

Creating a Vocabulary About School-Age Childcare Using Photography

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Abstract

Engaging children in school-age childcare (SAC) in the research process through the use of photography gives them a voice that is not necessarily heard otherwise. This article discusses a research project undertaken in an Australian SAC service using photography as a means for the children to describe their play experiences. It examines the literature about researching with children using photography and discusses some of the challenges and how these can be overcome in order to provide staff and policy makers in school-age care with understandings about school-age care from the perspectives of the children. SAC plays a significant role in the lives of children and families; however, the research about this service is minimal.

Keywords

school age childcare, photography, agency

Introduction

The repositioning of children as active social agents in the new paradigm of childhood has initiated a diverse range of research strategies. Stephenson (2009) states that in recognition of this repositioning, for over a decade, there has been an upsurge of research that has experimented with a variety of approaches to include the perspectives of children (e.g., Christensen & James, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998). Quinn and Manning (2013) acknowledge that as a pedagogical tool, the use of photography (and photographs) is widespread in early childhood education. Photographs also feature in school-age childcare (SAC) services. In Australia, SAC services are burgeoning; however, little is known about them.

Purpose

This study aimed to discover how children aged 6–12 years experienced play in an SAC service through the use of photographs and interviews. Five children from a SAC service collected photographic data about the play activities and opportunities available to them during a 1-week period and then engaged in conversations with the researcher about their photographs.

SAC is a growing phenomenon in contemporary Australia with increasing numbers of children using services. *My Time Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia* describes principles and practices that guide services to achieve

high-quality outcomes for children (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011). In SAC, as in other forms of childcare, the provision of play opportunities is a core component of the services offered to nurture children's well-being and learning. With increasing numbers of children attending, Australian SAC requires a closer examination of how play is encouraged and provided for within services.

Children who attend SAC are situated in an environment that has predetermined and structured access to spaces, materials, and activities. The majority of SAC services in Australia as well as Britain and the United States are colocated in schools (Barker et al., 2003; Cartmel, 2007; Halpern, 2006; Moss & Petrie, 2002). In Australia, the SAC services are managed separately to the school and are underpinned by a focus on play and leisure (DEEWR, 2011). These factors influence play experiences in the childcare setting.

The Children's Rights agenda has cultivated child research by nurturing a realization that children and young people have a right to be consulted, heard, and to appropriately influence the

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facilities and services that are provided for them (Lansdown, 1994; Woodhouse, 2004). James (2007) argues that despite children's voices becoming a symbol of the modern welfare state's commitment to the values of freedom, democracy, and care, such representations of children's voices may nonetheless continue to be suppressed, silenced, and ignored in their everyday lives. Rather than symbolic representation of children's voices, if children are going to be heard so that they can influence facilities and services provided for them, real and tangible acceptance of children's rights is necessary that will amplify their voice allowing change to occur. Children will then have the ability to influence facilities and services provided for them.

There has been little research examining children's play experiences in Australian SAC services. The few studies that have been undertaken focus on the perspectives of administrators, policy makers, and parents (Cartmel, 2007; Hurst, 2015, 2017; Simoncini, 2010; Simoncini, Cartmel, & Young, 2015; Winefield et al., 2011). This study intended to examine the use of photography and interviews to provide insights from children's perspectives about SAC.

Positioning children as active social agents in research about SAC using photo elicitation enables their perspectives to be heard, facilitating a more complete picture of the images being presented. Pyle (2012) cautions that when the images produced by children are not shared, the voices of children are missing consequently leading to an incomplete picture. Researchers have a responsibility to enable the voice of children to be heard beyond consultation and toward active participation (Sixsmith, Nic Gabhainn, Fleming, & O'Higgins, 2007). Pyle (2012) explains that over the last two decades, researchers have encountered three central challenges to working with children in exploring the methods of enquiry: developmental appropriateness, the power differential between adults and children, and language barriers (Cappello, 2005; Davis, 2007; Parkinson, 2001; Stephenson, 2009). Combining interviews with photographic exploration of children's experience provides a deeper understanding of the data; however, it is not without contestation.

