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(ACECQA)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF) guides State /Territory government regulatory authorities to meet national goals for continuous quality improvement. The effectiveness of the NQF is demonstrated by steady improvements in quality as measured against the National Quality Standard (NQS). From 2014 to 2018, the proportion of services with an overall rating of Meeting NQS or above increased from 62% to 78%, and the proportion with a rating of Exceeding NQS increased from 26% to 33% (ACECQA, 2018). In order to further examine the drivers of quality improvement and high quality ratings, ACECQA commissioned Macquarie University to lead a national study of long day care (LDC) services that had improved their NQS rating over two sequential NQS assessments.

This report presents findings from the three phase, mixed-methods Quality Improvement Research Project, which investigated the characteristics and internal processes of quality improvement in LDC services. While recognising the integrated nature of the NQS, and interrelationship between the seven quality areas, the study concentrated on Quality Area 1 (Educational Program and Practice) and Quality Area 7 (Governance and Leadership).

METHODOLOGY

The sequential nature of the three-phase design provided both scale and depth in data collection and analysis. **Phase 1** compared service characteristics of LDC services that had improved their rating from Working Towards NQS to Meeting NQS ($n = 957$) and services that had improved from Working towards NQS to Exceeding NQS ($n = 381$) with services that had no change in their rating of Working towards NQS ($n = 597$). Findings from Phase 1 informed the selection of services for Phases 2 and 3.

Phase 2 applied qualitative analysis approaches to Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) and Assessment and Rating (A&R) reports from a selected sub-sample of 60 LDC services to explore the factors and strategies that influenced quality improvement in Quality Area 1 and Quality Area 7.

The findings uncovered in Phase 2 were further explored in **Phase 3** which comprised in-depth qualitative case studies of 15 LDC services. The research team engaged directly with service leaders, educators and Approved Providers to investigate the challenges and barriers associated with quality improvement, and the strategies and additional supports that promoted quality improvement.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Genuine and sustained quality improvement is the result of collaborative effort, and therefore needs to be seen as a shared responsibility. While recognising the need for a team approach, the findings place emphasis on the need for leadership at all levels of service delivery and ECEC policy. In particular, the important role of the Educational Leader is highlighted. The study also identifies priority areas to support and sustain quality improvement evidenced by improved A&R outcomes.

ROLE OF THE APPROVED PROVIDER AND ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

The Approved Provider was key to ensuring the service could focus on quality improvement. They enabled the Educational Leader/Service Director and educators to lead the program, and provided the time to do this, for example, by release from face-to-face teaching to focus on goals and strategies for improving practices.

Quality improvement within services requires organisational leadership, support and resourcing. This spans the recruitment and retention of qualified and skilled early childhood teachers and educators, support for professional learning, resourcing of the learning environment, and creation of a positive work environment.

There was evidence of greater support for quality improvement in larger services and services operated by larger organisations. However, some smaller services were creating their own local networks and engaging external mentors to enhance organisational support.

SERVICE LEADERSHIP

Service leaders play a critical role in supporting and sustaining quality improvement, including leading the service philosophy and working with the Approved Provider to create and maintain a positive and supportive workplace. The service's philosophy was a critical document for driving the program. In services that improved to Exceeding NQS, philosophy statements were detailed, involved all stakeholders and demonstrated systematic approaches to the revision of the philosophy.

A strategic approach to creating a supportive workforce enabled educators to focus on quality improvement and supported a positive work culture. Links between longevity of staff and quality improvement and rating was evident, as well as the contribution of effective leadership on teamwork and professional practice.

ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER

Effective educational leadership is essential to the provision of quality educational programs and practice. Recruiting the right person to be the Educational Leader and supporting them to be effective in this role is key to quality improvement and improved A&R outcomes. Employment of staff who understand pedagogical practice and can enable others to develop their skills and knowledge about play-based learning is highly beneficial in delivering high quality early childhood programs.

In services that improved to Exceeding NQS, Approved Providers valued and supported the role of Educational Leader, providing training, resources and time to ensure the intent of the role was realised.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATORS

Continuous quality improvement is based on shared learning and effective teamwork. All members of the team need to be proactive in their own learning, support the professional learning of others, engage in critical reflection on practice, and embed continuous quality improvement in their day-to-day practice. In **services that improved to** Exceeding NQS, individual educators were involved in quality improvement strategies, committed to continuous improvement, and professionally accountable. This was evident in the culture of the service, including strong teamwork approaches.

