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# Communicating for quality in school age care services

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**SCHOOL AGE CARE (SAC)** services have existed in Australia for over 100 years but they have tended to take a back seat when compared with provision for school-aged children and those under school age using early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Many SAC services are housed in shared premises and many children attending preparatory or preschool use SAC. Reforms introduced by the Australian Government have included a *National Quality Standard* for school age care (COAG, 2009b). Like the *National Quality Standard* for early childhood education and care settings (COAG, 2009b), this quality agenda has prompted a greater focus on the ability of services to provide environments that support the wellbeing and development of school age children and meet the quality standards. SAC is one of the fastest growing ECEC services provided for children and families (DEEWR, 2013). This article makes the case that skilful communication is needed among stakeholders in early education and care settings, schools and SAC in order to provide high-quality services.

**RECENT REFORMS IN THE** education and care sector have advocated for stronger links between care and education services for children under five years of age (COAG, 2009a). However, the school age care (SAC) sector had remained distinct from the strategic directions for the education of children between the ages of five and 12 years until the introduction of *MyTime Our Place: Framework for school age care in Australia*, which is linked with the early years' reforms (COAG, 2009a; DEEWR, 2011a). This Framework states that SAC services should extend and enrich children's wellbeing and development in SAC settings. It 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, 2011a). The Framework also recognises that children need time to interact with friends, practise social skills, solve problems, try new activities and learn life skills. In SAC settings there is now greater importance placed on relationships and nurturing children's talents and interests, which is consistent with COAG aims for early years' reform and the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (MEECTYA, 2008).

The reforms associated with the *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b) have highlighted the significance of the partnership between SAC services,

schools, and services for children before they begin compulsory schooling. Early childhood education and care settings such as kindergarten, preschool and preparatory classes are part of school contexts in some Australian states, and increasingly, settings such as long day care and kindergartens are located close to schools and SAC facilities. Some newer complexes have long day care, school (including preparatory settings and kindergarten) and SAC facilities in close proximity. The *National Quality Standard* for SAC services faces the challenge of historical circumstances in providing high-quality services. For example, more than three decades ago, Gifford's (1991) report recommended that schools not get involved in childcare provision, stating, 'schools must get their own house in order before they attempt to solve other problems' (p. iii). The report understated the connection between SAC services and access to school for the children of working parents. As a result, SAC has lacked an identity in current service models because there has been a lack of appreciation of the role provided by SAC.

Societal attitudes to and policies associated with SAC are linked to a lack of understanding and appreciation of the role played by SAC in the lives of contemporary families. Even though SAC services in Australia have been around for more than 100 years, there has been little research examining these services. SAC services

undertake a diverse range of responsibilities for children and families but they have not attracted the same amount of attention or research as childcare services for very young children. The stagnation of policy, practices, knowledge and understanding about SAC services has dire consequences for the quality of service delivery for the 248 000 children using school care in Australia (ABS, 2011). However, the introduction of *My Time Our Place: Framework for school age care in Australia* (DEEWR, 2011a) has meant that in school age childcare services there is an increased impetus to provide programs in suitable venues that achieve the desired high-quality outcomes for children.

This paper draws on Australian research to discuss the importance of high-quality communication among early childhood education services, SAC services and their host venues, which, in many situations, are schools (DEEWR, 2011b). We make the point that skilful communication is closely connected to issues of quality. To begin, the paper considers a brief history of SAC in Australia. It then focuses specifically on aspects of communication and how this is linked to quality in SAC programs.

## History

Over the past 100 years, the Australian SAC sector has altered considerably in role and structure, and this is particularly evident within the past 40 years. After-school programs offering cultural and recreational pursuits for school-aged children have been operating since the 1900s (Brennan, 1998, 1999; Elliott, 1998a; Finlason, 2004; Piscitelli, 1988). Programs first operated in community playgrounds and then moved into community halls and school playgrounds. Generally the programs were coordinated by arts or recreational organisations (Apps, 1944; Finlason, 2004) and had few links with schools or school staff. It was not until after the 1970s that there was a demand for services that had 'care' and not recreation as their focus (Moyle, Meyer & Evans, 1997).

