

## **The Role of staff in developing and maintaining quality practice in preschools.**

The years from birth to five span the period of the most rapid learning and development in children (Boomer, 1992; DECS 1996; Bredekamp & Copple, 1996; Berk 1997). There is a wealth of research in early childhood education that details the importance and benefits of children spending time during these years in an early childhood program including Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Rutter, 1985; Sylva & Jowett, 1986; Berk; 1997, 1998, 1999.

Since 1970 a great deal of research has been conducted into the benefits of early childhood programs. Some of this has looked at the diversity of program delivery and the relative benefits of these programs. Overall the conclusions are that all early childhood programs benefit young children. (Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Vandell & Powers, 1983; Rutter, 1985; Schweinhart, Weikart & Lerner, 1986; Jowett & Sylva, 1986; Howes & Stewart, 1987; Andersson, 1989, 1992; Lamb et al., 1988; Howes, 1988, 1990; Vandell et al, 1988; White, 1989; Melhuish et al, 1990a, 1990b; Schlieker et al, 1991; Jacobs et al, 1992; Andersson 1989, 1992; Bredekamp & Copple, 1996; Berk, 1997, 1998, 1999)

More recent research and/or documentation states that the benefits for children only occur however if the programs are of high quality (Vandell & Powers, 1983; Howes & Stewart, 1987; Melhuish et al, 1990a, 1990b; Bredekamp & Copple, 1996; Schlieker et al, 1991; Jacobs et al, 1992; Andersson 1989, 1992).

Doherty-Derkowski (1995, p.20) lists a number of longitudinal studies which show that 'children who were in high quality early childhood programs, when compared to peers without this experience:

- have greater social competency (Andersson, 1989, 1992; Howes, 1990; Lamb et al, 1988; Vandell et al., 1988; White, 1989)
- have fewer behaviour problems in elementary school (Howes, 1988, 1990)
- have higher levels of language development (Jacobs et al., 1992; Andersson, 1989, 1992);
- and perform better in all school subjects (Andersson, 1989, 1992).'

In summary, as quoted from *Childhood Matters*, the report of the Enquiry into Early Childhood Education (1996, p.15) 'high quality daycare leads to positive outcomes and low quality to adverse ones'.

Throughout business and commercial enterprises in the last twenty or so years there has been a worldwide focus on the importance of quality and the demand for greater

accountability. This worldwide movement has been instrumental in early childhood educators and researchers developing their work and suggesting that only high quality programs can deliver benefits to children and families (Cox 1996).

This emphasis on quality led to the development of accreditation and quality improvement scales/ criteria throughout the international early childhood field in the last twenty years. Some are voluntary and some compulsory. All are a series of benchmarks which centres must reach to be given a specified rating. These scales have generally been designed to relate specifically to childcare, both centre and home based.

The quality assurance movement started in the United States of America in 1980 when the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) consulted with practitioners and developed a set of criteria that demonstrated quality. The system is voluntary but research of Bredekamp and Glowaki 1996, has shown that those centres that have been through the accreditation system are delivering programs of higher quality than those that have not undergone the process.

Australia has followed suit. The Australian Early Childhood Association led the movement with the *Report on Quality* (Murray 1986). An interim National Accreditation Council was established and after much consultation with the field the Commonwealth Government developed an accreditation system. (National Child Care Accreditation Council 1993) This system involves staff and parents within the child care centre completing a self-study against defined criteria for fifty-two principles. A trained reviewer visits the centre to validate the self-study and then a team of three moderators - who have early childhood qualifications of the highest degree - moderates these two reports and gives a rating of 1-3 years.

*Childhood Matters*, the Report on the Enquiry into Early Childhood Education (1996, p. 104) states that 'Children's services are subject to a range of mechanisms designed to ensure quality. These include State and Territory regulations and licensing requirements, national standards, and accreditation schemes. Despite the multiplicity of quality mechanisms, there are many concerns relating to the level of quality of children's services.'

As Dodge (1989, p.44) suggests, 'If it takes quality programs to make a positive impact on children's lives, then we have a professional obligation to provide children and families with such programs.'

As Wangmann in *Childhood Matters* (1996, p. 702) states,

'I do not support the notion that...they (parents) can identify the components of quality ...I would suggest the majority can't. We need to do some more out in the community - and from government bodies - to inform parents what to look for so they can make informed choices.'

It is therefore crucial that we work with families so that they are aware of the content and types of programs available and the degree with which they feel comfortable in the service.

