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After School Matters

The times between school getting out and families sitting down for dinner are crucial for children. Some parents pick their children up from school and take them home for homework and playtime, but what about the children whose parents work late? Child care programs such as after-school care and other after-school programs are put into place for those children whose parents work late. Child care programs are supposed to enrich children after school since their parents are unable to do it during those hours. This includes helping the children with homework, playing games with them, and letting them run around the playground with other children. The goal of an after-school program is to work efficiently while providing enriching and safe opportunities for the children. Safety and health is especially crucial during this time because of the Coronavirus pandemic. This pandemic has also brought about new challenges that after-school programs need to get through to provide enriching opportunities for the children who attend. In this ethnographic study, we will show the few sufficient changes to combat these new challenges being faced because of the Coronavirus pandemic and precisely what needs to be done in order to keep all the staff and children safe while also providing adequate childcare.

Literature Review

In this ethnographic study, the concept of a discourse community, theorized by John Swales, is the main focus. John Swales' concept of a discourse community is "made up of individuals who share common goals agreed upon by most members" and meets his six

characteristics of a discourse community (Johns 544). Swales carefully describes each of his six characteristics of a discourse community so that we can follow his theory. It is important for the discourse community to have all six characteristics, so that it can achieve its goal and grow in knowledge.

The first of Swales' six characteristics is that the community has to have a broadly agreed-upon set of goals (Swales 471). These are the goals that the discourse community hopes to accomplish and grow in knowledge. For the goals to get completed, the discourse community must have mechanisms of intercommunication with its members (Swales 471). Simply, this means that the members have to be able to communicate with each other in some way. The third of Swales' characteristics is that a discourse community must have participatory mechanisms (Swales 472). In other words, all members of the community must participate in some way towards the agreed-upon goals. The fourth characteristic is that it must have genres, which are the ways in which the community communicates (Swales 472). If these ways of communication are clear and understandable, then the discourse community can get closer to their goals. Since the community must have communication, it must also have a specific lexis, or specialized vocabulary that a specific discourse community uses (Swales 473). Lastly, a discourse community must have a threshold level of members (Swales 473). A threshold level of members means that different members of the community are at different levels of authority or rank within the community. If a group, club, or organization meets all of these characteristics requirements, then it can be seen as a discourse community that is growing in knowledge to meet the set upon goals of the community.

This ethnographic study will specifically be looking at the discourse community of St. Paul's After-School Care placed in Mobile, Alabama. As a discourse community, it meets the

requirements of Swales' characteristics. The goals of this community include caring for the students, protecting the students, and helping the parents get adequate child care while they are working. These goals are accomplished through the participation of the members and communication. The members use specific communication tools and words like walkie-talkies, sign-in sheets, and GroupMe. Since the community has a threshold level of members, a higher ranking member might notice a member or two not participating effectively with the community and having problems come up because of it. Throughout my research of discourse communities similar to mine, I am finding ways to prevent or fix these kinds of problems that might arise within the community.

To find ways to fix problems within my discourse community, we first need to look at how similar discourse communities run efficiently. Examples of similar programs to St. Paul's After-School Care would be any after-school programs at schools or daycares. Deborah Vandell, a well-known researcher of after-school programs, defines a "high quality expanded learning program" by meeting these six characteristics:

> foster positive relationships between program participants and staff, build positive relationships among program participants, offer a blend of academic and developmental skill-building activities, promote high levels of student engagement, maintain an orientation toward mastery of knowledge and skills, and provide appropriate levels of structure as well as opportunities for autonomy and choice (Vandell 4).

These characteristics, similar to Swales' characteristics of a discourse community, are important to have so that the program can accomplish what it needs to and provide children with protection, knowledge, and fun. Positive relationships, an array of fun academic activities, and

engagement from the children and the staff are crucial for child care because it gives the children and parents what they need to grow and be healthy. Programs, such as my discourse community, can run efficiently by meeting these well-defined characteristics that Vandell has laid out for us.

