early Years Learning Framework to support the ongoing development of children who attend SAC services (DEEWR, 2011). It mandates that children have opportunities to participate in leisure and play-based activities that are responsive to their needs, interests, and choices (DEEWR, 2011). It would appear, however, that community perceptions have yet to catch up to the new vision for SAC (Kendall & Lindland, 2013).

Parent Expectations/Needs

Research shows that there are a number of concerns facing parents when accessing

SAC care, with a number of their inherent expectations (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). Location of the services, affordability, and hours of operations have been identified as key issues of concern to parents (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). The concerns of mothers seeking SAC arrangements for their children have received most attention in the literature (Hand & Baxter, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). Firstly, some parents feel that transport is a factor in after-school arrangements (Winefield et al., 2011). Services often have an added cost when children are required to be transported from the school grounds to the SAC facility. SAC facilities are becoming more readily available on school grounds because of these transport barriers (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). It appears it is important for parents that barriers for transport are alleviated.

Secondly, service costs are found to be another barrier for parents, and have been identified as a factor in determining the use and type of care for their child/ren (Baxter, Hand, & Sweid, 2014; Winefield et al., 2011). In the US, Christensen, Schneider, and Butler, (2011) assert that mothers in low-income families are less likely to seek employment and qualifications because of the unaffordability of SAC. Baxter and Hand (2013) noted that affordable care is a primary expectation for parents who are seeking employment or undertaking study.

Finally, the operating hours of SAC services have been identified as a barrier for parents seeking after school arrangements for their children (Hand & Baxter, 2016; Winefield et al., 2011). Parents, especially working mothers, express the need for more flexible, and longer operating hours for SAC services (Winefield et al., 2011). To accommodate changes in female employment patterns over the last few decades, SAC services need to adapt their service by increasing operating hours (Baxter & Hand, 2016). This will, in turn, reduce parents need to find multiple care arrangements, and increase parental satisfaction in SAC services (Baxter et al., 2014). Increasing operating hours also ensures that children are provided with safe and comfortable care arrangements while their parents are working later than standard hours (Baxter et al., 2014). Thus, it is important for parents, that the operating hours of SAC services are more responsive to family requirements.

Venues

In Australia, the majority of SAC services are located on school grounds (Cartmel, 2009; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). School grounds are seen to be ideal venues for a number of reasons. Firstly, schools often have pre-existing resources (such as playgrounds, ovals, sporting equipment, classroom resources) that can be used by the SAC service to aid in children's development and entertainment (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Moreover, because transport is often a concern for parents when accessing SAC services (Baxter et al, 2014), having the service on the school grounds alleviates the added cost and stress of finding transport arrangements for the child before or after school (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Moreover, having SAC services on school grounds has the potential to build effective relationships between school staff, families and SAC staff which supports children's transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Dockett and Perry (2014) suggest that SAC staff may be the conduit for the interactions between families and school. Despite the advantages of having SAC on school grounds, there are also a number of issues with co-location. For example, Simoncini and Lasen (2012) have identified power struggles between some schools and SAC services. Some of the SAC programmes do not have a dedicated space, but rather, use empty classrooms/halls, which can require SAC staff to frequently shift locations (Gammage, 2003; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). There is also a tenuous arrangement for purpose built SAC spaces (funded by the SAC management) that become school property under Queensland government policy (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). The spaces can be used by school administrators as additional classrooms, therefore the SAC service is without a secure venue (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Consequently, SAC staff can feel like 'outsiders' in the school environment, even though they work within the school grounds (Cartmel, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2014). The evidence suggests that there are a number of advantages and disadvantages to having SAC facilities on school grounds. It would appear that the advantages mostly relate to parents needs and the disadvantages are felt by the service staff.

SAC facilities do not necessarily have to be on school grounds (Department of Education, 2012). SAC facilities can be located at churches, community halls, not-for-profit organisation site venues and Family Day Care services (Cartmel, 2007; Department of Education, 2012; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). In countries such as China and the US, interesting initiatives have been made to accommodate the needs of the community. In China, freight containers have been converted into SAC

facilities for the children of migrant workers (Xinhau News, 2011). This came about due to concerns that migrant parents had for their children having no suitable place to go after school (Xinhau News, 2011). In the US, two apartments in San Diego have been converted into an after-school facility, where Undergraduate Social Science majors from the local university run the programme (Barkhaus, & Lecusay, 2012). Hence, SAC services can occur in a variety of venues to suit the needs of the community.

