

Development of Standards and Measurement Tools for Quality Assurance Systems in Australian Children's Services

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Introduction

In this paper, I will provide you with an overview of the development of quality standards and measurement tools for Quality Assurance systems in Australian children's services.

Australia is the first country in the world to develop national child care Quality Assurance systems that are initiated, funded and supported by Government. These are the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) for long day care centres, Family Day Care Quality Assurance (FDCQA) for family day care schemes and Outside School Hours Care (OSHCQA) for outside school hours care services.

Long day care centres in Australia provide formal care for children from birth to five years of age. The centres operate for a minimum of eight hours each day. Some centres operate longer hours or provide for the needs of particular workers, e.g. shift workers. Family day care schemes in Australia provide care for children aged birth to twelve in a carer's home. A local administrative coordination unit recruits and resources carers, and organises the placement of children with carers. Outside school hours care services provide care for school age children before and after school and during school vacations. Care is provided on school premises or in local facilities. Where care is not provided on the premises of the school that the child attends, the outside school hours care service puts into operation procedures for dropping off and/or collecting children.

Changes in utilisation of, and attitudes towards, child care in Australia have been significant over the last twenty years. In the early 1980s "*...child care was widely viewed as a worthwhile way to amuse children for a few hours per week while introducing them to the routines they would encounter at school, where the real learning would begin.*" (National Childcare Accreditation Council [NCAC], 1993: Foreword)

A number of factors set the stage for a change of attitude towards child care and provided an impetus for the development of Quality Assurance systems for children's services:

First of all, there has been an increase in the understanding of the significance of the early years in a child's life. Recent research on brain development has shown that quality child care enhances children's development and plays an important role in reducing criminal activity and poor health in later life. It is now widely accepted that we learn more in the first five years of life than in any other five-year period.

The **second** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that the number of Australian children being cared for outside their homes has greatly increased with the growth in the number of families in which both parents are working or, in the case of sole parents, where the parent is working.

The **third** important impetus for the development of the Quality Assurance systems is that:

The average amount of time an individual child spends in care has grown. A child can spend up to 12,500 hours in child care before starting school, (based on attendance of 50 hours per week for 5 years): that's only 500 hours less than the child will spend in lessons during the whole 13 years of schooling. (NCAC,1993: Foreword).

The National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) was established in 1993 to administer the QIAS for long day care. In July 2001 NCAC commenced the administration of FDCQA. The administration of OSHCQA commenced in July 2003.

The aim of Quality Assurance (QA) in children's services is to ensure that children in care have positive experiences that foster all aspects of their development. QA focuses on quality outcomes for children and relationships between staff, children and their families. This is done by measuring the factors that determine quality to gauge the standard of care and education that actually exists in a particular service. QA is designed to build on and complement state and territory licensing regulations (where they exist), which generally provide a minimum standard of operation for services. Regulations cover a range of factors including space, equipment, staff-child ratios and staff qualifications.

The QA systems define quality as positive outcomes for children's learning and development. A quality child care service:

- Has a clear philosophy and goals, agreed between the staff, carers, management and the families, which guide all activities at the service;
- Appreciates, respects and fosters the individuality and the interdependence of all children, including children from diverse backgrounds and children who have additional needs;
- Considers the appropriateness of all experiences and activities affecting the children in relation to their development;
- Encourages families to become involved in the service and fosters the relationship between staff, carers and families so that they can support one another in their complementary roles.

These determining aspects of quality are broken down into Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of Practice covering four main areas:

- Interactions and communications between staff, carers, children and families;
- Programs for day-to-day experiences and activities for children;
- Nutrition, health, safety and child protection;
- Service management and staff development.

In Australia, families on low and middle incomes receive assistance with child care fees from the Australian Government. Child Care Benefit is paid directly to parents accessing care in services participating in the QA systems administered by NCAC. So, while participation in the QA systems is not compulsory for services, as many parents need to offset the cost of child care with government assistance, most services need to participate in the QA systems in order to remain viable. Currently 4,473 long day care centres, 320 family day care schemes and 2,656 outside school hours care services are registered with the NCAC.

Development of Quality Assurance Systems

There are three essential elements of effective QA systems:

- Public standards that have face validity;
- Maximum reliability and validity of Accreditation Decisions;
- Processes that promote continuing quality improvement.

Face Validity

It is essential that QA systems be based on a theoretically sound set of standards developed by a panel of experts. It is also essential that there is consultation with the relevant field or profession on these standards and that a level of agreement is reached on the appropriateness of the standards.

Once agreement is reached, a standards document needs to be developed that clearly specifies these standards. Each of the NCAC's QA systems were developed by a working party with expertise in service delivery in the relevant service type and involved wide consultation with the relevant child care field. The QA standards documents (*QIAS Source Book*, 2001; *OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide*, 2003; *FDCQA Quality Practices Guide, Second Edition*, 2004) outline the Quality Areas, Principles and Indicators of Quality child care (All available at www.ncac.gov.au).

