

## **Improving early childhood quality through standards, accreditation and registration**

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Social practices and community values and issues are always in the process of redefinition and reconstruction. This means that our views on what is appropriate for children's care and education are constantly changing. Nineteenth and 20th century models of early childhood care and education, including regulatory and staffing models are often not appropriate for 21st century children and families.

Recent media and policy focus on child care and early education issues is well overdue. Finally, the volumes of research showing the benefits of strong, rich early childhood programs on children's development and learning have captured community attention. Quality early childhood programs help children reach key developmental milestones and have longer term social and academic benefits for students and families. Now, this knowledge must translate into vision and action for improved quality.

This chapter foreshadows greater regulation in early childhood care and education and proposes a registration scheme for early childhood practitioners, accreditation of early childhood practitioner preparation programs, and a set of standards for professional practice. It highlights the links between quality inputs (environment and staffing) and quality outputs (children's development and learning), and stresses the importance of getting the right staffing mix in early childhood settings. Generally, the concept of regulated pathways to practice is well established. However, while there is wide agreement on the importance of regulatory pathways to professional practice, there is less understanding about how these could benefit the complex and idiosyncratic early childhood sector.

On the international front, accreditation and registration of professionals provide an 'organised means' of assuring and improving quality services for consumers. Psychologists, medical practitioners, nurses, and often teachers, are registered and

graduate from accredited courses. Enhanced regulatory frameworks, especially if linked to rewards for increased quality improve practice.

In education broadly, and specifically in early childhood care and education, research shows consistently that quality learning environments are linked to the quality of staff. In turn, staff quality and professionalism are linked to education and training and to ongoing professional development. Assuring, monitoring and improving quality are difficult tasks in any profession – and nowhere more so than in education and care.

This chapter focuses on several related issues:

- establishing, maintaining and monitoring quality
- professionalism and nomenclature: terminology and perception
- professional standards
- the role and function of accreditation and registration in the early childhood sector.

### **The quality landscape: establishing, maintaining and monitoring quality**

There is considerable variability in the distribution, range, and quality of early childhood care and education across Australia. While many individual childcare centres and preschool or kindergartens are excellent, there is huge variability in quality and a myriad of legislation, regulation, providers, and funding bodies. There is a growing alarm about quality, accessibility and cost in the early childhood sector and recent references to a childcare ‘shambles’ are not too far off the mark.

Changing family and work patterns have fuelled expansion in the early childhood sector but it has been difficult to assure quality in this growth period, particularly in light of clearer understandings about young children’s developmental and educational needs. Research points to the positive impact of preschool experiences on early development and adjustment to school and on longer term educational and social outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable children and families. Unfortunately, many young children,

especially from disadvantaged families, miss out on rich learning experiences at home or in formal early childhood contexts, when brain development is at its most critical. It is at this time that experience helps strengthen neurological development and cognitive functioning and build school readiness (Shore 1997).

There is clear evidence of socio-economically linked achievement gaps in young children's language, cognitive and social development at school entry (Ainley & Fleming 2003; Centre for Community Child Health 2005). It is also clear that quality early care and education programs can narrow developmental and achievement differences before children begin school. Central to this quality are skilled educators who can plan learning programs based on each child's social and cognitive needs and on contemporary knowledge about learning and development.

All children need access to early childhood programs that both optimise early learning and development and provide for families' work-related childcare needs. To date though, a national approach to seamless provision of quality early education and care is a long way off. There is little agreement on exactly what is needed, which developmental and early learning models and approaches work best and in which contexts, and most critically, how to fund early learning programs for all children.

### **The impact of practitioner effectiveness on learning outcomes**

Research from the school sector emphasises the importance of pedagogical practices and teacher effectiveness on students' academic achievements. It is increasingly acknowledged that educational effectiveness and student engagement and achievement are underpinned by teacher competence, and that quality teachers and quality pedagogy are synonymous (Hayes et al. 2006; Muijs & Reynolds 2001). While *what* students bring to school matters, their learning experiences in the classroom, the ambience or climate of the school and partnerships with families impact most significantly on educational outcomes (Epstein, 2003; Datnow et al. 2003; Grace 2003; Maeroff 1999; Masters 2004; Rowe 2002 2005).

