



BIG STEPS QUALITY MATTERS REPORT INTERIM FINDINGS

MAY 2014



INTRODUCTION



United Voice, the early childhood education and care union, represents 17,000 early childhood directors and educators across Australia. United Voice members are actively campaigning to reform the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector through our Big Steps campaign.

United Voice members recognise that as educators we take responsibility each and every day for the growth and development of children in our care. Big Steps is our campaign to win a high quality sector with a professionally paid workforce so we can ensure that nothing stands in our way to delivering on this great responsibility to each and every child.

In March 2014 United Voice surveyed 1350 members and non-members from across the Victorian ECEC sector to understand their experiences of quality reforms implemented in 2012. The survey focused on those reforms included under the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the Early Years Early Framework (EYLF).

Educators and directors were asked to reflect on how the new Framework and qualification requirements have affected their practice as educators and the quality of the sector as a whole. This report outlines preliminary findings from this survey. Its focus is on questions regarding how the NQF reforms have affected educators' ability to meet children's and parent's needs. A second detailed report, to be released later in the year, will focus on how the reforms have affected the working conditions of staff.



United Voice members are the backbone of our community. We're proud of our hard work. We want to be valued for it. And we're ready to speak up.



Approved by Jess Walsh, United Voice Victorian Secretary.
unitedvoicevic.org.au



QUALITY MATTERS



The first five years are critical to a child's development. This is the most rapid period of a child's brain development, and establishes the foundational capacities (linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional and regulatory) upon which future development for a successful adulthood occurs. Research across medical and social disciplines identifies a relationship between quality ECEC and improved social, psychological, health and economic outcomes. The research indicates that positive experiences in early childhood can have long-term impacts on health, learning and behaviour. This is particularly the case for children from disadvantaged or vulnerable populations.ⁱ

In assessing the benefits that can accrue from ECEC, it is important to note that quality matters. The research points to the complex range of benefits that stem from high quality ECEC; they are not associated with poor quality ECEC services.ⁱⁱ In fact there are negative effects from low quality ECEC, and these are particularly pronounced for children under two, with the potential for 'long-term poor outcomes'.ⁱⁱⁱ

A number of interrelated factors determine quality ECEC, including the physical environment, educator-to-child ratios and the qualifications of educators in the sector.^{iv} International research has also shown that staff working conditions are a key determinant of quality ECEC.^v Factors which influence the high-turnover of staff (low-wages, lack of career progression) negatively impact on the quality of ECEC provision.

In recognition of the importance of quality ECEC, Australian state and federal governments embarked on a series of policy initiatives to support the vision that all Australian children have access to high quality early education and care. The most significant of these policy initiatives was the National Quality Framework (NQF). Implemented in 2012, the NQF incorporated measures to improve educator-to-child ratios, to ensure minimum qualifications for all educators, and improve curriculum and reporting requirements.

UNITED VOICE MEMBERS CAMPAIGNED HARD FOR THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK REFORMS. WE BELIEVE THAT CHILDREN DESERVE QUALITY EDUCATION AND CARE, AND THAT THERE SHOULD BE HIGH STANDARDS FOR ALL ECEC SERVICES AND THOSE WHO PROVIDE THEM.

QUALITY MATTERS SURVEY: KEY FINDINGS



- Over 18% of respondents work in centres operating at or above the 2016 educator-to-child ratios.



- 26% have witnessed a serious incident involving a child due to poor educator-to-child ratios. This stands as a warning to the Federal Government which wants to pause the implementation of the new 1:11 ratio for children over 36 months.



- Over 90% of respondents currently have a relevant qualification in ECEC and the remainder are working towards a qualification.



- 52% have either obtained their qualification in the last 2 years, or were currently working towards a qualification. Over 75% of these educators believed that their qualifications had improved their practice as educators.



- More than 70% believe that rolling back qualification requirements will lead to a decrease in the quality of ECEC provision.



- Almost 67% believed that the new curriculum requirements have improved their ability to meet the needs of children.



- 60% believed that these requirements have improved the satisfaction and confidence of parents.

NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK



Better quality ECEC through more one-on-one time

Better educator-to-child ratios improve quality by giving staff more time to engage meaningfully with individual children. When there are more staff each educator can spend less time on basic tasks such as toileting and feeding. This frees them up to engage children in spontaneous interaction and one-on-one time to build relationships and knowledge. Research has shown that these interactions are the basis of effective play-based early years education and are essential to building child confidence and social skills.

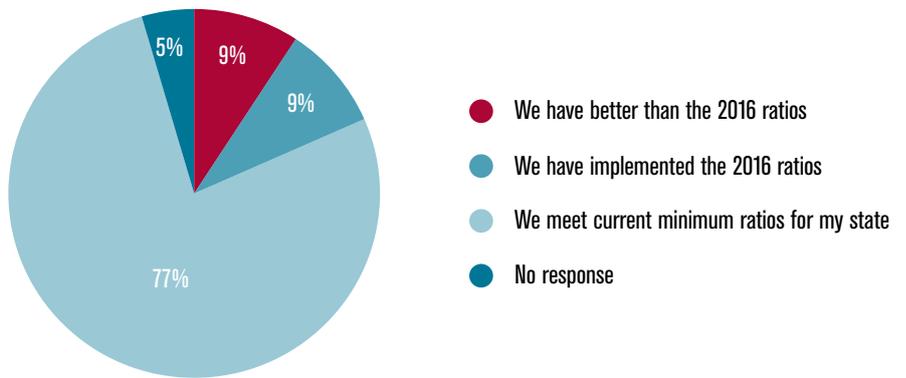
In recognition of this research the National Quality Framework introduced the following improved ratios for children and made ratios consistent across the country.

NQF educator-to-child ratios			
Age of children	NQF Ratios	Current educator-to-child ratios in Victoria	Date requirement applies from
Birth to 24 months	1 : 4	1 : 4	1 January 2012 - All states and territories (1 August 2012 - WA)
Over 24 months and less than 36 months	1 : 4	1 : 5	1 January 2012 - ACT, NT, TAS 1 August 2012 - WA 1 January 2016 - NSW, QLD, SA <i>Saving provision applies in VIC where ratios exceed national standard</i>
Over 36 months up to and including preschool age	1 : 15	1 : 11	1 January 2012 - NT 1 January 2016 - ACT, QLD, VIC <i>Saving provision applies in NSW, SA, TAS, WA where ratios exceed national standard</i>
Over preschool age	No national ratio has been set (state and territory ratios may apply)		

The Liberal Party policy released prior to the 2013 Federal Election is to ‘pause’ the implementation of the 1:11 ratio for children over 36 months. This would have the largest impact in Victoria where minimum educator to child ratios is currently the worst in the country for children aged 36 months and over, at one educator to every 15 children.

Given that existing ratios could now be paused, survey respondents were asked what ratios were currently in place in their centres. As illustrated in Table 2, despite concerns about cost and implementation, over 18% of respondents worked in centres already operating at or above the 2016 ratios.

What educator-to-child ratio does your centre currently maintain?



"I looked after 15 3-4 year olds on my own under the 1:15 ratio and there were many incidents. One person can just not deal with two situations at one time. It makes supervision of the room and bathroom hard or dealing with toileting accidents while not embarrassing the child by changing them in the room so you can watch others."

"Two children left the room via bathroom when I first started in childcare, they climbed the fence and ran next door to the school. (One educator to 15 children)."

"I had 15 children by myself in the room. One child (who has a behaviour issue) ran out of the room and went to outdoor area but I couldn't get him right away. He hurt himself but I couldn't explain how he hurt himself to the parent."

Have you ever witnessed a serious incident involving a child which was the result of poor educator-to-child ratios?

26% of respondents had witnessed a serious incident involving a child that was due to poor educator-to-child ratios. Common incidents included:

- Children being injured/having accidents and fighting (biting) because of inadequate supervision.
- Children escaping the supervised area without the knowledge of the educators.
- Staff giving children the wrong medication.
- Children being left behind when a group of children are moved into other areas.
- Delays in toileting children or providing comfort in moments of distress.

"AT A PREVIOUS CENTRE A CHILD WAS CHOKING ON A TOY IN A THREE YEAR OLD ROOM WITH JUST ONE EDUCATOR TO 15 CHILDREN."