ECEC ASSESSMENT AND RATING TOOLS

Meaningful engagement with the A&R process provided a platform for continuous quality improvement. Findings highlighted key influences on the impact of A&R on quality, and areas for further improvement at service and public policy levels.

Quality Improvement Plans: QIPs were varied in content, length and format, with some being very brief and others very detailed. There was also wide variation in the quality of the service philosophy statements. Critical reflection appeared in QIPs as a consistent theme and goal for quality improvement, but often lacked detail on how this was actually enacted in the service. Reference to diversity, culture and inclusion was minimal in both QIPs and A&R reports.

Assessment and Rating reports: The study identified differences in approaches to A&R, particularly the information and advice provided by the Authorised Officer; the support given to services in identifying strategies and goals for achieving improvement; and the Authorised Officer's interpersonal and communication skills and ability to help educators to feel at ease and to engage with the A&R process.

FINDINGS BY PHASE

Table 1. Key Findings for Each Phase of the Research

Phase 1	
<p>Services that improved from Working Towards NQS to Meeting NQS were more likely to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not-for-profit services. • Services operated by large providers. 	<p>Services that improved from Working Towards NQS to Exceeding NQS were more likely to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not-for-profit services. • Services operated by large providers. • Larger services - 60 or more places. • Services that had NOT changed ownership.
Phase 2	
<p>Factors influential to improvement in Quality Area 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on child agency and rights. • Sustained commitment to improvement. • Informed by theories of learning and children as competent and capable. • Planned critically reflective approach • Guided by knowledge of the EYLF. • Alignment with service philosophy. 	<p>Strategies influential to improvement in Quality Area 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involving families. • Maximising learning opportunities for children. • Educator practices of collaboration and critical reflection. • Involving local community.
<p>Factors influential to improvement in Quality Area 7:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established systems; transparency of procedures and policies to stakeholders. • Focus on professional growth and learning. • Positive culture; high expectations. • Support for staff and Educational Leader. 	<p>Strategies influential to improvement in Quality Area 7:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional learning; leading learning. • Systems leading quality improvement. • Induction processes. • Collaborative partnerships with staff, families and community stakeholders.
<p>QIPs: Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical reflection on service strengths and practices. • Meaningful goals, specific strategies and timeframes. • Focus on building educator capacity. • Progress notes; improvement made visible. • Collaboration and engagement with staff, families and children. • Culture of quality improvement versus a culture of compliance. 	<p>A&R Reports: Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence to support the rating and examples to make practice visible. • Language that is descriptive versus technical and compliance oriented. • Constructive pedagogical feedback and/or suggestions for improvement. • Captures progress and success clearly and tangibly. • Makes visible critical reflection within the service.

Phase 3	
<p>Factors identified as both enablers and challenges to Quality Area 1:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth of educators’ knowledge and understanding of EYLF. • Approach to program planning; connection between service philosophy and practice, supporting children’s agency and facilitating family engagement and voice. • Understanding and enactment of the assessment and planning cycle; documentation; critical reflection skills. 	<p>Factors identified as both enablers and challenges to Quality Area 7:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on strengthening leadership. • Understanding and support for the role of educational leader. • Team collaboration supported by a positive work culture and environment. • Strategic and sustainable approaches to professional development.

CONCLUSIONS

The study focused on QA1, Educational program and practice and QA7, Governance and leadership to identify key factors supporting quality improvement in LDC. Participants regarded QA1 as the most challenging area within the NQS, but also the most important as it provides the foundation for all seven quality areas. Services that improved to Exceeding NQS maintained a strong focus on QA1, seeking to build depth in educators’ knowledge of the EYLF and understanding of pedagogical approaches to maximise children’s learning and wellbeing.

The findings reinforce the importance of leadership at all levels of service provision and ECEC policy in driving and supporting genuine and sustained quality improvement. Services that improved to Exceeding NQS recognised the importance of pedagogical leadership by investing in the role of Educational Leader. Effective Educational Leaders had high level pedagogical knowledge and skills, were critically reflective and highly collaborative leaders, engaging all team members in planning and achieving quality improvement.