Since the 1980s, the focus of recreation services for children has shifted from an emphasis on the needs of children to the priorities of parents (Arnold, 2002; Brennan, 1998; Finlason, 2004; Winefield et al., 2011). Now the main concern of SAC services is to offer working parents care and protection for their children. As the services changed focus from recreation to care and grew in size, the systems required to administer them altered in structure. The early 1980s saw a rapid expansion of SAC services as women's participation in the workforce increased (Brennan, 1998; Elliott, 1998b; Moyle et al., 1997; OECD, 2001) and they subsequently required care for their primary school-aged children. In 1993, 4.8 per cent of Australian children were recorded as attending SAC in Australia (ABS, 1994). In 1999, 19 per cent of children in formal child care attended SAC services (FACS, 1999). The Department of Families and

Community Services (FACS) (1999) reported there may have been more children attending programs but accurate numbers were unknown because consistent counting methodology for SAC was not introduced until 1998. The Australian Bureau of Statistics collects information about the use and cost of child care in a survey conducted as a supplement to the monthly Labour Force Survey. In June 2002 there were 167 000 children aged between five and 11 years using before and/or after school care in Australia and in 2011 this number had increased significantly to 248 000 children (ABS, 2011).

The strategic direction of Australian SAC services and schools has been a topic of discussion, but of low priority since the 1980s (Arnold, 2002). In the early 1990s the Schools Council of the National Board of Employment, Education and Training decided that schools would not take responsibility for SAC, though they would be supportive of external organisations operating on their sites (Gifford, 1992). SAC services were typically viewed by government policy-makers and legislators as separate from the day-to-day operations of their venue hosts, even when the services were located in schools. One might consider SAC services as invisible additions to school sites (Cartmel, 2007). However the 2013 Federal Election campaign drew attention to the before and after school activities of children, particularly about innovative ways to be responsive to the challenges families were facing through linking child care, education and other support services for children and their families. The current reform agenda provides opportunities to address these important matters.

Education, care and leisure services for school age children have had separate policies, regulations, and funding methodologies, and each is coordinated by different government agencies. As major education reforms are currently taking place, and each of these sectors (school, SAC, early childhood education) are linked through the Melbourne Declaration (MEECTYA, 2008) and the COAG (2009a) agenda, now is the time to address these issues. When the Commonwealth Government has commissioned research projects about SAC services in the past, the specific focus has been on funding issues including cost impact analyses. For example, prior to the introduction of quality assurance processes in 2003 (CSML, 1999; Moyle et al., 1997), there was little focus on outcomes for children, expectations of parents, or the stakeholder partnerships involved in the delivery of services. Other reports related to the childcare workforce and combined childcare quality assurance processes have made minimal reference to SAC (Community Services Ministers Advisory Council, 2006; Elliott, 2006; Tayler, Wills, Hayden & Wilson, 2006). The *National Early Childhood Development Strategy—Investing in the Early Years* (COAG, 2009a) barely mentions SAC. More recently the Productivity Report (Productivity Commission, 2011) about the early childhood workforce had a dedicated section about SAC, however SAC is treated as an anomaly because SAC services straddle

the combined focus of education, care and leisure. This is the opportune time to capitalise on the common intent of the *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b) and the Melbourne Declaration (MEECTYA, 2008) to achieve high-quality outcomes for school age children.

SAC services have been responsive to children, families and society's expectations for care of children yet this has not been matched with resourcing such as physical venues and staffing to achieve high-quality outcomes for school age children. The number of services has grown (DEEWR, 2013). SAC services are perceived by families as critical in caring for children while parents are in the workforce (Simoncini, 2010; Winefield et al., 2011). However, SAC services have been referred to as the 'Cinderella' of the care services because they attract the least amount of funding and have the poorest working conditions (Gammage, 2003). SAC services are making 'contributions towards the social and psychological capital (not to mention safety) of children' (Gammage, 2003, p. 2) but often have impermanent premises and substandard service and equipment. These anomalies are compounded by low status and limited influences in the form of legislative developments and strategic initiatives associated with SAC services.

The stakeholders linked to SAC services have multifarious interests vested in the sector; however, SAC has previously received little recognition in the way of public funding and support. This diminished recognition exists in marked contrast to the multiple interests that demand a stake in the operation and management of SAC services. This situation is fraught with challenges in the current context of responding to the *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b). Many SAC services are housed on school sites (DEEWR, 2011b). They often use existing facilities to provide a venue for their activities before and after school and during vacation periods. For services operated on school sites across Australia there may be different entities that are the Approved Provider of services, for example school principals, school councils, or companies that operate many services. Under the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law) and the Education and Care Services National Regulations (National Regulations), an Approved Provider must show evidence that they are entitled to occupy a part of the school premises (DEEWR, 2011b). The SAC services need commitment from these stakeholders to ensure that services are able to achieve the *National Quality Standards*.

