

After-School Centres for 6–9 Year Olds in Reykjavik, Iceland

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Summary

This article discusses a) the institutional development of out-of-school services for school-aged children in Reykjavik, Iceland and b) provides some insight into how the children themselves experience the difference between after-school and school. The status of out of-school programs in the school system is weak and receives scarce attention from researchers and policy makers. In Iceland, there is no clear framework for the service and lack of policy concerning quality and control of the service. Together school and after-school centre frame children's institutional lives in their first years in elementary school. For many children, participation in after-school centre is a positive experience which provides opportunity to play and to be with friends. Children seldom get the chance to decide what they do in school. I argue that after-school programs should be considered an integral part of the educational system and thus, further development of the professional underpinnings of such services are necessary.

Introduction

Provision of out-of-school care for young school children is an important part of most European child care policies, in particular in the Nordic Countries, and is the fastest growing day care service in Europe (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) 2006). In Iceland, school attendance is obligatory for 6–15 year old children 180 days a year and the normal school day for 1st–4th graders is approximately five to six hours ending around 2pm. Workforce participation of Icelandic women is one of the highest in Europe: in 2009 84.3% of the women were employed as were 88.3% of the men (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2010) and there has been a

steady increase in the need for day care for school-aged children. The majority of the communities in Iceland offer after-school care in some form for young school children even though it is not legally required. In Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, after-school centres are a part of the available service offering day care for 1st to 4th graders from approximately 2 pm to 5 pm. In addition, the after-school centres in Reykjavik stay open 9am-5pm on school holidays and during the summer. Although some children spend many hours in the after-school centres in Reykjavik, these institutions have received remarkably little attention from both the political and academic communities in Iceland and have an unclear status in the welfare state. Further research is much needed of Iceland's after-school centres so that we may better understand their current status and the part they play in the education of children.

Aim of this research

In my ongoing doctoral project about the after-school centres in Reykjavik, my aim is to understand the specific role of this institution from the perspectives of different stakeholders: children, parents, recreation personnel and teachers. This article deals with two questions: a) What is the status of after-school centres in the overall educational system in Iceland?; b) how do the children themselves experience the difference between school and after-school centre?

Method

I use qualitative research methods to gain information about the status of after-school centres in the school system and on the perspectives of different stakeholders. Furthermore, I rely on public documents and debate to shed light on the discourse about after-school centres in the community. I focus on the management of after-school centres in Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, where the majority of the population lives. Thus, I analyse public documents about the after-school centres from the Sports and Recreation council of Reykjavik (SRC) which manages this service today. In order to shed light on activities in the after-school centre from the children's point of view, I followed two groups of children in two after-school cen-

tres over the period of two school years. I conducted formal and informal interviews and observed the daily activities of children in these two after-school centres. In order to secure the privacy of the participants in the research I do not use real names of institutions or persons. Although it is not possible to generalize results from these two cases to every after-school centre in Reykjavik, I hope that the issues raised may help others to investigate the status of the after-school services in Iceland.

Related research

Research on after-school centres or out-of-school care is scarce, not only in Iceland but generally. This section gives a brief summary of some of the issues raised in previous research on the institutional development of out-of-school care and on the perspectives of children, which relate to my current research into the status of after-school centres in Reykjavik.

The institutional development of out-of-school care

Out-of-school care is the fastest growing day care service in Europe (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) 2007) which can be traced back firstly to increased employment of mothers and secondly to social initiatives to ensure the safety and welfare of young school-children before and after school. Out-of-school programs take different forms within Western societies, the level of training and job qualification varies and the job titles for individuals who work in after-school centres are different, such as childminder or after-school teacher (EFILWC 2006). Research indicates that out-of-school care for school children is organized in various forms and may or may not be part of the school system (Capace, Schneider-Muñoz & Politz 2007, EFILWC 2006, Petrie, Meijvogel & Enders-Drägässer 1991).