The use of photographs during interviews to elicit responses from participants "photo-elicitation" enables the inclusion of children as active participants in data collection. This process is children-centered and hands-on empowering children to share meanings more openly thereby facilitating richer data (Gopnik, 2009; Meo, 2010; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). This study included children from a broad range of ages and required them to describe in detail their play experiences. Hence, the use of this methodology supported the children to collaborate with the researcher about the play in SAC services.

Using photographs as a tool for researching children is not a new concept for gaining children's perspectives and experiences. Over the last decade, several authors have recommended using photographs taken by children as a data gathering method (Clark & Moss, 2001; Cook & Hess, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2003; Hurworth, 2003; Rasmussen, 1999; Rasmussen & Smidt, 2001, 2002; Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998). Some specific

examples include Lodge (2009) who explored issues in visual research in schools—such as drawings, diagrams, photographs, and video recordings; Pyle (2012) constructed a participatory research method through engaging young children in research using photo elicitation; Cappello's (2005) study explored the potential of photo interviewing to navigate the problem of interviewing children in the school setting where children perceive the researcher to be some sort of teacher; and Stephenson (2009) studied how activities using photographs of an early childhood education center, and children's own photographs of that environment, were found to be effective ways of enabling young children (aged from 2 to 4 years old) to share their thoughts about their experiences. These studies have paved the way for other researchers to use photographic data collection strategies.

In research with children, inclusion of their voices in the analysis is imperative and privileging adult interpretations can limit the contributions of children. Stephenson (2009) articulates the use of photographs as a conversational focus is a widely used and documented research strategy with young children and can help us to placate communication challenges by enabling children to communicate through both visual and verbal means (Cappello, 2005; Clark, 2007; Thomson, 2008). Further, describing the context of the photo can amplify the reflexivity of the analysis (Fasoli, 2003) and understanding of what the image represents (Lodge, 2009). Therefore, photographs as a conversational focus when researching with children can help to negate privileged adult interpretations through the inclusion of children's voices.

SAC services are well positioned as a source for researching children. Barker and Smith (2000) argue that changing employment and family structures have resulted in more and more children spending substantial amounts of time in after school provisions; some spending their third largest amount of time in these environments, after home and school. Diverse in their provenance and organizational structures, after school settings have become important contexts of childhoods; particularly as they sometimes constitute the main locations outside of school where children play and socialize together (Smith, 2010). Therefore, SAC provided an appropriate and contextually relevant place to conduct a study with a focus on children's play.

Children's perceptions of their play experiences can be very different to adults' perceptions. The everyday life of children uncover many examples of children relating to "children's places" in their neighborhoods that are not identical with "places for children"; adults perceive them from a different perspective than children do, seeing them as examples of destruction, mess, disorder, and prohibited behavior (Rasmussen, 2004). However, Moss and Petrie (2002) argue that an alternative discourse of how children are presented with play opportunities recognizes children as fellow citizens and social agents with rights and strengths. Further, Moss and Petrie suggest children's places be reconceptualized as children's spaces where they are not regarded as passive recipients of policy agendas. Subsequently, it was important for children to have a vocabulary that could contribute to the policy agenda and

service delivery of SAC. Children needed a way to be able to provide tangible evidence of their experiences of play in SAC.

Growing literature is demonstrating children's agency, particularly their knowledge and competence (Corsaro, 1997; Haugen, 2010; MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2007; Markström & Halldén, 2009; McDonald, 2009; Smith, 2009). It is extending our understanding of "childhood" as a distinctive phenomenon, with its own characteristics (e.g., Corsaro, 1997; James & James, 2004; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Jenks, 1996). Valentine (2011) states children are increasingly described as agents, and agency is central to arguments for children's rights and participation. A paradigm shift in thinking has taken place within early childhood education over the last two decades that has led to many long-held assumptions about early childhood research and pedagogy with young children being challenged (Stephenson, 2009). The challenge that has emanated from the paradigm of the sociology of childhood recognizes children as having power and agency and being social participants in their own right (Prout & James, 1990). From these perspectives, it would appear that agency as it pertains to the new sociology of children is a relatively simplistic concept incorporating shared power as a fundamental element.