Effective pedagogy and teacher competence require clear understandings of children's cognition and learning within

socio-cultural contexts, deep content knowledge, and extensive pedagogical knowledge. Good practitioner knowledge and rich pedagogy are developed through strong, effective initial teacher training and ongoing professional development (Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005; Hattie 2003, 2005; Kennedy 2001; OECD 2001). Building and sustaining practitioners' professional understandings and skills requires strong initial professional preparation, continuing professional learning, inspirational leadership and sustained dialogue about educational goals and pedagogy (Coleman-Dimon 2000; Harslett et al. 1998 Hayes et al. 2006; Ramsey 2000; Rowe 2005).

There are now clear findings on the impact of effective care and education environments in the 0–5 sector. Staff knowledge of learning, development and pedagogy and the richness of their interactions with children are central to quality experiences and linked to positive cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes. The most important elements are:

- talking with children (questioning, explaining, discussion, responding, plus modelling, demonstrating and guiding)
- a knowledge of child development, cognition and learning processes
- a knowledge of content areas (language, early literacy, early numeracy, and society and environment)
- a knowledge of pedagogy.

Clearly, staffing quality and quality developmental contexts for children go hand in hand. Rich, stimulating learning environments are dependent on staff child development knowledge and early language and literacy, maths and science knowledge. Importantly, the presence of better qualified staff positively influences the behaviour of other staff (Darling-Hammond 2000; Ingvarson 2002; Sammons et al. 2002, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002).

To date though, frameworks that regulate practitioner credentialing and staffing quality in the 0–5 sector are weak to non-existent. While it is difficult to fully anticipate, articulate, formulate and then enforce comprehensive staff-related regulations, improvements in program quality and outcomes for children will

only come about with improvements in staffing. In Australia, as elsewhere, children from more economically vulnerable families and more isolated communities are most likely to have poor programs and poorly qualified staff. Yet, these children need the best programs and the best staff. Recognising that certain communities and children will be more expensive to educate and have fewer resources to contribute is also important in planning for quality enhancement.

### **Current staffing patterns**

There is dramatic variation in staffing profiles across the early childhood sector. The standard qualification for teachers of young children in the first years of school is a degree-level teaching qualification. Traditionally, preschools and kindergartens for children in the year or two before school have required 'kindergarten teachers' or 'preschool teachers' with a diploma or degree in early childhood education. However, a preschool teaching qualification is generally a convention rather than a mandated requirement. There is no clear federal or state based framework regulating qualifications in 'preschools' and considerable blurring over terminology, definitions and descriptors of what is a preschool and who is a preschool or kindergarten 'teacher'.

There are even fewer conventions or agreed understandings about who can and should provide care and education programs in childcare centres. Part of the reason for this variability is lack of agreement about the goals and outcomes of early childhood care and education and little to no consistency in approaches to curricula or programming. This lack of agreement makes it difficult to define and describe the scope and content of practitioners' work with children, let alone agree on the terminology to define and name practitioners' roles. Depending on the context, the following terms are used interchangeably to describe and name the same roles: early childhood educators; early childhood teachers; caregivers; early childhood practitioners; childcare workers; childcare practitioners; childminder; and, early childhood professionals.

Somehow, we have arrived at a point where a ‘teacher’ can be someone with a degree level early childhood teaching qualification, a certificate or diploma in children’s services from the vocational education and training (VET) sector, or no qualification at all. Equally, the designation ‘childcare worker’ is applied to a qualified early childhood teacher or to an untrained staff member.

Underscoring confusion about terminology is the perception that experience alone is sufficient for awarding the title of ‘early childhood teacher’ (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2004). Reflecting this confusion about nomenclature is the still common reference to the late Princess Diana as a ‘kindergarten teacher’, by virtue of her part-time employment at a London kindergarten. This descriptor persisted despite the Princess having no formal post-school qualifications in early childhood education.