Maximum Reliability and Validity

In order to ensure that Accreditation Decisions are reliable and consistent, it is essential that measurement error is minimised. To achieve this, it is important that data on quality care provided by the service is collected from a variety of perspectives, and that a confirmatory factor analysis is undertaken to ensure that the components of quality or factors, as specified in the standards document, are a good fit. That is that the indicators of quality relate well to their respective Principles and the Principles relate well to their respective Quality Areas. It is also important to undertake appropriate data analysis to calculate weightings that reflect the extent to which each standard (or Principle) contributes to its particular Quality Area. These weightings are used to calculate a *Composite Quality Profile* for each service.

For example, in the QIAS, data is collected from six perspectives: centre, director, staff, families, Validation and Moderation. In June 2002, a confirmatory analysis was undertaken by the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER). The confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data collected by the NCAC had an excellent fit with the construct of quality defined by the 10 QIAS Quality Areas and the thirty-five Principles underlying these Quality Areas. Indeed, this quality construct accounts for 99% of the variance and co-variance in the data. The results of the measurement analyses were used to develop database protocols in relation to the weighting of each Principle, thus minimising measurement error. These protocols enable NCAC to calculate a reliable *Composite Quality Profile* for each service receiving an Accreditation decision.

Continuing Quality Improvement

It is essential that continuing quality improvement is a focus for all services participating in QA systems. In the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA, the standards documents help services to engage in an on-going process of self-study and improvement of their practices. Services participating in the QA systems are required to submit a *Self-study Report* outlining current achievements against the QA standards and plans for continuing improvement in each Quality Area. All participating services have access to timely training and advice on relevant resources to assist quality improvement.

How the Quality Assurance Systems Work

All of the QA systems operate on a five-step process. The steps are:

- Step 1: Registration;
- Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement;
- Step 3: Validation;
- Step 4: Moderation;
- Step 5: Accreditation Decision.

Step 1: Registration

New services are required to register with the NCAC before their application for Child Care Benefit will be considered by the Australian Government. When a service changes ownership or management, the new owner must complete a change of registration. Registration and participation in QA is necessary if a service is to continue to offer Child Care Benefit to families attending the service.

Step 2: Self-study and Continuing Improvement

On a regular and cyclical basis, each service makes a self-assessment of the quality of its practice through consultation with all staff and families at their service. The service evaluates the quality of its practice for each of the Quality Areas and Principles against the standards outlined by the NCAC (refer to *QIAS Source Book*, 2001; *OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide*, 2003; *FDCQA Quality Practices Guide, Second Edition*, 2004) (All available at www.ncac.gov.au). From such ongoing self-assessment, the service develops and implements a continuing cycle of quality improvement plans.

The results of this self-assessment are summarised in a *Self-study Report*. In completing the *Self-study Report*, the service will provide a rating of its own performance against the QA Principles. The service will have the opportunity to document aspects of current practices and outline its *Continuing Improvement Plan*. Accredited services are required to submit a *Self-study Report* to the NCAC every two-and-a-half years. The Australian Government funds a range of agencies to assist services participating in the QA systems. This may be in relation to self-study and continuing improvement and the delivery of quality services. Services provided by these agencies include telephone information, visits to services, training courses, lending resources and bookshops.

Step 3: Validation

A peer Validator, selected and trained by the NCAC, visits the service to validate its quality practices. Wherever possible, NCAC uses the preferred specialist knowledge areas indicated by the service in its *Self-study Report* when allocating a Validator to visit the service. Such specialist knowledge areas include indigenous children, community based services and rural services.

The Validator observes the service's care practices, sights any necessary service documentation and completes a *Validation Report*. Validators also collect the *Validation Surveys* completed by the director/staff/carers and families/children during the weeks prior to the Validation Visit, and return them to the NCAC together with the *Validation Report*. Depending on the size of the service, the Validator will spend anywhere from one day in a small long day care service with up to and including twenty-nine licensed places in regular use, to five days in a family day care scheme with over 601 equivalent full time places.

Following the Validation Visit, the service may complete a *Validation Evaluation Form* and return it to NCAC. This form allows the service to provide feedback to NCAC on the Validation Visit and to raise any concerns or issues for consideration by NCAC.

Step 4: Moderation

The process of Moderation helps to ensure that all services participating in the QA systems are treated consistently on a national basis. Moderators assess the quality of the service's practice, guided by information in the service's *Self-study Report*, the *Validation Surveys* and the *Validation Report*. Moderators also consider information from the service's *Validation Evaluation Form*, where available.

