

When children speak up: their ideas about quality in leisure time services

Approximately 60% of all Flemish children between 2^{1/2} and 12 years old attend an out of school care service at least once a week. These services come in many different shapes and forms: playgrounds ('speelpleinen') organised by the city, out of school care centers established by private or subsidised ngo's (IBO), after school activities arranged by the school itself, and so on. These services offer recreation, play and leisure-based programs and they operate before and after school hours and during the holidays.

– BY: BRECHT PELEMAN –

No real quality without participation

In the light of changing regulations on the organization of out of school care in Flanders, a recent study conducted by VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years) and the University of Ghent, explored children's experiences with different types of out of school care services¹. In this research we wanted to discover what children themselves really think about these services, how they experience out of school care, what they like and dislike, what they expect of their teachers / educators / monitors and what they consider 'quality'. With the results, Child and Family wants to inform and guide policymakers in the development of new regulations, starting from the actual needs and experiences of the children who attend those services.

When thinking about quality of services, we have to acknowledge that 'quality' itself can never be a single feature of a center. Quality gets shaped and grows in the relationship between the service and the children and families that participate. This implies that quality can never be investigated in a purely introspective way and that research about quality is only significant when it provides insight in the way a service intervenes in the social environment of the children and their families.

Understanding this is vital in shaping a democratic society that allows everybody to participate. In this case, democratic participation means looking for ways in which parents and children can be involved in all decisions affecting their lives. Over the last years, there is an increasing tendency in involving the voices of children in research and policymaking. Not in the least this increasing attention is triggered by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."



Moreover, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasised in General Comment n°7 that "article 12 applies both to younger and to older children" and that "*as holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views*".

Children are part of the current society. They are the experts of their own lives and should be considered and heard as social actors who participate in the democratic life of today. It is an important criterion and right to citizenship².

For research in the field of childcare and out of school care, this has several implications. It means that children cannot be considered as passive 'research-objects' about which adult experts can formulate all kinds of opinions and advice. Children are competent individuals themselves who give meaning to their life and who have a voice that should be heard. To really understand their social environment, researchers should take into account all the possible meanings that children ascribe to their lives, to the places where they stay and to the people they meet.

A qualitative study with children as agents

And what better way is there than to ask it the children themselves? In the study, two researchers talked to 76 children aged 4 – 11 from 12 different out of school care services about the way they spend their time in the centers, who they meet there, what they like and dislike and what is crucial for them to have a 'nice time' in the center. A triangulation of methods such as interviews, drawings and photographic tours guided by the children, was used to support the children in expressing their experiences, opinions and feelings in 'multiple languages'. The most important conclusions of these qualitative conversations with the children were put together in a survey that was filled out by 438 children aged 7 – 12 from 24 different out of school care services in Flanders and analysed in a quantitative way. The goal here was to check if the findings could be validated within a broader group of children and whether or not there would be differences between the children. The results of the survey shed a light on those expectations and experiences that influence children's appreciation of and wellbeing in their out of school care center.

Friendship and belonging as basic needs

For children, being together with friends is the most important ingredient to make the organised after school time meaningful and qualitative. Especially the oldest children (aged 10-12) definitely want to be together with children of their own age. Teenagers in out of school care centers are the oldest children of the group and in most cases there are only but a few of them. They say that frequently, more attention is given to the younger children of the group, which often leaves them bored and alone in the center. An important finding is that the teenagers from the study sample have fewer positive experiences than the other children: there are fewer things for them to do and the educators pay less positive attention to them, they even have the feeling that they are more likely to be shouted at.

Children love to have the feeling of belonging somewhere and to have a space that they feel is 'just for them' where they can do something that is 'just for them'. In some centers, children stated that separate 'teen places' (tieneruimte) can have a special function in fostering and supporting friendships. A quote by a ten-year-old girl illustrates this clearly:

My friend and I were the first ones to enter the new teen corner. And from that point on, we really were best friends. (...) Yeah. And now, every time she is here, we go together to the teen corner.

