UP CLOSE

quality

Rattler

COMMUNITY CHILD CARE CO-OPERATIVE (NSW) QUARTERLY JOURNAL 102 WINTER 2012

QUICK VS QUALITY TRAINING NQF: HOW THEY DO IT IN QLD
NQS SPOTLIGHT: EDUCATION PROGRAM & PRACTICE + MORE
Welcome to all our new readers across Australia. If this is your first issue of Rattler, we know you won’t be disappointed! Each issue is filled with content and research of national importance and stories of innovative practice that will inspire you.

With the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) truly underway, Rattler delves more deeply into ideas and issues that relate to qualifications, roles and responsibilities, and original approaches to educational practice and management.

Kirsty Liljegren’s article will provide you with plenty to reflect on with regard to educational program and practice, and she asks interesting questions about children and their learning that provide a great foundation for your work in this area.

The Vox Pop on the role of the educational leader follows on well from Kirsty’s article, offering the opportunity to find out how others are developing the possibilities for new leadership in their services and expanding boundaries for educational program and practice.

Innovative approaches to community management are explored in the Coalface, with the spotlight on University of Western Sydney and its solution to enduring community management models.

This issue also takes a measure of the progress of the NQF both within New South Wales and Queensland. A sharing of knowledge and practices across Australia will raise the bar on national consistency, with states learning what works and what doesn’t from each other. This gives new meaning to ‘Working Towards National Quality Standard’ from a state perspective.

And finally, Helen Conway’s words emphasise the importance of attention to the status of women and wages, and reinforce that there are still battles to be won.

We would love to hear from our readers on your reactions to articles and any suggestions or ideas you would like explored in future issues. We are very aware that highlighting education and care settings in one community does not tell the whole story but does provide food for thought and inspiration. Over time, we will tell more stories and look forward to hearing from your community.

Leanne Gibbs, CEO
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SOLVING THE PUZZLE

Early learning by correspondence

The Tibooburra Multi-Purpose Centre faces the challenge of reaching children in remote, rural settings, so has developed a correspondence or ‘outreach’ program to stay in touch with families in outlying areas.

Located 333 kilometres north west of Broken Hill, the Tibooburra Multi-Purpose Centre services the township of Tibooburra and the ‘Corner Country’, where the three states meet. To engage children living on stations, the Centre provides fortnightly correspondence packages, partnered with a scrapbook that all children in the service receive at the beginning of the year to record activities and experiences. Then, when children living on stations come to the centre for a visit, they can see how the other children are undertaking the same experiences, including cooking, craft, numeracy and literacy, science, as well as song sheets and activities to develop fine and gross motor skills.

‘The parents also have a visual record each year,’ says Jennifer Jones, from the Tibooburra Multi-Purpose Centre.

‘Unfortunately we don’t have a budget to send out paints, crayons, story books, DVDs of the songs and the like,’ Ms Jones says, ‘but I look forward to the time when we can.’

AND THE WINNERS ARE...

The 2012 Australian Family Early Education and Care Awards have been announced.

Congratulations to Kerry Hennessy (pictured far left) from Gosford Family Day Care, who was crowned Early Childhood Educator of the Year; and Jessica Whippes (pictured far right, with other national winners), from Norwest Child Care Centre, Baulkham Hills, named this year’s Rising Star.

Congratulations, too, to Deni Harden, from NSW’s Bundanoon District Preschool, who received a NEITA 2011 ASG Inspirational Teaching Award.

BOOK WEEK

Be a part of Australia’s longest-running children’s book festival and celebrate the pivotal role books play in children’s lives. Now into its 65th year, Book Week runs from 18 to 24 August, and the theme for this year is ‘Champions Read’.

We know our readers love Rattler, but we’re always interested to know how we could make it even better.

So we’re asking you if there are any other issues you’d like us to cover, or ways to continuously improve this award-winning publication. We’ve created an online survey to find out what you, as a valued Rattler reader, would like to see in the future. If you complete the survey online, you’ll go into a draw to win a book voucher for your service, valued at $100!

Complete the survey now by going to: www.cccnsw.org.au/rattlersurvey

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Did you know Rattler magazine is on Facebook? Visit our page and LIKE us, to stay in the loop between issues! Check us out at: www.facebook.com/RattlerMagazine
what’s on CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILDREN’S DAY 2012
4 August 2012
For ideas on celebrating at your service, visit: snaicc.asn.au/news-events

ECIA BIENNIAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE
9–11 August 2012
Burswood Entertainment Complex, Perth, WA

QUEENSLAND EDUCATION RESOURCES EXPO
8–9 September 2012
Brisbane Convention Centre, Queensland
For more: www.quedrex.com.au

CONSULTING THE COMPASS—DEFINING DIRECTIONS
3–6 October 2012
Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre, WA
Info: www.ecaconference.com.au

WIN A BACK TO NATURE LIFE CYCLES CARPET FOR YOUR CENTRE VALUED AT $449!
Tell us how children experience nature’s life cycles at your service and WIN!
Thanks to Educational Experience, one lucky Rattler reader could WIN a Back to Nature Life Cycles Carpet. This bright and functional rug offers a colourful way to start group learning discussions about life cycles—such as frogs, birds, butterflies and trees—and can be tied in with any real-life examples children are experiencing in your service.
To WIN, simply send us an email and tell us in 100 words or less what you do at your children’s service to celebrate our wonderful world of nature. Send your entries by 17 August to saraandersson@cccnsw.org.au
And congratulations to children and staff at Glenorie Preschool, winners of the two Belonging Trees from Rattler #101.

In the movies
Little Big Shots, the touring film festival showcasing the world’s best films for kids, about kids and sometimes by kids, is back.
Screening local and international shorts, animations, documentaries and child-produced films, the festival aims to enhance children’s creativity and media literacy.
At Sydney Opera House, Little Big Shots screens 28 and 29 July, with the ‘Tiny Tots’ session suiting audiences aged two to five. Book on 9250 7777, or online at sydneyoperahouse.com

SECTOR IN THE SPOTLIGHT
With both PM Julia Gillard and Opposition leader Tony Abbott showing great interest in our sector in recent weeks—with a childcare summit and promises of a Productivity Commission Review—it looks like early education and care is shaping up to be a key issue in the election next year. What will it mean for the sector? Watch this space...

Nuri-ngayn Ivan.
Invite Annie and me to your Early Childhood Setting to explore traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture. See you soon!! xoxo

- ‘Pupup Tupli’ sensory workshop for under 3’s
- ‘Mara Ungga’ workshop for 3–5’s, with the Bunganditj Kids
- Educator notes with links to the EYLF provided for each workshop

www.playfulbeginnings.com.au
When you look at the education and care provided at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Hawkesbury campus today, it’s a very different picture than the one on show as recently as 12 months ago. Like the five other UWS campuses, Hawkesbury provided a long day care service on campus, offering places to university students, teachers and the wider community. And just like those other campuses, Hawkesbury was struggling financially, with low enrolment due to students only needing the service 26 weeks per year.

‘There’d been a history of financial difficulties in most of the centres,’ says Linda Williams, UWS Early Learning Limited operations manager. ‘And while they were all located on university land and they obviously take UWS students and staff, there really wasn’t any real engagement happening between the university and the centres.’

It was particularly troubling considering the university ran an early childhood education degree.

So UWS funded a 12-month review of the provision of care on UWS campuses, and in 2010 came to the decision to amalgamate each service into one not-for-profit entity—UWS Early Learning Ltd. As each centre ran independently of the university, with its own community-based management committee, all services had to agree to the amalgamation plans.

By the end of 2010, four out of five of the UWS services had voted to amalgamate, with the fifth service coming on board earlier this year.

A sense of community
The turnaround since the amalgamation has been dramatic. Two services that were struggling with low-occupancy and financial viability are thriving, Ms Williams says.

How the services engage with the community, particularly other university faculties, has also been a major about-face. ‘We had staff and students tell us they didn’t even know we had childcare on campus because we weren’t out there and noticeable.’

UWS Early Learning Ltd worked hard to raise its profile within campuses and is now tapping into UWS for professional training and support, making the most of the unique learning and engagement opportunities on offer in a university setting.
This isn’t just for early childhood teachers on prac, but nursing, medical and occupational therapy students, too. ‘We’re looking at getting them in to do research, or implement programs for us. And they’re getting real-life experience with children,’ Ms Williams says.

The learning experiences available to the children are pretty special, too. At the Hawkesbury service children can visit the pretend hospital set up within the medical science faculty. There’s even a reptile house that makes for an interesting excursion, plus a real Secret Garden in the horticulture school.