Research and policy on after-school programs has not correlated with the increase of different forms of out-of-school programs for school-aged children. In the last decade of the 20th century *The Women's Studies International Forum* published a special issue on school-aged child care (Petrie, Meijvogel & Enders-Drägässer 1991) which provided an overview of different policies and programs in Northern Europe at that time. It is one of the very few sources I have found on the international development of after-school programs which provides insight into this under-researched service being provided for children and families in most European societies.

As Petrie (1991) points out the invisibility of school-age child care has something to do with the fact that child care traditionally belonged to the private sphere of homes, and as such is in no need of public scrutiny or formal contract. Today, however, it can be stated that out-of-school care is receiving more attention as policy developers acknowledge the need for shared standards and goals for these services (EFILWC 2006, 2007).

Still, it seems that both the care provided in after-school programs as well as the institutional development of this service generally are not as high-priority in society as for example day care for younger children or schools. A recent Australian study showed that out-of-school programs were in danger of being marginalized due to a lack of validity and collective identity (Cartmel 2007). In Australia, as in Iceland, the workforce in after-school care is usually un-qualified and under-paid, making it difficult to develop a sense of professionalism and a shared vision. This makes it hard for the after-school developers to argue for their cause and gain respect of their collaborators (Cartmel 2007). This marginalization of out-of-school programs seems to exist whether or not the service is managed by the schools or outside of the school system. The Nordic countries have often been looked upon as international leaders in providing official day care for children. In the Nordic countries after-school day care is a service provided by municipalities with state support and regulators (Johansson & Thorstenson-Ed 2001). In Denmark and Sweden, out-of-school care is already provided as a part of an extended school day. In Sweden for example, out-of-school care is considered an integral part of the compulsory school. Traditionally, after-school centres in Denmark used to operate outside the school and were referred to as *leisure centres* (Danish: “fritidshjem”); today, most of the centres are called *out-of-school centres* (Danish: “skolefritidsordning”) and are managed by the schools. Denmark and Sweden are the only countries in which a profession of recreation pedagogues, specially educated to work with children in after-school centres, has developed and recreation pedagogues work part of their workday in school.

Bringing out-of-school care under the professional management of schools is not without costs. Calander (2000) maintains that recreation pedagogues who work in collaboration with teachers in schools soon become “the teacher’s assistant” and Haglund (2004) who researched the work recreation pedagogues organize in schools came to the conclusion that school-directed practices seem to override the traditional goals of the recreation tradition. Instead of focusing on activities that serve the chil-

dren's self-confidence and social development, recreation personnel seem to be affected by the idea of what "one ought to do" in school (Haglund 2004: 233). The integration of out-of-school services into the school system and the collaboration between teachers and recreational pedagogues calls for new definitions of what schooling is all about.

There are many similarities between the Icelandic system of after-school care and the Norwegian model, where the service is most often provided without a qualified body of professionals. A national report from 2003 about Norwegian after-school centres (Norwegian: "skolefritidsordning") concluded that to enhance the quality of these centres five things need to be implemented (Kvello & Wendelborg 2003): a) increased cooperation between school and after-school centre, though in such a way that the school culture does not override the more socio-pedagogic work in the after-school; b) that at least 30% of the personnel should have a college education (Norwegian: "fagutdanning"); c) that different professionals should be hired, including pre-school teachers, social pedagogues and special teachers, to increase interdisciplinary work; d) the leader of the after-school centre should be a part of the school's administration team; and e) the personnel group needs to be better equipped to meet the needs of all children, including children with special needs. It would be of interest to know what the status of after-school care is today in Norway, as I could not find newer references.

The out-of-school program can be seen as an intermediate between school and home – within them one finds educational discourses related to homework and "educational activities", as well as domestic discourses, especially in the way recreation personnel often try to make the after-school centre a home-away-from-home (Smith & Barker 2002). It is far from clear what professional and institutional underpinnings such services should have. The marginalization of these institutions in the school system seems to indicate that the main aim of such service is to provide informal care and a safe place for school-aged children. The ambivalent role of out-of-school services in the society calls for further research and international collaboration in the area.