Moderators look at each service as a whole, identifying patterns of quality care within the service. A composite *Quality Profile* is compiled by NCAC from information in the service's *Self-study Report* and *Validation Surveys*, the *Validation Report* and the Moderation ratings. The *Profile* shows a composite of these various perspectives of service performance across the Quality Areas of the QA system, using protocols developed for the NCAC by the Australian Council of Educational Research. Moderators write a *Continuing Improvement Guide* for the service which focuses on quality improvement, based on the trends evident in the service's composite *Quality Profile*.

Step 5: Accreditation Decision

The Accreditation Decision is the final step in the QA system and is determined by the NCAC. To be accredited, a service must achieve a rating of Satisfactory or higher on all Quality Areas as detailed on the composite *Quality Profile*. Accredited services are required to prominently display their *Certificate of Accreditation* in the service. Services are also provided with a second certificate showing the service's composite *Quality Profile* and the names of service staff who participated in the QIAS process. This *Quality Profile Certificate* is for display at the discretion of the service.

An Accredited service is required to continue its self-study and continuing improvement cycle (see Step 2 above) until its next *Self-study Report* is due for submission. The Accreditation period is 2.5 years between submission of *Self-study Reports*. Services that do not meet the standard required for accreditation are required to submit another *Self-study Report* six months from the date of the NCAC Decision.

Accreditation Decision Reviews

Where a service is not satisfied with the Accreditation Decision made by the NCAC, they may apply to the Accreditation Decisions Review Committee for a review of that Decision. The Accreditation Decisions Review Committee (ADRC) is an independent body, appointed under Section 16 of the Child Care Act 1972, to review Accreditation Decisions made by

the NCAC following the receipt of a service's application to have an accreditation decision reviewed.

Achievements of the QA Systems – Measuring Success

Progress of Services Through the QA Systems

QIAS – Total Registered Services on July 1st 2004: 4,473

FDCQA - Total Registered Services on July 1st 2004: 320

OSHCQA - Total Registered Services on July 1st 2004: 2,656

Other Benefits of Implementing QA Systems

The fact that Australia has funded and supported QA systems in children's services has brought a number of benefits to the early/middle childhood field:

- Community awareness of the work and worth of the childcare profession has been raised;
- Many resources are now much more accessible on a national basis due to interstate networking and sharing of ideas;
- There has been a national exchange of ideas relating to good practice. This means that a child care service on one side of the country can now benefit from the experience of a service on the other side of the country. In this way, much duplication of effort has been eliminated and good practice has been enhanced;
- Agencies outside the early childhood field are now targeting child care services and adapting their resources, kits, information and so on to the needs of children's services. This is particularly evident in the health and safety area where a number of resources are now produced targeting child care services, including the publications: *Caring for Children, Plan It, Staying Healthy in Child Care*;
- Corporate sponsorship has also been gained by child health educators for the development of national health, safety and nutrition information for service staff and families, directly related to the QIAS and FDCQA Quality Areas. This is being developed by the Centre for Community Child Health.

Community Response

Families and community members can use the NCAC hotline or website (www.ncac.gov.au) to obtain the names of accredited services in their area or to make inquiries or comments about the QA. The majority of community-related calls that the NCAC receives are from parents and these calls are steadily increasing. Most of the parents who contact NCAC are positive about QA and appreciate the information provided by the NCAC as a guide for choosing quality child care.

Administration of the Quality Assurance Systems

The NCAC is currently administering QA systems for 7,500 child care services, providing care to 763,000 children and representing more than 540,000 families across Australia. Although the QIAS, FDCQA and OSHCQA may appear straightforward, it is certainly a challenge to administer them.

The QA systems are based on peer review, where early childhood professionals working in child care are trained by NCAC to undertake a review of service practice. The NCAC continually trains Validators and Moderators and requires approximately 1,000 Validators and fifty Moderators across the country to undertake more than 2,600 Validation Visits and Moderation sessions each year.

Validators

Validators are qualified and experienced child care professionals with recent experience in a long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service. To become a Validator an applicant must, firstly, meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, www.ncac.gov.au). Secondly, the applicant must undertake a five-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required standard of competency in an assessment at the conclusion of the training program.

Validators are required to undertake at least ten days of Validation Visits each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback by members of NCAC's Validator Program. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues, an NCAC *Validator Bulletin* is published regularly and Validators attend annual update training sessions. Working as a Validator for the NCAC is a commitment not only for the Validator, but also the Validator's child care service. It is difficult for Validators to be away from their own services, even when they are replaced by relief staff. They may also need to travel and be away from their own families. However, there are benefits such as professional development, particularly in the areas of observation and communication, and the development of a deep understanding of quality improvement and quality practices.

Moderators

Moderators are qualified professionals with considerable experience in the early or middle child care field. They have recent experience in long day care, family day care or outside school hours care service delivery and/or in delivery of pre- and post-service training or in research.