Staff employed by UWS Early Learning Ltd also have access to the University’s Office of Organisational Development, which offers professional development services to all UWS staff. ‘There are management courses, finance courses, leaderships programs, Excel training, and most of them are free,’ Ms Williams explains.

Prior to the amalgamation, interaction and development opportunities within the university campuses was limited, and only accessed if one of the parents was a University staff member who might have facilitated things. ‘We’re at the stage where people within UWS are actively seeking us out now.’

Change management
The goal driving the amalgamation was simple: to provide affordable, quality care, while maintaining viable services— and a not-for-profit philosophy. So began the challenge of convincing parents and staff that the new model would do just that.

‘There was fear,’ Ms Williams admits. ‘Some people were concerned that it would no longer be a not-for-profit group, that perhaps the university would turn it into a profit business.’

To allay these fears, Ms Williams used examples of other universities, such as University of NSW (UNSW) and University of Technology Sydney (UTS), as well as other successful amalgamations and council-run services to highlight how the new model would work.

Staff had additional concerns about how the changes would impact on their ongoing employment, conditions and job security. ‘The tricky part of amalgamating was doing it in a way that we didn’t have to shut down centres, wind up the business and re-start and re-employ,’ Ms Williams says.

This meant first combining their separate Associations under NSW State law, before registering as a Company Limited by Guarantee, so everything was rolled into the new entity.

According to Catherine Morato, director of UWS Early Learning Ltd’s Hawkesbury service, the amalgamation has been a major boost to her staff. ‘Staff now feel the support that was lacking previously. They feel that all the changes have been a positive move forward for the centre in terms of financial viability and providing high quality care for the families that attend our service.’

To ensure this continues, UWS Early Learning Limited is in the final stages of developing a workplace agreement, one Ms Williams says maintains all the best parts of the old State Award, including paying staff above the Modern Award rates. ‘Our Board acknowledges the conditions and pay rates aren’t good when you compare them to other industries,’ she says. ‘We want to retain our good staff and when we recruit, we want the best.’

Support structure
The directors of the UWS Early Learning Limited services meet regularly with the operations manager and the other directors, ensuring they are getting information that’s relevant to their service while drawing on support from the other directors’ experiences.

Ms Williams says they are targeting the specialities of all staff. ‘I’ve got someone who’s really good on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); I’ve got someone who is doing great work on sustainability; I’ve got someone who thinks outside the box on problems.’

Directors also attend the open sessions of Board meetings. ‘It’s so they can have

‘Our Board acknowledges the conditions and pay rates aren’t good when you compare them to other industries. We want to retain our good staff and when we recruit, we want the best.’
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Ms Williams explains: ‘It’s a way for the centres to feel they really are involved in the management.’

Parental and community support is vital, too, with a family and community advisory group set up to co-ordinate social and fundraising events. It’s also an opportunity to discuss any concerns with the Board. ‘We are very much interested in what the parents are feeling about the service.’

Team approach

On top of dealing with the lengthy amalgamation process, UWS Early Learning Ltd had to ensure it was prepared for the National Quality Framework as well. ‘In one way the timing was difficult, but in another way it was good because the sector was going through change, so that’s made it easier,’ Williams says.

The new structure also increased the potential for shared ideas and support between the directors. ‘We spent a whole day all working on the Quality Improvement Plans. We’ve got a team approach where we’re going to run some mock assessment visits.’

This team approach was reflected in the establishment of the company’s Board, whose members are in-tune with the UWS Early Learning Ltd’s philosophy. ‘They’re all passionate about providing quality care for children. We’ve got a lot of people who are very experienced in children’s services delivery.’

Building relationships

Taking on the unique challenges faced by amalgamating a university service, it was important to collaborate with...
similar services, such as UNSW and UTS. ‘They understand the special challenges that university childcare centres face,’ Ms Williams explains.

‘It is tricky to budget when you think the first and final quarters can be low quarters, with the university year not starting until the end of February and then students start pulling out early November. So it’s not like managing your average childcare centre.

‘We rely very much on being accessible and being well-respected in the local community because we do require community attendance—they will attend the full year.’

In the case of Early Learning Ltd Hawkesbury, Williams attributes past financial woes to a lack of marketing and publicity in the local community, as well as a lack of strategic planning.

So to meet the challenge of low occupancy rates on campuses, UWS Early Learning Ltd reached out to the community, using local media and campus newspapers to build awareness. And university staff and students are offered a per-day discount, which is subsidised by the university.

The new management structure and subsequent boost to occupancy levels at the Hawkesbury service has resulted in a face-lift for the once-struggling service, from the inside out. ‘You walk in there and it’s just completely different to how it was,’ Ms Williams explains. ‘The centre’s been painted, there’s been a lot of physical work being done out there.’

There’s also been an injection of resources, and energy, to ensure the delivery of the curriculum is focused on the EYLF. ‘Our new director [Ms Morato] has done a great job in bringing new ideas in,’ Ms Williams says.

As a result, Ms Morato says her service is flourishing under a structure that ‘holistically supports’ the centres, which she says sets UWS Early Learning Ltd apart from other services. The atmosphere within the centre has changed dramatically and staff are happier, less stressed and can focus on their early education program.’

> Implementing the EYLF in your service?
> Don’t know where to start? Network with others going through the same process.

The EYLF Professional Learning Program offers a range of ways for EC practitioners to support each other:

- **The Forum**—a range of experts and peers will reply to your posts and answer your questions.
- **Facebook**—take part in informal discussion about the early childhood sector and the EYLF, and the ‘Thinking practice’ and ‘Observing practice’ series, designed to stimulate thought and discussion about what the EYLF means.
- **Twitter**—share your impressions of EYLF developments with others.

Early Childhood Australia has been funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to implement the EYLF PLP.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) represents a big change for early childhood education and care services. Driving the change is the goal to improve the quality of education and care in children’s services, and in its delivery comes a shift in focus from regulatory compliance towards a continuous pursuit of improvement.

This shift provides significant challenges for regulatory authorities, each dealing with their own distinct situation while working together to implement a consistent national framework and providing support to services during the transition.

In Queensland, the differences couldn’t be more apparent. The unique regulatory framework of the Child Care Act 2002 and Child Care Regulation 2003 means services are dealing with substantial conceptual changes, such as moving away from maximum group sizes and centre sizes and calculating ratios by room.

Due to the scope of the changes for Queensland, the Department of Education, Training and Employment chose to support services in their understanding of the changes across a range of mediums—face-to-face, online and via more traditional methods. This used a more flexible approach, co-ordinating the skills of department staff across the state.

A common issue for NSW services during transition to the NQF is the difficulty in accessing information. Rattler explores how Queensland’s Department of Education, Training and Employment has kept Queensland services informed about NQF requirements, juggling its role as regulator and supporter of quality improvement.
Within this dynamic environment, the Department has been considering its new complex role under the NQF to find a new balance as both regulator and supporter of continuous service improvement. According to Anne Reddell, executive director within the Department, it’s a logical connection. ‘In Queensland, our approach has always been to work with services to remedy a compliance issue to achieve improved outcomes for children rather than jumping immediately to statutory action. The NQF makes this role clear by tasking departments with supporting, quality assessing and regulating the sector. ‘Our approach is simple: we want to work with services to ensure that quality is available for every child and that statutory action is implemented when its needed in Queensland early childhood quality assurance.’

A team approach
Planning and review are at the heart of Queensland’s sector support program, given the ever-changing nature of the NQF. ‘We took an innovative approach to sector support and rather than having a central communications team managing the work, we made sector support a responsibility for all staff members—policy, regulation and communication staff,’ Ms Reddell explains.

The entire NQF team are involved in communications planning and implementation and we have processes in place to ensure sector support is top of mind for staff members across the central and regional teams,’ she says. ‘This means that at each new development, whether it be a policy decision or regulatory advice, staff are thinking about how this affects the sector and the best way to communicate the information.’

Queensland also has a number of consultative groups—representatives from peak bodies, other government departments, the community and special interest groups—who meet regularly and provide invaluable feedback on sector support activities.

To inform the NQF implementation in Queensland, the Legislative and National Implementation Reform Committee was established in 2009.

Through this group, stakeholders are asked to identify sector needs; review and check plans for communications, sample products and campaign results; and provide frank and open feedback.

This approach allows implementation activities to be tested before they commence, and for the Department to develop an understanding of how they can help stakeholders communicate with their audiences. It also removes the top-down approach from government and creates a mutually beneficial relationship of open feedback across the board.

‘Our stakeholders don’t hold back. They tell us exactly what their members are asking for and where we have dropped the ball,’ Ms Reddell says. ‘They also advise when we have done something well. Our attitude is one of openness and our stakeholders respect this approach.’

Training and support
The first step in sector support is to ensure department staff are properly trained to help rollout the NQF. This crucial step arms staff with the knowledge and skills to effectively support services.

