

More school, less play?

The role of play in the Extended School in Denmark and England

Introduction

The issue of childcare for school-aged children has attracted considerable interest recently. In England, the debate about the nature and level of childcare provision, including who should provide it and what it should offer, has come to the forefront through discussions on extended schools. Of course, these debates are not new. There has been an interest in the role of schools in providing before and after school care for many years, and many of the initiatives that are now being considered under the auspices of the extended school agenda have been around in some schools for many years. There is also learning to be derived from other countries. Denmark, in particular, has a long history of providing after school care. This small-scale study by researchers from Barnardo's, considers approaches after school care in Denmark and England and raises questions about what we can learn from the comparison.

Background and policy context

An extended school is one that provides a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider communityⁱ. The extended school policy has been on the political agenda in England since the late 1990's where reports highlighted the central role schools have in serving disadvantaged areasⁱⁱ. In 2005, the government published a prospectus: 'Extended Schools: providing opportunities and services for all'ⁱⁱⁱ, which highlighted the 'core offers' that should be accessible in or through all primary and secondary schools by 2010:

- 'Wraparound' childcare (8am-6pm all year around)
- Varied menu of activities (e.g. study support, sport, dance and drama, and foreign languages)
- Parenting support (e.g. parenting programmes and family learning sessions)
- Easy referrals to specialist support services (e.g. speech therapy, mental health services, family support and sexual health services for young people)
- Community access to school facilities (e.g. ICT, sport and adult learning)

Schools may either deliver services themselves, by working in clusters, or through third parties. Examples include networks of childminders, private and voluntary organisations or shared responsibilities with other schools.

Although the extended school, as a 'model' originates in the USA, extended schools within England have adopted a more educationally focused approach (for example, by looking at pupil attainment and adult learning). This focus on attainment has an impact on the services extended schools are required and encouraged to deliver. Given that the 'core business' of schools is to enable children to learn and to achieve with the context of the curriculum, the fundamental task of extended schools is to maximise attainment through a family and community context that is supportive of learning. The role of play, figures scarcely at all in the plans for extended schools. While activities, such as study support, homework clubs, music tuition and learning a foreign language, will benefit many children, some commentators have argued that too narrow an interpretation of educational achievement will deter those children who could benefit the most^{iv}.

Barnardo's Study

Barnardo's research focused on three case study settings in England and three in Denmark, which all offered children after school care five days a week. The sites were selected geographically in order to include a rural, suburban and inner-city perspective on after school care provision. A range of research methods were used such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation and other research activities with children. In each setting the manager of the after school club and staff were interviewed, as well as parents and the head teacher, where possible. The researchers^v spent approximately three days in each setting to involve children in informal research activities^{vi} or interactive focus groups. We also interviewed a number of professionals in Denmark with an interest in the childcare agenda to learn more about the policy context that has informed the development of Danish after school clubs.

Although small, and not representative of all schools and clubs providing after-school childcare, this 'snapshot' study aims to highlight some of the experiences that both Danish and English clubs have had in providing the extended school.

Key findings

- School premises are often viewed as underused and empty facilities, especially during school holidays and after school hours. However, sharing facilities can be challenging, and after school care providers in both England and Denmark valued having separate spaces that they can shape and make more play friendly and welcoming for children.
- Clubs with independent facilities were viewed by children as different from school. In clubs where facilities and staff were shared with the school, both children and adults tended to adopt school rules as club rules.
- To build and maintain friendships is an important function of after school clubs in both Denmark and England. After school clubs can enable children to develop and learn essential social skills, which they may not learn at home or at school.
- Attitudes to outdoor play varied significantly between Danish and English clubs. This affected the amount of time children were able to play outside and the type of equipment that was available to them. Danish children generally had unlimited access to more challenging outdoor facilities than English children.
- Good play opportunities in English after school clubs often relied on one highly motivated and energetic worker with a background in playwork. Where no such 'personality' was present, after school clubs tended to be more about 'crowd-control', than about offering children stimulating play opportunities.
- Certain activities, such as homework and booster classes, were clearly viewed by children in English after school clubs as 'more school' and some children expressed that they felt pressured into taking part in order to do well at SATs exams.

Research findings

Shared or separate facilities – a feeling of ownership

Danish clubs tended to be located in separate facilities from the school itself, either in the school grounds or within walking distance from the school. While some clubs shared facilities with the school, such as the sports hall, clay and woodworking rooms, they all had separate rooms or a house (depending on size) used exclusively by the after school club. A few staff explicitly said that if clubs had to share more rooms with schools (as has been suggested by Danish politicians) they would leave the profession as it would undermine their work with the children. Staff and managers

in Danish clubs emphasised the importance of a setting being cosy and feeling homely: 'a home away from home'. Staff and children all appeared to value the 'homely' atmosphere, as it created a sense of ownership and consequently responsibility for the setting. It was visually very clear when a club shared facilities with the school, as these rooms felt less cared for. For Danish children, having their after school club located separately from school, seems to promote the sense that school and after school club is different: at school you learn and at club you play. The activities, facilities, adults and rules differ and the children were very aware of this.