An important aspect of after-school programs is the staff and how the staff beneficially participates in the program. For an after-school program to run smoothly, staff should be properly trained so that they have the ability to implement developmentally appropriate activities that support after-school children's curiosity (Beckett 15). A good, formal education would be important for the staff as well so they can do this. Since more and more females are joining the workforce, after-school care has become a more reputable work so the staff that works there needs to be reputable as well. Beth Miller also agrees that since most after-school programs are run by part-time staff, they need to have "a wide variety of skills and knowledge, from building literacy skills to understanding diverse cultures" in order to help the children grow (11). In general, adult supervision of children after school beneficially helps the children by steering them away from bad behaviors, such as stealing, using alcohol or drugs, and hurting other people (Aizer 1847). Aizer found that with proper adult supervision in the after school hours, children were less likely to engage in these bad behaviors. Having a capable staff in after-school programs helps the workday run more smoothly as well as helps the children stay out of trouble and grow in knowledge and character.

For children to be actively happy and involved in their after-school activities, the programs need to have specific characteristics that allow children to thrive physically, mentally, and academically. In her book, Beckett gives us specific characteristics the programs need to have such as a variety of activities, flexibility of programming, emotional climate, space and furnishings available, and attention to safety and health (17). An array of activities that the

children can do while in after-school care programs, can help them time manage and decide on what they want to do rather than just doing what they are told to do by teachers and parents. Children should also be able to participate in these activities at flexible times because a more tightly scheduled after school is more straining for the children after a long, scheduled school day. A positive emotional climate is wanted to give more warm relationships between staff and staff, staff and children, and staff and parents (Beckett 19). This warm relationship between everyone involved in the after-school programs helps foster a better environment for the children to grow in. Lastly, the staff needs to beware of the safety and health of all the children under their supervision, so that all involved can continue to go to these programs and not be worried about their safety and health. David Blau and Janet Currie sum up Beckett's characteristics and describe a well organized and functioning high-quality child care perfectly as children having the chance to actively participate in an array of activities in a positive environment with experienced staff that fosters important curriculum content and health and safety standards (16).

When after-school programs have the characteristics laid out by Vandell and Beckett, then children are gaining more positive and enriching opportunities that help them in their overall life. Students who are involved in different after-school programs have better-standardized math scores, work/study habits, more student engagement, better social skills, and reductions in misconduct (Vandell 5). After-school programs help foster these positive outcomes through the staff and the activities that the children participate in. These significantly positive outcomes happen when the staff is helping support the school curriculum by helping children with their homework and providing them with literacy-focused activities (Miller 9). Child development can only happen if the after-school program has a positive and involved community of parents and families of the children attending them. Not only does after-school programs help

children with school and social skills, but it also helps reduce misconduct in children. In Anna Aizer's research, she specifically looked at the impact of some kind of adult supervision after school on children's behavior including school truancy, stealing, alcohol or drug abuse, and hurting someone else (1836). Aizer found that all school-aged children, even the older ones that some believe do not need supervision, can benefit from having an adult supervise their after-school activities (1847). Overall, past research has shown positive outcomes in children who attend some kind of supervised after-school program that is beneficial to the children's physical, mental, or academic state.

This research is not only about how after-school programs function beneficially, but also about how the recent Coronavirus pandemic has affected how these programs run. In early 2020, the Coronavrius, also known as COVID-19, spread to almost all parts of the world affecting many in its path. The deathly spread of the virus led to a nationwide shutdown and quarantine for months. As of the summer of 2020, areas started to open back up with mandates to be six feet away from others and to wear a mask at all times with other people. The study of the discourse community St. Paul's After-School Care will help fill in gaps about understanding how after-school care is done in a private school during the coronavirus and how they continue to foster positive outcomes in children attending them. New challenges arise from Coronavirus that need to be addressed so that the community can run efficiently and effectively contribute to the children's development.

Methods

This ethnographic study was researched to figure out how the recent events of the Covid-19 have changed the St. Paul's After-School Care program and what it is missing to make it run more smoothly. This study was conducted using a combination of primary research at the

specific discourse community as well as literary research about child care, in general, to better understand how the larger discourse community as a whole runs. St. Paul's After-School Care is a program for children grades pre-k to 6th grade attending St. Paul's Episcopal School whose parents can not pick them up right after school ends. The program runs off of parent fees as well as money set aside for the program by the private school. The primary research took place over the months of September and October, which are the first few months of the school being reopened after the Coronavirus shut down.