The internal communications strategy has a particular focus on front-line staff with an ongoing role to support the sector. It includes a mix of face-to-face training, video and teleconferences, regular newsletters and emails, web conferences and structured training products.

‘We have a broad geographic dispersion of staff so our methods of communication need to be a little creative,’ says Ms Reddell. ‘We ensure we bring regional staff together regularly so they are developing connections across the state, and then encourage them to share their collective knowledge and experience.

‘We’ve coupled this with a change champions program. Each region has identified a champion who meets regularly with central office staff and champions and talks through specific parts of the NQF. They then pass this information on to staff in their region, filtering out ideas and strategies for engaging services with the NQF and the learning frameworks.’

“When services transitioned into the NQF we had a small volume of calls from services unaware of their requirements—the hard work had been done in the lead up.’
Building relationships

Last year was a big learning curve for both the department and services. The NQF was developing at a fast pace. Laws were passed, regulations released, building codes consulted on and learning frameworks finalised.

‘New and detailed information was being released regularly, so our message to the sector was one of learning together,’ says Ms Reddell. ‘Services knew that while we didn’t always have the answers to their questions, we were happy to work with them and were dedicated to ensuring we assisted their preparation for the NQF.’

‘While this may not have been our preferred approach, I think it actually worked better. Services got involved in their own learning and, most importantly, our regional staff developed a close association with services. This has laid the foundation for a solid ongoing relationship.’

Queensland used a range of activities to support the sector. Two significant rounds of statewide public forums in March/April and October/November 2011 covered 40 locations across the state. Focused on the National Regulations, these sessions ensured services had the opportunity to understand and contribute to the consultation phase and then ask the pertinent questions about the final regulations. The sessions also broke down some of the barriers to communication and opened the door for educators to engage with the Department as a support function, not just a regulator.

The Department also attended more than 40 sector events presenting to a broad range of educators and managers. This included keynote presentations, workshops, trade displays and any other avenues to promote the NQF.

At a regional level, staff established a range of special interest groups to allow like-minded educators and managers to connect and develop relationships. ‘Our regional staff and our website are our biggest assets and we use a range of tools—newsletters, emails, direct mail and media—to point people to these avenues for more information,’ Ms Reddell says.

‘We work closely with peak bodies to develop materials they can use to support their members,’ she adds. ‘We also try to develop a range of materials to suit different learning styles. So, we have fact sheets and web pages with technical information but also searchable FAQs, podcasts and presentations.

‘The communications program has been a real work in progress. Social media is one example where we haven’t been able to reach our target market as we’d hoped. While this may be an effective medium for upcoming communications with families, we now know that services need a much more targeted approach, and access to much more than a 160-character sound bite.

‘We were also disappointed with our first online conference on the National Regulations, with registrations struggling to match some face-to-face sessions. We realised that this was a difficult medium to communicate detailed regulatory changes and we needed to look at our options further.

‘Throughout the process we have reviewed our successes and failures and used these to refine the sector support program,’ Ms Reddell adds.

In transition

Each state and territory approached transitioning services into the NQF differently. In Queensland, the Department chose to transition a range of existing service staff as certified and nominated supervisors, and all existing services with provider and service approvals. This was managed through an online transition pack, which stepped services through the transition process. Services were also provided with detailed transition information via the website and encouraged to contact department staff for more detail. The online tools enabled immediacy of information and allowed services to read through the materials and address complex questions about their service, in their own time.

This process worked well in Queensland, particularly since all communications in the months leading up to transition had focused on the upcoming transition pack. A direct mail letter was also sent to each approved provider, via the service. This ensured a 98 per cent response rate, with the final 2 per cent completing the pack by phone. The online childcare census annual collection meant services were familiar with the online process and this eased their use of the transition pack.

‘So far we’re very happy with the response from services to our support,’ says Ms Reddell. ‘We know from feedback that services value the information we have provided and the ability to contact us easily with queries and concerns.’

‘When services transitioned into the NQF we had a small volume of calls from services unaware of their requirements—the hard work had been done in the lead up, supported by our strong stakeholder network.’

‘The journey, however, doesn’t end here,’ Ms Reddell adds. ‘As time goes on we see the sector support function evolving, particularly around detailed guidance on the assessment and rating process for services.’

‘In Queensland, our approach has always been to work with services to remedy a compliance issue to achieve improved outcomes for children rather than jumping immediately to statutory action.’
WHAT THE SERVICES SAY

Camille Howard asks three services in Queensland how they feel about the communication and information offered around the National Quality Framework.

As the National Quality Framework (NQF) continues its rollout, Lisa Keegan, director of Bayside Community College Early Childhood Centre in Alexandra Hills, says one of the biggest challenges faced by services in her region was the switch from a focus on compliance. "I think there was a sense of having come from a system that was very much regulated and prescribed. And because the new document was very open to services being able to make it fit what they do, people are a bit lost," she says.

To help services in her region cope with the change, there has been training and support available from the Department of Education, Training and Employment and its Office for Early Childhood Education and Care, but Ms Keegan says it is not without problems. "In the beginning we had a couple of meetings that were held during work time which meant only certain members of the sector could get to," she says. "And that was useful but we really didn’t learn anything new than what we couldn’t already learn from reading the website or through the documentation that’s been provided."

As a high-quality service, Ms Keegan admits Bayside has accessed more suitable and targeted support from the Health and Community Services Workforce Council, the professional support co-ordinator in Queensland. But attending professional development forums has boosted her relationship with her authorised officers. "I’m fortunate in that I have more of a personal relationship where I can ring and say ‘how did you go, did you find out about that?’"

Feedback she is hearing from some other services, though, is they aren’t getting answers to questions. "I think with the limited resources and staffing they have, the Department are doing their best to get information out there."

Unfortunately, given the relative newness of the NQF, some information isn’t always available. "We’re running all the final requirements for the NQF from this year. So all the ratio changes and things that aren’t happening until 2016, we’re doing now. Because of that, I’ve found it a little bit tricky because they haven’t thought that far ahead yet," she explains. "I had one officer say that when you work it out we’ll come and have a look and we’ll know what to do when the next person asks!"

In Cairns, Kathy Lochlin, director at Smithfield Child Care Centre, says the educator forums she has been running for services over the past few years have been vital in terms of sharing information. And although the Department has organised its own training around the NQF in the area, she says local authorised officers have been keen to tap into these forums to communicate with services. "They were more than happy to attend all of them because they believe that the more information that’s out there, the easier it is for everybody to get their head around it."

Since the start of the NQF, the Department’s relationship with services has changed significantly, Ms Lochlin says, to be one that is more supportive than regulatory. "There’s a lot of feedback coming back saying how positive it is, how in the past they’d walk in the door and you’d go, ‘oh no, here we go, it’s a threatening visit’. But that just doesn’t happen now."

Setting up regional offices has gone a long way to improving these relationships. "We’re lucky, in Queensland, that it’s all regional," Ms Lochlin says. "You’ve got regional spread and the opportunities to build relationships with your local office."

Regular emails from the Department help keep them informed of areas of interest, and although they admit they don’t know all the answers, Ms Lochlin says authorised officers will get back to services, no matter how ‘weird’ the question. "They’re being approachable, which is a great improvement."

Similarly, Lesley Miller, quality and legislation co-ordinator for the Creche & Kindergarten Association (C&K) of Queensland, says the Department has been ‘very generous’ with support and guidance during the rollout.

For C&K services, though, ongoing technology issues in accessing documentation put added stress on all services, especially the 26 brand new services also trying to get service approvals. "Settling in new families into a service is difficult enough without the added burden of trying to assess the service in the process."

And while she says the Department kept her informed of changes and has offered prompt responses to emails and questions throughout the process, Ms Miller says the Australian National Quality Standard Conference in May this year was the most positive presentation of the NQF she has been to: "I came away feeling very inspired and will be passing on the information that was provided at the conference to our educators."
‘Fast-track your career... Certificate III in just three days! Enquire now!’ reads the promotional material of a local training organisation claiming to fast-track students to meet the NQF’s new qualification requirements. Leanne Gibbs urges caution, asking students and employers to think about the long-term impact of such qualification pathways.
‘There is a big issue around the quality of qualifications supplied by RTOs whose area of specialisation is not education and care.’

With the advent of the National Quality Framework, National Regulations and National Quality Standard, the need for a Certificate III and Diploma qualifications has become imperative. But despite warnings from the sector there have been few quality control measures put in place to ensure the standard of the qualifications and guarantee value for money for intending students.

So it’s time to urge caution and consider who pays the price for a qualification that promises much but really doesn’t deliver.

