

Productivity commission submission

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital community childcare centre is a service located in the western suburbs of Adelaide providing quality education and care to over 100 families.

We are licensed to educate and care for up to 50 children per day ranging from 3 months to 5 years of age. We service a unique community both culturally and socio-economically diverse.

As a service we have first-hand experience of the issues that have surrounded the early childhood education and care sector for many years. In this submission we will highlight the issues that impact our service, its educators and the community the most.

We include statements from our educators on:

- Their experiences working in the sector,
- Their views on quality, and the changes needed to achieve quality
- The role professional wages play in ensuring quality and parent confidence
- The impact that staff turnover has on children and families
- The role the NQF plays in achieving quality and their experience of the paperwork that goes with it.
- Their ideas on how early childhood education and care can be improved.

We asked our educators what it was like working in the early childhood education and care sector. Educators agreed that although rewarding, the job was challenging and undervalued. Many educators said that the work does not stop when they finish their shift. Exhausted from the day, they then go home to finish paperwork in their own time unpaid.

As one educator says “You have to love this job to work it every day. It can be physically and mentally tiring but 100% worthwhile when you can influence children in their first few (very important) years of life. Being underpaid and not recognised as professionals within the sector is seeing many educators leave, which is a huge shame. Seeing children grow, learn and laugh is what keeps us here.”

Other educators focused on the importance on our role as educators. Creating those secure attachments, supporting, guiding and scaffolding childrens experiences contributing to life long learning was why they stay in the profession.

Another educator writes “The most rewarding part of my job is to come in and spend time building secure attachments and relationships with the children and their families. Knowing that you are using your knowledge to support, guide and scaffold children through all aspects of their learning and development, contributing to life long learning during the most important years of their life.”

When asked what quality looks like to them our educators believed nurturing, relaxed environments in which children felt safe and secure enough to explore their environment, be active participants in their learning and take risks was essential for quality. They also stated that primary caregiving, partnerships

with families and qualified professional and dedicated educators who are respected by children, their parents, the committee and the wider community was also important in achieving quality.

One educator writes “Quality looks like engaged, inquisitive children, happy engaged educators and parents who have trust and are happy to leave their children in our care. Quality also includes nurturing, enriching environments and interactions that encourage risk taking as well as respectful relationships between educators, children and families.”

When asked what changes need to happen to achieve quality there was no doubt that lower ratios and higher wages for educators were needed to retain educators and provide high quality education and care.

An educator explains “Lower ratios provide opportunities for quality small group and 1:1 interactions. It is extremely challenging to provide toddlers with a safe environment to explore with a ratio of 1:8 and almost impossible to be available to scaffold their learning experiences ,whilst providing adequate supervision.

If a nappy change is required in a typical toddler room with two educators and 16 children, one educator would need to supervise 15 children whilst the other changed the nappy. If all 16 children required assistance with toileting, and a quality unhurried nappy change took on average five minutes, one educator is left with 15 children for an hour and fifteen minutes. This would need to occur several times a day and is not safe and certainly not high quality!”

The national Quality Standards (NQS) states:

‘Responsive learning relationships are strengthened as educators and children learn together. Educators are more likely to be responsive, purposeful and thoughtful when staffing arrangements at the service allow them to direct their full attention to their work with children, and when they do not have to attend simultaneously to other tasks.’ (adapted from the Early Years Learning Framework, pages 14–15.)(NQS pg 112)

Another educator explains that higher wages are necessary for quality education and care.

She writes “Qualified dedicated educators who are paid well and respected as professionals, will be happier and more likely to stay in the same centre over a longer period of time and therefore turnover of educators would be lower and consistency maintained.”

When posed the question about the role professional wages played in ensuring quality and parent confidence educators were unanimous in their opinions that higher wages would:

- Help retain professional educators, which would in turn maintain quality, consistency and parent confidence.
- Lessen the stress on personal and external lives of educators which promotes positive wellbeing and leads to happier educators.

