Before and After School: Literature Review about Australian School Age Child Care

Jennifer Cartmel[1] and Amy Hayes[2]

[1]School of Human Services and Social Work, Menzies Institute of Health Queensland, Griffith University, Meadowbrook, Queensland, Australia
[2]School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, Meadowbrook, Queensland, Australia

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

■ **Keywords:** school age childcare, SAC, working parents, policies, research

Introduction

School Age Care (SAC) is the fastest growing sector of child-care services in Australia and represents the greatest proportion of children attending services (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2013). One in three school-aged children attend SAC services (Baxter, Hand, & Sweid, 2014). SAC services have become important contexts of childhood, particularly as they sometimes constitute the main locations outside school where children play and socialise (Bell, 2013; Hurst, 2013). SAC, also referred to as "outside school hours care", includes before school care, after school care and vacation care, and provides school-aged children (5–12 years) with supervised and planned recreational activities in a safe environment while their caregivers are working or studying (DEEWR, 2011).

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 September quarter of 2012 was 315,220, an increase of almost 80,000 from the September quarter of 2004 (DEEWR, 2013). The number of families using SAC has increased from 61,450 to 225,780 for the same timeframe (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 into the sector be undertaken.

Methodology

A review of literature provided a holistic overview of the key issues and themes relevant to the Australian SAC sector. The review was guided by the following research questions:

How are SAC 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 used 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. Griffith University library catalogue provided further literature on the topic of focus, and literature was also sourced from key contacts and professionals in the SAC sector. In addition, the authors undertook a process of citation tracking to find Australian

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Jennifer Cartmel, School of Human Services and Social Work, Menzies Institute of Health Queensland, Griffith University, Meadowbrook, Queensland, Australia. E-mail: j.cartmel@griffith.edu.au

literature pertinent to the 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 and 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 more than 12 years old. However, due to the limited results, the search was expanded to include literature from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Literature was screened by reading abstracts. If the abstract contained information relevant to the key research questions, the article was downloaded and read in full. Publications were not excluded based on the country of origin or context, but were limited to those written in English. The literature review also excluded publications unavailable 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 studies used a mixture of research methodologies to report on the circumstances of school age care services. Twelve items were categorised as grey literature, including ten government reports.

An analysis of publications' content revealed some significant themes. Most notable were descriptions about the growth of the sector and characteristics of the organisation or service types. Four additional themes identified as particularly relevant to the purpose of this review were: parent expectations, venues, workforce needs and children's well-being.

Findings

Growth of the Sector

The SAC sector has expanded considerably over the past century and continues to grow to meet the needs of society (Hand & Baxter, 2013; Mullan, 2013; Thompson, Cooper, Flanagan, Crawford, & Worsley, 2006). Originally, many SAC services operated as recreational programs for children and often operated in community playgrounds (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). However, as their activities moved into community halls and schools, care and education were demanded, rather than just recreation (Cartmel, 2007; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). In the 1980s, SAC services further expanded as women's participation in the workforce exponentially increased (Brennan, 1998; Elliott, 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 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 program 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 childcare benefit was approved in the Australian federal budget to increase places available in SAC services (Cartmel, 2007). Initiatives such as the 2009 National Early Childhood Development Strategy (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), the 2011 *My Time, Our Place* (MTOP) Framework (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 an increase in the development of relevant policies and regulation.

Organisation and Service Types

There are many organisations that administer and manage SAC services. These include church bodies, 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 (Department of Education, 2011; Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2007; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Consequently, the structures of administration, service delivery and support can differ depending on the type of SAC service (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). For example, SAC coordinators who deliver the services in schools 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 perceive themselves as more important than the SAC workforce, potentially undermining 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, respectful communication and interaction between SAC workforces and school staff is essential. Being open and non-judgmental, and engaging in generative listening to consider each other's perspectives is needed to create a collaborative partnership to support children and families (Cartmel & Grieshaber, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 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). Support from both the management body and QCAN is essential for coordinators of SAC services to have more time to plan quality care programs, rather than focusing on administration and meeting accreditation or quality standards (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). The advocacy of the peak organisations has 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 relation" in childcare (Cartmel, 2007) and the "Cinderella of services" (Gammage, 2003). Early childhood services are expected to offer both care and education for young children, whereas school-aged children are assumed to be educated at school and cared for by SAC services until their parents collect them (Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS), 2005; Elliott, 1998). The perception that SAC services have 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 is equivalent to 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 the term "care" that perpetuates the low regard for SAC. Traditionally in Australia, SAC has not been viewed as making any instructional, developmental or social capital contributions to a child (Gifford, 1992). Instead, it is has been viewed as child-minding, fulfilling a parental need rather than being of benefit to children. This is in direct contrast to the United States, 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 United States 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). Indeed, over the last decade, US research investigating after school programs has increased exponentially (Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010). A comparable 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 suggests that children have opportunities to participate in leisure and play-based activities that are responsive to their needs, interests and choices (DEEWR, 2011).