Children's views on participation in after-school centre

There is a strong tradition to look at the phenomenon such as the after-school centre from the perspective of politicians, administrators, principals, teachers or parents, i.e. only from the adult perspective. But perhaps the most interesting perspective is the one provided by the main users of

the service, namely the children. The perspectives of children are generally not incorporated either within practice or research within the compulsory school system (Christensen & James 2008, Einarsdóttir 2008, Thomsen & Gunter 2009). Although educational authorities in Reykjavik emphasize individualized and co-operative learning, research shows that the individual child seldom gets to take part in decision making or choose their collaborators (Einarsdóttir 2008). Through increased awareness of children's rights and the establishment of the sociology of children (see for example James & Prout 1990), researchers and practitioners increasingly seek to find ways to involve children in decisions on matters that affect them. Interestingly, the majority of research on after-school centres in the Nordic countries to date has been ethnographic research with children. It has revealed among other things how children talk about what they do in the after-school centre and how it relates to other parts of their lives (Hviid 1999, Johansson & Ljusberg 2004, Strandell 2008).

The children usually do not decide themselves whether they are in the after-school centre or not; it is the parents' decision. Some children, especially as they grow older, would prefer to go home after school even though they would have to spend some time alone before the parents come home. From the children's point of view there can also be positive sides to self-care, like being able to do what they want at home, get some private time after a busy school day etc. (Petrie et al. 2000). A recent study showed that many Finnish children liked going home alone, they had the home to themselves and many reported having friends, siblings or neighbours with whom they socialized (Strandell 2008). Thus, there is a positive and negative side to children's self care in after-school hours.

However, most children seem to enjoy taking part in after-school centre and for many children, it is a place to "make and meet friends" (Petrie et al. 2000: 115). According to Smith and Barker (2002), children in UK who attend after-school centres consider it a special kind of place, different from both school and home. Their study, involving 400 children from six counties in England and Wales, revealed that most children did not want school-like activities such as homework during their time in the centre, neither did they compare the centre to their home. In Sweden, Johansson and Ljusberg (2004) followed a group of 12 children (six boys and six girls) for a period of two years in their after-school centre and gathered data with interviews, participatory observation, video and log-books. They maintain that the after-school centre is a place of informal learning, of play

and interaction where the individual child has to make its own voice heard and to make sure he or she is allowed to participate in play.

There are suggestions that taking active part in after-school centres can be important for children who are struggling in school, such as children experiencing social problems or children with special needs (Hviid 1999, Højholt 2001, Raymond & Schough Larsen 2002). When studying the effect of longer school hours on children, Raymond and Schough Larsen (2002) found that children who have difficulty in managing the skills required by the school have a difficulty handling longer hours in school; those children often enjoy themselves and do well in the after-school centre. This is important because it is vital for children to be able to experience control and get rewarded for being who they are, therefore positive experience in the after-school setting can enhance self-confidence and help children do better in school (Højholt 2001).

Thus, it can be concluded that out-of-school programs play an increasing part in the lives of children today. Children have different experiences and views on the activities in the centres: while some children enjoy being in a place with many children, others might choose a more peaceful environment. Researchers seem to agree that the service of out-of-school day care centre is an essential part of the welfare state. There are however different ideas on the purpose of these centres whether they should contribute to education or simply be a place where children are kept safe while parents work.

History of after-school centres in Reykjavik

The development of after-school centres in Reykjavik shows that the need for day care emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as mothers increasingly became part of the general workforce. The service has been moved between organizational units within the municipality of Reykjavik and the historical background of the after-school centres can be described in three periods (Pálsdóttir 2009):

Table 1. Overview of the historical development of after-school centres in Reykjavik.