The full report includes a summary of the research team’s conclusions and observations regarding key factors and strategies that led to genuine and sustainable quality improvement. These are offered to provide a focus for collaborative critical reflection to support self-assessment and to plan and prioritise areas for quality improvement.

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INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In October 2018, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) sought the services of an external organisation to design and conduct a national research study to identify the characteristics and drivers of quality improvement in long day care (LDC) services. The focus was on LDC services that had achieved an increase in their rating from Working Towards the National Quality Standard (NQS) at the time 1 assessment to Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS at the time 2 assessment.

RESEARCH AIMS

The stated aims were to identify:

1. service characteristics that may impact reassessment outcomes;
2. the factors that contribute to quality improvement, with a particular focus on improvement in Quality Area 1 (Educational Program and Practice) and Quality Area 7 (Governance and Leadership);
3. the challenges associated with, and barriers to, quality improvement;
4. the strategies for quality improvement, including the role of the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) in driving continuous improvement;
5. types of additional support that will promote and assist quality improvement, with a particular focus on support for improvement in Quality Area 1 and Quality Area 7.

A national consortium of researchers led by Macquarie University was selected to undertake the study. Their three phase design comprised an integrated sequence of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and analysis techniques to explore the five research aims.

Phase 1 used statistical analyses to identify the service characteristics that were associated with improvements from Working Towards NQS to Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS in a sample of 1,935 long day care (LDC) services.

Phase 2 applied a mix of qualitative document analysis methods to Quality Improvement Plans (QIPs) and Assessment and Rating (A&R) reports for 60 LDC services to identify the factors and strategies that contributed to quality improvement in Quality Area 1 (QA1) and Quality Area 7 (QA7).

Phase 3 conducted in-depth qualitative case studies of 15 LDC services to investigate the challenges and barriers associated with quality improvement, and the strategies and additional supports that promoted quality improvement, with a focus on QA 1 and QA 7.

The sequential nature of the three-phase design contributed to the efficiency and efficacy of this national study, providing both scale and depth in data collection and analysis. The findings from Phase 1 informed the selection of services for inclusion in Phase 2 and Phase 3. The findings uncovered in Phase 2 document analyses were explored in more depth in in Phase 3.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

PHASE 1

The National Quality Agenda IT System (NQA ITS)¹ dataset was used to identify a study sample of 1,936 LDC services that had two assessments with an initial rating of Working Towards NQS. Of these, 597 services (31%) had no change in their overall NQS rating; 957 services (49%) had improved to Meeting NQA, and 381 services (20%) had improved to Exceeding NQS.

Statistical analyses were used to test the effects on improvement outcomes of seven service characteristics available from the NQA ITS dataset:

- Jurisdiction (8 categories): NSW, ACT, NT, QLD, SA, TAS, VIC, WA;
- Location (4 categories): metropolitan, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote;

- Community socio-economic advantage / disadvantage (5 categories): SEIFA quintiles (1st quintile = lowest advantage; 5th = highest advantage);
- Type of Approved Provider (3 categories): for-profit; not-for-profit community-based or school-based; not-for-profit government or non-government organisation;
- Size of Approved Provider (3 categories): standalone service; medium (2-7 services); large (≥ 8 services);
- Service size/number of approved places (2 categories): small, < 60 places vs large ≥ 60 places;
- Transfer of ownership (2 categories): transfer versus no transfer.

The impact of these service characteristics was examined by comparing results for the three groups (No Change from Working Towards NQS, Improvement to Meeting NQS, Improvement to Exceeding NQS) using multinomial logistic regression analysis². For each characteristic, the first category was set as the reference category, which was then compared with each of the other categories to identify significant differences within the service characteristic. For example, for jurisdiction, the reference category was NSW and improvement outcomes for services in NSW were compared with outcomes for each of the other States / Territories, the 'test' categories³. For type of Approved Provider, the reference category was 'for-profit' and improvement outcomes for this type of provider were compared with improvement outcomes for two test conditions of 'not-for-profit' types of providers.