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Educator

NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK



Better quality ECEC through qualifications and professional learning

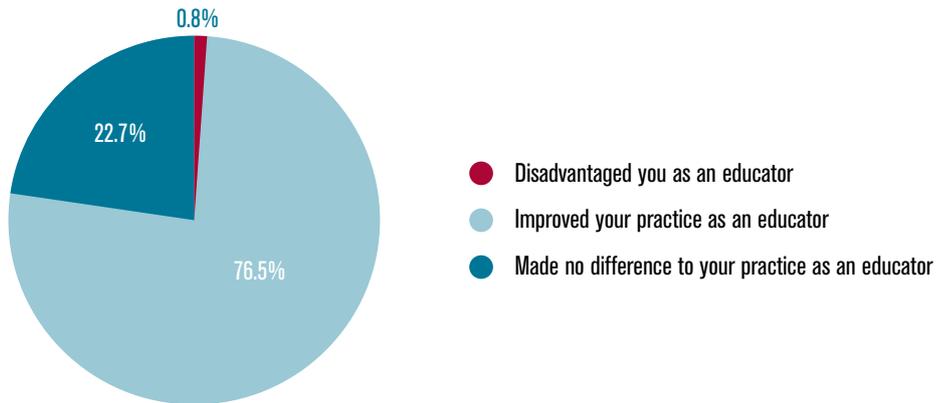
International research has shown that staff qualifications are one of the strongest determinants of high quality education care. In particular, it finds that staff qualifications:

- Improve the types of engagements that educators have with children.
- Give educators the resources to implement effective play-based education programs which support skill and social development and that are responsive to the needs of individual children.^{vi}

The National Quality Framework introduced minimum qualification requirements across the ECEC sector. These include the requirement to employ a teacher, half of all staff to hold a diploma or higher qualification and minimum certificate III qualifications for all staff.

Over 90% of respondents currently have a relevant qualification in ECEC and the remainder are working towards a relevant qualification. 53% of respondents had either obtained their qualification in the last two years, or were currently working towards a qualification. These respondents were asked what effect this qualification had had on their practice as an educator.

If you gained a formal qualification in the last two years, has it:



A significant majority of these respondents believed that gaining formal qualifications has improved their practice as an educator. While, less than 1% believed that it had disadvantaged their practice as an educator.

"I am much more equipped to work in this sector, aiding my professionalism, knowledge and confidence. My education has given me the tools to further improve my centre, and the sector as a whole."

"There is no doubt that my formal education has enhanced my professional performance. Knowledge and understanding of early childhood development underpins all my practice and improves the quality of care."

"Good education and care in the early years can have a positive impact on babies and young children as they grow and develop. The qualification I gained helped me to improve the skills, knowledge and understanding I need to give the children I work with the best possible start in life."

"RESEARCH HAS CONSISTENTLY AND UNEQUIVOCALLY PROVEN THAT AN ONGOING POSITIVE EXPERIENCE OF HIGH QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION ARE ESSENTIAL FOR CHILDREN ACROSS THEIR LIFETIME. IT IS SIMPLY NOT POSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE THE NECESSARY HIGH QUALITY IF EDUCATORS ARE NOT THEMSELVES EDUCATED."

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Educator



"We are not babysitters, we are educators. Unqualified staff are as bad as using Google to diagnose medical conditions without consulting a doctor."

