

We have found that our time spent working in the early childhood sector has afforded experiences with a host of people with a wide range of abilities. It is this spectrum of abilities that makes it difficult to define or categorise what exactly it is like working within the early childhood education and care industry as an Educator's experience will vary greatly from centre to centre. One commonality throughout the industry is the children. While the children that we work with in the industry are as diverse in interests and abilities as the Educators that work with them, it is ultimately the child that should underpin all that we do. It is ultimately the needs of the child that we should all seek to meet. Meeting the needs of the children in our care is the challenge that faces all Educators each and every day.

Meeting the wide range of needs of the wide range of children that provide the lifeblood to the early childhood industry is quite the challenge indeed. In doing so, Educators are faced with the task of identifying the developmental needs of what is usually a very high number of children in what can be a very small amount of time. These needs need to be identified, documented and supported through thorough observation of the children, engaging in activities that reflect the interests of the child. The developmental needs of the children are not drawn from one area, but all developmental areas that a child experiences. While a professional early childhood Educator observes, documents, discusses and follows-on the needs of the children in their care, it is a reality of the industry that that same Educator must chart illness and injury, cook, clean, see to the toileting needs, address families, organise activities, set up and pack away a host of activities each morning and afternoon. The professional life of an Educator is a busy one indeed.

The above-mentioned responsibilities takes on even more depth when one considers the fact that an Educator is quite often faced with seeing to the needs of a range of age-groups as well. At our centres, an Educator working with our youngest room is faced with meeting the vast range of needs of children that are between the age of six weeks to fifteen months. An Educator new to the industry soon discovers the vast difference in the abilities of the children in that room, and realizes the vast demands that the age range places on the Educator. The reality of the early childhood education industry is that every room caters to children of a wide range, further reinforcing the skills needed for the profession.

It is the skills of the profession that one must consider when reflecting on the productivity of the given worker. While the profession demands a huge range of skills in an employee, the sad reality of the industry is that there is a great lack of skilled employees in the sector. With great debate rampant through the industry as to why a lack of highly skilled Educators exists, a strong argument can be made for a variety of these debated reasons.

One of the reasons that the industry consistently fails to retain skilled staff is a noted inequity of wage to responsibility. With the National Quality Framework (NQF) in place, the expectations from relevant authorities of Educators have greatly expanded. While the NQF has provided a much needed structure in practice and qualification, the wage of the industry has failed to meet the newly formed demands of the job. The NQF mandates that centres are to employ a particular ratio of qualified staff by particular dates, however the pool of qualified staff that employers have to draw from is not particularly deep. Qualified Educators are difficult to attract and maintain. A very strong argument can be made that low wages are a primary contributing factor to this.

There is another reason that early childhood qualifications are an issue when it comes to retaining staff and that is that up until very recently, the Registered Training Organisations (RTO) have failed to deliver training programs that reflect current practice. While the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the NQF have existed since 2009, the content of the programs delivered from RTOs reflected the pre-2009 expectations of the industry. As such, many Educators have become 'qualified', but the validity of that qualification is questionable. Educators cannot be faulted for this. It was still the initiative of the Educators that drove them to complete their qualification in an attempt to help the industry. Educators cannot be expected to pay the price for the failure of the system instilled by the past government.

If the industry is to expect to maintain high quality, qualified Educators, there must be incentive for qualified staff to remain within the sector. Relevant content in study for attaining qualifications is one way to keep staff, but another means to this end would be to increase wages. There have been reports that state a concerning number of Educators leave the sector every week in search of higher paid jobs. While one should always question the source of claims such as this, we feel that what we are qualified to comment on is the experiences of our team. Our Educators are under constant financial pressure to seek employment in an alternate industry because of the low wages. This in turn causes great strain on our business and ultimately, our children. In an industry that is supposed to educate, support and nurture children, a negative impact on our most precious resource is not an acceptable result.

Retention of skilled, qualified Educators benefits children by offering consistency and reasonably predictable routines which contribute to emotional development. A skilled Educator that demonstrates the professional abilities of a current qualification ensures that children are receiving the education and support in development that was intended through the implementation of important documents such as the EYLF and NQF. In the midst of an education overhaul such as Australia currently finds itself, a healthy start for a child is crucial in the early years.

The NQF is the key document in the early childhood education and care industry that offers consistency in outcomes throughout the sector. It is absolutely paramount that the NQF is maintained. Many Educators will complain that the 'paperwork' related to supporting a centre's adherence to the NQF is cumbersome and ultimately takes an Educator's attention away from the children. We would argue that this is not entirely accurate. We believe that a centre's adherence to the NQF must be proven and a child's progress needs to be tracked just as it is through the primary and secondary school system. The NQF is the document that ensures the early childhood education industry is maintained at a professional standard. The NQF provides the benchmark for all centres nationwide to meet and ultimately exceed. Without the NQF, the industry breaks down and returns the standard and expectation to the level of glorified babysitters. An industry needs a professional standard, and the NQF is ours.

While a good deal of Educators point the finger of blame at the NQF for overburdening staff with paperwork, we point the finger of blame towards the training institutions that have failed to adequately train and support students through the transition to the NQF. RTOs have failed to prepare Educators to deal with time management issues to meet the needs of the NQF, leaving the training and support for newly qualified Educators to the management of early childhood education

centres, overburdening both workers and management and ultimately taking attention away from the children. This systematic failure must be addressed.

The people currently choosing to enter the early childhood industry in search of a career seem to be heading into the industry for the right reasons; they care about the education and wellbeing of children. With the right training, ongoing support to adhere to the NQF and a wage that will continue to encourage highly skilled, qualified staff to join the sector and remain in the industry, an industry of highly motivated early childhood professionals.

Regards

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