Confusion about titles, roles and qualifications is not confined to the media. Recently, New Zealand Education Minister Trevor Mallard referred to ‘unqualified early childhood teachers’. He said that life-experience, warmth, and age should be sufficient to confer qualified teacher status on experienced and competent people already working in early childhood services. It was ‘commonsense’, he said, to recognise ‘the ability of older practitioners’ given ‘the teacher shortage in the early childhood sector’ (2004).

In Australia too, few people outside the early childhood sector recognise the range, mix and complexity of early childhood roles, credentials and certification processes. Clearly, designating an unqualified person, even one with a wealth of parenting and life experience a ‘teacher’, does little to promote the status of early childhood education or recognition of professionalism. It is hard to imagine a similar situation in psychology, nursing, or medicine. Professions guard titles closely.

### **Defining professionalism in the early childhood sector**

Given the schizophrenic profile of the early childhood sector, especially in staffing patterns and qualifications, there has long been debate about whether those who work in the sector are ‘professionals’. The reality is, when assessed against the usual measures of professionalism, most early childhood practitioners are

not ‘professionals’. There are well established criteria for professionalism (see Table 10.2) and generally, early childhood practitioners don’t comply.

A profession is defined by its body of knowledge and its focus on acting first and foremost in the public interest. Professions have several characteristics, but the basics are a well developed body of knowledge, academic accreditation, professional certification, self-governance, and a national governing body. Professionals are required to abide by professional standards and a code of conduct and regulation. Standard setting and monitoring is often controlled by an independent body. The Australian medical registration board or newer teacher registration boards are examples of these independent bodies.

In the early childhood sector there has long been discussion around the edges of professionalism, but little concerted focus on what it means to be a profession or about professional conduct, and regulation and licensure (Elliott, 2006). This must become more vigorous and focused if quality is to improve across the sector.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian standard classification of occupations* makes a clear distinction between professional and ‘other’ or non-professional early childhood occupation categories. The *education professionals* category includes pre-primary teachers who work mainly in preschools and kindergartens. ‘Other’ caregivers are termed *intermediate service workers*. Tasks specified for each staff category highlight a clear division on traditional ‘care’ and ‘education’ lines.

The range of qualifications for childcare personnel shown in Table 10.1 provides little evidence of the ‘extensive formal training’ that characterises professionals. As can be seen, only about 10 per cent of staff has a degree level qualification and about 30 per cent have no formal relevant qualification, although many are undertaking training. Encouragingly, there is a slight increase in the proportion of staff with formal qualifications between 2002 and 2004. Only Queensland requires all childcare staff to have a relevant qualification, although this may be a six month VET certificate.

Table 10.1 Child care staff numbers and qualifications in 2002 and 2004

	<b>Community child care 2002</b>	<b>Community child care 2004</b>	<b>Private child care 2002</b>	<b>Private child care 2004</b>
Early childhood teaching	1580 (9%)	1722 (9%)	1803 (7%)	2055 (7%)
Primary Teaching	332 (2%)	308 (2%)	592 (2%)	594 (2%)
Nursing	583 (3%)	495 (3%)	590 (2%)	533 (2%)
Child care 1 year	2020 (11%)	2516 (13%)	3699 (15%)	5654 (19%)
Child care 2 years	4374 (24%)	4642 (25%)	4995 (20%)	5935 (20%)
Child care 3 years	1183 (6%)	1577 (8%)	1950 (8%)	2938 (10%)
Other relevant	1081 (6%)	1264 (7%)	1371 (5%)	1502 (5%)
Undertaking a qualification <i>or</i> no qualification but worked for 3 years	2292 (13%) 3156 (17%)	2128 (11%) 3004 (16%)	4608 (18%) 2852 (11%)	5351 (18%) 2891 (10%)
<b>Total staff</b>	<b>18 231</b>	<b>18 793</b>	<b>25 105</b>	<b>29 300</b>

Sources: Department of Family and Community Services 2005, 2004 Census of Child Care Services, FACS, Canberra; Department of Family and Community Services 2003a, 2002 Census of Child Care Services, FACS, Canberra.