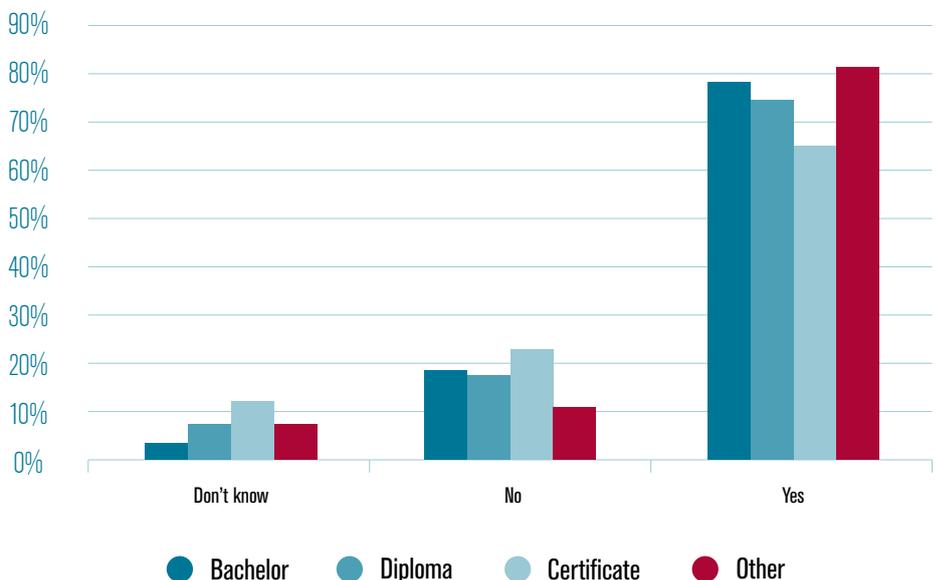
"I firmly believe that it is critically important that all educators working with young children to have a basic knowledge of how children develop, of strategies for guiding and developing children's learning and behaviour, and for building partnerships with parents and families. These are essential components of working in the early childhood field, and while there is a lot that can be learnt on the job, there also needs to be the foundation knowledge that can be built upon."

If the qualification requirements were to be rolled back, would it decrease the quality of ECEC?

Some operators and politicians have argued that the qualification requirements are costly and are not necessary to ensure the quality of ECEC services.

Educators were asked if they believed rolling back of qualification requirements would impact on the quality of care. More than 70% of respondents said they believed that rolling back these requirements would lead to a decrease in the quality of ECEC provision. Significantly, even those without a formal qualification strongly supported the qualification requirements.

Do you believe removing the requirement for all educators to hold a minimum Certificate III will negatively impact on the quality of care in centres?



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“I’VE SEEN UNQUALIFIED STAFF YELL AT CHILDREN AND THEN ISOLATE THEM; A CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS BE EXPECTED TO RESPOND IN A MANNER OF A CHILD WITHOUT THOSE NEEDS AND I’VE SEEN A CHILD FED FOOD THAT HE WAS ALLERGIC TO.”

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Educator

“I’ve seen isolation or no afternoon tea as punishment. Children being dragged by arm. Special needs children being labelled as naughty and putting pressure on families to fix these ‘problems’.”

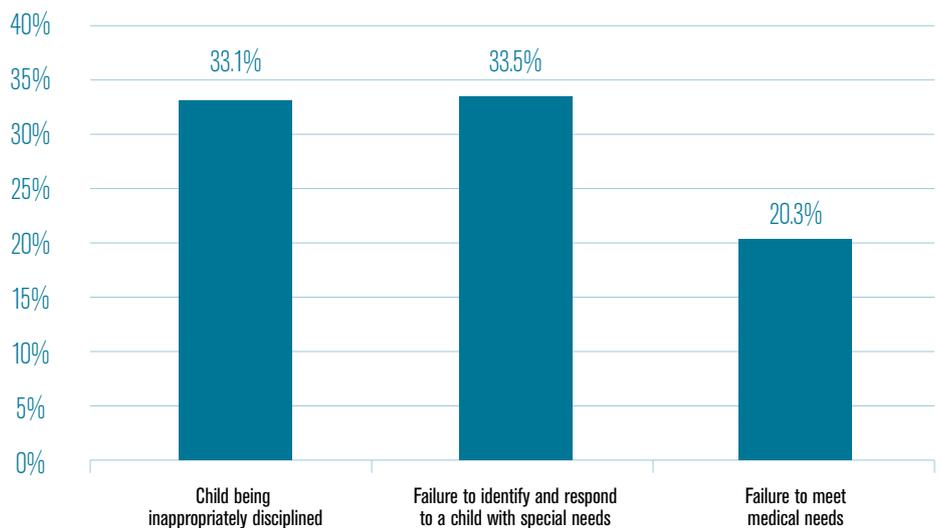
“I’ve seen children being put in corners and yelled at. Staff who don’t understand child behavioural issues and don’t provide adequate support for children with special needs. Staff who don’t understand proper procedures for children with allergies.”

“Many unqualified casuals will often use inappropriate discipline and not understand why this is inappropriate. They don’t have the training to understand special needs children puts stress on other educators.”

