Outside school hours care and schools

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In Australia limited research has been conducted into Outside School Hours Care services, as emphasis has generally been placed on examining care provision for children below school age. Yet increasing numbers of women involved in the labour force rely on the services to care for their children. At present there is little understanding of the complexities, both of purpose and operational administration, that apply to care outside school hours.

In Queensland, like other Australian states, the majority of Outside School Hours Care services are sited within school grounds, and provide recreation, play and leisure-based programmes before and after school and during vacations for children aged from 5 to 12 years.

My study examined two Outside School Hours Care services attached to primary schools in the heavily urbanised area south of the capital city of Queensland. One service was housed in a purpose-built facility in the grounds of a state education authority school and catered for 65 children; the other was co-located in school classrooms and catered for 140 children. Each service provided care before and after school, and in the vacations. Each service programme was staffed according to Queensland Child Care Regulations.

At the time the research was conducted the services were licensed by the Department of Communities and managed separately from the schools. However ... the Government’s care and education ministries for children have recently been combined into one department, and any impact this may have on Outside School Hours Care services is still unknown. The research was conducted at a time of critical change for the operation and administration of these services, with mandatory standards and quality assurance processes being introduced and with services looking to respond to the childcare needs expressed by parents with school-age children.
Over 18 months of critical ethnographic research, techniques such as participant observations and semi-structured interviews were used to explore what is below the surface of social existence in these Outside School Hours Care settings. Then the interactions between the stakeholders, particularly the Coordinators and school Principals were analysed.

The analysis identified distorted communication between the Coordinators and Principals that prevented the Outside School Hours Care services developing a solid and stable relationship within the school community. The Principals executed control over the care programme, despite not being involved in its direct management on a daily basis, commanding authority over many strategic decisions, including the availability of space, selection and retention of staff, finance, and interactions with parents and the wider community. These issues, coupled with not acknowledging the professional status of Outside School Hours Care staff, were linked to wider concerns in the sector regarding workforce shortages and the lack of policies governing the provision of care. As a consequence, Outside School Hours Care Coordinators and services tended to be treated as outsiders by the school community, which hinders the positive outcomes for a service that is intended to support children and families.

Based on these findings, seven recommendations were proposed for Outside School Hours Care services within Queensland schools, that have applications for all stakeholders including policy makers, educationalists and community development planners:

- A definition of Outside School Hours Care services is needed that includes integrated policy provision for children’s services, including issues of quality.
- Public policies that legitimise Outside School Hours Care should be developed, from economic policies associated with increasing workforce participation to social policies supporting children’s wellbeing and protection.
- More research is needed into issues impacting on the sector, including workforce issues of morale, recruitment and retention; children’s experiences of Outside School Hours Care; and the role of the service as a communication conduit between parents and teachers.
- Specific permanent venues for Outside School Hours Care services should be designated as a physical symbol of the identity and legitimacy of the sector. Stability also makes a service easier to operate.
- All stakeholders should acquire more knowledge about the relationship of Outside School Hours Care with children’s lives, to build a holistic picture of the child’s life rather than distinct ‘school’ and ‘care’ experiences.
- Better training for Coordinators and staff, with the option of specialising in schooling and Out of School Hours Care services. Coordinators and staff should be required to attain educational qualifications, and be remunerated accordingly.
- Open-mindedness is needed to think differently about programmes and contexts for children,
making school sites ‘places of childhood’ where children spend time developing knowledge and citizenship skills. The pedagogue model, blending traditional roles such as teacher, health educator, nurse and sporting coach with Outside School Hours Care responsibilities, could create full-time, sustainable employment within the school setting.

There are many challenges facing the Outside School Hours Care sector including a lack of definition. This has been highlighted in recent times as the Outside School Hours Care sector strives to find its place in the Early Years Agenda of both the State and Commonwealth governments. Outside School Hours Care has been loosely attached to the early childhood sector through the common thread of care work. The challenge for the sector is that some see it as ‘home-like’ while others see it as a professional activity. Outside School Hours Care needs an identity in its own right so its contribution to children’s lives is not trivialised. This issue reflects the history of out of school care and will further challenge the relationship between schools and Outside School Hours Care services.