While it is not easy to access a similar overall staffing profile for preschools and kindergartens, typically all preschool (kindergarten) classes aligned with schools and most community preschools, have one degree qualified early childhood teacher per class. Childcare centres with designated 'preschool' or 'kindergarten' education programs may also employ a degree qualified early childhood educator and this is mandated in New South Wales for centres with more than 29 places. Whether personnel providing care and education for children below school age require professional, degree level preparation has long been a contentious issue.

### **Why this staffing variability?**

The reasons for the distinctly different staffing profiles in preschools and child care services relate mainly to the historical 'care' and 'education' divide. Traditionally, child care was welfare oriented and preschools and kindergartens educationally focused. Policy and perception shifts over the years have seen child 'care' move from a welfare to a related labour focus and retain the care orientation. Preschools have remained 'educationally' focused and hence their requirements for 'teachers'. Until 'care' and 'education' dimensions are integrated both conceptually and practically, the differential 'care' and 'education' staffing distinctions are likely to remain. Clearly, there are economic reasons for the division, but these are short-sighted in the light of new knowledge about the value of high quality early learning programs on longer term academic and social outcomes for children.

While many people believe young children are at a critical phase of development and require the expert nurturing and guidance of qualified early childhood educators, there is also a widespread perception that early childhood 'care' requires warm, kind, mother-like qualities – not specialised professional qualifications. We've seen over the high demand period of the last decade, that childcare service roll-out has been of prime importance.

Unfortunately, during this expansion period few childcare centres could afford the costs of employing the full complement of professionally qualified early childhood staff suggested by the *National standards for long day care* (1993) and offer an affordable

service for families. Rather, they complied with the minimum state-based regulatory staffing requirements filling other positions with ‘untrained’ personnel. Provision has been all important, often at the expense of quality.

This combination of factors and especially the lack of national or even state requirements for degree level early childhood credentials have made it difficult for universities to justify offering specialist degree level courses and gradually, strong, specialist early childhood courses have been eroded. If recent announcements about universal ‘preschool education’ are to become a reality, early childhood teacher education capacity in universities will need rebuilding. Further, attracting qualified early childhood educators to remote, regional and disadvantaged communities will require some creative thinking and incentives.

The introduction of the *Quality improvement and accreditation scheme* (QIAS) in 1994 has been instrumental in ensuring minimum quality standards across child care centres during the rapid expansion period, but has focused mainly on inputs or potential inputs. As the early childhood sector settles into a period of greater stability, ensuring that quality is enhanced is of paramount importance, especially in the most disadvantaged communities. Central to ensuring this ‘quality’ and the developmental and educational significance of children’s experiences are effective staff and inspired leadership. Closing the care and education gap is shaping up as a major imperative for the early childhood field and for the wider community.

### **Professional standards, registration and accreditation**

During the mid 20th century there were the same concerns about the quality of schooling as there are now about the quality of the early childhood sector. Rapid growth focused on expansion, often at the expense of quality. In an effort to improve overall teacher quality and student outcomes most states implemented stronger quality improvement procedures, including regulated pathways to practice and legislative frameworks for teacher registration and accreditation or similar employer controls. These vary considerably from state to state but generally reflect a combination of inputs and ‘standards’ approaches. Most recently,

they have been guided by a *National framework for professional standards* agreed to by the state ministers of education in 2003. ([www.mcceetya.edu.au/pdf/national\\_framework.pdf](http://www.mcceetya.edu.au/pdf/national_framework.pdf))

Typically, teacher (or other professional) registration systems have major developmental, regulatory and advocacy goals. Internationally, and increasingly nationally, registration procedures and the accompanying accreditation of professional education providers are designed to ensure and track quality control. In most jurisdictions, registration or certification and accreditation are closely linked. Teacher education course accreditation is often used as the basis for teacher registration. It verifies that the initial preparation conforms to specific 'quality standards' or 'graduate standards' set by the approval or accrediting agency. Greatest benefits are likely to accrue if the registration and accreditation agencies operate in partnership and in conjunction with professional education providers to assure program quality and continuing development. At the same time, they must operate independently of professional education or training providers. Relationships that are too close and too collaborative can lack credibility and objectivity. (Ingvarson et al. 2001)