Period	Service provider	Daily administration	Facilities	Legal framework
1971–1992	National day care organization	Pre-school teachers	Outside of school, often in specialized buildings (like other day care centres)	Law on Day Care Institutions
1993–2002	The Educational Council	Teachers, then other non-teaching groups	Within school facilities (with exceptions)	None
2003–today	The Sports and Recreation Council	Recreation personnel	Within school facilities (with exceptions)	None

The first after-school centre in Reykjavik was founded in 1971 by a charity organization which by that time had already established playgrounds for young children and several day care institutions for preschoolers on the basis of an agreement with the municipality (Jónasson 2006). In many ways, the aims and structure of the service was best defined during this period. These first after-school centres belonged to the social welfare department and were defined as a part of the overall day care system for children. Therefore, regulations for after-school centres and other day care institutions for younger children were similar and fell under a single law on day care institutions. It was required that staff members should be educated as preschool-teachers, and the aims of these institutions, to create a healthy and nurturing environment for children, was made clear. Furthermore, in an attempt to guarantee child safety and an environment suited to the needs of the child, housing facility regulations and the ratio of staff to children were adopted. The disadvantage, however, during this period was that this service was only available to a very limited number of children, mostly from deprived families. One could in fact only register a child through the social service sector. Only about 5–6% of school children at the age of 6–9 years attended after-school centres at this time. A report from 1992 showed that the majority of children were staying at home alone or with a sibling for many hours per week (Pálmadóttir & Rútsdóttir 1992). This report roused strong voices calling for immediate actions and it was demanded that schools should provide extended services for their youngest students.

Period two in the historical development of this service is characterized by the schools themselves providing day care. The idea was that every

school should offer holistic service to children and parents which should extend throughout the day providing children with a safe place during the parents' workday. In the beginning, teachers were hired to manage and provide the service but after 3–4 years the service was mostly provided by staff members without professional training, who had originally been hired to the school to do cleaning, supervision during school-breaks, or work as assistants in the classroom. The main reason for this change is that as the school day became longer, teachers were beginning to get full-time jobs instead of just part-time jobs as classroom teachers. They no longer needed the extra hours that work in the after-school centre had provided them. Secondly, there had always been strong voices asserting that teachers should teach and not engage in extra curricular activities, as performed in after-school centres. Thirdly, it was more expensive to hire a teacher to work in after-school than persons who had not received special training and that definitely mattered for the school management. At the end of the eighties, authorities were looking for a more efficient way to provide day care for school children.

Today, we are in the third period. Now, the after-school centres are managed by the Sports and Recreation Council of Reykjavik (SRC) but the service is still provided in the school buildings. Steps have been taken to enhance the quality of care offered in after-school centres by setting shared goals, offering educational programs for staff and strengthening professional dialogue between leaders and staff. The majority of the staff-members have not received tertiary education, but a high percentage of them are university students (some for example currently working for a degree in social studies, pedagogy or teaching). Salary is not high and the jobs are mostly part-time, which explains why it is difficult to hire professionals, such as teachers or pedagogues. Furthermore, in Iceland there is no profession of recreation pedagogues as for example in Denmark and Sweden (Danish: "fritidspædagog"). The Recreation Studies Program has only been taught for a few years at the University of Iceland; it is not a vocational program or a professional programme and is not directed towards after-school centres in particular.

According to information on the SRC website and brochures about the after-school centres, emphasis is on care, informal learning and a variety of activities so that every child can find something to do (SRC, 2006a, 2007). Homework is not done in the after-school centre, as it is considered to belong to the school and parents to oversee the academic development of the children. After-school centres are considered areas for free play, a

place where children can take part in creative activities, under adults' supervision. In each centre children can choose between different activities, engage in free-play on different areas, both indoor and outdoor, or participate in a more organized group work led by an adult. The policy of the SRC is to enhance democracy when working with children; hence, each centre is encouraged to find ways to incorporate the views and preferences of children when organizing daily work.