The primary research started in September of 2020 with an ethnographic observation of the discourse community of St. Paul's After School Care. On that day, an observation took place to understand the day-to-day work of a classroom counselor. All of the classroom counselors begin their workday by signing in and taking their temperature for a Coronavirus precaution. It should also be noted that after-school employees must wear a mask the whole time to protect the children, parents, and other employees. They all then separate to go to their specific classrooms. A pre-k classroom was observed for this research. The counselor gave all the children hand sanitizer and let them choose a snack out of the snack bucket. After snack, the counselor occupies the children with things to do such as playing in the classroom, going to the gym, and going to the playground until the child's name is called on the walkie talkie to go home. After the children had left, it was the counselor's job to clean the tables and classroom toys with the new cleaning supplies given by the school to help prevent the spread of Coronavirus. On this particular day, the after-school care was short-staffed, so I was also able to observe how that situation was taken care of. This observation helped me figure out what questions to ask in a survey for all of the employees.

At the end of September, I prepared a survey to be sent out to all the employees of St. Paul's After-School Care. Using the application of SurveyMonkey, I was able to create a survey with seven questions for the employees to answer. The questions were:

1. What is your job at St. Paul's After-School Care?
2. What does all your job entail?
3. Do you think the workday runs smoothly?
4. What are some resolutions to make the work day run more smoothly?
5. How do you think the Coronavirus pandemic has changed work at St. Paul's After-School Care?
6. Has St. Paul's After-School Care took good precautions to stop the spread of the Coronavirus? Explain your answer.
7. Do you like working at St. Paul's After-School Care? Explain your answer.

I sent this survey out in the employee's GroupMessage along with a message from me stating that the survey is for a class research paper that will only take five minutes to complete and is anonymous. This way, the employees could fill out the survey with honesty and not worry about their truthful answers coming back to hurt them. Eleven employees answered the survey: nine classroom counselors, one carpool helper, and one senior staff member. The responses to these survey questions will help me get the key points and formulate what exactly needs to be done to make the workday run more smoothly with the new Coronavirus precautions in place.

Along with the helpful survey from the staff, I set up a phone interview with the Extracurricular Activities Coordinator at St. Paul's Episcopal School in early October. Mrs. Jackie Jackson and I had an over the phone interview that lasted ten to fifteen minutes. Before the interview, I prepared some questions for her to answer that will help me better understand how St. Paul's After-School Care was running. Some of the questions that I asked her were:

1. What is your job title?
2. How long have you worked in this particular job?
3. What does your job entail?
4. How has COVID-19 changed the way St. Paul's After-School Care looks?

5. Do you believe St. Paul's After-School Care runs smoothly with the new way it is running?
6. What are some things you would change and how?

These questions were answered in greater detail by Mrs. Jackie Jackson and gave me some information that I was looking for involving the senior staff's positions on the changes to the after-school care program.

The focus for the primary research done at St. Paul's After-School Care was based on the main research questions for this paper. These questions includes:

1. How has the Coronavirus changed the way St. Paul's After-School Care runs?
2. What are the specific problems that are prohibiting the workday to run smoothly?
3. What day-to-day tasks need to be changed in order for the employees to beneficially participate in the community?

The observation, survey, and interview was done while researching were sources to the information that will lead us to the answers of these questions. Through these primary sources from the discourse community itself, the research has gotten some answers to these questions that will beneficially help the St. Paul's After-School Care community.

Results/Discussion

St. Paul's After-School Care was an efficiently run after-school care until the Coronavirus pandemic hit and changed what the workplace looked like. Before the Coronavirus hit, the after-school care had enough employees to watch the children in the gym, playground, coloring room, and game room. All the children, grades pre-k through 2nd, were able to play together in any of these spaces and they liked being with other children from other grades. After-School Care had to change many things about how it ran and how it was staffed after the Coronavrius affected us. The discourse community had to find a new efficient way to work with the changes due to the virus. The point of this ethnographic study is to find out how the Coronavirus pandemic has changed our workdays and what the members of the discourse

community need to do to keep themselves and the students safe and healthy as well as what members can do within their day-to-day tasks to beneficially participate in the community.