Quality … what does the sector think?
A comprehensive insight into the issue is documented in the Productivity Commission Research Report on the Early Childhood Development Workforce (2011). The report notes that over the coming years around 45,000 new and existing workers will require training and yet there has been no comprehensive quality review of courses and only minimal work on a strategic approach to delivering the number of trained educators required to the sector.

In addition to the supply issues, the aspects of content and quality have received limited attention and there are questions on whether courses incorporate current legislative frameworks or are even delivered by trainers and assessors who have attended to their own professional development in order to be suitably informed (p.215).

A review of the scope of a number of registered training organisations (RTO) Certificate III and Diploma courses reveals the lack of relevance under the National Quality Framework. Only a small number of RTOs indicate their courses prepare educators for their roles under the National Quality Standard or the Early Years Learning Framework and many indicate that upon graduation, students will be ready to take up the role as an Authorised Supervisor—a role that became redundant in January 2012.

This is not only bad news for the students but also for the ‘end user’—in this instance, children and families. An RTO provider that hasn’t considered the importance of incorporating the latest learning on education and legislation indicates a lack of interest or knowledge in delivering a quality qualification.

This challenge is compounded when an RTO delivers a large range of industry qualifications. Arian Ploeg, Manager of Community Child Care’s RTO, says this often leads to more questions on quality.

‘There is a big issue around the quality of qualifications supplied by RTOs whose area of specialisation is not education and care. If they are coming from a background of business, hospitality and beauty therapy, is this a good basis for delivering a Certificate III? If you are an RTO and you cover off various sectors, how can you specialise? It becomes difficult to manage. You still need to have the expertise and have the industry consultation but how do you achieve that and develop networks that build the quality of your qualification?’

The Productivity Commission reported that study participants said: ‘…that the quality of ECEC training delivered by RTOs is highly variable. While there are examples of excellence, concerns about poor quality training from RTOs are widespread. Unless the issue of quality is addressed, a significant proportion of increased expenditure on VET could be wasted.’ (p.203)

Solving workforce issues … or not
How can the supply and demand issues be addressed? Admittedly, fast-tracking Certificate III and Diploma-level courses to solve the workforce shortage is an appealing proposition. The shortage of qualified educators is particularly chronic in the regional, rural and remote areas of the state, and it was recognised within the Productivity Commission’s report that the full implementation of the COAG ECEC reforms in these...
Is RPL the answer?
Quite apart from fast-tracking and streamlining courses, the option for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is one arrangement that could be vulnerable to the issuing of substandard qualifications. In RPL, according to the Commission’s report, ‘skills and knowledge that a student has acquired through previous training, work or life experience can be used to gain status or credit in subjects and modules’ (p.235).

While this is a great option for long-term educators within the sector (and in many cases ensures retention of significant skills), it is agreed that when RPL is undertaken with a quality RTO, it isn’t a quick alternative to studying.

Annette McConnell, director of Como Preschool Kindergarten in Sydney, reflects: ‘This in no way was a “tick and flick”. We were one of the first to do the RPL with Community Child Care. Educators Cathy and Ann were daunted at first so we sat down and reflected on how we were going to undertake it.

The RPL process was very comprehensive and we were able to work on the assessment process together, talking over policies, the practical implications, scenarios, and the completed assignment work and classroom demonstrations. They learnt so much along the way and did plenty of research. It was a real partnership between our leadership team and Cathy and Ann. We were able to help build their confidence through mentoring and giving time to the process.’

For every good news story though, there are tales of the RPL process being mishandled. Indeed, the Commission’s report is littered with references to the ‘tick the boxes’ approach to certification but the pressure can come from employers trying to fast-track educators and even from the educators themselves.

I remember this anecdote from a director: ‘One of our team was really keen to have a Certificate III. A local RTO offered a pretty cheap course and told her she could get Recognition of Prior Learning and it would be quick and easy. When the materials came I was told just to sign her off. I couldn’t do it—it was really against my principles. Unfortunately, we were all unhappy but I felt the RTO just wasn’t doing the right thing and that my employee could learn more despite her years of experience.’
What are the options?
Despite these stories of poor delivery, it is important to hear positive stories and note the initiatives being put in place to address supply and quality issues.

There are some great options for achieving qualifications that consider the unique needs of educators without compromising course quality. Mixed mode and flexible delivery courses allow students to undertake courses at a distance, while experiencing support and the opportunity for reflection.

For example, the Early Childhood Training And Resource Centre (ECTARC), an RTO focused on early childhood education and care qualifications, offers a range of support for students including the allocation of a personal training officer to support them throughout their studies. Students can also participate in live, interactive online study sessions or view pre-recorded study sessions to enhance learning.

Choose wisely, not quickly
A number of government and RTO initiatives have led to the establishment of programs that will create more opportunity and better access to quality qualifications. The Workforce Development Fund is delivering a program of combined employer and government-funded Certificate IIs and IVs to the sector, and another project for RPL assessors will provide a quality assessment tool and training to be used for services in rural and remote areas. These programs were initiated and delivered by DEEWR and aim to increase the number of qualified educators with training that meets quality measures.

Doing the homework
It is important that educators take on the responsibility to research the training providers and institutions they are considering. Intending students and employers who are paying for qualifications should consider the content of the curriculum, support available, arrangements for teaching and studying and the resources of the training body or institution.

It is essential that students choose RTOs that are recognised as providers of quality assured and nationally recognised training and qualifications. Only RTOs can use the nationally recognised training logo on all qualifications and statements of attainment they issue. The logo signifies that training courses are accredited under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and that the qualifications issued are recognised by all other RTOs.

Students can then be confident the skills attained are of a high quality and accepted and valued anywhere in Australia. It also allows students to enrol, transfer or complete their training at any RTO across Australia.

More importantly, remember that quality curriculum, training and education are essential for ensuring not only ‘a piece of paper’ but a skilled and confident educator who can confidently work with children at a critical stage of their development.

Leanne Gibbs is Chief Executive Officer of Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW).
WHEN Rattler first spoke to four NSW services—a community-based preschool, council-run long day care, a private long day care and a council-run family day care service—they had just completed their Quality Improvement Plans. While each service faced challenges, the message was clear: continuous reflection and quality improvement was reshaping the sector. As the services prepare for their assessment visit, questions are flying: what is the visit going to be like, what will they say about my service, what does it mean for the future? By Camille Howard.
FOCUS ON LEARNING

Two years ago Forbes Preschool was struggling, with low enrolments forcing the closure of one room. Now they are bursting at the seams, with a new preschool being built to cope with demand. It’s a busy time for the director, Amy Shine, who has just put the finishing touches on her service’s Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). ‘Things have changed dramatically at Forbes Preschool over the last two and a half years,’ she says.

With a relatively new team, Ms Shine says there has been a lot of staff training, both in-house and involving significant travel, in preparation for the National Quality Framework (NQF). ‘We’ve been meeting to talk about the NQF and reflect on what we’re doing and why, so nothing’s done without a lot of thought.

‘Even if it’s been something we think we’re doing well, it’s been a way to reflect on why we think we’re doing that well, or what else we can do,’ she explains. ‘I keep saying to staff that we’re not running a program like this, or doing anything, just because of the National Quality Framework, or for our assessment visit. We’re doing it because we believe in it.’

With over a decade in the industry, Ms Shine has also been a part-time TAFE teacher for about 10 years, which she says ties in nicely when reflecting on her QIP. ‘It gives me the opportunity to really reflect on what I’m doing, and to always be learning. Then I can bring that back and teach to the staff as well.’

Reflecting as a team has been a big benefit of the process so far. ‘Everyone’s ready to learn. We’ve got a pretty dynamic staff. We’ve got young, old, Aboriginal, non-Aboriginal staff, a range of educational backgrounds, and everyone’s pretty supportive of each other’

This supportive attitude was vital in creating her QIP, which began by encouraging a lot of discussion between her staff and committee. But she admits with all the busyness surrounding the building of the new premises, she would have liked more time. ‘Ideally, if we had more time I would have liked to have a lot more communication with families,’ she says.

That said, she plans on ensuring communication with families is ongoing, so she and her team are constantly talking to parents to communicate what they are doing in the service, and why.

Overcoming challenges

Putting the QIP together has presented difficulties, such as costing Ms Shine about a week off the floor. ‘With all the focus on the NQF, it’s harder to focus on the day-to-day’

She feels a bit ‘snowed under’ with all the paperwork that is tying her to the office. ‘I’m away from the team and away from the children a bit more at the moment.

‘I have to make myself go out at nine o’clock to say hello to families, otherwise I’m in my office and no one sees me. And that goes against everything I’ve written in our Quality Improvement Plan.’