As stated before, the after-school centres in Reykjavik are no longer run by the schools even though they are located inside the school buildings and provide extended school-day to students. There is little cooperation between the school's administration and the after-school manager but there exists, however, a signed contract between the Council of Education and the SRC on the management of after-school centres in schools (SRC 2006b). This contract refers to issues of facility, number of square meters per child, cleaning and other practical matters. The after-school centre is guaranteed an area of 60–100 m² and can use specific other areas that the school principal agrees on. The classrooms are generally not used and often the after-school centre can be found in a temporary facility, not considered suitable for teaching, such as basement areas, canteen area or even in school hallways. A report from SRC from September 2008 showed that many after-school centres do not have adequate facilities for the service.

There is an interesting clause in the contract between SRC and the Council of Education about the rules that should exist in the after-school centre. It says that the rules set for children and employees on daily activities or conduct should be the same as the school rules. It seems a little strange to put this in a contract about practical management of after-school centres in school buildings. Also, this is the only indicator that there should be some kind of an ideological agreement between these two institutions working with the children. And, unfortunately, it comes in the form of a unilateral directive, in the sense that the school determines these rules. The limited cooperation between schools and after-school centres provides additional support for the view that after-school centres do not have a strong position in the school system.

Thus there are many obstacles which impede the development of the after-school centres in Reykjavik within or alongside the educational system. The authorities have not shown great interest in this service, which is witnessed by the fact that no legislation defines the purpose, nature, management or quality of after-school centres. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any pressure from the municipalities to strengthen the formal

basis for this service. Together, school and after-school centre frame children's institutional lives in their first years in elementary school. My research on after-school centres in Reykjavik indicates that there is, however, little cooperation between these two institutions.

Two examples of practice

Two after-school centres in Reykjavik participated in the research: North Valley after-school centre and Sunny Side after-school centre. Their adjacent schools are North Valley School and City School. I interviewed a group of children from both centres, in all 43 children aged 6–7 years old, 12 persons working in after-school centres and 4 teachers in the two adjacent schools. I provide these two examples to give insight into the daily lives of children in the after-school centres in Reykjavik; they represent in some respect different ways of organizing after-school care and are quite representative of the after-school centres in Reykjavik.

Table 2. Overview of the two after-school centres that participated in the study.

	Daily schedule	System of choosing	Facility
Sunny Side centre	<i>Flexible:</i> Each day not decided beforehand	<i>Collective:</i> Children sit down in a group with an adult and take turns choosing	<i>Special:</i> Building next to school
North Valley centre	<i>Structured:</i> Every week is structured and clear division of labour for staff	<i>Individual:</i> Children use the activity board and put their name next to an activity	<i>Within school:</i> One private classroom and others shared with school

North Valley after-school centre and North Valley School

North Valley after-school centre is adjacent to North Valley school which serves about 330 students from 1st to 10th grade. In the school year 2008–2009 approximately 75 children were registered at the centre. The after-school centre has about 60 m² for their own use within the school premises and does have access to another classroom on a daily basis as well as access to other areas, such as the gym and the computer room. The canteen area is also used on a daily basis to serve refreshments and can also be used for play or organized activity. The outdoor area is not very big and

although there is a green area behind the school, the children are not allowed to go there without supervision. Since there is usually only one instructor outside with the children, they can only play in front of the school. The leader of North Valley after-school centre is Helen who is a preschool teacher. Helen believes in a very organized environment where both staff and children have simple and clear guidelines to follow. There are few but strict rules (set by the adults) but emphasis on creating an environment in which children can play together, get cared for and enjoy themselves with their peers. The staff has a clear division of labour and for each weekday there is a schedule indicating where each one should be: who is preparing the refreshments, who has out-door duty, who is with the 1st graders etc. The leader is responsible for making this schedule, but it is discussed in staff meetings and everyone has a say on how things could be organized. When asked, the recreation personnel said that this was very convenient and that it made their work easier to know precisely what was expected of them. With regard to cooperation with the school, the leader does not have close contact with the teachers; even though her office is within the school premises and her daily work is in the school building, she does not have her lunch within the school canteen along with the teachers. However, she meets the principal on a regular basis and sorts out any matter that arises either in such meetings, or by talking to the relevant classroom teacher.

