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Active participation, practice and pedagogy

An important part of the assessment process surrounding the implementation of the National Quality Standard is the opportunity it affords early childhood educators to work with more focus as a team, and to network with other professional colleagues working with young children, their families and communities. The NQS supports a more strategic and professional approach to the everyday work of early childhood educators, and sets in place a culture of continuous improvement.

Positioning oneself as a professional incorporates thinking about professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement and commitment. In practice, these domains are interwoven and educators draw on all three to inform what they do, how they do it and why they do it the way they do.



- *Professional knowledge* encompasses our knowledge of how children learn and the influences on this, and appropriate ways of using this knowledge in practice while respecting histories, cultures and language.
- *Professional practice* refers to the planning, preparation, implementation, evaluation and communication to others of quality programs and experiences,

taking into account individual children and groups of children. It is about problem-solving and critical and creative thinking, tuning into children while building positive, reciprocal and responsive relationships with children, families and communities.

- *Professional engagement* and commitment calls for knowledge of, and engagement with, contemporary issues related to young children, learning and teaching, connecting with professional organisations that support the professional practice of early childhood educators, critically reflecting on practice in order to improve, contributing to the program and centre, continued professional learning, and supporting colleagues.

This developing emphasis on professionalism takes the focus away from individual educators and supports staff to focus on their practice rather than on themselves or their colleagues as *individuals*. Focus on the standards, as a staff, helps to build a community culture or sense of common directionality and orientation. For example, when deciding what is being done well and what could be done better, educators and other professionals are coming together to discuss their work with a readily identifiable and recognised direction, offering a positive move towards change. The move towards change is a positive re-evaluation of what is being done on a daily basis, rather than a criticism of personal behaviours.

Everyone can do better! There is always another way of better informing the processes, procedures and practices of working with young children and their families. The standards do not sit outside of

daily practice; rather, they allow educators to focus more attention to aspects of their work providing a springboard for the initiation of rich, empowering dialogue about practice within colleagues within services. This promotes critical reflection and discussion about practice as part of the everyday occurrence in early childhood education and care services.

So while the elements currently within the standards may change, the basic tenets on which we base quality practice will remain the same and should continue to inform discussions and reflections.

Developing the annual QIPs can be viewed as a vehicle that enables the team to work together towards a common purpose which has relevance and meaning for those involved, and as a process for enacting change. This is not change for its own sake. Rather, it is an open and responsive move towards change that is clearly understood and documented.

Some things need to be considered when implementing change in an effective and sustainable manner and these are presented below:

- There needs to be a clear understanding of why the change is necessary.
- Communication is fundamental to the effectiveness of change processes.
- Good timing and an appropriate pace are also necessary as teams respond differently to change, some being more adaptive than others. Rushing the change processes is likely to create more resistance than positive outcomes.
- When change is effectively managed, a staff team can feel a greater sense of empowerment and autonomy as professionals.
- By contributing to the decision-making process, educators can develop a sense of ownership .



Indeed, change within organisations is not only necessary but inevitable. There are various factors that can make the process less challenging, and result in better outcomes for staff, the children and their families. Change will need to be well planned, sensitively handled, and appropriately timed.

There will be consequences of the changes brought about by the decisions made in the coming years, and successful leaders and managers appreciate the impact their decisions can have on individuals, a team of educators, families and children.

The NQS provides an unequivocal focus for professional attention and provides a much-needed opportunity for engagement and responsiveness across and beyond early childhood settings and services. This calls for flexibility, openness and responsiveness to change. The NQS needs to be viewed in a positive and empowering light where there is an expectation of taking up new challenges and trialling new ways of working.

As can be seen in various early childhood settings, meaningful conversations, asking questions and stimulating shared learning will all make it possible to overcome any challenges that may be encountered through differing values, beliefs and attitudes held by different members of staff.

The implementation of the extensive pedagogical and regulatory reforms connected with the EYLF and the NQS will require the employment of well-qualified and experienced educators who are able to lead and manage staff teams effectively.

Given the difficulties of attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff, particularly in rural and remote areas with high numbers of indigenous children, for instance, it is essential to look for ways of nurturing staff wellbeing through adequate wages and conditions, including funding for professional learning opportunities. When staff feel that they are respected and valued, giving their best to children and families will come more easily. This is the key to establishing high performing staff teams who can deliver high quality programs that foster the best interests of children.

The ACECQA website, for the first time, offers a single place to find everything that is required to inform educators, staff teams, managers and leaders for their work with respect to what is required formally, legally and professionally. Further professional support is provided through the Early Childhood Australia website and much valuable professional reflection and support is available through interactions documented here.



We hope that you find this book a useful resource to be used in conjunction with other supporting material, to promote stimulating discussion on practice to lead all early childhood education and care services forward in ensuring quality practice into the future.