Training around the NQF has been frustrating, too. As a regional service, getting to some face-to-face training required extensive travel, which meant hiring additional staff to cover this. To ensure her whole team was accessing training, Ms Shine arranged in-house training, at additional cost to her preschool. ‘I strongly believe in keeping our staff up-to-date and I like the fact that if we have in-house training all staff can attend.’

Although she found the Department of Education and Communities very supportive when she called with questions, they often weren’t able to help. ‘The difficulty was that they had not yet been trained and had as little experience as me in the whole process. So the information was not always as much as I wanted or needed.’

Fear of the unknown

Because the NQF and assessment process is so new, Ms Shine admits there is some apprehension. ‘We’re happy to be one of the first services assessed because we believe we offer a pretty good program, but of course we’re going to be apprehensive as well,’ she says.

‘What are our assessors after?’ Despite this nervousness, Ms Shine is looking forward to her first assessment visit. ‘I’ve really enjoyed the process. We’re really passionate about what we do, so I hope that’s reflected in our assessment,’ she says. ‘I don’t for a minute think there is no room for improvement but for where we are at the moment, we’re pretty happy.

‘If there’s something we can improve on then we will improve on it, we’ll work as hard as we can.

‘We’re looking forward to seeing what it’s all about, then talking to other services about our visit,’ she says. ‘There are some really exciting conversations in early childhood at the moment and I’m excited about that.’

Amy Shine, second from right, and her team reflect on their QIP.
When director Deborah O’Rorke purchased Cow and Koala Professional Child Care in August last year, after working in the service four years, it set into action a significant cultural change. ‘We haven’t had a team like this that works so well together for a very long time.’

As a non-teaching director, coming from a training background helped Ms O’Rorke better understand what the NQF set out to achieve. Despite this, the process of reflecting on the service’s practices, while undergoing this cultural change, took time.

Her approach to the QIP, then, was systematic. She and the Nominated Supervisor each looked at key areas of responsibility before coming together to work through the QIP as a whole. ‘Then we would go away, leave it for a few days and then come back again,’ she says, ‘because it takes time for the cream to rise to the surface.

‘It was really easy to look at our practices and say, well I think we could do better, because it’s easy to criticise yourself. We both found listing our strengths to be quite difficult because we were shining a light on ourselves, and culturally we just don’t do that.’

Energy boost
In putting the QIP together, Ms O’Rorke says it created a heightened level of energy and enthusiasm among her staff, which she is keen to maintain. ‘This is an emotional investment,’ she says. ‘You are putting “you” under that spotlight and that is daunting; that takes energy and strength to do that.

‘It has been really emotionally draining to put it all out there, on paper, to give it to complete strangers and say “come in here and judge us”. But the comfort is knowing we do do a great job. ‘To keep that energy level up, for me, going to be my biggest challenge. Not enthusiasm, just energy. I want this to work, I want this to be a success because the outcomes are positive for everybody.’

Getting staff to embrace the process has been positive, as it has allowed them to see how improvements to their day-to-day will produce tangible outcomes, even though it may not be immediate. ‘That’s the beauty of the QIP: maybe in two, three or six months time, the impact will be felt,’ Ms O’Rorke explains.

‘That’s the role of leadership and management in the service—you don’t need to know it all but you need to know: have you made a positive difference to a child today, what tools can I give you to make that positive difference?’

Putting the QIP together has also provided the impetus for more regular reflection. ‘We all get so busy in the work, doing what we do every day, we don’t take the time to take that one step back and reflect,’ she says. ‘This is a great tool to assist you in running a business. In a way it’s been given to us on a plate—they’ve even done the hard work of doing the template for me!

Work in progress
As a small regional centre, training proved problematic, with five hours travel required to get to some face-to-face training venues. And now that her QIP has been completed, Ms O’Rorke says there are still some questions regarding the NQF. ‘The National Regulations seems to be, and rightly so, quite broad, but it’s obviously left open to interpretation.

‘So when we get the assessment visit, yes, there’s a sense of trepidation because of the broadness of the regulations and therefore the interpretation that can be made, but also this is a brand new system and we’re all feeling our way in the dark, to an extent.’

But Ms O’Rorke sees the assessment as a greater learning experience. ‘I see this as a really positive thing; as something that will hopefully open up services, open up lines of communication between the regulatory bodies.

‘I only hope we can convey strongly enough that we are proud of what we do, we love what we do and we do do a good job. And it is nice to be told that every now and then.

‘Since putting in our QIP, the supervisor and I are talking and I’m actually doing some other things that need to go in the next Quality Improvement Plan. It’s an organic document, it’s never going to stay the same. Yes, there’s the big goal, the big plans, but when they come and visit us in a few weeks time, the document is going to be very different. I take heart from the fact that what I said I was going to do 12 weeks ago is not what I’m actually doing today.’

‘It has been really emotionally draining to put it all out there, on paper, to give it to complete strangers and say “come in here and judge us”’

2 CELEBRATING STRENGTHS
For Lynne George, manager of Children and Family Services for Marrickville Council, the rollout of the NQF has been a big undertaking. Marrickville Family Day Care (FDC) service provides education and care for up to 165 children from homes located throughout the Marrickville local government area. Currently there are 26 approved FDC educators, most of whom have English as a second language.

‘The service has been preparing for the NQF rollout for some time,’ she says. ‘To start, questions that reflected on policies and practices were given to all educators and co-ordination staff to work through during home visits, with the service’s educational leader providing mentoring and leadership in the development and implementation of a curriculum based on the Early Years Learning Framework and individual programs for each child.

Putting together the QIP also required a team approach from co-ordination staff and management, starting with a review of an existing improvement plan. ‘We incorporated individual and service issues and strengths identified by families in the annual parent satisfaction surveys completed in November last year. We also accessed 10 hours individual service support with Nicky Cocksedge from Children’s Services Central.

‘Different staff members were allocated different quality areas to prepare and bring back to the team for review and finalisation,’ Ms George says.

This prompted careful review of all policies and procedures, to promote best practice among staff and educators and to build on individual educator’s strengths and support improvements where needed. ‘More regular home visits have been conducted according to individual educator’s needs,’ Ms George adds.

Room for improvement

For Marrickville Council, the biggest benefits of creating the QIP have been identifying meaningful and achievable improvements for the service, as well as becoming more familiar with the standards. ‘It helped us to focus on and really assess what we were currently doing in some areas and plan for improvements to meet the needs of all involved,’ Ms George says.

‘We continually review our practices and liaise with other schemes in the region to share ideas and keep current with new practices. Marrickville Council provides training for permanent staff and encourages professional development on an ongoing basis. Staff recognise the value of imparting this culture with educators and families, and undertake such as an important part of our role.’

In terms of challenges faced, Ms George says ‘lack of time’ was a key concern: ‘Especially when support during home visits around this crucial time is so valuable to the educators, and some of our training relevant to the National Quality Standards and NQF had not been completed. Our QIP had to be realistic for our service.’

Also, she says, they were initially overwhelmed because Marrickville FDC was to be one of the first services assessed under the new standard. ‘In addition, at the time we were notified to lodge our QIP, the assessment and rating tool had still not been published so we felt apprehensive as to the expectations against which we were to be assessed; and whether the new system would truly be less focused on “ticking all the boxes” and genuinely examine our approach, vision and practices as demonstrated by our staff, educators and documentation.’

Knowing how to present the QIP was problematic, she adds, in terms of understanding what information was required. ‘No training was provided to inform us how best to undertake the QIP. Throughout our region the feeling of uncertainty was the same.’

‘No training was provided to inform us how best to undertake the QIP. Throughout our region the feeling of uncertainty was the same.’

In family day care there is, I think, a little more anxiety about the assessment visits because we don’t know which of our educators will be assessed, and we know they feel quite anxious and a great deal of responsibility to the service as a whole for their “performance” during the assessment visits.’

While there is some trepidation about the visit, Ms George is hopeful of a positive outcome. ‘We have devoted an enormous amount of time preparing our educators for the assessment. We have identified educators who may have needed extra support and provided extra home visits and training both individually and in some small groups. We’re hoping that the assessors recognise the uniqueness of each individual educator and what their service offers.’

Educator Marie Manacos role-playing with children.
4 BECOMING PROACTIVE

‘Everyone was trying to find what the Department’s “formula” was. That was a difficult thing to get across, that there’s no magic formula.’

On top of that, Ms Rodriguez found that there needed to be a shift in educator’s thinking about this process as one that is ongoing and evaluative. ‘Getting [them] to understand that there’s always going to be room for improvement was difficult,’ she explains. ‘It took a very long time for staff to think analytically. Rather than thinking, “we’re the best and if we’re the best, why do we need to improve?” now they’re saying, “we do these things really well, how can we do them better?”

