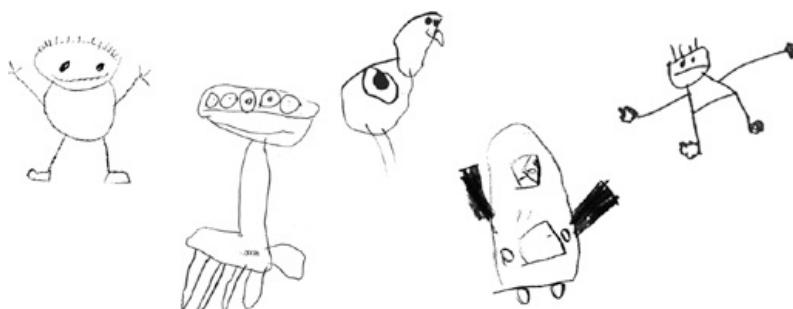




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What's SWOT in Attitudes Towards Young Children in Danish After-School Provision: Perceptions From an 'Irish Lens'.

Jennifer Sturley, Mary Immaculate College, UL

Abstract

Based on observations of afterschool provision and interviews with stakeholders in Copenhagen, Denmark, this paper presents a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of the attitudes of adults towards children. Some key strengths are that children are treated as active citizens in a democratic environment and that autonomy and socialisation are considered essential components of the curriculum. This paper reflects on these observations and proceeds to compare Danish and Irish data on health and well-being of older children and voter participation in young adults. In doing so, possible long-term outcomes are hypothesised in order to stimulate reflection and discussion.

Introduction

An increasing number of children from four years of age upwards are spending significant amounts of time in after school facilities in Ireland (Moloney, Sturley and Kane, 2008). The impetus for this paper came whilst on a research trip to explore after school provision in Copenhagen, Denmark. The impressions that form the basis of this paper stem from direct observations of after school settings and interviews with key stakeholders. From the perspective of an Irish researcher in the field of early childhood, the attitudes that adults had towards the children were particularly striking, most notably, the emphasis on promoting responsibility and active citizenship in children.

In order to document and contextualise the observed attitudes in a coherent fashion, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was conducted. The rationale for using this approach is discussed and the findings addressing the four areas are presented. This paper highlights the difficulties surrounding the process of comparing and interpreting childhoods, acknowledging that when examining policy and practice in other countries, we do so from our own national perspective or 'lens', often clouded by our own history, culture and current social climate. The focus of this paper is a reflection on these attitudes rather than a comprehensive overview of school-aged childcare per se.

The experiences that children have and the attitudes of adults towards them may have long-term personal and societal implications. The potential long-term implications of such attitudes are explored by drawing on comparative data on well-being in older children including indicators such as youth suicide rates and by examining young voter turnout as a proxy measure of civic responsibility. This aspect of the paper is exploratory in nature and should be read as such.

Context

In relation to after school services, the Danish system has been well acknowledged as a sophisticated model of provision, in operation for some time. Since 1975, it has been possible to operate day care facilities in school premises. From 1984, municipalities (or local authorities) have been able to facilitate the use of primary schools outside regular school hours for play and other leisure activities for children enrolled in the school (OECD, 2000). In Copenhagen, the Danes refer to after school provision as 'leisure time' which is significant, therefore, the term after school/leisure time will be used throughout this paper. Of note, approximately 80% of the 6-10 year age group attend a leisure time facility (OECD, 2006).

From an Irish perspective, in order to fully contextualise and interpret the provision and practice of after school care, it was imperative to gather as much information about general policy, social issues, and the Danish welfare and education system as a whole. The following points of information in relation to economic and social aspects are also significant to the discussion:

- According to the OECD (2006) approximately 80% of women in Denmark with children from the ages of 3-7 years participate in the labour force. In recent years, Ireland has seen a significant rise in the rate of women with children actively participating in the labour force although to date, the figure remains lower than in Denmark.
- The rate of taxation is higher in Denmark (approximately 50%) however; the Danes spend 2.1% of GDP on early childhood and after school/leisure time facilities, compared to less than 0.5% in Ireland (OECD, 2006). All childcare provision including after school care is subsidised and parents only contribute towards the cost of provision on a means tested basis.