The concept of agency though is not simplistic as not all things are equal: power cannot always be equally shared. Valentine (2011) asserts that recognizing children's agency as multidimensional, complex, and ambivalent requires that we surrender cherished notions of agency's benefits, and therefore, it cannot be understood as the exercise of authentic choice or self-directed action. Valentine proposes "social" models of agency insisting that difference as well as equality must be goals of participation and engagement between individuals. A failure to incorporate a critical, embodied, engendered, material account of agency into childhood studies risks reinscribing a model in which privileged children will be given more agency than those who do not display rationality and choice in conventional ways (Valentine, 2011).

In contrast, Smith (2009) reveals that a number of efforts have been made to expand analytical frameworks for defining children and childhood, providing additional information to the emerging recognition of the significance of agency. For example, James et al. (2004) recommend that consideration be given to thinking in terms of a number of overlapping "models" of the child. The aim is to provide a thorough account of the possible ways in which children's own experiences interact with the structural factors that determine "childhood." Smith (2009) suggests these categories are conceptualized as:

- tribal child,
- minority group child,
- structural child, and
- socially constructed child (p. 254).

There is insufficient scope to examine these categories individually here; however, it is important to recognize two key points: that our concepts and characterizations of childhood

are, inexorably, "socially constructed" and that children's capacity to act as independent social actors must be accepted (Smith, 2009). Given that children remain outside of major political and social power structures, their rights are only manifested through adults' perceptions and provisions for them (Smith, 2010). This highlights the paradoxical nature of children's rights and agency to influence their lives that policy makers and communities need to address before real and dynamic agency can be enabled for children. As increasing numbers of children are spending time in SAC, researchers need to use tools that allow children to have their perspectives considered about this type of service provision.

Method

The aim of this research was to explore children's experience of play in one Australian SAC service using photography. The research was conducted in a SAC service situated on a school site. It engaged five children in a collaborative research venture using photographic data collected by the children. The photographs were a stimulus for discussion with the researcher. The children were asked to take photographs of play activities and opportunities available to them during a 1-week period.

The use of photography provides participants the opportunity to control the camera and/or guide the manipulation and discussion of the photographs. Thomson (2008) maintains that digital image research offers a very accessible way for young people to actively participate in the research process themselves, to reverse the usual role of having research done to them, and allow them to participate more in this process. In summary, it both acknowledges the competence of children and gives them agency in the research process (Pyle, 2012).

Ethics

Prior to beginning the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee. Written permission was gained from the SAC service director and then children and their parents/carers. Parental consent was required as the participants were minors, and it was also necessary to gain the children's written consent to fully comply with university ethics requirements. During the initial meeting, the children were made explicitly aware, using developmentally appropriate language that they could withdraw from the project at any time without the need to provide reason. In addition, the children were given the opportunity to choose their own personal pseudonyms, so that data could be de-identified and confidentiality of their responses was assured. Moreover, to comply with ethical issues around the use of photographic images, participants were instructed to seek verbal permission from others should they wish to take their photos. The participants were informed that all images and recordings emanating for the study would be destroyed and not used in the final report about the study.

Participants

An introductory meeting was held with all children in the SAC service to explain the purpose of the research and give information and consent forms to those who were interested. Children were selected to participate using a combination of mixed purposeful sampling (Llewellyn, Sullivan, & Minichiello, 2004). Five children were selected based on the return of their signed permission slips, signed parental permission slips, and their availability to participate at the same time and day each week for 3 weeks. It was considered that children attending SAC a minimum of 3 days per week would be appropriate for the research purpose.

The intention was to gather information that was rich and offered in-depth understanding and insights rather than empirical generalizations (Liamputtong, 2009) in a timely way. Children were selected for their capacity to remain engaged in the study.

