School-Age Care and After-School Programs

Developing a responsive curriculum — Revisited 25 years later

by Rich Scofield

In 1979 and 1980 Child Care Information Exchange *ran a series of five articles about what was then called school-age day care: "Getting It Off the Ground," "Designing an Effective Structure," "Developing a Responsive Curriculum," "Selecting and Motivating Staff," and "Managing the Money." These articles from 25 years ago captured the essence of school-age child care then. As a child development specialist I believe that while "the times" may change, developmental stages, needs, and characteristics do not. In this article I revisit one of those articles — "School-Age Day Care: Developing a Responsive Curriculum" and focus on what is the same and what has changed.*

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Right in step with today's trends, Exchange's content teaser on the cover in 1979 used the term "after school." This past February the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA — founded in 1987) announced changing its name to the National AfterSchool Association (NAA) based on the fact that the organization was national, it was about after-school programs which has become the term the public recognizes, and it was an association.

Grammatically and culturally the article has been modernized. Present verb tenses have been changed to past to indicate a perspective of reflection on the period at the end of the 1970s. Outdated terms particularly "day care" and "school age day care" have been changed. It should be remembered that the school-age care of the 1960s and 1970s was focused on the elementary child grades K-6 with most of the children K-3.

Older children, that is, upper elementary ages did not attend "child care" programs with the same frequency as today. There are two possible reasons for the increase in numbers of this age group in the 1990s. The first was brought to my attention by center directors. They said parents had grown accustomed to having care available and were expecting it would continue as their children grew older. Their children had been in after-school care since kindergarten. "Latchkey children" and after-school programs had become mainstream concepts in the media. The second reason may be that with more programs actually located in the elementary schools, the stigma for the school-agers of going to a "preschool" center was lifted. Also many child care centers had changed the name of their after-school program for similar reasons. After all, what self-respecting fourth grader wants to jump up when the school PA system announces, "All the Little Ducklings, your van is here for the Little Ducklings Child Care Center."

Programs that functioned as accountable care for seventh- and eighth-graders were almost non-existent back then. That changed dramatically a couple years ago with the infusion of one billion in federal dollars (yes, that is a one and nine zeros) for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) grants program. A major portion of these new dollars were targeted for middle-school, after-school programs.

School-age care: Developing a responsive curriculum

Her daughter was a school-age care dropout, and she explained why: "She was bored — it was nothing more than a warmed over preschool program." Unfortunately, this complaint [in 1979 was] not an uncommon one, especially for newly organized school-age programs. Since at the time the preponderance of the nation's child care experience was in the preschool arena, practices and models from preschool programs were often utilized in organizing school-age programs. Yet the needs and interests of school-age and preschool children were widely divergent. To aid school-age care planners, this article aimed to outline the development needs of school-age children and identify the central features of responsive school-age care and after-school program curricula.

Specific needs of school-agers

Erik Erikson has described the school-age years as the period of "industry versus inferiority." During this period the child is attacking three developmental tasks:

■ **Acquiring a sense of industry.** The child

seeks to " . . . become an eager and absorbed unit of a productive situation. To bring a productive situation to completion is an aim which gradually supercedes the whims and wishes of play" (Erikson). The school-age child is concerned with producing things. Even games are considered to be serious business. The child is less interested in imaginative free play and more likely to gravitate toward more structured games where she can learn and follow the rules. The school-age child, therefore, needs opportunities to experience this sense of industry, as well as to learn the rules of the game as they apply to many aspects of her life.

■ **Developing a sense of competence.** Flowing from the urge to be productive is the urge to master — to use one's skills in controlling one's environment. School-age children become concerned with developing their competence at both physical and intellectual levels. They need to have a wide variety of opportunities to develop a full range of competencies.

■ **Fending off a sense of inferiority.** The child's concern with mastery and accomplishment brings with it a concern about how he compares with other people. "The child's danger, at this stage, lies in a sense of inadequacy and inferiority" (Erikson). To allay the fear, a child needs to experience success that he recognizes and that is recognized by others.

The school-age child becomes aware that he will not always live within the family, but that he is not ready to live in the adult world. As a result — "The child's peer group, the 'gang,' is most important to him at this time; and he spends as much time as possible with his peers" (Bergstrom).

In summary, the school-age child wants to make a place for himself among those of his own age . . . . He wants to run the fastest, jump the farthest, be the strongest, tell the funniest jokes, be the best at whatever he's good at and not bad at anything. He learns by doing, loves to experiment, wants to try everything within his grasp" (Core).