To become a Moderator, an applicant must firstly meet the selection criteria set by NCAC (available on the NCAC website, www.ncac.gov.au). Secondly, the applicant must

undertake a three-day training program and thirdly, they must successfully attain the required competency standards.

Moderators are required to undertake five, two-day Moderation Sessions each year. They are provided with regular support and performance feedback. To keep them up to date with changes or current issues an NCAC *Moderator Newsletter* is published regularly and annual refresher training is provided.

The Tyranny of Distance

One difficulty we face in administering the QA systems is a uniquely Australian problem – vast distances and the distribution of the population across the continent.

To ensure there is no conflict of interest, the NCAC requires that the Validator and child care service have no prior connection. When scheduling a Validation Visit for a rural or isolated service, it may be that the nearest eligible Validator, who does not pose a conflict of interest, is located hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. This is especially difficult in the Northern Territory where distance, combined with a small population, usually means flying in a Validator from a neighbouring State/Territory. Even within States the distances involved can be great – to send a Validator from Brisbane to a service in Bamaga (both located in Queensland) – is a 5,000 kilometre round-trip.

Future Directions

The Australian Government is investigating the viability of extending QA to other forms of child care, including Indigenous and In-Home Care.

Conclusion

As educators and advocates for children, I feel that we should be justly proud of the quality of care and education we provide for children and our efforts to improve quality. I am proud of the quality standards in Australian children's services. I would encourage you to continue to strive for continuous quality improvement – as quality improvement is a journey not a single destination.

Publications and Support for Services

The NCAC produces a number of publications for child care services participating in the QA systems. These include:

QIAS Handbook (Second eEdition 2001), FDCQA Handbook (Second Edition 2004) and OSHCQA Handbook (2003) - contain background information on the specific QA systems, an overview of the steps involved in achieving accreditation and a summary of the Quality Areas and Principles. The *Handbooks* are targeted primarily at service management, staff,

carers and parents as well as students and others interested in quality child care. The *Handbooks* are also available on the NCAC website in a variety of community languages.

QIAS Source Book (2001), OSHCQA Quality Practices Guide (2003) and FDCQA Quality Practices Guide (2001) - the main documents or standards to be used by children's services progressing through the QA systems and targeted specifically at management, staff, carers and parents who are participating in their service's accreditation process. The *Quality Practices Guides* and *Source Book* detail the Quality Areas and Principles and give examples of indicative practices. Services are responsible for designing their own self-study process against the standards outlined in the *Quality Practices Guides or Source Book*. A service's quality of care is also validated against these standards.

QIAS Self-study Report (2001), FDCQA Self-study Report (Second Edition 2004) and OSHCQA Self-study Report (2003) - the working documents to be used by services to rate each Principle, record evidence of practice and plan for continued improvement across the Quality Areas. The *Self-study Report* will be completed by the management and staff and submitted to NCAC at the required time.

FDCQA Workbook (2001) and OSHCQA Workbook (2003) - optional publications intended to assist services to conduct self-study and develop improvement plans. The *Workbooks* are designed to be used by management, staff and carers. Supplementary documents to the *Workbooks* are also available on the NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au).

NCAC support for services includes:

QIAS Introductory Video (2001), FDCQA Introductory Video (2001) and OSHCQA Introductory Video (2003) - designed to introduce the service to the relevant QA system. NCAC suggests that the service use the video to assist management, staff, carers and families to become familiar with the process and resources of QA.

NCAC has created an *Online Training Module* for each QA system, which is available on our website (www.ncac.gov.au). This package provides training on the processes of the QA systems and links to the QA documents available on the website. It is particularly useful to new management, staff and carers, students and interested family members.

NCAC's ***Choosing Quality Child Care*** brochure is a helpful resource for families seeking child care. It contains information on what to look for in a quality child care setting, questions to ask, the role of families in care, as well as information about NCAC and the QA systems. These brochures and posters are available to services free of charge.

Putting Children First - quarterly newsletter distributed to all services registered with NCAC, to peak child care bodies, tertiary institutions, State and Territory governments and other interested parties. It contains information on the QA systems and practical suggestions for achieving quality.

NCAC website (www.ncac.gov.au) - is a valuable tool for early and middle childhood professionals. It makes a wide range of resources easily accessible and provides current information about the QA systems. The site contains:

- All NCAC publications;
- A range of forms such as Registration, Change of Registration, and NCAC Book Order forms;
- Online Training Modules;
- Support documents for each step of the QA systems;
- Information on becoming a Validator or Moderator;
- Translations of the *Handbooks* into community languages;
- Easy access to NCAC's e-mail address qualitycare@ncac.gov.au;
- Links to relevant external web sites including training organisations and State/Territory Licensing authorities;
- An integrated search facility for children's services.

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