Parent Expectations and Needs

Research shows that there are a range of concerns that parents face when accessing SAC care, including the location of the services, affordability and hours of operations (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Hand & Baxter, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). In addition, the specific concerns of mothers seeking SAC arrangements for their children have received considerable attention in the literature (Hand & Baxter, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). For parents in general, location is a key concern given the importance of transport 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. Partly in consequence, SAC facilities are becoming more readily available on school grounds because of transport barriers, and it appears important that these barriers continue to be alleviated for parents (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012).

Secondly, service costs have been recognised as a barrier for parents, and have been identified as a factor in determining the use and type of care chosen for children (Baxter et al., 2014; Winefield et al., 2011). In the United States, 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. Hand and Baxter (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 (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Winefield et al., 2011). Parents, especially working mothers, have expressed the need for more flexible- and longer-operating hours for SAC services in order to accommodate changing employment patterns (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Winefield et al., 2011). This, in turn, will reduce pressure on parents to find multiple care arrangements and potentially increase parental satisfaction with 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, particularly into the early or late evening (Baxter et al., 2014).

Service Venues

In Australia, the majority of SAC services are located on school grounds, and this is regarded as ideal for a number of reasons (Cartmel, 2009; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). First, schools often have pre-existing resources-such as playgrounds, ovals, sporting and classroom equipment 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

making transport arrangements for the child before or after school (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Having SAC services on school grounds also has the potential to build effective relationships between school staff, families and SAC staff. By acting as conduits for interaction between families and school, SAC staff may be able to support children's transitions between, for example, different year levels or changed circumstances at home (Cartmel, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2014).

However, 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 programs do not have a dedicated space, but, rather, use empty classrooms or 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, leaving the SAC service without a dedicated, 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).

Overall, the evidence suggests that there are both advantages and disadvantages to having SAC facilities on school grounds, and that the advantages mostly benefit parents' needs while the disadvantages are felt by the service staff. However, by no means all SAC services are necessarily located on school grounds (Department of Education, 2011). SAC facilities can be based at churches, community halls, not-for-profit organisation venues and Family Day Care services (Cartmel, 2007; Department of Education, 2011; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). In countries such as China and the United States, interesting initiatives have been shaped 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 the children of migrant parents had no suitable place to go after school (Xinhau News, 2011). In the United States, two apartments in San Diego have been converted into an after-school facility, where undergraduate Social Science students from the local university run the program (Barkhauus, & Lecusay, 2012). Clearly, SAC services are adaptable to a variety of venues to suit the needs of the community.

Workforce Needs

Within the literature the issue of workforce needs is discussed from two perspectives: the perspective of the wider Australian workforce in terms of accessing services, and that of the staff delivering SAC services. Research suggests that the increase in SAC services relates directly to the growing needs of the Australian workforce (Cartmel & Grieshaber,

2014; Hand & Baxter, 2013), with Winefield et al. (2011) noting that SAC services are vital to parents' ability to work, especially in the case of single-parent families. According to Hand and Baxter (2013) and Winefield et al. (2011), many parents are unable to fulfill their supervisory responsibilities for children due to conflicting and rigid work schedules, and this situation applies equally to families where both parents or sole parents (in the case of single-parent families) are employed. Researchers including Hand and Baxter (2013) report that it is, however, more often mothers who experience conflicts in work scheduling and care arrangements, and reduce work hours in order to care for their children (Baxter & Hand, 2016; Hand & Baxter, 2013; McNamara & Cassells, 2010). Conflicts between family and work responsibilities are also likely to impact negatively on a mother's health and wellbeing (Winefield et al., 2011), which can have a bearing on the wellbeing of the whole family.

In terms of services' workforce needs, Simoncini and Lasen (2012) found that the employment of high-quality staff was linked to supportive line management and administration provision. There are, however, identified problems with recruiting and retaining staff, which are attributed to the low status of the profession, the low pay, insecure working conditions and limited career or 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 pursue the professional development needed to deliver quality SAC services to children (Simoncini, Cartmel, & Young, 2015; Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Moreover, SAC workers already have the highest rate of under-qualification in the care or education sectors, exacerbating SAC's low status within the field (Simoncini & Lasen, 2012). Training and qualifications are not only needed to equip staff to problem solve and respond appropriately to changing circumstances, but also to attract additional investment in research and scholarship (Cartmel, 2007; Wheelahan, 2007). By doing so, SAC services may be able to address misconception that SAC services are there solely to meet the needs of working parents, and instead promote services as a context for a child's social, cognitive and physical development (Bell, 2013; Bell & Cartmel, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 2014; Mullan, 2013).

Children's Wellbeing

Studies showed that SAC services are able to improve children's emotional, cognitive and social development when quality care and developmental programs are provided (Hurst, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011). Such quality programs offer an environment that values cognitive stimulation and nurtures safe, unstructured play, and acknowledges the importance of quality social interaction (Winefield et al., 2011). In addition, services that provide "developmentally

appropriate opportunities" appear to reap positive outcomes for the child and their families (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Elliott, 1998; Simoncini et al., 2015). In the United States, 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). Therefore, when quality SAC services are provided for children, there is the potential to enhance a child's emotional, cognitive and social development.