- All children have the right to a place in an after school programme (although not necessarily in the particular programme/institution of their choice, some settings would have waiting lists).

Data Collection: Gaining insights

Direct observations of after school/leisure time facilities and interviews with key stakeholders were recorded on a research trip to Copenhagen to gain an in-depth insight into after school provision for young children. The settings visits included:

- The Children and Youth Administration of Copenhagen (Meeting with two representatives)
- A Seminarium providing training for social pedagogues (Meeting with College lecturer)
- Establishment A: After School Facility located within an affluent area of Copenhagen (Meeting with staff and direct observation of the setting)
- Establishment B: After School Facility located within a disadvantaged area of Copenhagen (Meeting with staff and direct observation of the setting)

Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to meet with and gain the perspectives of parents. The SWOT analysis presented is from the perspective of the researcher, based on information obtained and interpreted from these interviews and observations.

Rationale for the use of the SWOT analysis

For a researcher from a primarily quantitative background, reporting on attitudes appeared to be an onerous task. There are obvious tensions surrounding the abstract, subjective nature of attitudes and an analytical research process. In preparation for presenting this paper at the OMEP conference (April 2007), much thought and deliberation went into how to present my findings, my impressions and perceptions in a coherent, comprehensive manner. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis seemed an appropriate tool for this purpose. The SWOT analysis is a commonly used framework for evaluation purposes in business; however it is a useful framework for application outside of the business world and has been adopted in a diverse range of fields to 'assess and guide any organized human endeavour designed to accomplish a mission' (Rizzo and Jounghyum Kim, 2005:119).

SWOT Analysis Findings

Table 1: This table provides an overview of SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<p>Sense of civic duty, responsibility and participation</p> <p>Leisure time emphasis</p> <p>Training of Staff</p> <p>Staff acting as facilitators</p> <p>Socialisation and freedom of choice (within limits)</p> <p>Curriculum highly influenced by the children themselves</p>	<p>Potential lack of Support for inclusive education</p> <p>Lack of supervision for older children (over ten years)</p> <p>Lack of participation of parents of older children.</p>
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<p>Further sharing of knowledge and pedagogical practice with a wider audience</p>	<p>Cognitive testing of children (PISA studies)</p> <p>Formalisation of the after school/leisure time facilities</p>

Strengths:

Emphasis on active participation

The after school facilities are underpinned by three core principles that aim to:

- Support parents with respect to the development and wellbeing of the child
- Respect the interdependence between the different environments such as the home, institution or local area of interest that impact on the child's development.
- Complement the ethos of the public school system

One of the main aims of the education system is to create Danish citizens with a true understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a citizen.

The school must prepare pupils for participation, shared responsibility and acceptance of rights and obligations in a free and democratic society ... the school's teaching and full daily life must build on intellectual freedom, equality and democracy'. (Quotation from representative 1: Children and Youth Administration).

Based on observations in the after school/leisure time facilities, it would appear that these facilities are indeed complementing the ethos of the Public School system. One of the key strengths observed was the emphasis placed on responsibility and inclusion in a democratic society, beginning with the youngest children. From the observations and interviews conducted, it would appear that the after school/leisure time facilities were run in a democratic way whereby, children had an active voice both at management level, with representation on the boards of management and at ground level by directly influencing their curriculum. Children were active contributors, they could follow their own interests and were given freedom but within flexible limits. There was a sense of freedom whereby children had scope to choose from a range of daily activities, quiet time or engaging in homework. Their choices were also respected and valued. The curriculum in the settings were determined largely by the children's interests and continually monitored and adapted in response to the children's needs and wants.

Emphasis on holistic development

The holistic development of the child was central to the working of the after-school/leisure time facilities visited. The activities provided appealed to the various interests that the children had: *e.g.* music and movement (including a sound engineering studio in Establishment A), outdoor play (although space is at a premium in some city establishments), arts and crafts, woodwork and technical work, drama, role play, fantasy play, computer games, quiet time and homework areas.