Another challenge proved to be working towards compliance within a price-conscious environment. ‘We’re concerned for the impact on price point,’ she says. ‘What we consider is going to have a cost impact, such as changes in ratios, we are looking at that now.’

This long-term planning, Ms Rodriguez says, is another shift. ‘We’re being more proactive than we normally have been.’

One size does not fit all

Over the last 18 months, the teams in Kogarah City Council’s three education and care services attended about three or four training sessions, as well as the Department’s Sydney-based information sessions. That helped people understand that it’s a process, an ever-evolving process, and that we’re all starting from the same base line,’ says Ms Rodriguez. ‘It seemed, in the early stages, that everyone was trying to find what the Department’s “formula” was,’ she explains. ‘That was a difficult thing to get across, that there’s no magic formula.’

Even with the training, Ms Rodriguez realised there was a feeling of going in blind. ‘It was all new,’ she says. ‘All the people that gave us information and training said, “this is as much information as we have right now, we’ll keep everybody posted and updated”’

What added another level of confusion for Ms Rodriguez during the process was the growing number of businesses set up to profit from services’ uncertainty of the assessment process. ‘You have a lot of people on the periphery of childcare, not necessarily working in services, who develop their own business models and market them to services as tools to do their assessment,’ she says.

But she says information from the Department and Community Child Care Co-operative has been very good at highlighting how services need to develop their own ways of doing the assessment. ‘Because we had that background, staff are becoming a bit more scrutinising of what they see. But still, some of these people who market their product are very good at it; they know exactly where the anxiety is and they target that.’

Waiting game

Not knowing much about the impending assessment, Ms Rodriguez is keen to get a clearer picture of the logistics. ‘How much notice are we going to get? Will they need to see? We need to make sure we maintain staff ratios and ensure everything is running smoothly when they come out. And do they want to see parents?’

Although she got a lot out of the overall process, Ms Rodriguez is keen for answers to these questions and for greater communication overall from the Department. ‘They have everybody’s email addresses,’ she says. ‘They could just send an email saying, “this is what we’re expecting the process is going to be.”’

So, are you ready? ‘We’re as prepared as we can be for it,’ she says. ‘It’s up to someone else to come in and say “we’re doing the right thing”, or “this is where you need to improve”. And we welcome that feedback.’

‘I like this process better than the accreditation process,’ she says. ‘I think this is a nice way to combine quality with regulations.’

*DEC has recently taken steps to address concerns within the sector, including emails to keep services informed of DEC’s approaches to NQF requirements.
Latin American musician Raul Bassa is offering music shows/workshops for preschool children. The workshops cover music from different parts of Latin America played on a wide variety of traditional instruments – pan pipes, bamboo flutes, bongo drums.

‘It was fantastic. The children loved every moment. Even the staff couldn’t help dancing to the music with the children. A great multicultural experience for everyone.’

Cardiff Community Child Care Centre, September 1995

For bookings and enquiries phone (02) 4751 5768
Throughout 2011 and 2012, Rattler turns the spotlight on the seven Quality Areas of the new National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care. 

The National Quality Standard includes seven areas of quality for early childhood education and care services: 

1. Educational program and practice.

2. Children’s health and safety.
3. Physical environment.
4. Staffing arrangements, including improved staff-to-child ratios and qualifications.
5. Relationships with children.
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities.
7. Leadership and service management.

WHAT IS THE QUALITY AREA?

1.1 An Approved Learning Framework informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child’s learning and development.

1.2 Educators and co-ordinators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child.

It forms the backbone of our curriculum, but an educational program without a supportive environment will fall well short of its mark. Kirsty Liljegren asks critical questions to ensure the educational program and practice supports children’s learning and development.

EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

As educators we all aspire to have an educational program and practice that is stimulating and engaging in order to enhance children’s learning and development. How do we ensure that we can achieve this in order to fulfil each child’s potential? What does an engaging and stimulating practice look like? How does it foster children’s sense of belonging in order to further develop their sense of identity and allow them to flourish?

As we critically reflect on our practice it is important to have a strong sense of our pedagogical underpinnings together with how we see the needs of today’s child who exists in a changing world ‘…where global influences are strong and the nature of childhood is transforming. Societies are made up of people from many places with varied experiences all contributing to the richness and diversity of communities.’ (Department for Education and Child Development, 2008, p.9)

A shared understanding does not come easily and is a complicated web of interconnecting elements. Loris Malaguzzi, Reggio Emilia co-founder, likened learning to a ‘tangle of spaghetti’. Everything is connected and interdependent. If children do not feel good about themselves, safe and secure, then the curriculum becomes unreachable. If the environment doesn’t nurture positive relationships and invite children to learn and stimulate their natural sense of curiosity and wonder, then how are children able to learn effectively?


Services should have a strong sense of their belief systems for children, which should look and feel different according to the community that it reflects—the children, parents, grandparents and staff.

The process we have all undertaken to reshape our philosophy statement is a valuable one, and timely, too. Do you have strong sense of the identity of your service? What are your dreams and aspirations for your service, your children and families?

How do we make time in our extremely busy schedules to ensure our decision-making processes are based on solid foundations, and of a shared culture, values and intent. How do co-ordinators ensure all team members have an input, a voice into this shared vision?

What can we do to be relevant, current and, as per the Guide to the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011), ensure the educational program and practice responds to children’s interests and scaffolds their learning?

Listen and learn

Engaging all children and incorporating their interests is not a simple task, and to do this authentically, and competently, is a recipe requiring many ingredients. One of the crucial ingredients I believe is listening to children at play, supported by the important process of collaboration between educators.

What is it that these children are exploring, working though, wondering and enquiring about as they play? What are they theorising about? How do we support children as researchers, as they seek meaning from the environment they interact with?

Reggio Emilia has taught us many things about the pedagogy of listening to children, listening with all of our senses while tuned into the richness and complexities of the play. Vea Vecchi (2010) refers to the careful, respectful and tender ‘listening’ to children’s strategies and ways of thinking.

Our role as teachers is crucial; we have a responsibility to the children in our care to listen genuinely. As Carla Rinaldi suggests: ‘Observe and listen to children because when they ask “why?” they are not simply asking for the answer from you. They are requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers. This attitude of the child means that the child is a real researcher.'
If the environment doesn’t nurture positive relationships and invite children to learn and stimulate their natural sense of curiosity and wonder, then how can they learn effectively?

As human beings, we are all researchers of the meaning of life. Yet it is possible to destroy this attitude of the child with our quick answers and our certainty. How can we support and sustain this attitude of children to construct explanations? (Rinaldi, 2004, p.2)

**Rules of engagement**

There are many ways that we can engage with children and scaffold their learning, both individually and in groups. This can range from one-off experiences, to experiences and projects that may last several days, weeks or even months.

Currently, at Cornish College Early Learning Centre, we are undertaking an intriguing project with the big idea being about cubbies. The intent behind this project is to build a tree-house style mezzanine cubby in the four-year-old’s room, incorporating the ideas from the children. A strong interest in cubby building by the children over the last few years has been a catalyst for us to reflect on what this means for children and learning.

Key questions we asked were: What does a cubby mean to a child? What type of play happens here?

As we research this idea, we become learners, too, alongside the children as they investigate and further develop their ideas using many languages or modes of expression.

Right from the beginning, the children’s knowledge of what a tree-house cubby is becomes a springboard for further experiences and explorations, as does listening to the children’s play in other scenarios.

At a time when we can access research so readily, we have discovered some fascinating and useful information through Facebook, blogs and books to further understand and make sense of the learning that is occurring.

As Elizabeth N. Goodenough wrote in her foreword to *Special Places*: ‘Children know the importance of hiding out, of finding the “just for me place” where they cannot be seen. Peeking through a hollowed-out hedgerow or climbing a tree is the initial discovery of a “self-ish” space, a site detached from parents, siblings, teachers, or peers … We like to imagine that when this place of discovery is outdoors, children will find that the best things in life are still free: sand, air, trees, animals, water.

‘What girls and boys want most of all is to “make a world in which to find a place to discover a self.” However humble the shelter, these first getaways and solo vantage points live on in memory and imagination.’ (Sobel, 2002, p.viii)

**Learning strategies**

Documenting children’s play and ideas allows us to analyse and share the strategies and thinking used by the children as they work together. This makes the learning visible to the child and the community, and is an important resource for us as we reflect on the learning that has taken place and could occur in the future.

Of course, it’s not feasible to document all that we do with children, so it is important to be selective, prioritising what we are documenting, together with having a strong sense of “why?”, what is the purpose behind it, who is it for?

Doing this enables children to be authors of their own learning, together with what you decide is important for them to know or understand. It enables us to be selective, think things through, to research and gain insights into the child—their questioning, hypothesising and wonderings both as individuals and in groups.