North Valley School is a newly established school located in one of the suburbs of Reykjavik. In the North Valley School, emphasis is on teachers working as a team with groups of children instead of the traditional class system of one teacher with 20–25 students. For example, children in 1st grade in the school year 2008–2009 were in total 34. They shared one big classroom and two teachers worked with them. The room was so big that the teachers had to use a microphone to make sure everybody heard them clearly. The schedule for each day and week was very structured, leaving little space for spontaneous activity. The class was also divided into smaller groups, which travelled to and forth between art, craft and sport sessions. As a result, most of the time the children did not decide what to do in school and, in fact, free-time (the time where they are allowed to decide what to do themselves) was a rare reward. North Valley School has recently incorporated a special school wide behaviour support to improve school culture and guide students which involves teachers praising students for positive behaviour and clear guidelines to prevent negative behaviour. Individual students are given a small token on a regular basis for positive behaviour; this token is put in a collective jar which

the whole classroom shares. When the total amount of tokens has reached a specific number the class is rewarded in some way, for example the children may decide together with the teacher to have a “party” or to watch a movie instead of having regular classes.

Sunny Side after-school centre and City School

Sunny Side after-school centre is located closer to down-town Reykjavik and works in conjunction with City School. City School was founded about 50 years ago and serves about 300 children in 1st to 7th grade. In the school year 2008–2009 about 100 children attended the after-school centre; however, the number rose to 130 in the school year 2009–2010. The leader is Anna who has an extensive experience of working with children in after-school programs. The after-school centre has premises both within and outside of the school, due to the number of children. Since its establishment the main operation of the centre has been in a three-storied house located next to the school. With some renovation this building has proven to serve the after-school centre quite well with cosy areas for recreational activities, play and art work. Furthermore, the leader has her office there which also serves as a kind of staff room, where people keep their belongings and can prepare or work on the computer when necessary.

Like in North Valley centre, the day begins with a short meeting where the personnel discuss the schedule of the day ahead of them. The work-schedule is flexible and not necessarily decided beforehand. Before the children arrive to the centre, the workers discuss what is to be offered that day and where each worker wants to be situated. Anna has regular meetings with the principal where issues are dealt with if needed but she is in daily contact with teachers as she has her lunch in the school canteen along with other staff members of the school. This is important from her point of view since she obtains information there that she would otherwise have missed and also because she establishes a more personal contact with people she has to collaborate with.

City School is known for emphasis on individual learning and encourages teachers to use a variety of teaching methods. In the school year 2008–2009 there were 44 children in 1st grade divided into three classes each with their teacher, about 14–15 children in each class. Children were most of the time in their local classroom, but were also split into groups that went to the gym, library or other special classes. Three times a week the children had the chance to choose between different activities: play, reading, math, computer, etc. and mix with other classes; all the class-

rooms as well as other areas in the school were used and the teachers took turn supervising the areas. This was the only time children could decide for themselves where they were in the school building. Apart from that, the timetable was structured and it was planned beforehand where the children should be, with whom and doing what.

Daily schedule in the after-school centres

In both after-school centres emphasis was on children's free play and the children could choose different indoor or outdoor activities or play area, sometimes under adult supervision (for example in the arts and crafts area) but more regularly the children would engage in free play in different areas and recreation personnel could be seen supervising these areas, assisting children, preparing refreshments etc. Both after-school centres operate from 13:30–17:00 and the majority of the personnel work part-time, only the leader has a full-time job. The daily schedule in these two after-school centres are in some ways different:

North Valley centre is more organized beforehand, both in regard to the activities and the responsibilities of the staff. In NorthValley after-school centre activities are indicated on a special board (the optional activities board). Each child has his/her name on a plastic sticker and puts it below the activity she/he chooses. Some activities may only allow a limited number of participants and the children can see how many are allowed, as the number is then specified on the board. The activity board in North Valley centre was a central point for both children and adults: there everybody could see what was going on, and who was where. Children could switch between activities, the only rule was that they had to clear up before they left an area and go and move their name on the table.