The children appeared to be viewed as capable learners and the level of trust in the children and their abilities was obvious. In these settings, children were respected and trusted not to abuse their environment, the tools, the dressing up clothes or the equipment in the music area and so forth. One obvious example was in the workshop area, equipped with an array of actual tools that children had direct access to (*see photo overleaf*). According to the staff in this setting, the children had been exposed to such tools

throughout early childhood and had experienced the correct ways to utilise the equipment. Therefore, they were recognised as competent individuals, trusted to use the tools appropriately.

Emphasis on leisure time

The emphasis of these facilities was leisure time rather than an extension of the school day. The focus was on a natural childhood, a stimulating home-like environment (as physically evidenced by the comfortable sofas indoors – *see photo below*).

They also referred to the establishments as ‘the house’

and outdoors, activities such as climbing trees, building a tree house and looking after



Photo 1 Workshop-Establishment A



Photo 2. Leisure Time facility!

pets (rabbits in this instance) were obvious traditional home-like features. When queried about safety concerns, the staff in the setting explained that activities such as building tree houses were a part of normal childhood experiences and that these were ideal opportunities for children to work together and problem-solve.

Staff

An integral aspect of after school/leisure time provision in the Danish system is the high level of training and qualifications of the staff in the settings. In establishment B for example, a significant number of staff (six out of the eleven staff in the setting) were qualified social pedagogues that had trained for three and a half years. Their training, which encompasses both a theoretical focus and practicum, equips the staff to be facilitators in the setting working with children, parents and teachers in the local schools. Mac Naughton *et al.*, (2007:161) argue that citizenship can be advanced for all when staff become ‘equitable collaborators’ ‘instead of being experts acting on behalf of children’. A significant proportion of their time involved preparatory work, including a forum in the mornings to discuss the children for example, issues around peer groupings may be shared

and the adults may decide together how best to facilitate socialisation among the children. Based on the accounts of the staff in the settings, it would appear that there are strong relationships with parents, most notably of those with children under ten years of age. Active involvement is required of parents, particularly for example, in issues relating to behaviour management and parents endorse elements of ‘risky play’ such as climbing trees and working with tools.

Weaknesses

From the observations and stakeholder interviews, it would appear that there is a general lack of support for inclusive education in practice. For example, in the area of support for children with special educational needs, two support staff work for only eight hours per week each. In relation to general policy of inclusion, according to the OECD (2006 p.312), ‘mainstreaming is the general objective but there is also a wide variety of specialised institutional settings’.

The level of supervision of children is something that could be viewed as a potential weakness. It would appear that most notably from ten years of age, the children were given tremendous levels of freedom and in one of the settings visited, the attendance (or non-attendance) of the older children was not monitored. Mayall (2002) in her comparative study of Finnish and British children reported similar findings. In the settings observed, it would also appear that participation of parents of children over ten years of age is not viewed as necessary.

In terms of health and safety, based on our current regulated preschool system, the issues around the lack of safety measures, and the ‘laissez-faire approach’ adopted by staff could be viewed as a weakness by some.

Undoubtedly, some Irish practitioners, parents, policy makers and researchers may shudder at the sight of the equipped tool workshop or the encouragement of risky play, climbing trees or the level of freedom given to the children. It is fundamental however, that we recognise that our perceptions of strengths and weaknesses are based on our own experiences, historically and in a contemporary socio-cultural frame. When asked about fears of litigation, the Danish staff smiled and said *“this is not America, nobody sues here and besides, the parents know what the children do here, if they fall, this is a part of*

childhood". Of note, statistically, Danish children are less likely to die from non-intentional injuries (accidents) than Irish children (UNICEF, 2001).