Through careful consideration we can find the right balance of being in the moment with children together with making some of their learning visible through a variety of forms.

**Solid foundations**

The choices we make about the way our environment supports children’s learning, how we listen to children, is directly correlated to how we view children. Do we see the competent child, or do we work from a needs-based mindset?

One of the greatest gifts of Reggio Emilia is the strong and
What is stimulating and engaging for babies and toddlers? The overwhelming response from staff working in the under twos room was 'connecting with people!'

Clayton (18 months) is sitting at the table happily singing out 'red,' ‘green’ as he sorts the wooden blocks. Sally, his teacher, joins him in the game, intentionally misnaming colours. Clayton laughs loudly, saying 'No!' and correcting Sally. The game continues awhile, with both Clayton and Sally showing delight and pleasure.

Later, Sally reflects on this: 'How else could I scaffold Clayton's interest in sorting? Does he want to cement his knowledge of colours? Is it about sharing his knowledge with me? Or is it about sharing an experience with me?'

Sally investigates further by setting up a combination of colours and shapes to sort.

In the coming weeks it becomes clear to Sally that Clayton is using his knowledge of colours to develop a strong connection to her. During this time, Clayton would run to Sally on arrival saying ‘green jumper!’ while pulling at his jumper, or pick up the yellow ball and run to Sally telling her the ball was yellow.

There is so much engagement and learning happening in this scenario. The key is an educator who is focused, reflective and who shares with the child the delight and excitement of learning.

Lynn Farrell, manager, Learning and Development Services, The Infants’ Home.

powerful image of the child, a child that actively seeks to make meaning with the world right from birth. Our society is inclined to see the needy child: the child that needs protecting, the ‘sponge’ or empty vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge.

The National Quality Standard invites us to view children as competent and capable, and this should be at the very foundation of the choices and decisions that we make with our programs and practice.

They [children] are autonomously capable of making meaning from their daily life experiences through mental acts involving planning, co-ordination of ideas, and abstraction ... The central act of adults, therefore, is to activate, especially indirectly, the meaning-making competencies of children as a basis of all learning. They must try to capture the right moments, and then find the right approaches, for bringing together, into a fruitful dialogue, their meanings and interpretations with those of the children.’ (Loris Malaguzzi, quoted in Edwards et al, 1993, p.75).

Good intentions

The concept of intentional teaching is an important one. Young children deserve the very best programs we can offer them, but what makes me nervous is its possible interpretation. Will it mean that formal learning will be inflicted on young children because it is seen as extending children's learning? Will worksheets be handed out because it ‘keeps parents happy’? Will it mean that formal learning will be inflicted on young children because it is seen as extending children's learning? Will you let go of, to see what possibilities can emerge?

Together with intentional teaching, we should also be mindful of the importance of a sense of joy and fun, being open to those unexpected moments.

And when thinking about our program and practice, perhaps we can be reminded of Bruner's suggestion of ‘learning productively’, in his introduction to The Wonder of Learning. He suggests the art of learning is about elaboration of what has been learned, rather than the acquisition and storage of information. It is about a depth of knowledge, and that ‘thoughtful learning promotes not only human competence, but also creative dignity’ (The Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2011, p.10). Bruner titles his introduction, ‘The pursuit of the possible’, which to me is full of optimism and hope, as we should be with our attitude to what we can make possible through our exemplary practice with young children.

Kirsty Liljegren is teaching director of the Cornish College Early Learning Centre. An advocate of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, she is a regular presenter at conferences throughout Australasia. With 25 years teaching experience, Kirsty recently received a NEiTA 2011 ASG Inspirational Teaching Award for innovative practice.

References


As director of Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace, Helen Conway is leading the charge to address gender bias in the workplace. She talks to Rattler about her efforts to ensure that equality becomes a reality.

Why did you take on your current role as director of Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace?
In my former life I was a corporate executive and director and worked across various industries, and during that time I had an ongoing interest in equal opportunities for women.

I accepted the role at EOWA because I am committed to driving change in the gender space. I am deeply concerned by the fact that despite improvements in the conditions and prospects of working women over the last couple of decades, gender inequality remains prevalent in Australian workplaces. Women, for example, continue to earn less than men and are significantly under-represented in leadership positions.

What do you hope to achieve?
I want to drive a shift in workplace culture to a point where gender equality is a reality: where caring and family responsibilities pose no barrier to career progression, where flexible work practices are available to men as well as women—and taken up by them. I want to see workplaces where employees are engaged and promoted purely on the basis of merit, and all workers receive equal pay for work of equal or comparable value.

The education and care sector is 98 per cent women, what changes would you like to see in a sector such as ours?
The education and care sector is an area where the skills and expertise of its workers can be undervalued, often because of a traditional view that they are performing ‘women’s work’. We need to examine whether the remuneration and working conditions within this sector reflect the workloads, responsibilities and challenges shouldered by its employees. They must be remunerated fairly.

You’ve noted our slow progress to gender parity. Why is pay equity so important?
Regrettably, at 17.4 per cent, the current gender pay gap is about the same as it has been for a couple of decades and this has serious financial implications for women, most particularly when it comes to their retirement savings. Sadly, women are two-and-a-half times more likely to be living in poverty in their old age than men.

Why does the gender pay gap still exist—why hasn’t it changed in 25 years?
Progress has been hindered by the concentration of women and men in different occupations, industries, and job levels. Many jobs women do are undervalued. Also, women continue to shoulder the majority of caring work and are under-represented in management and leadership positions where higher salaries are paid.

What’s stopping us from exacting change? Where do we need to start?
Change can only occur when leadership is firmly committed to gender diversity. As with any business initiative, accountability is also an essential part of making change happen. This means establishing clear action plans, measuring and transparently reporting on outcomes, and holding managers to account for achieving results.

Employers can begin by conducting an analysis of what barriers to gender equality may exist within their organisation and put in place action plans to address the issues they identify. For example, they can do a pay analysis to determine if they have a gender pay gap. They can ask themselves whether working flexibly in their organisation limits a person’s career. Tools to guide companies through these processes are available on EOWA’s website.

What is your vision for the future?
My vision is for all Australians to be able to reach their full potential in the workplace, regardless of gender.

And what would this future mean for the childcare industry?
That the childcare industry would become a more attractive career prospect for both women and men.

What keeps you awake at night?
Not a lot these days. Working hard to improve gender equality in the workplace generally leads to a good night’s sleep! There is still a lot to do.
We know educational leaders need to be ‘suitably qualified and experienced’ but what does it really mean to have an educational leader operating in your service—and how do we keep them informed and motivated?

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS NOMINATED BY DIRECTORS

Trish Brown
Director, UnitingCare Children’s Services:
‘UnitingCare Children’s Services (UCCS) recognises the educational leader plays a key role in a service, guiding and monitoring the application of theory to practice. They need to have currency and be passionate and enthusiastic about embracing the Early Years Learning Framework. The ability to share skills and knowledge while working alongside the team is key, as is the scope of the role—supporting the program across all rooms and groups in the service.

The educational leader in a UCCS service is nominated by the service director, after consultation with the staff. To qualify for nomination, we reflect upon our Guiding Principles for the Implementation of the Educational Program, ensuring the educational leader is either the director (early childhood teacher) or a suitably experienced room leader (diploma).

‘We value our educational leaders, providing support and professional development through: mock assessment visits for all services, review of draft Quality Improvement Plans, professional reflections with members of UCCS management team, leadership training; targeted resourcing, training and mentoring in services; combined director/co-ordinator meetings for the UCCS network; and UCCS express newsletter, informing current training available and updates on information as it becomes available from the sector.’

DIRECTOR AS EDUCATIONAL LEADER

Tricia Brown
Director, Gymea Preschool:
‘As a new director with the new quality framework, I thought it was really important for me to lead by example in improving the level of education in the centre.

‘We have a very big team here, with lots of experienced early childhood-trained teachers, so the management committee was very keen to have like-mindedness in the team—as it’s my first year here, to bring everybody together, they felt it was important that I be the leader at this time.

‘Now that we’re pulling this document apart and everybody is reflecting every day and making education a really important part of what we do, I can see that I can make sub-committees. I’m deciding whether to nominate them based on their experience, but I’d like to involve as many as are willing.

‘For the more experience teachers, it’s re-invigorated us. They love that they are being seen as professionals, that the board of management are aware of them as professionals, so it’s lifted their profile and reinvigorated their teaching.’

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS CHOSEN THROUGH CONSULTATION

Danielle Gallacher
Manager, Children’s Services Community Management:
‘There were plenty of discussions and collaboration with our teams on who the educational leaders would be. The teams talked about and defined what they thought it meant to be a leader and an educator and, generally, what the role meant bringing those two aspects together.’

EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER AS EDUCATIONAL LEADER

Felicity Barclay
Director, Gordon Community Preschool:
‘Our educational leader, Alex Hammond, is one of our four early childhood teachers, and has always naturally shown a particular interest in learning theories and the documenting of children’s thinking and learning; she is very keen to attend professional development training.

‘It is early days yet but so far Alex has set up a fortnightly focus meeting. She runs the meeting and the current focus is to have each room take a turn to talk about their program, the approach to planning, to share challenges, and to practice articulating the way we are thinking and practicing intentionality. Alex has also said she will look up articles for team members or take up ideas for discussion or exploration.

‘Our plan is to look out for courses for Alex to attend, which may further support her in this new role. We are sure the role will morph and change as time goes on.

‘As I am a non-teaching director, it’s great to have Alex taking on this role; this notion of shared leadership has to benefit everyone. The centre of our work in early childhood education surely has to be the “why” or the “intention” behind what it is we do. I see the educational leader role as putting this at the forefront.’
How is the educational leader operating at your service?

‘It was important to evaluate team members’ strengths, qualifications, and people’s interest and passion for guiding the development of the program and mentoring colleagues.

‘Our educational leaders engaged in a workshop where they collaboratively developed a position description for the new role. This involved defining our goals—what this role will do; what do we want to inspire our educators to be; how are we going to inform other educators and families—and defining how the educational leaders are going to oversee the program, advocate the importance of quality children’s programs with educators, family and community, and support educators to be meaningful in planning and reflection.

‘Other professional development will be via online workshops, time for research, and consultation and collaboration with other educational leaders during networking meetings, workshop sessions from Children’s Services Central and in-centre training. We hope this will ensure our Education Leaders stay informed of current information and continue to support and motivate them in their role.’

### DIRECTORS CHOSEN AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

**Michelle Richardson**
Manager, Professional Learning and Development: ‘We have always acknowledged the significant leadership contribution early childhood teachers bring to the construction of curriculum and children’s educational outcomes. Historically, the role of the director within KU services has assumed these leadership responsibilities, and the role of educational leader.

‘Professional learning opportunities for educational leaders at KU have been designed to provoke, inspire and support educational leaders’ capacities to mentor, drive and shape curriculum within the context of their service and community. Professional learning communities have been established in addition to existing pedagogy networks, to promote critical reflection, a diverse range of educational perspectives and ongoing professional dialogue. In addition, KU is fortunate to have consolidated relationships with experts and academics in the field. These relationships continue to assist the educational leader to explore concepts of leadership, pedagogy and change.

‘New leaders are demonstrating an appreciation of the support of the organisation’s structure, including the Early Childhood Education Teams and KU’s professional networks.

‘The teams have developed and consolidated a culture of inquiry, research and professional sharing, and continue to provide invaluable support and guidance to new leaders as well as mentorship and provocation to experienced leaders. This collaborative community, inclusive of leaders and practitioners, ensures a culture of dialogue, debate, research and reflection that continues to impact rich pedagogical practices and outcomes for children and families.’

### EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER AS EDUCATIONAL LEADER

**Kylie Paddy**
Head of School, Hills Montessori Preschool: ‘The educational leader at our service is one of our classroom teachers. She was chosen for the role because of her extensive knowledge of the Montessori philosophy and child development, and many years experience in the field.

‘She sees this role as one that allows her to ensure the program offered to the children is reflective of the Early Years Learning Framework, while keeping the Montessori method of teaching ingrained within this.

‘She has embraced the position by ensuring the children have a program that instils a love of learning, that staff are mentored and discussions take place on a regular basis so effective learning experiences are offered to the children, and that parents are kept informed of the new regulations.

‘Reflection and continuous improvement are high on her agenda and she is embracing this new role with dedication and passion.’

### EDUCATIONAL LEADER CHOSEN BY STAFF

**Eny Barbosa**
Educational Leader, Auburn Long Day Child Care Centre: ‘The staff chose me as educational leader. Since taking on the role I’ve been searching for information to give the rest of the team.

‘I recently went to a training session about being educational leader. The facilitator encouraged me to always reflect on: What I am doing? Why I am doing it? Can I do it better? Also, Auburn Children’s Services Network organises meetings every two months for educational leaders from local community-based services to discuss what we’re doing as educational leaders.

‘At the moment I am working on the possibility for change to our observational format and our programming format, to make it easier to link them with the Early Years Learning Framework outcomes.

‘This role is important because while we always followed the regulations before, it’s good for someone to be looking carefully at our programming and to keep the staff’s learning ongoing. Most of our staff have been here 10 years or more and you get used to the same old thing. It’s good for someone to always be giving them something new.’
**Lightning Jack**  
By Glenda Millard and Patricia Mullins  
Published by Scholastic Press  
Cost: $26.99  
Our small cowboy-booted protagonist Sam Tully introduces us to this picture book’s namesake with the words ‘a gallant horse, a midnight horse, a horse called Lightning Jack.’ When he first sees the spirited brumby, Sam vows to ride him, sparking an outback adventure in which he musters cattle, flies into the air like the mythic Pegasus, is ambushed by Ned Kelly and even races against a ghostly Phar Lap. Only near the end of this lyrical tale do we learn it is a fantasy: the black stallion is in fact a painted carousel horse in an urban fun park. Glenda Millard’s whimsical story is complemented by Patricia Mullins’ delightful illustrations, which combine watercolours with torn tissue paper to capture the colour, texture and movement of wild brumbies, racehorses and stampeding steer. *Lightning Jack* will engage young readers when read aloud, but would best suit children three years and above.

**Ivy Loves to Give**  
By Freya Blackwood  
Published by Little Hare Books  
Cost: $24.99  
True to its title, *Ivy Loves to Give* presents. They might not always be quite right, like giving mum’s cup of tea to a chicken, dad’s shoe to a snail, grandma’s reading glasses to the dog or her baby brother’s dummy to the family cat... But that doesn’t stop this spirited little philanthropist.  

The simple story is told with minimal text, as writer-illustrator Freya Blackwood’s illustrations really tell the story. Once again, Blackwood captures modern family life beautifully with her trademark pencil and watercolour drawings. Her attention to the details of domestic life is wonderful: a mother sits breastfeeding an infant, breakfast sits untouched on the kitchen table, a chook wanders into the house, and dad scratches his head while pondering the whereabouts of his lost shoe.  

At its core, *Ivy Loves to Give* is about acts of kindness and their often unexpected rewards—an important life lesson for the youngest of readers. An act of kindness by Ivy’s big sister brings the story full circle (and ends with a hug) reminding us that receiving is pretty nice, too. *Ivy Loves to Give* is appropriate for ages one to four.

**Show Day**  
By Penny Matthews and Andrew McLean  
Published by Omnibus Books for Scholastic Australia  
Cost: $26.99  
Today is a special day for Lil and her family: it’s Show Day. With Princess Marigold (Goldie) the cow, Albert the grumpy rooster and Bart the guinea pig, Lil and her family travel from the farm to the showgrounds to compete in the country show. Mum enters her giant pumpkin, cake, jams and scones, and Dad puts his orange marmalade on show. He even takes a crack at the wood-chopping contest, although he’s not very good. And while her little brother Henry is hoping to win the Best Pet prize, Lil has a secret entry for the Most Unusual Pet...  

Readers aged four and older will get the most from this adventure that takes them through the prize-winning highs and shows us how Lil and her family put aside the disappointments when things don’t go to plan. After all, ‘that’s show business’.

**Time Bomb: Work, rest and play in Australia today**  
By Barbara Pocock, Natalie Skinner and Philippa Williams  
Published by NewSouth Books  
Cost: $34.95  
Australian parents are all too familiar with the phrase, ‘time poor’. As this thought-provoking book’s blurb says: ‘Time poverty is a problem for many Australians and work is the main culprit.’ Recreation time and employment are increasingly at odds, and many Australians are sleep-deprived, fatigued and too busy to take a holiday. Pocock, Skinner and Williams argue that it’s getting harder, not easier, for working parents to spend time with their young children, putting unprecedented pressure on our households and our communities. *Time Bomb* draws on five years of research by the University of South Australia’s Centre for Work + Life about the demands of work and care. Gender, work and community are key themes in this book, which looks at poor urban planning, inefficient public transport, workplace laws and practices, childcare obligations and other issues that rob us of that precious, precious commodity—time! With chapters including ‘Learn, earn, burn’, ‘Caring by the clock’, and ‘We need to talk about work, Kevin’, this accessible text is easy to understand. A must-read for children’s services peak bodies and policy-makers, who need to be aware of this alarming trend in their everyday work with communities and families.
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