In Sunny Side centre the structure was more flexible, giving the staff more space to improvise and decide what to do according to for example the weather, children's wishes etc. The system of choosing also took on another form in Sunny Side centre; when the children arrive after school, they began by going outside to play for 15–20 minutes. When they come in they are split into 2–3 groups with one or two adults supervising each group. They then sit down in a circle on the floor and in midst of the circle there are small cardboard boxes which show by letter and picture a certain activity or a play area that is available that day. The number of cardboard boxes for each activity depend on how many can share the same activity;

for example almost an unlimited number of children can choose the outdoor play area while only 6–8 children can choose the cookery when available. However, this act of choosing was sometimes skipped in Sunny Side centre when for example the weather was extremely good and the personnel decided that everybody should be outside and play. This may partly have been because it could be time-consuming to get all the children inside to sit down in a circle to choose.

Children’s perspectives on the difference between after-school centre and school

The present study indicates that after-school centre provides an opportunity for the children to take active part in deciding what to do within the institutional setting. Most of the children I interviewed made a sharp distinction between school and after-centre and said that they “played” in the after-school centre but in school they “learned”. When asked what they learned, they mentioned reading, writing and doing mathematics. From this we can draw the conclusion that even at the early age of 6–7 children relate learning to books and to knowledge drawn from books. Children are quick learners and most of the children I have interviewed so far respond quite perceptively to the institutional value placed on the after-school centre that has been set by adults and the system. Hence, for them it is quite clear that there is a great difference between school and after-school centre and what they do there. “There is a lot of difference because in [after-school centre] we are always playing and get to eat ... And there is a big difference between after-school and school, because then we are learning all the time” (Anne, 1st grade). Also, many of the children referred to the after-school centre with the Icelandic term “gæsla”, often used by teachers, parents and others, that implies that these centres are simply a “safe-house” or a “storage place”.

The children experience more freedom to choose in after-school centre than in school: “We always decide in the after-school centre” (Magnus, 1st grade). However, sometimes they can’t find anything they want to do, sometimes their friend had chosen some activity that might be fully occupied and they only wanted to be with him. Even though it may be considered educational to learn that you can’t always get what you want, it has to be pointed out that sometimes the children had very limited choices. And

many of them said that they simply prefer to go outside to play when nothing interesting is available indoors. The older children had learned that often it would solve things just to talk to the adults and explain their situation; “Sometimes, I think everything on the board is extremely boring, then I just keep my name tag and tell the teacher that I don’t like anything on the board” (Vera, 3rd grade). And often the adults would offer them to choose something *not* on the board. The 1st graders had not realized this and just seemed to accept the way things were and that they simply had to be patient and sometimes just go outside to play or choose something they really were not that interested in.

The views the children expressed on their teachers and the adults in the after-school centre confirms the institutional view that in school children learn but in after-school children are only playing. To describe what their teachers do in the school, the children used words such as “teach”, “tell us what to do”, “explain”, “correct” etc. In comparison, many children said that the staff members in after-school centre simply “babysit” or “watch over them”, and one said that the staff simply “did nothing but sit on the sofa”. The children experienced the staff in the after-school centre as being more passive than their teachers; however, some did confuse the two and used, for example, the word “teacher” when they talked about the staff in after-school. I did, however, also hear some extreme statements such as that the teachers always yelled at them (which was in fact quite common among the children from 2nd and 3rd grade in North Valley School); and I am quite sure that if asked the adults would not accept these descriptions as a general rule.