Workforce

According to Hand and Baxter, (2013) and Winefield et al., (2011), many parents are unable to fulfill their supervisory responsibilities due to conflicting and rigid work schedules. This situation applies to families where both parents are employed and many single parent families in which the sole parent is employed. With the increase of mothers entering the workforce, families are unable to care for their children after school (Hand & Baxter, 2013, 2016; McNamara & Cassells, 2010). Hand and Baxter (2013) report that it is more often mothers who experience conflicts in work scheduling and care arrangements, and reduce work hours in order to care for their children. The conflicts experienced between family and work responsibilities can negatively impact a mother's health and wellbeing (Winefield et al., 2011) which subsequently has a bearing on the whole family. Winefield et al (2011) note that SAC facilities are vital for parents' ability to work, especially in single parent families. There is a need for flexible and quality SAC services to meet the needs of the growing workforce (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Winefield et al., 2011).

To accommodate the needs of the Australian workforce, there has been an increase in SAC services (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Hand & Baxter, 2013). With the development of services, Simoncini and Lasen (2012) examined organisations within the sector and found that high quality staff were linked to supportive line managers and administration provision. There are, however, identified problems with recruiting and retaining staff (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). This may be attributed to the low status of the profession, the low pay, insecure working conditions and limited career/training advancements (Misko, 2003; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Staff turnover is notoriously high, and this is concerning because it "results in a lack of continuity of care for children and problems for services in relation to time spent in staff recruitment and training" (HAFS, 1997, p.17).

Due to the low pay and the status of the SAC profession, employees are often unwilling to undergo further training and professional development needed to deliver quality SAC services to children (Simoncini, Cartmel, & Young, 2015; Simoncini &

Lasen, 2012). Furthermore, SAC workers have the highest rate of under-qualification in the care/education industry, contributing to SAC's low status within the field (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Training and qualifications equip staff to problem solve and respond appropriately to changing circumstances (Cartmel, 2007; Wheelahan, 2007). Further, training will contribute scholarship and research in the SAC sector (Cartmel, 2007). This draws attention for the need for investment in training and professional development in this sector to reduce the misconception that SAC services are there solely to meet the needs of working parents, but rather, also a context for a child's social, cognitive and physical development (Bell, 2013, Bell & Cartmel 2014; Mullan, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2014).

Children's wellbeing

Despite common opinion, SAC services improve children's emotional, cognitive and social development when quality care and developmental programs are provided (Hurst, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). Such quality programmes provide an environment that values cognitive stimulation and nurtures safe, unstructured play, and acknowledges the importance of quality social interaction (Winefield et al., 2011). Moreover, services that provide 'developmentally appropriate opportunities' are seen to reap numerous positive outcomes for the child and their families (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Elliott, 1998; Simoncini et al., 2015). In the US, research has found that children who attend SAC services are less likely to experience social dissatisfaction and loneliness than children who are in other care arrangements (such as familial or self-care) (Demircan & Demir, 2014). Hence, when quality SAC services are provided for children, there is the potential to impact a child's emotional, cognitive and social development and reap positive outcomes.

SAC services also have the potential to improve the health outcomes of children as they provide them with opportunities to be active and make healthy food choices (Sangster, Eccleston & Porter, 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Moreover, SAC services have been shown to improve children's eating behaviours and the amount of physical activity they engage in (Demircan & Demir, 2014). Regular physical activity and good nutrition can assist in the prevention of obesity, heart disease and Type 2 Diabetes in young children and later in their life (Sangster et al., 2008). SAC is therefore, well placed to promote healthy lifestyles and physical activity (Sangster et al., 2008; Thompson, 2006). According to Sangster, Eccleston and Porter (2008), SAC services operate in optimal time periods when children are most likely to be active. Health promotion is seen to be effective in the SAC setting (Sangster et al., 2008), however, there are a number of barriers to implementing such programs in the

SAC services (Sangster et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Due to limited training, support and resourcing in the SAC sector surrounding health promotion, many services are not planning meals specifically to enhance the health of the children in their care (Sangster et al., 2008). Thus, it is important that further training is provided for SAC staff to enhance their knowledge, confidence and capability to provide healthier food options for the children in their care (Sangster et al., 2008). Moreover, insufficient space and play equipment can provide a barrier for SAC services to provide active choices for children before and after school (Thompson et al., 2006). It is therefore necessary for SAC program coordinators and staff to be trained to provide actively stimulating programs both with, and without play equipment and space (Thompson et al., 2006). By overcoming these challenges, the SAC sector has the potential to improve the health of children.