As stated, all of the above work has related specifically to child care centres which care for children from three months to five years for up to ten hours per day. My specific interest is in preschool programs, which in South Australia provide an educational program for children in their year before school entry. Therefore the age range generally covers four to five year old children and the sessions are for twelve hours per week.

Hence in 1995, I researched and developed a paper called *The Key Determinants of Quality in Early Childhood Services*. (Department for Education and Children's Services) This paper documented the following ten areas as crucial to achieving quality practice in preschools:

- physical environment
- staffing patterns
- staff qualifications and training and development
- interactions between staff and children
- interactions between staff and parents
- curriculum
- evaluation
- management and administration
- health and safety
- food and nutrition.

Each of these ten criteria has a series of indicators that provide an understanding of what quality practice would look like in each area.

For my current study, I have determined that the first three criteria,

- physical environment
- staffing patterns
- staff qualifications and training and development

are structural aspects of quality. They are the static components that contribute to quality but are areas over which preschool staff have little control. The employing department or state and national standards prescribes these components.

As Wangmann (1995) confirms, and I quote, 'in general all of the systems used throughout the world have a set of criteria which can be broken into quality determining and quality contributing factors.'

The determining factors are those into which staff in centres have crucial input. In the model that I developed in 1995 for South Australian preschools, these included interactions between staff and children, interactions between staff and parents, curriculum, evaluation, management and administration, health and safety, food and nutrition. (Department for Education and Children's Services 1996)

These are the process aspects of quality as they are interactive and occur within a preschool. They are also referred to as the dynamic components of quality.

For the purposes of this study, I have trialed a model of quality practice which combines these seven determining criteria into the areas of:

- curriculum
- communication
- information
- relationships

Katz (1993) uses five perspectives to look at programs:

- top-down (how program is experienced by the organisation)
- bottom-up (how program is experienced by children)
- inside-outside (how program is experienced by families)
- inside (how program is experienced by staff)
- outside (how program is experienced by the community)

My model has used the top-down, inside-outside and inside perspectives. A general feeling of the other two perspectives were gained through observations.

I have trialed this quality practice model across twelve very different preschools to ensure applicability of the model. These centres have included:

- those in different socio-economic areas (three ranges based on category rankings determined by the department related to isolation, Government assisted school students, cultural backgrounds)
- child parent centre (a school based preschool where the principal is the line manager of staff)
- a preschool with diverse cultural representation
- a preschool with a speech and language program (an intensive program for six children with severe language and communication disorders)
- a 0.4 rural preschool (one trained and one untrained staff)
- a rural preschool with occasional and rural care programs (occasional care provides care for children aged under and over two depending on the community's needs: rural care is a self funded family day care provider who provides care in a preschool rather than in their home)
- an integrated centre (preschool and long day care for children aged three months to five years)
- a preschool with high numbers (ninety-four per day)
- an Aboriginal preschool

For this study, the review process consisted of a review team of two to three staff spending two days in a preschool. The review team gathered data from the following sources:

- interviews with a sample of families (using set questions relating to the four areas)
- the family opinion survey carried out with another sample of families
- interviews with all preschool staff including any other staff who may be working in the preschool during the time of the review (eg: bilingual or preschool support workers)
- examination of existing data such as statements of purpose, annual reports, children's records, newsletters, etc.
- completion of the best practice survey from direct observation and questioning
- use of photos which staff took to demonstrate quality in their program

I am not aware of any quality practice criteria being used in Australian preschools with the exception of one recently developed in Victoria, *The Preschool Quality Assessment Checklist*. The Victorian model has received some criticism from practitioners in that State.

Some work is in progress in the United Kingdom (1998) (both the OFSTED criteria and the work of Pascal, Bertram and Ramsden (1996)) and I will further investigate both these models.

My methodology has been based on case studies. I have drawn on methodologies cited in Burns, 1990; Stake, 1995; Pascal & Bertram 1997 and others. As a researcher I have recreated the lives of a group of people (families and staff) through a description of their

beliefs, knowledge and behaviour. After reviewing the twelve preschools according to the quality practice model I have written case studies of each preschool.

As Donmoyer (cited in Walsh, Tobin and Graue 1993, p. 468) pointed out, 'case studies have the virtues of being accessible and personally meaningful: when reading a good case study, we get a chance to experience the world through the eyes of the author as well as the subject of the study.'

In each case study report, I have focussed on the four areas being analysed - communication, information, relationships and curriculum. There is evidence from families, staff, existing documentation, observations and surveys. This process looked at the interactive patterns of behaviour that occurred in the preschool and their relationship to the outcomes of the experiences.

The paradigm I have used in my research is the interpretative approach.