The children from both centres did in general not experience the possibility to decide what to do in school hours, where the teachers decided and controlled the activities. This is what some of the children said when asked on what occasions they themselves were offered to decide what to do in school: “When we have worked extremely hard and well” (Ragna, 2nd grade). “When we have worked a lot” (Margaret, 2nd grade). “When we have behaved extremely well” (Siv, 2nd grade). “When we have finished the assignment” (Hanne, 3rd grade). “When we have gotten 300 points, we get to choose something fun to do” (Vala, 1st grade). This corresponds with what the teachers in school told me about the opportunities children have to decide during the school day. Although the teachers sometimes used games to involve the children in projects, free play is not a part of the regular school day. Thus, it can be concluded that overall the children do

not decide what they do when in school and there is not much time to play with friends during school hours.

Many of the children said that recess was their favoured time of the school-day. Gunnar, 2nd grader, had this to say about school breaks: “We just play then.” There are two breaks during the six hour school day and in North Valley School the latter break was 40 minutes long. All children are required to go outside and play during recess. Some of the children thought that the latter break was too long especially when the weather is bad (which, by the way, quite often the case in Reykjavik). Also, many of the children in North Valley School reported that injuries were frequent during school breaks and they also complained of being teased and bullied outside and also in the school hallways. This was not a general issue amongst the children from City School and may be connected to better adult surveillance on the playground during recess.

In the after-school setting the children can decide, within a frame controlled by the adults, what they like to do. Hence, most of the children seem to enjoy being able to choose an activity and play with their friends. The ground rules and frame, such as spaces and time-tables, are decided by the adults who work in the after-school centre. Nevertheless, the children experience more freedom and are less restraint in the after-school setting than in the school; they can do what they want to do and with whom they choose. They develop their social skills, learn to be independent and take responsibility for their actions.

Discussion

The institutional development of after-school centres in Reykjavik shows that the service has been like the ugly-duckling, being tossed from one organisational setting to the other. No one within the institutional hierarchy has really liked that little duckling; still, it has started on its journey hopefully to become a swan (might even become a beautiful one), but it still needs time, care and attention. After-school centres are looked upon mainly as a storage place for children, a place where children are kept safe while their parents are at work. There is no doubt that the children I interviewed were indeed very much affected by this institutional value placed on this service. My preliminary results indicate how easily and effectively the children adapt to the institutional setting they are placed in and thus

how important it is to frame it in such a way that it is given its full pedagogic potential.

Out-of-school programs can provide an area where children are allowed to take an active part in deciding what they want to do and participate in activities in a group of peers. The children in this study were encouraged to take initiative, be independent and responsible for their choices within the after-school setting. This sharp distinction drawn between play and learning by the children is interesting because it reveals their understanding of education and what growing up means. In order to become an adult, or a grown-up, an intelligent person, you need to learn and work, not play and have fun. Schools seem to have this established and authoritative purpose, to educate children, whereas after-school centres are meant to be play-areas for children, a place where they are simply looked after. Nordic countries stress the importance of democracy in the lives of children. According to Icelandic law compulsory school should “encourage pupils’ general development and prepare them for active participation in a democratic society that is continuously developing” (The compulsory school act, nr. 91/2008). Furthermore, the school’s “...activities shall lay the foundations for pupils’ autonomy, initiative and independent thinking and train their cooperation skills” (ibid). These are the skills developed within the after-school centres but rarely are children allowed to be autonomous, show initiative or be independent in school hours.

The education and care of children have been institutionalised in Western societies; responsibility of children during a large amount of their waking hours has been moved from the home to institutions, such as schools and day care institutions. The institutional development of after-school care in Reykjavik, Iceland, reveals the unclear status of the service which correlates to research from other countries and even continents on the marginalization of out-of-school care. Parents, researchers and policy makers need to be critical and thorough in their efforts to ensure quality care for all children. Firstly, we need to research further out-of-school programs both from the institutional point of view as well as from the children’s point of view. What is the status of children within school and after-school care; what opportunities do children have to affect the rules of this organizational setting, such as the school schedule, curriculum or activities? There are indicators that after-school programs build in many ways on the view of the child as an independent social actor who acts on his own grounds. To be granted an opportunity to participate is an integral part

of every child's education and thus, the care provided in after-school centres should be acknowledged as a part of the educational system.

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