Teacher registration processes are usually underpinned by a set of professional standards. These represent a consensus on professional values and beliefs and describe 'a vision' of teaching in terms of pedagogic knowledge and practice. They are statements about what is *valued* in a profession. Ultimately, they rest on professional consensus about definitions of quality learning and development and what educators should know, believe and be able to do (Ingvarson 2002). This consensus is fundamental to standards development and scoping the content of educators' work (Sykes & Plastrik 1993). Standards can also be measures or specifications about levels of performance or achievement. They can provide a basis for making professional judgements about teachers' work or level of competence.

Generally, 'professional standards' provide a framework for describing an educator's responsibilities, knowledge and practice, and specifically:

- professional knowledge and understanding
- professional skills and abilities

- professional values and personal commitment.

They are based on evidence about conditions that foster development and purposeful learning. They help delineate what teachers need to know and be able to do to support development and learning in specific areas of the curriculum, or for children with specific educational needs or at specific levels of education. In early childhood education professional standards are used to guide practitioners' roles in optimising experiences and outcomes for young children and their families.

Once professional standards are developed and agreed by the relevant educational communities, they can then be used:

- as a basis for professional registration
- to improve, analyse and evaluate practice
- to plan for professional development
- to provide a clear public statement about professional conduct and ethics
- to develop, monitor and evaluate pre-employment preparation courses (degrees and diplomas) leading to relevant awards.

### **Standards, registration and accreditation for the early childhood sector**

Early childhood professional standards, registration and accreditation are likely to be useful vehicles for strengthening the early childhood regulatory environment and improving sector quality. As in other areas of community service, such as medicine, teaching, nursing, and psychology, a national professional accreditation and registration framework would provide clear benefits to the sector and to children, parents, the community and governments. It would assist the sector in improving quality inputs and outcomes, especially practitioner credentialing, and programming and pedagogy.

As a starting point, a set of early childhood standards would:

- provide explicit and common national understandings of what practitioners need to know and be able to do to nurture development and learning,
- describe levels of professional practice (from initial to advanced) and ensure provision of initial and ongoing professional development opportunities to achieve these levels
- provide explicit and consistent national understandings on approaches to early childhood practitioner preparation, qualifications and certification
- provide explicit and consistent national understandings for graduate outcomes.

Many early childhood (children's services) courses within the vocational education and training (VET) sector exemplify the lack of rigour and accountability in preparing early childhood practitioners. VET Children's Services courses are nationally consistent. However, there is varying consistency in the way courses are delivered. There are hundreds of registered training organisations (RTOs) that deliver VET courses in children's services. In Queensland alone VET courses are delivered by some 50 or so providers, yet there is little monitoring or assessment of course delivery or of graduate standards or outcomes.

As can be seen in the staffing spread shown in Table 10.1, there is little consistency with the characteristics of a profession listed below (Table 10.2). There is no clearly defined, codified, accessible knowledge base, no rigorous training, no code of practice or content and no registration scheme. There are many early childhood care and education theoretical and knowledge bases, some of which are not well defined, agreed or readily assessable (Elliott, 2006). Early childhood care and education is a very complex and idiosyncratic area.

Table 10.2 Characteristics of a profession

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- A clearly defined, highly developed, specialised, and theoretical knowledge base
  - Extensive formal training and life-long learning; control of professional learning
  - Certification and admission to practice by licensure
  - A structured induction period
  - On going monitoring and updating of professional skills through formal processes
  - A clear, agreed and public set of standards
  - A code of ethics
  - A disciplinary system for violation of the code of ethics
  - An obligation on members, even in non-professional matters, to conduct themselves in a disciplined and honourable manner
  - The presence of a collegium or national professional body
  - A commitment to public service
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*(Darling-Hammond, 1987; Goodlad, 1990a, 1990b; Levine, 1988).*

Developing professional standards across the early childhood care and education sector will not be easy. The varying theoretical, historical and cultural traditions, and the close alignment with family and community values, mean it is not always exactly clear what *is* or *should be* expected for children and what *should be* expected of professionals. Clearly though, there must be articulation and agreement of shared values and expectations.