Opportunities

There is an opportunity for the Danes to further share their knowledge and ways of working with young children in after school/leisure time provision. In the Irish context, after school provision is a rapidly expanding area and can benefit from the insights of professionals in other countries. The OECD (2006) has highlighted the need for countries to share findings of qualitative research on pedagogical practice at a wider level. The merits of sharing innovative pedagogical practice within an international community are obvious and this is something that we at Mary Immaculate College are particularly interested in exploring further.

Quantitative research is currently underway such as the national longitudinal study-Danish National Birth Cohort (based on babies born in 1995). Under the auspices of the Danish National Institute of Social Research, some interesting working papers have been produced to date based on these young children. Also, the Copenhagen County Child Cohort is exploring issues around child health and well-being with a focus on child mental health. BUPL (Borne og Ungdomspædagogisk Landsforbund- translated as The National Federation of Early Childhood Teachers and Youth Educators) is also very proactive in providing research and discussion papers on key areas such as children's competencies. From a global perspective, it is important that practitioners, academics and researchers from every country engage in the sharing of knowledge on innovative practice with children.

Threats

Throughout the discussions with stakeholders and practitioners, it was evident that the tide may be turning slightly in Denmark. To date, emphasis has been placed on the importance of socialisation of the child; the holistic development of the child has been at the core of service provision, particularly for younger children. However, each of the stakeholders all referred to tensions surrounding a shift in philosophy/ideology around the education of young children. The current practice appears to be standing in the shadow of international comparative work such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment, conducted by the OECD) which primarily involves the

measurement of cognitive abilities (literacy skills, mathematical and scientific skills). It would appear that the fear at grass roots level in Copenhagen is that the policy of learning in an informal manner may be replaced by more of an emphasis on academia, with a focus on formalised learning and that the 'leisure time' may be replaced by an 'after school-school' focus. At present, areas like homework can be done in quiet rooms in the after school/leisure time facility but, it appears that this work is not monitored by the staff in the setting to any great extent and the onus is not on them to ensure that the children complete their homework. Although, some school settings have homework clubs where children can remain at the school and have an opportunity to work on their homework.

The international comparative approach or 'league' can ironically threaten the countries involved and may not be in the best interests of the child. For example, the negative associations with the PISA studies were very evident in the conversations with all of the stakeholders and tensions have been flagged at OECD level:

The PISA 2000 results shook the belief of Danes that theirs was the best education system in the world. Though spending on education in Denmark is high compared to OECD countries, the PISA confirmed that the quality and equity of outcomes are only average. (OECD, 2004)

Bertram and Pascal (2002) highlight the 'enormous scope for demotivation' that involvement with such comparative work can bring, 'given that only one country can 'win''.

Exploring long-term implications

These observations interested me greatly; the sense of active participation, the acknowledgement of the importance of socialisation of young children and the concept of citizenship appeared to be very positive measures. I was interested to see if there were long-term positive consequences although as noted, the benefits did not seem clearly evident in cognitive test scores of older children. I was interested in the broader picture and therefore looked to the comparable data that was available for adolescents that went beyond cognitive testing.

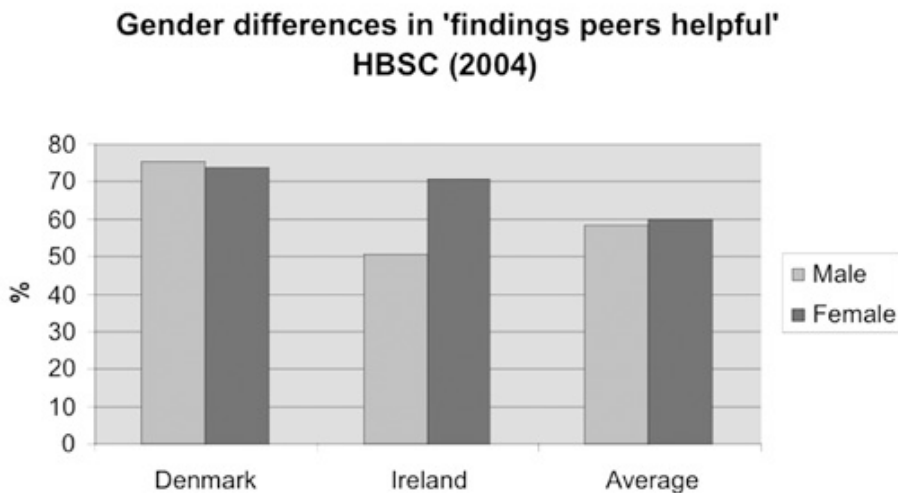
Subjective well-being

The international Health Behaviour in School age Children (HBSC) data seemed highly