A significant proportion of respondents have witnessed serious incidents as a result of the inadequate qualifications of staff members. These incidents include:

- Inappropriate behaviour management strategies, including the use of ‘time outs’ (isolation) with young children.
- Educators ‘freezing’ because they didn’t have enough experience in dealing with stressful situations.
- A lack of awareness of appropriate developmental milestones for children with special needs, and an inability to implement developmentally appropriate tasks for those children.
- Not knowing the signs of or how to deal with an allergic reaction.

Have you experienced/witnessed any of the following because of inadequate qualifications of staff?





**PROFESSIONAL
STANDARDS MAKE
THE DIFFERENCE**



He was just three years old but had already been deemed a difficult and disruptive child who was too much for his childcare centre when Kerrie Devir first met “Anthony” last year.

As his mother told Kerrie, Anthony had spent almost as much time isolated in the centre director’s office as he had in contact with the other children. He was at times verbally and physically violent, hitting out at other children, and also angry and defiant.

Kerrie later learned that a psychiatrist was considering a diagnosis of ADHD and medication to manage Anthony’s behaviour. But eight weeks after he began attending an education and care service with experienced and trained educators it was clear there was no need to medicate him.

“I would love to say I did something amazing with him, but I did what I would do with any child,” said Kerrie, a professional educator with 30 years’ experience. “You create a predictable environment, a stable place and learning experiences that appeal to them. When I found something he really loved I helped create successes for him.

“Children are very redeemable. The more we turn their challenges into successes the more we give them the resilience to work through their challenges.

“This is not something stunning. It’s what every educator should know and be doing. Professional educators do know these things. That’s what professional training brings you.”

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**“CHILDREN ARE VERY REDEEMABLE. THE MORE WE
TURN THEIR CHALLENGES INTO SUCCESSES THE
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THROUGH THEIR CHALLENGES.”**

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Kerrie Devir, Educator

EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK



Individual focus backed by professional practice

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) was introduced in 2009. Entitled *Being, Belonging, Becoming*, the EYLF recognises that children learn and develop skills from birth, and was intended to ‘extend and enrich children’s learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school’.^{vii} It drew on extensive international research which showed that quality ECEC environments involve educator-child interactions that recognise how children learn through play and which are responsive to the individual needs of children.^{viii}

The Framework positions all staff as pedagogical leaders, emphasising their role as educators. The EYLF encourages educators to engage with current and cutting edge research on early childhood pedagogy and to reflect on their practice as educators.^{ix} Educators are expected to develop individualised programs and experiences which are targeted towards individual children and their needs. Daily observations of children by educators are recorded and used to respond to the changing interests and learning of children and to share their learning journey with families.

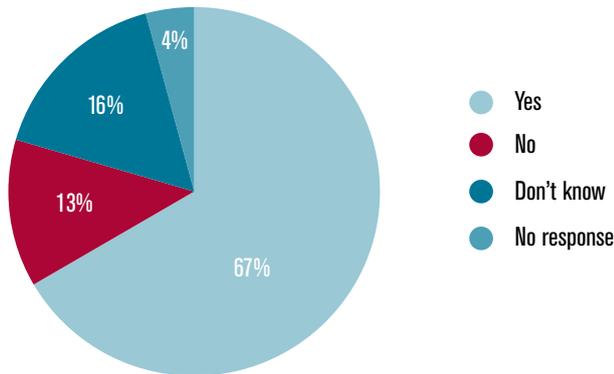
The majority of respondents believed that the EYLF has enhanced their ability to meet individual children’s needs.

“We have already gone through the hard work to learn about the outcomes and have now embraced it. Why remove a tool which produces and expects quality?”

“Ensuring planning for each child focuses on all of the NQF principles and therefore results in a program/ room which addresses the needs of the child in all facets. It is a great framework to guide educators to help the children learn.”

“It has given me more of an understanding of children’s development, more understanding of the importance of play, more time to spend with the children instead of worrying about all the paper work.”

Do you believe the EYLF has had a positive impact on your ability to meet individual children’s needs?