SAC services also have the potential to improve the health outcomes of children since they provide them with opportunities to be active and make healthy food choices (Sangster, Eccleston & Porter, 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Demircan and Demir (2014) reported that SAC services have been shown to improve children's eating behaviours and the amount of physical activity in which they engage, and according to Sangster et al. (2008), SAC services operate in optimal time periods when children are also most likely to be active. SAC services are therefore well placed to promote healthy lifestyles and physical activities, potentially serving a health promotion role by aiding the prevention of obesity, heart disease and Type 2 diabetes both when children are young and in later life (Sangster et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006).

However, while health promotion may be effective in the SAC context, there are a number of barriers to implement these types of programs (Sangster et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Due to limited training, support and resourcing in the SAC sector, many services are not currently planning meals specifically to enhance the health of the children in their care (Sangster et al., 2008). Moreover, insufficient space and play equipment can be a barrier to SAC services providing active choices for children before and after school (Thompson et al., 2006). Consequently, there is scope for SAC program coordinators and staff to be trained to provide creative opportunities for physical activity, both with- and without-access to play equipment and space (Thompson et al., 2006).

Discussion

Despite the large numbers of children and families who access SAC, there is a paucity of research about SAC in Australia (Mullan, 2013; Winefield et al., 2011), although the available studies highlight some of the key features and concerns. With increasing numbers of children spending time in SAC services, and with government subsidies directed towards helping working parents access 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. During the middle years, children's physical, cognitive and social attributes are still developing and they need adequate time and opportunities for the type of activities that strengthen and sustain their physical and social wellbeing (Lester & Russell, 2008). For children who attend SAC services regularly, there is, with adequate planning, the potential to influence their capabilities to succeed academically, build social competencies such as collaboration and citizenship and contribute to good overall health and wellbeing.

Clearly, providing playing opportunities that develop children's wellbeing and support their learning and development is a core purpose of SAC services (Bell, 2013; DEEWR, 2011; Hurst, 2013), and recent policy and legislative changes have supported this by indicating that SAC is considered an educational service. Nevertheless, some practitioners and stakeholders in the sector still perpetuate a view that the service primarily offers care rather than education (Cartmel, 2007; Simoncini et al., 2015), and the continued use of the word "care" in "School Aged Care" may contribute to this. The perception that SAC is only a care service presents problems for the SAC workforce, especially for those individuals working in the sector who must uphold policy and accreditation standards, including education quality frameworks (ACECQA, 2012; Hurst, 2013). At the same time, other SAC staff are employed in positions that define their role as carers rather than educators (Dockett & Perry, 2014). As long as these mixed views of the SAC sector continue to influence the management and administration of SAC services, they also impact on the identity and defined characteristics of the overall SAC workforce.

The interpretation of the roles and responsibilities of educators working in Australian SAC services has also been shaped by educators' own ecological frameworks. The *My Time, Our Place* Framework (DEEWR, 2011) provides an outline of the principles and practices that educators are expected to enact through their role, but there is little empirical research about the features of practice and the impacts on children's development and wellbeing (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Much of the information has been an "interpretation of possibilities" based on other forms of service delivery for children from birth to 5 years of age, leaving the SAC workforce feeling vulnerable and lacking a professional identity (Cartmel, 2007).

As part of the National Quality Standard for quality assurance (ACECQA, 2012), SAC services have kept visual and written records of their activities, but there has been no fine-grained analysis of their intent and impacts on individuals or groups of children in the short or long term. Nor has there been an extensive evaluation or investigation of the intricacies of SAC programs since the inception of the quality assurance process. Although SAC services have the potential to shape children's values and beliefs, and SAC staff are understood to act *in loco parentis*, the educational responsibilities and significance of SAC services, including the relationships between staff, children and families, remain little understood.

Without a gamut of expert opinion or investigation, it is hard to make the shifts required to create a professional identity and raise status for the SAC workforce or examine the impact of SAC programs in the lives of Australian

children. If services are to continue growing and responding to the needs of children and families, and support the productivity agendas of Australian governments, opportunities are needed to gather much more evidence about the role and contribution of SAC services.

Further Research

As the current literatures indicates, while SAC services have been 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). The studies that have been conducted generally focus on workforce needs and maternal arrangements, rather than focusing on the intricacies of SAC services or how they might be developed to meet the demand for appropriate, cost effective and quality out-of-school care (Hand & Baxter, 2013). Although there have been quite a number of studies investigating SAC services in the United States, it is difficult to generalise their findings to the Australian context due to policy and regulation differences (Simoncini et al., 2012). Internationally, it is also reported that, where the education system is involved in providing out-of-school care, the emphasis is often on "custodial care or homework rather than developmental leisure time activities" (OECD, 2006, p. 84). Without further research and policy development, the position of Australian SAC services in relation to this statement remains unclear.

Conclusion

With SAC services often operating on shoestring budgets, there have been no finances left over to support rigorous research and scholarship activities to provide insights into the operation of services. This review has indicated that there is much to be done to ensure SAC services are viable organisations able to promote the significance of their responsibilities to children, families and society. The SAC sector awaits a significant investment of resources to improve and expand its knowledge base. However, that investment will undoubtedly serve the best interests of children and social sustainability.

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