



Working More Equitably With Older Children In OSHC

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I still recall my first week of work in an Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) service over 20 years ago. My manager briefed me on my new role and some of the major challenges that I would face. Included in this list of challenges was that of older children (aged 9 to 12 years). I was told they would be bored and much harder to please than younger children. In the years that followed, I have heard many times about the challenges of working with older children. This article provides a summary of my recent research into the experiences of older children in OSHC (Hurst, 2013). Although only a snapshot, it gives the reader an insight into the lives of older children in OSHC.

The project

Whilst there isn't a lot of current literature on older children in OSHC, most of the literature is consistent in how it refers to older children. Older children are often referred to as bored, rebellious, like teenagers and resentful of being in OSHC (Gifford, 1991; Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2004; Longobardi, 2001). A key feature of the literature was how it represented mostly adult opinions and less the voices of children.

I decided to find out more about older children in OSHC from a different perspective, that of the older child. Nine older children from three OSHC services were involved in the project. They acted as co-researchers and had input into the project methodology. The participants took photographs of things from their OSHC that they did or didn't like. These photographs were used to inform the subsequent semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the participants. The photographs were critical to the research as they allowed the children to guide discussion and limit my 'adult biases'.

It is important to acknowledge the small size of this project. The findings discussed in this article really only apply to the nine participants, and can't be used to generalise about all older children. However, the findings still provide valuable insights into the lives of older children that can be used by educators.

Do we disadvantage older children?

Older children are a minority in OSHC and outnumbered significantly by children aged six to eight years (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2009). The participants spoke in multiple ways about how being in the minority affects them.

Some spoke of how activities in OSHC are better suited to younger children.

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"Jim: So, baseball the other week.... the activities were set for younger kids. The older kids could do them quite easily.

Interviewer: What's annoying about it?

Jim: That you can't like really show your best or improve that much."
.....

Jim finds himself in a compulsory activity designed for younger children that doesn't offer sufficient challenge. Instead Jim must modify Jim's play in order to fit in. Many of the participants described similar situations where activities were better suited to younger children, lacked challenge or were uninteresting.

Some participants suggested that privileging occurs not just within activities but also in the provision of materials and resources. They identified a number of ways in which this occurred:

- Most play equipment was better suited to younger children
- Dress ups that were too small for older children
- Few books were suitable for older children
- Movies were better suited to younger children
- Art materials were better suited to younger children.

Captain illustrates privileging in this discussion about books.

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"Um I took a photo of the book shelf cos...there's not much book selection and um they're too babyish the books... The younger kids read them" (Captain).
.....





Most participants discussed the provision of books, but not all commented negatively. At one site, the participants discussed how they enjoyed the books provided. For all children, their opinions about the books provided centred on whether they were appropriate for older children.

Decision-making processes at OSHC were also identified as a means by which older children are disadvantaged.

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“Actually more younger kids...
than older kids and yep we
usually don’t get
our way” (Emily).
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Emily described a democratic voting process that educators use to select activities. The system described mostly awards the decision to the majority younger child. The minority, older child would only vote successfully if their choice matched that of the majority younger child. Involving all children in the decision gives the impression of fairness and consensus, allocating one vote to each child, but in reality, as a minority and an outsider Emily finds that it serves the needs of younger children (van Dyk, 2006).

These accounts provide just a few examples that demonstrate how older children are sometimes positioned as outsiders in services that are meant to include them.

Conclusion

This research revealed much new knowledge about how older children experience OSHC. It raised the possibility that we can sometimes act in ways that seem fair, but disadvantage older children. It also suggested that it is unfair to label older children as rebellious and difficult when there are greater complexities that inform their behaviours. Perhaps the most profound lesson from this research is that if we genuinely seek their opinions, we may gain new insights into our practices that can improve equity for all children. ◀

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