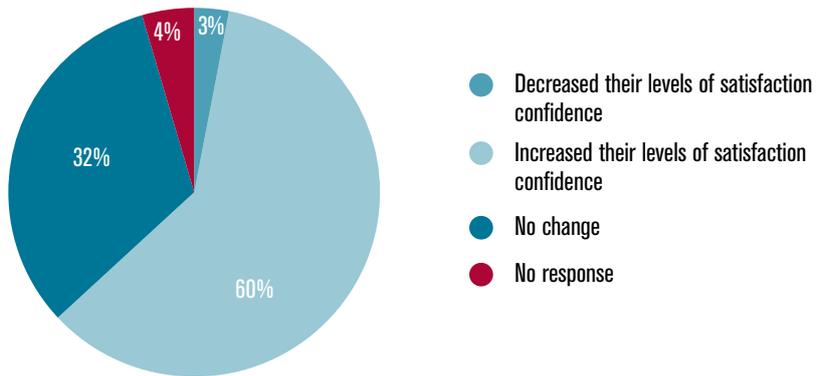


“PARENTS HAVE GREATER CONFIDENCE ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING IN THE CENTRE BECAUSE WE ARE PROVIDING CHANCES FOR THEIR CHILDREN TO LEARN.”

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Educator

The majority of those surveyed also believed that the EYLF has also improved parents' level of satisfaction and confidence with their children's experience of ECEC.

Do you believe the EYLF has affected parent satisfaction and confidence with their children's experience in ECEC?



“The Learning Framework makes it easier for us to link observation of the child to their plan. It also provides common language when discussing early childhood education with other professionals or parents. The way we now observe the children provides parents with visual as well as written information. They love it, we love it!”

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“AT FIRST IT INCREASED MY WORKLOAD AS I HAD TO TRAIN MY TEAM. NOW TWO YEARS ON, IT’S POSITIVE, ENGAGING AND THE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES ARE BETTER.”

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CONCLUSION



These survey findings demonstrate that Victorian early childhood educators overwhelmingly support the reforms implemented through the National Quality Standards and Early Years Learning Framework. These vital reforms are helping underpin a profound transformation across the early childhood education and care sector.

The ECEC sector is now well advanced in an historic journey. Where once minimal education levels and uneven standards were the norm, today staff are professionally trained and qualified and they deliver high quality programs that meet the learning and developmental needs of each and every Australian child.

While educators note the additional workload imposed through the additional regulations, they believe that any roll back of these critically important national standards will result in a loss of quality across the sector. This would have negative and unacceptable implications for children’s development, as well as parental satisfaction and workforce participation across the economy.

END NOTES

- ⁱ COAG, *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education*, Sydney, COAG, 2008.
- ⁱⁱ European Commission, *Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our Children with the Best Start for the World of Tomorrow*, Brussels, European Commission, 2011.
- ⁱⁱⁱ ECE Taskforce, *An Agenda for Amazing Children*, Wellington, ECE Taskforce, 2011, p. 59.
- ^{iv} For a review of this literature see: L Huntsman, *Determinants of quality in childcare: A review of the research evidence*, Sydney, NSW Department of Community Services, 2008; see also: LC Phillippsen, MR Burchinal, C Howes, & D Cryer, 'The prediction of process quality from structural features of child care.' *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol 12, no 3, 1997, pp. 281-303.
- ^v L Huntsman; OECD, *Encouraging Quality in Early Education and Care*, Paris, OECD, 2010; J Shonkoff & D Phillips (eds), *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, 2000.
- ^{vi} L Huntsman, *Determinants of quality in childcare: A review of the research evidence*, Sydney, NSW Department of Community Services, 2008.
- ^{vii} Productivity Agenda Working Group. *A national quality framework for early childhood education and care*, Canberra, Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008.
- ^{viii} S Edwards, M Fleer, & J Nuttall, *A Research Paper to inform the development of An Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Melbourne, Office for Children and Early Childhood Development, 2008, p. 5.
- ^{ix} M Fleer, Final Report: Baseline Evaluation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), Melbourne, DEEWR, 2011. For more research on professional development and the use of research in applied contexts see: AB Smith, B Grima, M Gaffney, K Powell, L Masse & S Barnett, *Strategic research initiative literature review: Early childhood education*, Wellington, Ministry of Education, 2000; I Siraj-Blatchford, K Sylva, S Muttock, R Gilden, & D Bell, *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*, Department for Education and Skills, United Kingdom, Research report RR356, 2002; L Mitchell & P Cubey, *Characteristics of professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best evidence synthesis*, Wellington, Ministry of Education, 2003.



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