The English clubs generally used the school assembly hall as their main area. Some clubs (generally where the coordinator had a play-work background) used mats and benches to divide the hall into different zones to create a more interesting and stimulating setting. As halls are used during school hours (for PE lessons and/or as dining room), club staff generally arrive 30 minutes before the children to set up and prepare activities. All club equipment, both indoor and outdoor, had to be stored away again at the end of the session. Managers often expressed some frustration over their lack of ability to display children's art work and make the hall more personal and permanent. Staff who had worked in settings where facilities were separate to school facilities, expressed their preference for this, as they were able to make the setting more pleasant and have more permanent games and resources available to the children. One club manager in a very busy extended school, also highlighted the risks of using the school playground when parents and other adults were using the school after hours for adult classes, as it reduced the club's ability to keep the children safe. Although English children were aware of the differences between school and after school club, the distinctions were less marked, especially when club staff also worked in the school during the day as, for example class room assistants or lunch supervisors. In such settings children would address the adults as if they were teachers rather than by their first name, and both staff and children would adopt school rules (which tend to be stricter, more detailed and more frequent), as after school club rules. In clubs where workers differed from school staff, the children were more aware of club as a different entity to school, as having fewer rules than school and as a place where you play.

Size matters

After school clubs in Denmark tend to be used by most children in the 6-10 age group, as the need for childcare is greater than in the UK (most women are in employment) and there is a sliding scale of fees and cost free places depending on household income, which enables unemployed parents to use the facility. Danish clubs are therefore larger with between 50 – 100 children attending daily. Clubs in English schools tend to be used less frequently (more women work part-time and after school clubs attracted a daily fee of £6-12). Clubs in our study were consequently smaller, with 10-35 children attending daily. Bigger clubs generally employ more staff and due to their size have a larger range of resources, facilities and equipment available, which offer children more opportunities to try different activities than smaller clubs.

Friendships and socially acceptable behaviour

In both Denmark and England after school clubs provided children with opportunities to be with friends and to develop new friendships. To build and maintain friendships is an important function of the clubs, as children are not always able to play with friends at home, due to time pressure, long distances between where they live, and parental fears about children playing outdoors.

Managers and staff in both countries recognised that after school clubs enable children to develop and learn essential social skills, such as sharing, taking turns, acceptable social behaviour and empathy for other children. The fact that children of different ages attend the club encourages

older children to consider and watch out for younger children, while the younger ones learn from older children's experiences. Both English and Danish staff highlight the difficulties children often have in adapting socially when they first join the after school club, and a significant amount of staff time is spent resolving conflicts between children and encouraging them to think of others and share. According to playwork staff, such social skills are not necessarily learned at home or at school, as teachers and parents have limited time available to help children deal with conflicts independently.

Outdoor play

Attitudes to outdoor play differ significantly between English and Danish settings. In England after school clubs generally go out for a limited period (for example 20-30 minutes per session) as a big group, when the weather permits it. This restricts individual children's choice (those who don't want to play outside have to, or are encouraged to, while other children are limited to a certain period). On occasions, this was due to the distance between indoor and outdoor facilities, so workers felt it was unsafe for children to move freely between the two. Poor weather was often used as a justification by adults for limiting or withdrawing outdoor play, even when children did not perceive the weather as a hindrance.

In Denmark adults expressed a different attitude to outdoor play. Outdoor play is seen as a very important and necessary part of child development and well being. Playing outside was generally not a group activity, individual children would rather flow in and out as they choose. (Although one setting insisted that all children spent at least one hour outside, regardless of the weather).

Outdoor resources and facilities varied across the English and Danish clubs, depending on individual settings. However, Danish clubs generally offered more 'risky' play equipment, like roller skates, unicycles, den-building facilities and climbing towers with slides. As English settings shared outdoor facilities with schools, outdoor facilities depended on the schools' investment in playgrounds and sports fields and hence varied significantly in quality. The English clubs had limited outdoor play equipment that relied on being mobile and being able to be stored away in indoor cupboards, such as skipping ropes, balls and tennis rackets.

Staffing and workforce issues

The level of staffing in terms of adult-child ratio did not vary significantly between English and Danish settings. In fact English clubs seemed to have slightly fewer children per adult. However, the level of experience, qualifications and involvement of staff did vary between the two countries.

- *Qualifications*

Danish settings had a limited number of unqualified staff employed in after school clubs. However, there are no legal requirements, so this does vary depending on the manager of the individual club or the local authority. One Local Authority manager responsible for overseeing standards in 50 after school clubs stressed that he would be concerned if the percentage of qualified staff fell below 70 per cent. A qualification in pedagogy takes 3 ½ years fulltime and is the equivalent of a 'practice' degree. As a part of the training, students have three placements in a variety of settings, including nurseries, after school clubs and specialist settings working with disabled children or children in care.