While the article referred to the pressure 25 years ago on school-agers to master skills and to fend off inferiority, we could not imagine back then today's pressures on school-agers. We could not envision an academic climate that now suggests increasing teacher pay according to increases in class scores on achievement tests. Equality for girls and women in school sports was just beginning. The pressure to start learning a sport by first or second grade or be left behind had not yet taken root. (Scofield, 2004)

Special problems of school-agers

If the developmental needs of school-agers are different than those of preschoolers, their problems are doubly so. School-age care workers must be prepared to deal with potentially serious social and emotional problems.

■ **Alcohol and drug use**. Studies [in the late 1970s] showed that children were starting to experiment with alcohol consumption and drug use as early as age nine (Bergstrom).

■ **Obesity.** A number of factors including food availability, family eating habits, and personality characteristics were contributing to the increasing occurrence of obesity among school-age children [in the late 1970s] (Bergstrom).

■ **Learning problems.** Because of their need to display competence and their fear of inferiority, school-age children [of that time period] were commonly bothered by learning problems (Cohen).

■ **Developmental problems.** Children at this age may display for the first time serious developmental problems. Most common among these are abnormally hyperactive behavior, destructive behavior, and timid behavior (Cohen).

While the "problems" above referred to the 1970s, they could be written in present tense about today's issues. Absent back then for the after-school program staff were the concerns about "missing children" and sexual abuse potentially occurring both at home and at the program. While there was concern for childhood obesity, it had not yet been declared an epidemic. Providers were not put in the position of being pressured to help children academically and also to keep them physically active to prevent obesity. "Hyperactivity" and attention problems were not yet affecting a significant portion of elementary-age children. Prevention of transference of "bodily fluids" was unknown to child care workers in the pre-HIV/AIDS era. (Scofield, 2004)

The responsive curriculum

Based on the needs and problems of school-age children described above, as well as on the findings of several surveys of existing school-age programs — Prescott, Bergstrom, and Poe — the following key characteristics of responsive school-age curricula were identified:

■ **Providing opportunities for initiative.** Responding to children's sense of industry at this age level, centers should provide children with opportunities to engage in work, especially work which is needed or is self-chosen (Prescott). Examples of the kinds of work which children have accomplished in child care settings include caring for animals, helping buy groceries, painting furniture, helping care for younger children, and constructing a clubhouse. Some programs find that children value the opportunity to make money by delivering newspapers and mowing lawns.

Since school-agers have even fewer opportunities to purposefully be engaged in the neighborhood or community at-large due to issues around their personal safety, it is even more important for programs today to provide school-agers with opportunities for real work with real tools (Scofield, 2004).

■ **Supporting children's sense of competence.** Much of the work children engage in will support their sense of competence. In addition, many other opportunities to display mastery should be presented, such as vigorous games, language play, reading, math games, painting, scientific puzzles and experiments, and crafts.

In making these opportunities available, care should be taken to select activities that are within the children's skill range. Children's feeling of inadequacy may be supported if they too often experience failure in their efforts.

■ **Support children's peer association.** "Day care for school-age children must support each child's need for close relations with children his own age . . . . " This is especially important since schools " . . . make little special provision for this kind of peer group activity with no adult around" (Cohen). Children at this age are especially eager to participate in clubs. Cognizant of this fact, many programs call their groups clubs, set up special "clubhouses," and in some cases even provide partial uniforms or insignia. Loma Alta Preschool in San Diego makes the school-age children fully responsible for arranging, painting, sweeping, and cleaning their clubhouse room. One potential danger with clubs can occur when clubs degenerate into cliques which exclude certain children.

■ **Involving adults appropriately.** Elizabeth Prescott identified three characteristics of effective adult caregivers: 1) They have know-how, so they can "help children learn skills, understand how social systems work, and develop satisfying arenas of initiative where industry and competence are required to bring plans to fruition" (Prescott); 2) They are actively involved in the activities of the children. "They move in and out of children's activities giving support, encouragement, instruction; challenging children to move on to the next step" (Core); and 3) They act as role models, helping children to develop healthy attitudes toward eating, drinking, working, and inter-relating with others.

■ **Complementing the schools.** Effective school-age programs must take into account children's experiences during the day in school. Since "academic skills dominate the child's school day, they should not be the focus of a day care program" (Poe). Most child care programs make space, time, and assistance available for children who want to do homework, but most do not insist or even encourage children to do it. When schools pay little attention to industry, social interaction, and motor skills, these should receive heavy emphasis in the school-age program. Since schools do not teach children to use their leisure time in creative, self-fulfilling ways, school-age programs should do so (Poe).