Making choices in an organised setting

In the out of school care centers, children want to have a clear choice about how they arrange their leisure time. They prefer to have free play, both inside and outside, but they also appreciate it when there is a variation with guided activities organised by educators. Nevertheless, an important condition is the freedom of choice about whether or not they participate with the activity. Freedom of choice means having decent alternatives if they choose not to engage. Both in free play and organised activities, children expect it to relate to their interests. They love appropriate challenges that broaden their playing experiences.

A range of activities in the out of school care center that triggers them and that they don't find anywhere else, is highly appreciated. In this way, the center can acquire a unique meaning. For some children it is the place par excellence where they can play outside, as some don't have outside space at home, or have so many activities during the week (music lesson, dance course, homework classes, sports training...) that they have no time left to freely play outside. Sometimes their free time is already fully booked with obligations. For other children the out of school care center broadens their social environment by going to a forest, a park or a pool. The children talked with great enthusiasm about activities



that stimulated them to play with 'unusual' or natural play materials that provided them with new and challenging opportunities to start exploring new sensations together with other children.

This picture (bottom page) was taken by a five-year-old boy when asked about his favorite outside spot of the center. The 'construction site' is a demarcated area on the playground where children can do hammering and carpentry and build different types of wooden constructions together with the educators. It is something the boy really loves and he can only do it in that out of school provision.

The impact of space

Considering the interior of the out of school care centers, children find it very important to have different rooms that are freely accessible and that allow them to play different things. Besides that, children want to have resting places in the center. A quarter of all the children in the research state that there are no opportunities for them to rest or just relax and that it is hardly ever quiet and peaceful inside the center. Again, for the teenagers, these resting places where they can 'hang out' with their peers establish a more welcoming climate for them.

Do you have moments that you would want to be on your own in the centre? -Yes, when I had a quarrel; then I go sit in a corner. Is there a corner like that? -Yes, in the storage room. Because everyone just leaves me alone there. Does anyone know that you go there? -No. And what do you do there? -I just sit there to cool off, that's all. (girl, 10y)

How do children and educators relate?

Children also talked about what they considered essential in the role of the educators. They highlight that the adults in the center have two major roles: care and play. The care function is their basic role. On a minimal level, children expect their educators to be present and give attention to all children. In most of the centers, this basic level of care is offered. On the other hand, they report that more 'specialised' or higher levels of care - such as individualisation, comforting them when they are sad and dealing with conflict situations in a fair way - are less present, while these levels of care are even more important for the wellbeing of the children.

The play function is even more absent. Half of the children say that the educators sometimes play together with the children when asked and only one third of the children experienced that an educator sometimes plays alone with an individual child. When asked what the educators do most of the time, one fourth of the children state 'they shout hard'. Again, it is noteworthy that the oldest children (11 and 12 years old) encounter the least positive experiences with both the play and care function of the educators.

And now... ?

When organizing out of school care for children, it is important to take into account their voices. In fact, starting from their actual experiences, desires and thoughts, the out of school care provision can become a fully fledged play and learning environment that provides children with the opportunity to meet other children in their leisure time. If we want children to experience things that broaden their social



environment, we have to look for what children themselves find meaningful, what challenges them and what inspires them. It is precisely these things that we have to focus on when arranging activities, tailored to the children's needs and looking for the right balance between offering them organised activities and freedom for them to shape their own leisure time. We have to facilitate and support them in making choices and stimulate them to experience new things which will enrich their leisure time after school hours.

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Check out the dvd 'Knopjesman' (Buttonman) available in Dutch, English, French and German.

For a trailer, watch <https://vimeo.com/55445064>
More info on <http://www.vbjk.be/en/node/4549>

References

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- 2 MOSS, P. (2007). BRINGING POLITICS INTO THE NURSERY. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS A DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE. WORKING PAPER 43. BERNARD VAN LEER FOUNDATION. DEN HAAG.