appropriate for this purpose. This cross-national research considers health in a broad sense encompassing physical, social and emotional well-being. The most recent comparable data dates from 2002 and is based on responses from adolescents in 35 countries to a broad range of indicators of health and well-being (Currie *et al.*, 2004).

Looking at the data on adolescents, it appears that Denmark scores significantly higher than Ireland in some categories, such as adolescents reporting 'high life satisfaction' (81% vs 70%) and positive peer support (60% vs 53%). Danish children aged 11 are significantly more likely to report liking school a lot (33.7% compared to 25.4% of Irish children) [of note, the average rate is 34%, so Irish children fall significantly below the average]. If we examine the gender differences in these rates, there is a striking pattern with Irish males (aged 11) as only 20% reported liking school a lot compared to 31% of Danish boys (30% is the average rate). Gender differences are also evident in reports by 15 year olds on whether they find their peers helpful and this data is summarised in Figure 1. Significantly however, Irish children aged 11 are less likely to be bullied than their Danish counterparts (30% compared to 34.5%). There are other indicators such as finding it 'easy to talk to their fathers' where no major differences are evident.

Figure 1



Youth Suicide rates

In relation to mental health, in particular, if we take a crude measure such as youth suicide rates, Wasserman, Cheng and Jiang (2005) reported global suicide rates obtained from the WHO (World Health Organisation) Mortality Database for persons aged 15-19.

Based on data from 2000, the Irish rate was 12.3 per 100,000 and the Danish rate (based on data from 1999) was significantly lower at 4.9 per 100,000. The mean suicide rate for the 90 countries included in the analysis was 7.4 per 100,000. The stark difference in figures is immediately striking. Significant gender differences are also apparent. The rate for young Irish males was 19.8 per 100,000 compared to 9 per 100,000 in Denmark (of note, the average male rate is 10.5 per 100,000).

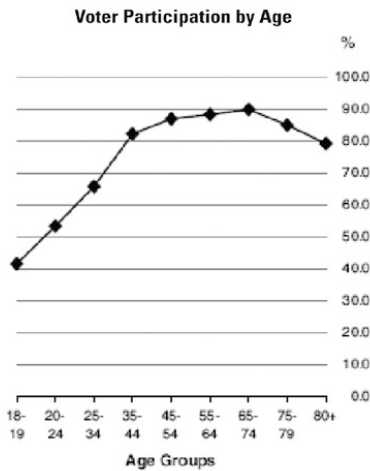
Youth suicide is undoubtedly a complex, multifaceted problem and the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that there are direct correlations between after school provision and suicide. Nonetheless, the high youth suicide rate in Ireland, particularly in males, is not something that we can ignore but something that as a society, we need to reflect deeply on.