PHASE 2

A representative sample of 60 LDC services⁴ was selected for Phase 2. ACECQA, with the support of state and territory regulatory authorities, provided de-identified copies of the most recent QIPs and A&R reports for each service. Three analytic approaches were used to explore distinctions between services that had improved to Meeting NQS versus an improvement to Exceeding NQS.

Thematic analysis was applied to researcher summary memos of 'first impressions' of the QIP, A&R report and relationships between these. NVivo software was used to identify broad categories of patterns and themes specific to QA1 and QA7 in the QIPs and A&R reports. Leximancer software⁵ was applied to make a conceptual analysis of QIPs, producing content analytic visualisations of the QIPS for QA1 and QA7, with analysis of patterns evident for services that improved to Meeting NQS versus Exceeding NQS.

PHASE 3

A sample of 15 LDC services was selected for in-depth case studies. Each service was visited by a member of the research team⁶ who spent two days onsite, engaging in professional conversations (Irvine & Price, 2014) with service leaders, educators and, where possible, Approved Providers. The focus of the conversations was on participants’ views and experiences of the A&R process, the factors and processes that supported improvement and those perceived to be important for sustaining and promoting quality improvements at each service. Each researcher engaged in a sequential conversation with the participants to elicit factual, reflective, interpretive and decisional information (Stanfield, 2000). Examples of these types of questions are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of questions used in Phase 3 case study visits

Sequence of Conversation	Example questions
<p>Objective questions (conversation starter, what happened?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Looking at QA1 Educational Programs and Practices, what did you focus on? Why?</i> • <i>Who was involved? Why? How did the team work together?</i>
<p>Reflective questions (providing insight into values, beliefs and attitudes that may influence behaviour and learning)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How did you feel about the assessment and rating process overall?</i> • <i>What areas of your work did you feel most confident about? Why?</i>
<p>Interpretive questions (provoking deeper thinking, making connections with self and work)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do you think are the key quality areas to focus on when preparing for assessment and rating? Why?</i> • <i>What is the role of leadership in a successful assessment and rating outcome?</i>
<p>Decisional questions (next steps)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are you doing to maintain momentum and a focus on continuous quality improvement?</i> • <i>What challenges you most about supporting educators to commit to continuous quality improvement/committing to continuous quality improvement?</i>

Handwritten field notes were used by individual researchers to develop a summary case study report for each service, which was then reviewed and approved by service participants. These de-identified case study reports were then shared with research team members. These reports provided the focus for a facilitated process of collaborative thematic and content analysis discussion, and facilitated by an expert early childhood researcher acting as a ‘critical friend’.

KEY FINDINGS – PHASE 1

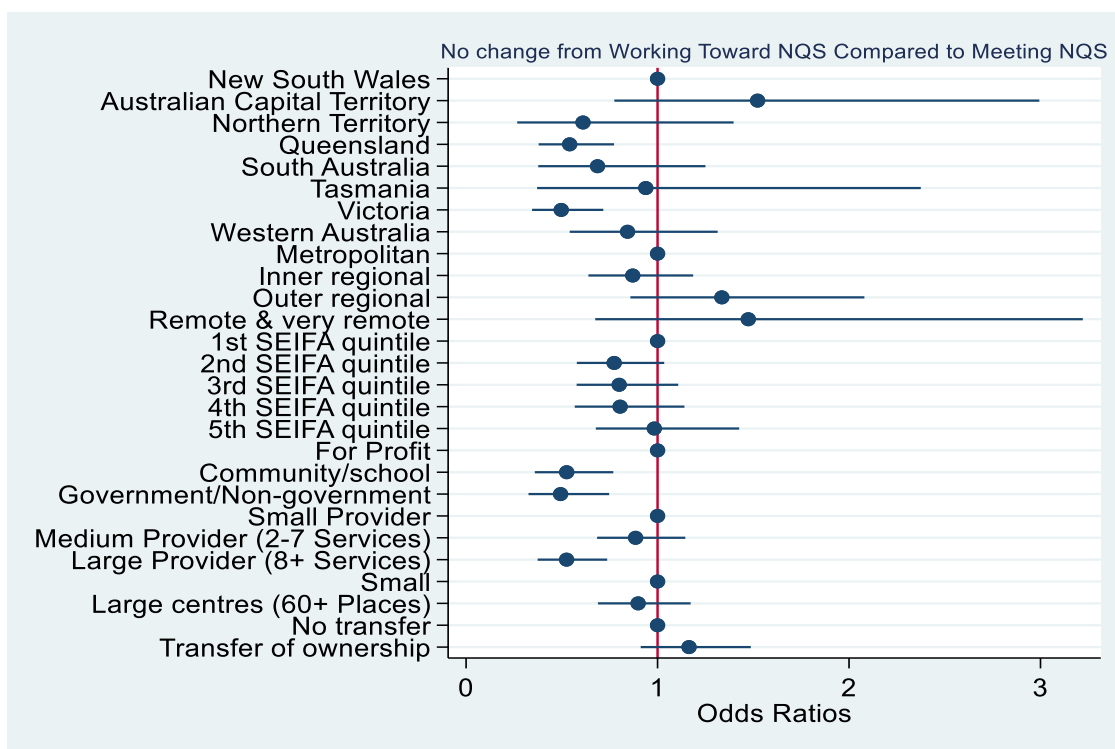
This section summarises the results of the multinomial logistic regression tests to identify the impact of seven service characteristics⁸ on quality improvement outcomes for services rated as Working Towards NQS that had a reassessment. Improvement outcomes were: No Change from Working Towards NQS, Improvement to Meeting NQS, and Improvement to Exceeding NQS. A significance level of $p \leq .05$ was used in these analyses.