Procedure

Data Collection

The researcher attended the SAC for three sessions over 4 weeks. The research plan during these visits involved a systematic three step process that included the following:

1. An introductory meeting with the children and supported by the SAC staff to explain the research projects' purpose and consent issues and also to harness the children's interest for the purpose of presenting information and permission slips. Although not planned, the researcher had the opportunity to engage in conversation with some of the children who were naturally inquisitive and this proved to be advantageous in the requisition of volunteers.
2. After receiving the signed permission slips from both children and parents, the researcher provided digital camera to the children, so that during the following week, they could take photos of play experiences that have meaning for them. The children were given instructions about how to use the cameras. Pyle (2012) contests the use of a camera can be an unfamiliar activity for children, and previous research has revealed that this lack of familiarity can result in less than ideal images. This instruction period allowed the children to become familiar with the tool and support the production of purposeful photographs during the research.

It was at this point that the task was explicitly discussed with the participants. They were each instructed to take between 15 and 20 photographs of play experiences that matter to them the most. It was explained that too many images would not leave enough time to talk about why they took them. Additionally, it was articulated that they were not allowed to take photos of other children as special permission was needed from

those children's parents. It was made explicit that both positive and negative experiences could form their portfolio of photographs. This is important because the children's thoughts and feelings about the photographs taken would be explored for meaning during later presentation and discussion. Stephenson's (2009) study identified that limitations ensure that later interview sessions are conducted with a manageable number of photographs. Settings in SAC services provide a variety of play spaces, materials, and structured and unstructured activities that are conducive to being captured by visual images.

3. Unstructured interviews were used to unpack the digital images taken by the children, so children would have some control and ownership of the process. (This was the beginning of the data analysis process, more details provided in the description of the data analysis). The unstructured interviews were audio recorded with permission for later transcription. It was difficult for the researcher to be viewing the images and taking notes. The audio transcriptions provided substantially more detailed records of the verbal interaction than any amount of note-taking or reflection can offer. Excessive note-taking can be distracting, interrupting the free flow of conversation (Kvale, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009). During the analysis phase, the audio recording of the interviews allowed the researcher to freely explore the children's views on the images while transcription facilitated an opportunity to reflect on the dialogue in more depth.

The photographic images on the memory card from each camera were transferred to a laptop computer prior to the interview. The duration of interviewing varied between 30 min and 60 min and involved open-ended questions that served to draw out children's perspectives on the images taken. Questions beginning with the words "how," "what," "why," "when," "who," and "where" are all characteristically open-ended in that they invite some kind of descriptive, expansive response, not validation of information that has been provided by the person asking the question (Harms, 2007). The researcher asked, for example, *what did you like about that tree? Tell me more about those portraits! Why do you like the pool? When are you allowed to use that equipment?* Using an open-ended questioning technique allowed the children to elaborate in their language meanings behind the photographs enabling their perspectives to be acknowledged. Presentation of the photographs was conducted with three of the children.

It was planned for all participants to contribute to the data collaboratively in a group interview to help negate the inherent power imbalance between the adult researcher and child

participant. The ratio of 1 adult to 5 children could have created an ambience to lessen the power of the adult. However, during the interview phase, the researcher was unable to formally interview two of the girls. They were not in attendance at the SAC when the researcher was present. Thus, collection of interview data for these participants became an independent process of reviewing their photographs. The photographs taken by these participants were similar in content to the other children's photographs. However, the researcher could not assume that the interview data were congruent with the other three participants.

The amount of photographs through which the children conveyed their experiences' was substantial, and the themes that emanated from the photographs and subsequent interviews were diverse. For the purpose of the interviews with children, a substantial number of photographs were deleted to allow for time manageable interviewing. Of the total of 675 photographs taken by the children, 455 were selectively deleted by the children due to the significant number of similar photographs.

Data Analysis

Initial analysis of the data began by discussing the photographs of play captured by the children prior and during the interviews. Using an adapted version of semiotic analysis (Daly, Kellehear & Glicksman, 1997), the researcher collaborated with the children to uncover the themes about the play experiences. The questions for analysis (Daly et al., 1997, p. 135) and examples from this study are described as follows:

- What is missing in the data/text? The researcher, through the process of reading and re-reading data, found that the children do not differentiate SAC and school. For example, *When referring to the pool located in the school grounds, which is for use during "school hours" only, CJ commented I like swimming, but I can't... We have a pool but only use it in summer and JJ also reflected "I took a picture of the pool too."* Here, the children are referring to the fact that although they love to swim, they are not permitted to use the facility while in SAC. They do not understand why they are not permitted to use the pool because, to them, they are still students regardless of the context in which they are located.
- What is not being said or written? Identifying a substantial amount of images by the children indicated that they are agentive when given the opportunity to do so. For example, *researcher: Why did you take pictures of all those things in the kitchen? Buster: You might not have that stuff. I took every single thing.*
- Why may this happen? Providing children with an opportunity to capture images that were important to them negated power discrepancies that are inherent in child-adult relationships. This is demonstrated in the fact the children followed their own agenda by taking 675 photographs even though they were aware of the

photograph limits. There were no adults with them while they were taking photographs checking compliance with the researcher's request.

- Why are specific languages, words, or phrases chosen by the author and not others? The researcher uses phrases such as power discrepancy, agentive individuals, and new paradigm of sociology because these fit within the current paradigms of childhood. Kellehear (1993) asserts semiotic analysis aims to discover not just the author's view on the text, but how this fits in with that of contemporary society in general.
- What may be the possible importance of those choices and preferences? The importance of these choices is that they enabled the researcher to deconstruct meaning through application of theoretical frameworks. Childhood is a social construction, and Daly et al. (1997) contends researchers must adopt theoretical frameworks to deconstruct a text.

The researcher looked for hidden meanings in the data through a process of hermeneutical reflection. That is, constantly going backward and forward between the photos and transcript in a hermeneutic arc; interpretations were constantly being analyzed and challenged within this theoretical framework. This resulted in unpacking several broad themes that were later compartmentalized into smaller, yet more specific themes. Thus, semiotic analysis enabled the researcher to step back and reflexively explore implicit meanings that reside in texts.

In the second wave of analysis, the researcher reviewed the photographs and the transcriptions of the interviews. This range of tools contributed to the triangulated process of data collection that further helped to enhance clarity around the children's experiences. These were crucial strategies in the process of gathering data. Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller (2005) posit that employing multiple methods in researching children's experiences is a valuable approach that does not simply duplicate data but also offers complementary insights and understandings that may be difficult to access through reliance on a single method of data collection. Triangulation "is based on the convergence of information from multiple sources to corroborate the data and emerging themes" (Carpenter & Suto 2008, p. 152) offering researchers a more accurate picture of the phenomenon.

Findings

The two key themes identified were the natural environment and children's agency. These two themes are derived from the broader categories identified as forbidden areas, outdoor play, and indoor play. These themes reinforced the notion that children and adults do have different perspectives that impact on play opportunities. This is demonstrated through children exerting their agency over the research process as well as the content of the photographs taken.

In the setting where this study was undertaken, some of the physical environment is shared between the school and SAC; however, much of the space and most of the equipment that is available as a school student is not available once the student transitions into the care setting. Furthermore, all children attending this school-based care setting walked from their last class wearing their school uniforms to the SAC center where their attendance is registered, strikingly similar to the process in school. SAC plays a unique and expanding role in the provision of care for children after school. It is unique in the sense that the majority of services are situated in school settings and its expansion is evident in the increasing numbers of children using services. Having services situated in schools creates some ambiguity for children as they are typically aware of school rules and boundaries that are not necessarily congruent with those rules and boundaries in SAC.

Discussion

Power imbalances are particularly salient in school setting where SAC services are situated. Indeed, Pyle (2012) asserts that while this difference in power may be an institutional necessity, it also serves to communicate the supremacy of the adults, which implicitly places the children in a position of inferiority. In this study, the unstructured and informal interviews combined with the use of photographs taken by the children, however, allowed the children to engage in the interviewing process freely and openly. Darbyshire et al. (2005) assert that negating inequalities in power can be achieved through meaningful participation of children throughout the research process, including the analysis stage where power disparities are manifested (Mayall, 2002). Involving the children in the research process, thus, helped to negate some of the power imbalance and allowed the children to share their thoughts and feelings about the photographs they took. Using this photo elicitation method helped to expose the subjective truth behind the data thereby gaining a more in-depth understanding of the children's experience of play.