Interpretative research allows us to understand the meaning that people (in this case staff and parents) are constructing in their everyday actions. This is supported by Jacob (cited in Walsh, Tobin and Graue 1993, p.464) who listed three attributes of interpretive research: '...it is conducted in a natural setting; stress is placed on the importance of understanding participants' perspectives; and questions and methods emerge in the process of fieldwork.'

This quality practice model has been trialed collecting both qualitative and quantitative data to determine whether a centre is operating at quality practice levels and makes recommendations for areas of improvement. As Porter (1982, p. 29) says the advantage of collecting both sorts of data is that 'qualitative methods encourage us to become better acquainted with the intimate details which form the substance of our profession' and 'a major goal of quantitative methodology is to achieve reliability.' This is supported by Harms and Clifford (1993, p. 485) who state that 'increasingly it is being recognised that educational programs are complex social systems that require a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of study.'

'In qualitative case study ... we want to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of self, the case, its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts' (Stake, 1995, p. 16). There is a need therefore to identify the research questions early. I have done this by structuring questions for families and staff around the four main areas to be analysed - curriculum, communication, information and relationships. These have helped determine the structure for the observations, the interviews and the document review. The best practice survey and the parent opinion survey also analysed these four areas.

The majority of my information came from qualitative data and as Stake (1995; p. 37) states 'qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists.'

Whilst data gathering I and other members of the review team remained as unobtrusive as possible. As Stake (1995, p. 44) says, 'qualitative researchers are non interventionists...During fieldwork, they try not to draw attention to themselves or their work...They try to observe the ordinary, and they try to observe it long enough to comprehend what, for this case, ordinary means. For them, naturalistic observation has been the primary medium of acquaintance. When they cannot see for themselves, they ask others who have seen. When formal records have been kept, they pour over the documents.' In my study, all of the observations, interviews, surveys and existing data have combined to produce a balanced analysis of the interrelationships which existed in the centre.

As each centre was different from the others it was essential to provide a contextual statement in each case study so as 'to develop vicarious experiences for the reader, to give them a sense of "being there", the physical situation should be well described.' (Stake, 1995, p.63)

All preschools were contacted and the director/principal asked if they were prepared to participate in the review process. The leaders of each preschool then discussed the proposal with their staff team and on approval from everybody agreed to participate in the trial.

All centres participating in the study received information which clarified the research areas to be analysed, the sources of data and the time and effort involved in gathering the data and how it would be triangulated. Staff and families were assured of the confidential nature of the process and signed consent forms in relation to this.

It was clearly outlined how the data was to be gathered and what staff and family involvement was required. Preschools were provided with a day's staff relief whilst the review team was there to ensure minimal disruption to their service whilst staff were being interviewed.

Staff selected a random sample of families to be interviewed with a set series of questions (designed by the reviewer) and to complete the family opinion survey and asked families' permission to be involved.

The best practice survey (developed from my work in 1995) was completed using observations and questioning of all staff. Each reviewer completed this survey individually and then consultation occurred between reviewers to assure validity.

Before their case study report was finalised, staff had the opportunity to ensure that it was valid and representative. There will be a synthesised report of the twelve preschools and anonymity is ensured in this report.

Preschool staff have distribution and editorial rights of their individual report.

The data was triangulated with information coming from many different sources - surveys, interviews and observations. The interpretation of the data began in the field.

In analysis and interpretation, the strengths and weaknesses of the program were apparent through the four areas that were analysed.

As indicated there are a number of scales against which staff may choose to rate their centre, themselves or their staff team. However, I believe that crucial to the achievement of quality practice is the role of the leader in developing and maintaining high quality within the centre for which they are responsible. Some work has been done on this area of quality leadership but little has been developed in Australia. The preschool reviews highlighted the important roles staff play and in particular the role of the leader.

This area of leadership and its impact on high quality programs will be the major focus of my Masters Research.

## **Glossary of Terms**

Centre based childcare - children are cared for in a centre for up to ten hours per day.

Preschool - children can utilise a preschool program in South Australia for up to 4 sessions per week for the year before they enter school, provided that they have already turned four.

Quality - there are many definitions but the one I like is from Kruithof and Ryall (1994, p. 217), 'Quality is a way to think about things; it is a way to treat each other; and it is a way to constantly improve everything we touch.'

Best Practice - 'It involves determining the most efficient way of doing things and adopting (and where necessary adapting) the practice. This enables firms to avoid reinventing the wheel. Where other have developed techniques and processes which deliver superior performance, we should not hesitate to learn what lessons we can from their experience.' (Lewis, Morkel & Hubbard in Hunter & Tually, 1998, p.29)

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