In teaching, bodies such as the teacher registration boards help promote professionalism by providing a context and process within

which the tenets of a professions can be developed, tested, and refined, and then be promulgated and self-regulated. Importantly, these bodies act to inspire and galvanise public confidence in the education and qualifications of staff. Professionals are educated in courses that have been prepared, delivered and accredited in the accordance with standards of the profession. According to Goodlad (1990a, 1990b), confidence in qualifications and professional education provides a foundation for public respect and recognition. These are both necessary conditions for building quality and for establishing a profession. To date though, there is no agreement on credentialling, certification and registration in early childhood care and education, no national bodies to develop standards or guide and monitor early childhood preparation and no registration requirement for early childhood practitioners.

### **Policy directions**

Lack of across-service agreement and explicitness on what is valued and how to monitor learning and educational progress makes it difficult to ascertain the relative impact of service provision on children's development (Elliott, 2006). It is also difficult to compare across and within childrens' services.

What training and credentialling is most appropriate for a practitioner working with a four year old child in the year before school? An early childhood degree? A diploma? A certificate? Nothing? Nationally, there is little agreement or even discussion. It depends on the state and service type and/or the number of children. Often, the socio-economic status of the childcare centre impacts on staffing profiles, as well-qualified staff are more expensive to employ.

While the early childhood literature is explicit about the close connections between care and education, their separate histories and traditions have resulted in distinct policy, funding and administrative divisions that confuse notions about their purposes and outcomes for children *and* thus whether young children need professional care and education and who is a 'professional'. Recently, consultations around the *National agenda of early childhood* have given some voice, status and credibility to the relationship between the quality of early childhood education and

children's wellbeing, especially for the most vulnerable children. Too often though, discussions about quality seem to be administrative and bureaucratic exercises, rather than child-focused.

For the sake of equity, quality and effectiveness issues relating to the links between quality and professionalism must be addressed as a matter of urgency. Educationally significant early childhood services need clear statements of expectations for children's development and learning to be serious about boosting learning and closing the achievement gaps so apparent at the beginning of school. The quality of learning environments and provision is intimately linked to practitioner professionalism. Importantly, the different staffing tracks in child care and preschools must end. These care and education distinctions affect community perception and confidence, industrial awards, working conditions, and ultimately, program quality and outcomes for young children.

An early childhood agenda for the decade ahead must seek to *both* optimise early learning and development *and* provide care during parents' working hours. One well accepted means of increasing quality, status and educational effectiveness of early childhood programs is to better regulate the field through professional standards, accreditation and registration.

There is a clear need to improve quality and effectiveness in early childhood education or we are in danger of further widening the learning gap at school entry. All children, and especially the most vulnerable, must have access to rich, well planned learning experiences provided by qualified early childhood professionals to complement or boost home learning. But unless bipartisan action occurs at the highest levels of government, the twin system of care and education will be prised further apart and many children, especially the most vulnerable, will continue to miss out on early childhood education. Many children will be underserved and many programs will have limited developmental or educational significance.

Without a formal system of regulation and accountability across the early childhood sector, quality and hence opportunities and outcomes for children will further erode. A regulatory framework providing professional standards, accreditation and registration for

early childhood educators needs serious consideration as a means of assuring the developmental and educational significance of early childhood services and closing the socio-economically linked achievement gaps in the first year of school. As a community, we all have responsibility for the social, psychological, physical and intellectual development of the most vulnerable sector of society – young children. Surely, it is important that early childhood care and education practitioners, who are at least as important as teaching, nursing, or medical practitioners, are regulated and registered by a professional body with clear professional standards, ethics, and codes of practice?

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