English settings frequently relied on one or two qualified workers, generally the co-ordinator or leader of the club, while the remaining staff were unqualified (some clubs do encourage staff to

train as play-workers while working). The typical qualification for co-ordinators is a NVQ level 3 in playwork. Playwork courses tend to be part time and portfolio-based.

- *Experience*

After school club staff in Danish settings tend to view playwork as a full-time career path. This means that many workers have worked in the profession for a number of years (in two of the three after school clubs we visited, staff had worked in the same setting for over 20 years). When employing staff, managers often look for additional skills or experience that the workers have, such as being able to play a musical instrument, doing handicrafts, sports or woodwork. These skills are not necessarily taught at training colleges, but are practical skills that offer children opportunities for rich and varied experiences at the after school club (other examples include making role play costumes and weapons, ship-building, film-making and circus skills).

English settings tend to experience a higher rate of staff turnover, relying on young staff or less experienced workers who do not mind working unsociable hours, such as holidays and evenings. They tend to work in the playwork field for a limited period, partly because after school care is part-time and staff move on to other professions where full-time work and careers are available.

- *Involvement in the setting*

In Danish settings all staff members appeared to take responsibility for the children and facilities regardless of their qualifications. Staff have weekly paid staff meetings that deal with practical issues, planning and evaluation, as well as any issues regarding individual children.

Managers of English settings generally took the responsibility for planning activities, organising facilities and disciplining the children. Other staff tended to take on a more supportive, and less leading role, which made them appear less visible in the setting and less involved in dealing with conflicts and issues among the children. This may be due to a combination of lack of experience and qualifications.

Good play experiences

Overall Danish after school clubs offered very good play experiences for children. Staff and managers generally have a background in playwork or pedagogy, and see their key role as supporting children's free play. This is done within an environment that offers children a huge range of choice and the freedom, flexibility and support in making such choices.

Good play opportunities in English schools often relied on one highly motivated, very energetic personality (generally the coordinator) with a background in playwork. Where no such 'personality' was present, after school clubs tended to be less play focused and more controlled or 'school like', with fewer choices and few opportunities for children to control their play and activities.

Doing homework

In Denmark, as well as in England, there have been recent debates about the role of homework in after school clubs. Qualified Danish staff and their union representatives have expressed strong concerns about this possible development, mainly because it contradicts the pedagogue's traditional role as an adult who supports children's free play and freedom to make choices about their leisure time. Some staff felt unqualified and underpaid to provide homework assistance, while others expressed concern that this development will leave parents with no role and little responsibility for their children's lives. Hence, currently children do not do their homework in Danish after school clubs, unless they themselves choose to do so.

Children in English after school clubs (especially in Year 6) described homework clubs and booster clubs as 'extra school'. Children in one school said that they felt pressured by parents, teachers, friends and by themselves into attending booster classes, in order to do well in their SATs tests. One after-school club encouraged children to do their homework during club hours, except on Fridays, as this allowed children to have more quality time together with their parents in the evenings.

More school, less play?

So what, if anything, can we learn from the Danish experience? The overarching lesson seems to be that creating an extended school ethos needs more than simply extending the school day and making use of school facilities outside normal school hours. If we want to encourage children to participate (including those who are alienated from normal lessons), we need to create a separate culture and range of provision which has implications both for where after school care is provided and who provides it. Another question raised by this study is how we achieve a balance between promoting attainment and giving children good play experiences. Whilst nobody would argue with the importance of improving achievement, there are other aspects of children's lives which also need to be supported and nurtured. Is more school and less play really the way forward?

ⁱ DfES (2002) Extended schools: providing opportunities and services for all, pp. 5

ⁱⁱ DfEE (1999) Schools Plus: Building learning communities. Improving the educational chances of children and young people from disadvantaged areas: a report from the School Plus Policy Action Team 11, DfES.

ⁱⁱⁱ DfES (2005) Extended schools: access to opportunities and services for all: a prospectus, DfES.

^{iv} Research into non-participation in study support shows that children with negative attitudes towards school, who disliked teachers and who were poorly supported at home were more likely not to participate in study support (EducationExtra, 2003: Non-participation in study support, DfES)

^v The researchers involved in the Danish part of the research were all native Danish speakers and were therefore able to interview adults and children in their mother tongue.

^{vi} Such research activities, which often took place while the children played or were engaged in other activities, included a 'spinner' and 'the chatterbox'. These are commonly used childhood games, which were altered to ask questions, such as 'what are the rules here?', 'Something new I have done here' and in effect worked as a mini interview guide. Before playing the games the researcher enquired whether he or she was allowed to record the child's answers.