Throughout all of the research done for this ethnographic study, I found that the discourse community of St. Paul's After-School Care was an efficiently run workplace with a few problems with the new way that it was being implemented due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The head of the program, Mrs. Jackie Jackson, believed the program was a well run program with a few new problems brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic. Mrs. Jackie Jackon agreed that the staff was adjusting well and keeping all the children safe during the times of after-school care. The staff was able to get children to and from places as well as to their parents with little difficulty. Only when the workday was unstaffed did it cause more of a problem. The survey also showed that all of the staff thought the same as Mrs. Jackie Jackson as well as enjoyed their jobs there even with the new implementations.

The new things being implemented due to the Coronavirus pandemic included wearing masks at all times, taking temperatures, keeping students in their classroom pods, and thoroughly cleaning all surfaces and toys at the end of each day. From the survey of the workers at St. Paul's After-School Care, everyone believed the program's new precautions to keep everyone safe from the Coronavirus pandemic were being implemented well. A few members of the staff mentioned how it was hard to keep the children separated from other classroom pods because all the children want to do is play with all of their friends. Mrs. Jackie Jackson wants to help fix this by getting more grassy outdoor areas for the children to run around in their classroom pods divided by a fence or something similar to it. Another problem that arose from the staff being separated into classroom pods is communication. Several members of the staff mentioned in the survey that even though all staff members have a walkie-talkie and are in the staff GroupMe that they are

still having troubles with communication. People not speaking clearly over the walkie-talkie, and walkie-talkies breaking were two of the most repeated communication problems in the discourse community. The after-school care being unstaffed might also have something to do with the communication problems being faced.

As viewed from the observation of a day of work at St. Paul's After-School Care and survey responses, the program not only had communication problems but is also understaffed and that is prohibiting them from having a totally smooth workday. Last-minute changes to the schedule due to staff members not being able to come into work, create an unstaffed problem in the discourse community. Several members of the staff said that having more workers on a daily basis would help with watching the children as well as transporting them from the playgrounds to the gym to their classrooms. More staff would also be helpful if there is a problem that needs to be addressed by multiple staff members like a broken walkie-talkie or a hurt child. An easy fix to this problem would be to hire more classroom counselors as well as carpool helpers so that we have enough staff members to watch all the children and have proper transporting of the children. As mentioned in the survey response, a request off form that staff members would have to fill out at least a week in advance would also help to make sure that no day is overwhelmingly unstaffed again.

This ethnographic study of the discourse community of St. Paul's After-School Care has shown that the Coronavirus pandemic has created new problems that workplaces, like the after-school program, have to solve. As shown by the research, St. Paul's After-School Care has taken the necessary steps to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus while also keeping the staff members and children safe. The new changes that the pandemic has made to the program have created problems that are actively being addressed. The head of the program, Mrs. Jackie Jackson, has

come up with several new ideas and implementations that will fix the problems brought on by the new changes. One of those ideas was that a proper walkie-talkie training session that staff has to go through as well as more communication messages in the GroupMe can help with the communication problems being seen in the program. Another is hiring more capable staff members to add to the already amazing staff that has started to work through the new challenges brought on by the Coronavrius. These problems and solutions that St. Paul's After-School Care has gotten can help other programs that are having similar new changes and problems due to the pandemic. As Vandell and other researchers have concluded, a high-quality after-school program needs to have flexibility, positive relationships, student engagement in fun and literary focus activities, and a safe and healthy environment (Vandell 4). Responding positively and quickly to the new changes and problems due to the pandemic, an after-school program can run smoothly and almost the same as before.

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of the discourse community of St. Paul's After-School Care will be beneficial to many researchers wondering about how the Coronavrius pandemic affected child care programs. New implementations like keeping the classroom pods separated and washing down all the tables and toys throughout the day are important to do during the time of the pandemic. It also has great cause and effect challenges that will be useful to other child care programs trying to figure out how to run more smoothly with the changes due to the pandemic. Clear and understandable communication was noted as an important aspect of a smoothly operating child care program. St. Paul's After-School Care has already started to implement some of the solutions mentioned and has seen a positive change to communication and staff challenges, just like a discourse community should to achieve their goals.

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