Discussion

Despite the large and increasing numbers of children and families who access SAC, there is a paucity of research about SAC in Australia (Mullan, 2012; Winefield et al., 2011), but what is available highlights some of the key features and concerns. With increasing numbers of children spending time in SAC services and, with government subsidies directed to working parents' utilising SAC services, there is a need to ensure that these services are meeting the expectations and needs of multiple stakeholders while also supporting children's wellbeing. Children's physical, cognitive and social attributes during the middle years are still developing and so they need adequate time and opportunities for the type of activities that are going to strengthen and sustain their physical and social wellbeing (Lester & Russell, 2008). For children who attend SAC services it should be noted that with adequate planning, there is the potential to influence their abilities to succeed academically and with social competencies such as collaboration and citizenship.

The continued use of the word 'care' in regards to SAC services may contribute to the sector's low standing within education fields (Cartmel, 2007). One purpose of SAC services is to provide play opportunities that develop children's wellbeing, and support their learning and development as they grow (Bell, 2013; DEEWR, 2011; Hurst, 2013). With recent policy and legislative changes, the SAC sector is considered an educational service; but practitioners and stakeholders in the sector are often still perpetuating the service as care rather than education (Cartmel, 2007; Simoncini et al., 2015). This continued sense of care provides problems for SAC practitioners. Practitioners working in the SAC sector must uphold policy and accreditation

standards, including education quality frameworks (ACECQA, 2012; Hurst, 2013). However, practitioners are also in working relationships that define their role as care, rather than educators (Dockett & Perry, 2014). These mixed perceptions about the SAC sector influence the management and administration of SAC services and have an impact on the identity and definition of the characteristics of the SAC workforce.

The interpretation of the roles and responsibilities of educators working in Australian SAC services has been shaped by educators' own ecological frameworks. The *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011) provides an outline of the principles and practices to shape the manner in which educators enact their role, however there is little empirical research about the features of this practice and the impact on children's development and wellbeing (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Much of the information has been an interpretation of possibilities based on services for children from birth to 5 years of age. The SAC workforce has felt vulnerable and lacking a professional identity (Cartmel, 2007).

As part of the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2012) for quality assurance, SAC services have kept visual and written records of their activities, but there has been no fine-grained analysis of the intent and impact on individuals or groups of children in the short or the long-term. Since the inception of the quality assurance process, there has not been an extensive evaluation or investigation of the intricacies of SAC programmes. SAC services have the potential to shape children's values and beliefs about collaboration with others and children's competencies in self regulation – skills associated with effective citizenship. Children may spend longer in SAC services than they do at school. SAC educators are endowed with the duty of *loci parentis*. However the responsibilities and significance of SAC services including the relationships between educators, children and families is little understood.

Without a gambit of expert opinion or valid investigations it is hard to make the shifts required to create an identity, raise status and examine the impact of SAC programs in the lives of Australian children. Opportunities are needed to gather evidence about the role and subsequent impact of SAC services on children and families, particularly as the services are growing and responding to the productivity agenda of the Australian government.

Further Research

Although SAC services have shown to reduce problem behaviour, improve academic achievement, increase social competence and even reduce the risk of obesity, there are few Australian studies that discuss SAC services, and how they affect the growing

child (Sangster et al., 2008; Simoncini et al., 2012; Winefield et al., 2011). Furthermore, despite the demand for appropriate, cost effective and quality SAC services in Australia, there has been very little research conducted (Simoncini et al., 2012). The studies that have been conducted generally focus on workforce and maternal arrangements, rather than focusing on paid SAC services (Hand & Baxter, 2013). Although there have been quite a number of studies investigating SAC services in the United States, it is difficult to generalise the findings from these studies to the Australian context due to policy and regulation differences (Simoncini et al., 2012). The lack of research into SAC and children's experiences in this setting emphasises the notion that SAC services are "custodial care or homework rather than developmental leisure time activities" (OECD, 2006, p. 84). More research in the SAC sector would assist in enhancing policies and delivering high quality services for children and families and placing a positive outlook on the SAC setting.

Conclusion

This review has highlighted key features and issues in the Australian SAC sector. To date, SAC services have operated on a 'shoestring' budget themselves. There have been no finances 'left over' to support rigorous research and scholarship activities to provide insights into the operation of services. There is much to be done to ensure SAC services are viable organisations that promote the significance of responsibilities of the sector to children, families and society. It will require a significant investment of energy to develop and expand the knowledge base about the Australian SAC sector however it will serve the best interests of children and social sustainability.

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