## Communication

Significant sharing of knowledge is required to form and maintain SAC services. The achievement of the *National Quality Standard* for SAC (COAG, 2009b) ensures that children in SAC services enjoy the best possible conditions (ACECQA, 2013). The type of communication required is complex when services are housed on school sites. Successful communication may

be difficult due to differences in values and beliefs and the interpretation of social norms and systems held by SAC educators in contrast to those held by school staff. More specifically, communication between SAC supervisors and school principals is the site of potential contestation of meaning-making as the two parties attempt to negotiate everyday issues such as the use of equipment and resources, spaces within schools, and face-to-face contact with families. In such circumstances, each stakeholder needs to understand the perspective of others when engaging in interaction and each needs to be mindful of the circumstances of individuals and contexts in which communication is enacted. The ability to make decisions and solve problems is directly influenced by the perspectives of each of the stakeholders. If stakeholders are unable to express their ideas and are unable to 'negotiate common definitions of the situation' (McCarthy, 1978, p. 36), communication processes are threatened.

In interactions between principals and SAC supervisors, it is highly likely that power-based imperatives can be at the basis of misunderstandings. School principals and teachers can position themselves as privileged when interacting with SAC staff (Cartmel, 2007; Palsdottir, 2012; Simoncini, 2010). When this type of communication occurs there are negative consequences for the operation of SAC services as staff feel devalued. Being positioned as less privileged in interactions produces a lack of self-esteem and lack of a sense of wellbeing (Cartmel, 2007). This in turn influences the motivation of staff to undertake their roles in the service. In such circumstances, achieving consensual understandings necessary for meaningful coexistence becomes more difficult (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Lack of common understanding between early childhood education and care, school and SAC staff increases the difficulty of operating SAC services successfully and in the interests of all stakeholders. Power-based imperatives limit opportunities for effective communication and often mean that all stakeholders are not well informed and do not have in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the SAC sector.

For SAC services operating in schools, there are often contested arrangements in relation to the use of buildings and equipment. The rules for use of space change according to whether the space is being used for early childhood education and care, school or SAC activities. Regulatory authorities require certain national standards to be attained by SAC services. Schools operate with different building and equipment standards from those of SAC services (Cartmel, 2007; Palsdottir, 2012; Tayler et al., 2006). The standards applying to children attending 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 et al., 2006, p. 37). Negotiating these contested arrangements requires skilful communication.

Equitable communication should be a feature of interactions among stakeholders in SAC. In the process of engaging in meaningful interaction, all parties need to be respectful of each other. That is, each is ready and willing to listen with an open mind to what the others have to say. A basic premise of being ready and willing to listen is that all participants in communicative acts are positioned equally, with no-one commanding privileges in the interaction (Petrie, 2011). The success or otherwise of communication among stakeholders has a direct effect on the quality of SAC services (Cartmel, 2007). However, as acknowledged in the *Evaluation of the Quality Assurance Training Projects*, services have been compromised in relation to communication because it is '... a by-product of services' limited resources, the part-time nature of the sector and the reduced hours that services operate' (FACS, 2005, p. 30). While these factors do play an important part, the position of all stakeholders in communication processes needs to be considered. When communicating, meaningful interaction occurs when mutual understanding is achieved among individuals. In the context of SAC stakeholders, two points are important: each person involved must have an understanding of the issues from the perspectives of other stakeholders; and communication needs to be equitable. Meaningful interaction is the lynchpin of the productive operation of SAC services.

## **Quality**

Issues of communication between early childhood education centres, schools and SAC services have become increasingly pronounced since the introduction of quality management processes in 2003 (NCAC, 2003) and more recently the *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b). The development of the quality assurance process for SAC services had different historical circumstances from those of other childcare services. The accreditation or quality assurance process was seen as a way to alter the perception that SAC was a lesser kind of care service in comparison with long day care services (Arnold, 2002; CSML, 1999; Monro Miller, 2003). Communication is directly related to quality of services because systems of public governance work only if communication structures function effectively (Habermas, 1984, 1987). Like early childhood education centres and schools, SAC services require proficient organisation, administration and communication strategies to ensure that they deliver quality services to children and families. Communication between SAC staff and parents has always been recognised as important (NCAC, 2003), just as communication within the school is considered a significant part of everyday operations (DEEWR, 2011b). The communication between early childhood education centres, schools and SAC services increasingly requires strategic attention. Without

effective communication, opportunities to consolidate and extend the features of the physical and social environment which comply with rigorous health and safety requirements and provide the conditions in which children will learn and experience a sense of wellbeing will not be realised (ACECQA, 2013).