- Reassure parents that the service values educator knowledge and their experience and regards them as professionals.
- Help change societies perception of the profession. If we are paid like professional educators, society would start to regard us as so.

High educator turnover can have devastating effect on quality. Finding quality educators willing to work for low pay can be difficult. Often as a service we find educators use ECEC as experience and funding during their university studies. Availability is often sporadic arranged around their study time table which affects educator consistency. When educators leave it often takes months to go through the interview process which can also be costly. This takes valuable resources away from the children as we are a non for profit organisation. Once a new educator has been hired they then need to be trained and start to build relationships with other educators, children and families. It can be a stressful time for all.

The NQS states: Consistent and committed educators and coordinators support good quality standards and continuity of care for children. (NQS pg111)

One educator explains her experience of the impact staff turnover has had on children and families.

“It is upsetting for both children and their families to lose someone they have formed a strong trusting relationship with. It is hard enough for families to initially leave their children in the care of educators, having someone new causes an uneasy feeling of needing to form a new trusting relationship. Consistency and secure attachments are vital in ensuring children are trusting, confident and happy in their environments.”

Our educators believe the National Quality Framework plays an important role in achieving quality. Like any new framework, it takes time, training and understanding to implement successfully. However once you have in place the systems, policies and procedures necessary for successful implementation, it is easily managed.

Our educators have expressed their disappointment at the decision to lower the standards needed to achieve a rating of ‘*exceeding quality standards*’. They believe that lowering the standards will essentially lower the quality of care within the sector. They believe that continuous reflection and improvement lifts quality and creates better outcomes for the children.

One educator writes *“The framework gives a clear understanding of what we need to do to maintain a high quality centre and emphasises the need to continually reflect and improve ourselves.”*

Another educator writes of the importance of the NQF and how it is incorporated into our service to achieve quality.

“We continually reflect on our practice incorporating the NQF to achieve the goals we set for ourselves, our children, their families and the service. We strive for high quality at all times which includes continual professional development and NQF fundamentals embedded into our philosophy. The paperwork is a byproduct of these processes and is necessary to our continual reflection showing where we have come from and where we are heading.”

How can the early childhood and care sector be improved?

As a service we believe there needs to be a major change to the way early childhood education and care is viewed by the community. The government can play an important role in making this happen. If the government values educators as professionals, the community is more likely to change its perception of the sector.

Educators need to be paid more. Experience shows that \$19 an hour is not enough to retain educators within the sector and in turn leads to inconsistency and lower quality education and care.

There need to be guidelines for registered training organisations (RTO's) that provide Diploma and Certificate 3 courses to educators that include minimum on the job experience and comprehensive theory units. You cannot expect a Certificate 3 qualified educator that has completed a six week online course, to have the same underpinning knowledge as an educator with the same qualification that has completed a ten month full time comprehensive TAFE course.

These courses need to also have field educators come and assess students. Educators are not trained to sign off on student competence nor is it in their job description to do so.

Ratios need to be lower. It is not acceptable, safe or high quality to expect educators to be able to educate and care for children at the current ratio levels.

As the Early Years Framework suggests, Quality education and care needs to be child focused. Money should not be the deciding factor in determining the importance of quality in these young citizens lives. These children are the future of our nation. We need to invest now to ensure the best possible outcomes for them and ensure that our nation is able to compete on a global scale in the future.

We leave you with a quote from an article written for the National Childcare Accreditation Council by Professor Frank Oberklaid.

“Nurturing and responsive relationships build healthy brain architecture, providing a strong foundation for childrens learning, behavior and health. The relationship a child has with their caregivers literally sculpts their brain and determines the development of brain circuits. Therefore it is essential that child care settings promote consistent, nurturing relationships between childcare professionals and children in which childrens needs are recognised and responded to sensitively.” (NCAC Issue 24 Dec 2007)

Sources:

Websites : www.acecqa.gov.au

Newsletters: Oberklaid,F. 'Brain development and the life course-the importance of the early caretaking environment.' Putting children first, issue 24 Dec 2007 pages 8-9 (NCAC).