■ **Emphasizing recreational activities appropriately.** "Team sports, games, and individual activities which develop strength and coordination are an important component of a school-age program. They should not, however, dominate. Staff should base their teaching of these skills on a conscious and clearly expressed awareness of how physical activities relate to a center's overall goals for human development. These activities, for example, could be used as vehicles for teaching cooperation, self-confidence, and strategizing skills . . . . " (Poe).

■ **Involving children in the community**. "Much school-age child care is provided to keep children from the community. They are protected while in care momentarily from the dangers of unsupervised exploration of a community which is not judged safe or suitable. But in the process they are often cut off from observing or contacting life as it unfolds in the community . . . . There is an intimacy of knowledge that comes from traversing an area by foot, day after day . . . . There is also a growing sense of competence and responsibility which comes with the freedom to explore and map, in one's mind, a neighborhood" (Prescott).

Many programs do get children out into the community with frequent field trips. Some take children to typical school trip locations such as playgrounds, parks, and other recreational areas. Others take children to "real life" settings such as factories, offices, stores, and hospitals.

In a few programs children are allowed to go out into the community on their own after "checking in" with the program. In some cases they go to special activities in other locations, such as clubs, classes, recreational sessions, or athletic events. In other cases they are allowed to participate in jobs such as mowing lawns and delivering papers. In general the more freedom given to children to explore the community, the more adults, especially insurance agents, become nervous.
As the article implied even back then the threat of lawsuits curtailed many of the opportunities school-agers could have (Scofield, 2004).

The highest quality program

The Pacific Oaks study of 1974 of school-agers in group (center) care assessed what constitutes a quality program for school-age children. They concluded that for center care "Complex Activity Programs" which matched the following description best met the developmental needs of school-age children:

"This program provides non-nursery school activities which require initiative and encourage continuity. These activities are characterized by high adult involvement and know-how, good space, and ample equipment and supplies. Work activities are also a part of

these programs. The program, with the help of authoritative adult support, appears to develop a social system among children with responsibilities, obligations, and a sense of belonging" (Prescott).

The overall characteristics of responsive school-age care curricula were best summarized by Dr. Bruce Gardner:

"Pre-adolescent children need much more than mere supervision. They need challenge, stimulation, resource material, ideas, people around them who know how to listen, and adults with whom to identify. They have talents and skills to develop, energy to put to use, and huge reservoirs of creativity which need tapping" (Bergstrom).

These descriptions from the 1970s of quality programs parallel the findings of various studies and work done over the past 25 years on programs for children and youth. In fact, the concept of school-agers developing their own social system parallels recent discussions of "self-organization" as related to chaos theory and complexity theory. And that brings us back to 1979 when Meg Barden Cline summarized school-age care by saying, "Given a safe, not too sterile environment and an adult nearby, most school-agers spontaneously plan a good after-school program" (Scofield, 2004).

Resources from 1979

Bergstrom, J., & Dreher, D. (1976). "The Evaluation of Existing Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements — Day Care for the School-age Child." Washington, DC: USDHEW.

Cohen, D. J., et al. (1978). *Day Care: Serving School-age Children*. Washington, DC: USDHEW.

Core, M. (December, 1978). "When School's Out and Nobody's Home." *The Record*. (*The Record* is a newsletter of Tennessee Department of Human Services.)

Poe, C. (1978). *Recommended Guidelines for After School Day Care*. New Jersey: Bureau of Research, Department of Human Services, Division of Youth and Family Services.

Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and Society* (2nd Edition). New York: VIPW Norton and Company.

Prescott, E., & Milich, C. (1974). *School's Out: Group Day Care for the School-age Child*. Pasadena, CA: Pacific Oaks Bookstore.

Helpful Resources 2004

Bender, J., et al. (2000). *Half a Childhood: Quality Programs for Out-of-School Hours, 2nd Edition, Completely Revised*. Nashville, TN: School-Age NOTES, Inc.

National School-Age Care Alliance. (1998). *The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care*. Boston, MA: National School-Age Care Alliance.

www.AfterSchoolCatalog.com — web site for School-Age NOTES newsletter and resources.

www.NIOST.org — web site of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Wellesley, MA.

www.gse.uci.edu/casp — This is an extensive online center of the Collaborative After-School Project of the California Department of Education and the University of California at Irvine.