Ineffective communication results in negative outcomes for SAC services, early childhood education centres and schools in relation to the use of shared spaces, resources and equipment (Cartmel, 2007). In turn this situation impacts on the quality of services offered to children and their families. For example, different groups wanting to use the same space (such as the oval) at the same time can experience frustration if there is not a communication system in place to prevent this occurring (Cartmel, 2007). School age children often find it uncomfortable using the furniture in early childhood education centres because of the smaller size of tables and chairs. Other examples include lack of communication about inability to use buildings when carpets are being cleaned, pest control is underway and parent-teacher meetings are occurring. On these occasions, high-quality outcomes for children have been compromised as SAC programs are unable to proceed as planned and children and staff have been forced into makeshift circumstances (Cartmel, 2007). In these examples, there are several levels of communication that must be negotiated to avoid children and staff from SAC being displaced and without a venue. Achievement of *National Quality Standards* for SAC, particularly relating to the physical environment and partnerships (COAG, 2009b), are made more complex due the numbers and types of stakeholders involved in the layers of communication (ECEC management, school administration, teachers, SAC supervisors, SAC educators, parents).

Relationships between ECEC settings, schools and SAC operate in two dimensions. One is the day-to-day operations as SAC services, ECEC settings and schools share space and resources; the other is at the policy level and concerns the roles and responsibilities of the wellbeing, care and education of school-aged children. These dimensions form the context in which communication occurs and each affects the other. The *Evaluation of the OSHC Quality Assurance Training Projects* (FACS, 2005) reported that in relation to staff, 'services on school sites ... are generally attributed a low priority in the scheme of things' (p. 29). School principals are often the point of contact for SAC management and staff. If principals attribute a low priority to services, it is likely that they position themselves as privileged during communication with SAC staff. Being seen as having little status makes it hard for SAC staff to negotiate their desired outcomes (Cartmel, 2007). To complicate matters further, the low profile and low confidence of SAC educators are barriers to achieving standards as they are reluctant to engage in communication with

management teams, school principals and parents about changes that could potentially improve their work circumstances, often because of the power-based imperatives invoked by principals (Cartmel, 2007). The reluctance of SAC educators to engage and communicate with other stakeholders impacts on their ability to lead and manage SAC services, and therefore the quality of those services.

The *National Quality Standard* for SAC (COAG, 2009b) will be achieved through a set of designated principles and practices. Moss and Petrie (2002) propose that when services such as SAC, ECEC settings and schools coexist, there is a need for a detailed, principled strategy to ensure that there is a balance between civic and individualistic values. These values underpin all communication among stakeholders. High-quality SAC programs will be impossible to achieve if services do not have some control or the ability to negotiate with venue stakeholders about the kinds of structures, equipment and other resources required to achieve these outcomes. We suggest the following as strategies for enhancing communication between SAC and schools:

- weekly meetings between school and SAC management and coordinators
- focused conversations about professional practice with children and families
- the development of collaborative funding proposals to purchase resources for SAC and schools
- the development of joint projects such as a community garden.

## Conclusion

Poor communication impacts on the quality of service delivery in SAC. Distorted communication among SAC supervisors, school principals and ECEC management, where there is little interest or attempt to understand the perspectives of the other, can have dire consequences for the operation of the SAC service and ultimately children's wellbeing and development. Detailed and principled strategies are needed to ensure that high-quality outcomes for children are achieved. A key component of an effective strategy is good communication. The quality agenda has prompted a greater focus on the ability of SAC services to provide environments that support the wellbeing and development of school age children and meet the quality standard. The goals identified by COAG (2009a) and the Melbourne Declaration (MECCTYA, 2008) are shared by schools, SAC and early childhood education and care settings. High-quality SAC services are more likely to be achieved by focusing on the achievement of these common goals, facilitated by effective communication.

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