The use of cameras enabled personal reflections of the children's world in SAC that are inherently oblivious to adults. Children's vocabulary in this study is significantly below that of adults and their ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings can impact on our understanding. The idiom "a picture tells a thousand words" seems particularly relevant in this context. Many pictures were taken of the natural environment including grassed areas and trees that are not permitted for use during SAC sessions. The children referred to these aspects as representations of "what they would like to do as opposed to what they are allowed to do." Having placed such emphasis on the natural environment in the SAC setting, it is important then to look at what might be the underlying motivation of the children. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) determined from the literature of hundreds of studies that people with access to and contact with nearby-natural surroundings have been found to be healthier than other individuals and immediate outcomes included enjoyment, relaxation, and lowered stress levels. The

children in the study identified implicitly in the photographs that their desire to connect with nature is a fundamental part of their being and that connection with their natural environment is a "natural" yearning. Having access to natural environments serves an intrinsic human need. Thus, enabling children to use photography creates a vocabulary about their world in the SAC setting that promotes positive health benefits. It manifests a much deeper understanding for adults to contemplate when provisioning for not only play activities but also leisure and recreational opportunities.

There were some limitations to the data collection methods used in the study. Timing of the interviews was challenging, as not all participants were available on the agreed time and day. The researcher was as flexible as time allowed, however, was unable to formally interview two girls who were not in attendance when the researcher was present. Although this was not ideal given the importance of including participant's voices, the images from these participants were, in most instances, congruent with images and conversations with the other participants.

Another potential limitation of this research was the focus of the children during the interviewing. During the interviews, all the children at least once were either distracted or intent on going outside to play. As stated previously, the SAC service is situated in the school setting where the children have been in a controlled environment for most of the day; so it is not surprising there was some restlessness. Cappello (2005) states that interviewing children is complicated by the school setting in which children might see an interview as part of doing school work and they quickly grow tired of simply talking about what they know during the interview process. Information shared to researchers could be what they think the researchers want to hear rather than engaging in thoughtful dialogue (Cappello, 2005). Including photographs in the interview process ameliorated this problem through engaging the children in discussions of their choices and also alleviated some of the issues of focus.

The sample size of five was a potentially limiting element of the study; however, the aim of the study was to discover children's experience of play in only one SAC setting, and using an interpretive hermeneutical approach was chosen to get a deeper understanding of this question. Further studies with larger numbers of participants in other SAC settings would help to enhance generalizability of this study. The study was carried out to induce further research about children's experiences in SAC.

Credibility of this study is supported by the purposeful selection of children unique to the experience of SAC and the use of triangulation methods for data collection. Triangulation methods are the most powerful means for strengthening credibility in qualitative research (Liamputtong, 2009). Using multiple methods of data collection enabled the researcher to check, recheck, and reflect on the information, thus, providing an in-depth account of the children's play experiences.

Conclusion

Use of photographs created a new vocabulary for children to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of play that might otherwise be silenced. Children using SAC services do so not as a choice; rather, it is through sociological necessity—the reasons for which are beyond the scope of this article. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the impact that services can and do have on children's well-being through the provision of child-focused environments congruent with quality play opportunities.

The aim of this study was to examine children's experience of play in one SAC service. Play is unmistakably fundamental to positive outcomes and recognized as part of a child's right to existence. SAC use in Australia shows no indication of decline in the foreseeable future and the numbers of families accessing SAC services has witnessed exponential growth during the past 8 years.

In this study, children gave examples of how they took control of their surroundings and manipulated it for their own needs. The literature is strong about how play can influence positive developmental outcomes for children. Capturing children's experience of play in SAC can make a significant contribution to ensuring policies and programs are appropriate. Foundational to this is a need to listen to children's voices. Adults in early childhood education and care often speak "to" children about many things including what they like to do and play and it is from these conversations that provision is made for play opportunities. Children in SAC using their new-found vocabulary can negate some of the inherent power adults have over the SAC program. Speaking "with" children can open up many dialogical opportunities that can facilitate a shift in adult perceptions of what children want and need. The information can inform policies for childcare services and the day-to-day activities of SAC services.

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