Voter turnout

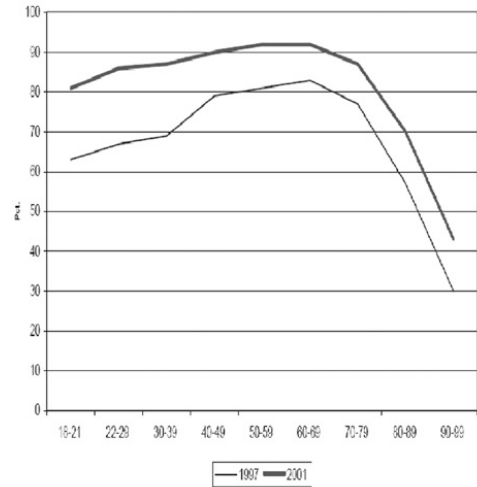
The wider impact of this sense of civic duty emphasised in Denmark also merited further investigation. When this paper was presented at the OMEP conference in April 2007, the Irish General Election was forthcoming and so ‘voter turnout’ seemed a pertinent measure of civic responsibility. If we look at voter turnout by age in the previous General Election in Ireland, (2002 based on data collected from the Quarterly Household Survey Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2003), **figure 3** highlights an obvious curve suggesting that voter turnout increases significantly by age. If we look at voter participation by age in Aarhus, (a region in Denmark) for 2001, (Elklit, 2005) the direct opposite relationship is evident. In a democratic society, proportion of voter turnout is a powerful statement on the sense of civic duty and participation. It would appear that young Danish citizens are significantly more involved than their Irish counterparts are. According to the CSO (2003) figures, when questioned why they did not vote, the main responses were ‘not interested’ (21%) or ‘not registered’ (23%) (which may also be interpreted as voter apathy). Although the comparison is not wholly scientific (and issues around methods of data collection, different data sources and population sizes must be acknowledged) nonetheless, the overarching message is striking. There appears to be a stark contrast in youth (or first time) voter apathy from Ireland compared to Denmark.

There are a whole range of different factors associated with complex issues such as mental health, suicide rates and voter participation. There are also fundamental issues surrounding the comparability of data obtained from different sources and the author is

Figure 2



Ireland (CSO, 2007)



Aarhus, Denmark (Elkit et al 2005)

fully aware of these. The purpose of this paper therefore is not an in-depth discussion on these matters per se, but the aim is merely to draw hypothetical inferences from various data sources, raising points to spark future discussion and debate. There may be possible correlations between adult attitudes towards active participation in childhood and future well-being and engagement in society. The revival of child participation discourse has been noted by Jans (2004, 27-43). Historically, citizenship was viewed as the final destination of childhood however; Jans argues that citizenship should be viewed as a learning process, dynamic and continuous in itself rather than an end product of ‘future citizenship’ or a predefined learning objective. Mac Naughton *et al.*, (2007) highlight that if we see children as active participants, we are advancing citizenship and so participation in civic life grows. They refer to the emergence of a new model that views young children ‘as ‘social actors’ who can shape their identities, who can create and communicate valid views about the social world and who have the right to participate in it, acting with adults to develop new policies and practices’ (*ibid* p.164). In the Irish context, at a policy level, the National Children’s Strategy, *Our Children-Their Lives* (2000) encourages active participation as does *Stolta- The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006). Limerick City Childcare Committee in conjunction with Mary Immaculate College have also recently produced a curriculum framework for after school programmes entitled *Voice and Choice*. The challenge however, is to ensure that policy initiatives permeate into practice.

Conclusions

Based on the observations in after school/leisure time facilities in Copenhagen, it would appear that meeting the needs of the individual child from a holistic perspective is central. This is facilitated through cooperation and coordination of staff working together and with parents, with the common goal of promoting socialisation and instilling a sense of participation and autonomy to encourage active citizenship in their society. There also appears to be a sense of trust and respect for the children, they are treated as capable and important citizens with a high level of responsibility both for themselves, for their curriculum and their environment.

There are a growing number of children attending after school facilities in this country. However, regulation, staffing and curriculum are areas that need further consideration to facilitate participation and ensure that the holistic needs of children are addressed (Moloney, Sturley and Kane, 2008). Looking to other countries to inform policy and practice can 'provide a lens through which to view our own country' (Moss *et al.*, 2003 p.6) however, the limitations of comparative work must also be recognised. Societal and contextual influences pertinent to specific countries and the very understanding of children, the family and the concept of childhood should also be acknowledged.

Nevertheless, there are key aspects to draw from this experience. Within an Irish context, there is a need to reflect on and reconceptualise our attitudes towards young children and to explore apathy and levels of (dis)content in Irish youths (particularly in males). As a society, we must recognise the importance that experiences in childhood have for learning, participating, social, emotional and physical well-being in later life.

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