COMPARING NO CHANGE FROM WORKING TOWARDS NQS WITH MEETING NQS

Results presented in Figure 1 show the Odds Ratios (ORs) for the service characteristics as the reference category compared with each of the other categories. These analyses indicate that three characteristics had significant effects after controlling for all service characteristics: jurisdiction, type of Approved Provider, and size of Approved Provider.

- Compared to services in NSW, services in Queensland and Victoria were more likely to improve to Meeting NQS than to have No Change from the previous Working Towards NQS rating.
- Compared to for-profit services, not-for-profit community and school-based services, and not-for-profit government and non-government-managed services, were more likely to improve to Meeting NQS than to have No Change from the previous Working Towards NQS rating.
- Services that were operated by large providers, whether these were for-profit or not-for-profit, were more likely than services operated by standalone providers to improve to Meeting NQS than to have No Change from the previous Working Towards NQS rating.

Figure 1. Multinomial logistic regression results for No Change from Working Toward NQS compared to Improvement to Meeting NQS presented as Odds Ratios (dots) and confidence intervals (blue lines) for each service characteristic

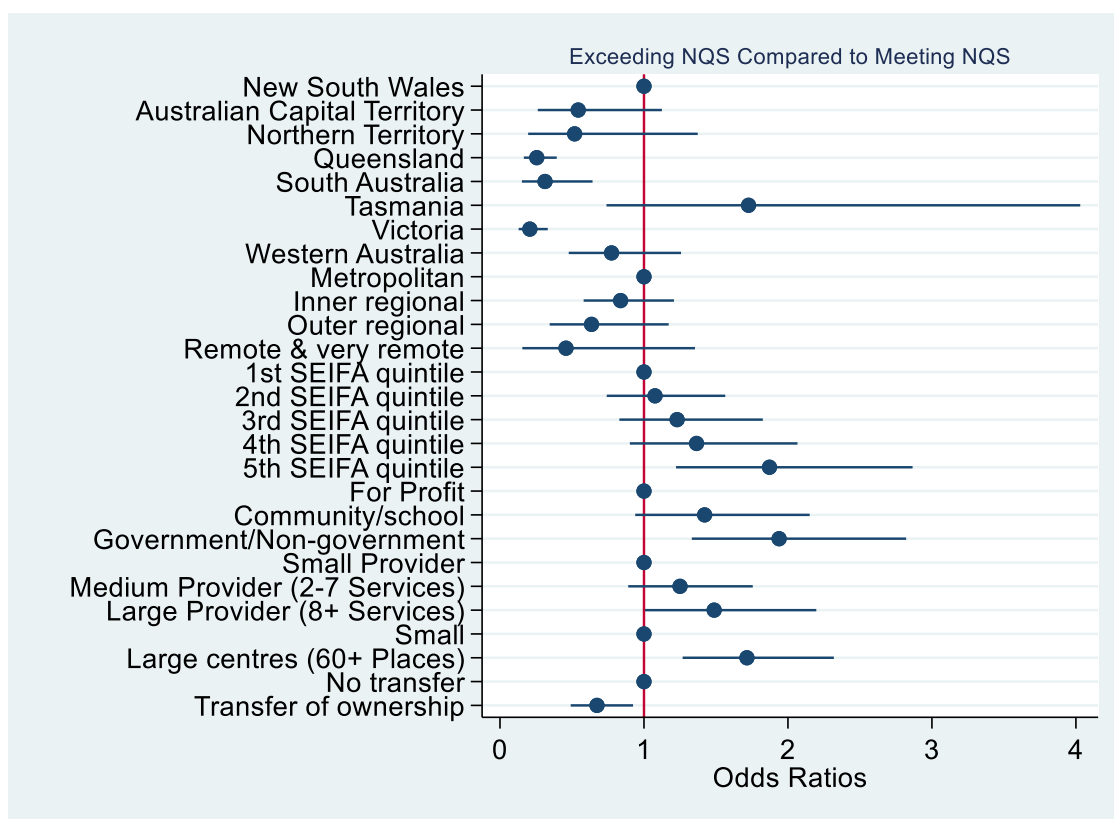


COMPARING IMPROVEMENT TO EXCEEDING NQS WITH MEETING NQS

Results presented in Figure 2 indicate that six of the seven service characteristics were significant predictors in this analysis. Only location did not explain improvement outcomes.

- Jurisdiction effects were evident for Queensland, South Australia and Victoria, which had ORs < 1.00, meaning that services in these states were less likely than services in NSW to achieve an improvement to Exceeding NQS.
- Community disadvantage, SEIFA quintile 1 (reference category) reduced the likelihood of services improving to Exceeding NQS (OR < 1.00) compared to services located in highly advantaged communities, SEIFA quintile 5. For the other SEIFA quintiles there was no difference from the reference category.
- Type and size of Approved Provider were both associated with Improvement to Exceeding NQS:
 - Not-for-profit services that were managed by government or non-government organisations were more likely to improve to Exceeding NQS than for-profit services (OR > 1.00).
 - Services that were operated by large providers (regardless of type of provider) were more likely to improve to Exceeding NQS than services operated by standalone providers (OR > 1.00).
- Larger services, with 60 or more approved places, were also more likely to improve to Exceeding NQS (OR > 1.00) in comparison to smaller services with fewer than 60 children.
- Services that had experienced a transfer of ownership were less likely to achieve Exceeding NQS (OR < 1.00) compared to services that had not had a transfer.

Figure 2. Multinomial logistic regression results for Improvement to Exceeding NQS compared with Improvement to Meeting NQS presented as Odds Ratios (dots) and confidence intervals (blue lines) for each service characteristic



KEY FINDINGS – PHASE 2

This section summarises the findings for each of the three methods of document analysis for 60 services:

- thematic analysis of researcher summary notes;
- NVivo analysis of QIPs and A&R reports;
- Leximancer analysis of QIPs.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF RESEARCHER SUMMARY NOTES

The researcher summary notes documented first impressions of the QIPs and A&R reports as tools to support quality improvement. **Table 3** provides a summary of the strengths (i.e., more effective attributes) and challenges (i.e., less effective attributes requiring further development) of the QIPs and A&R reports. These included reflections on service strengths, strategies to support quality improvement, and alignment between the QIP and A&R report.

Table 3. Summary of strengths and challenges documented in the use of QIPs and A&R reports to support quality improvement

Documents	Strengths	Challenges
QIPs	<p>QIP is an effective strategic planning document.</p> <p>There is evidence of critical reflection on strengths and practice, with some supporting examples illustrating improved practice.</p> <p>QIP prioritises a small number of meaningful goals and includes clear and specific strategies with timeframes to achieve these goals. Goals and strategies focus on building educator capacity and improved child learning and outcomes, informed by theory and research.</p> <p>QIP is used and there are regular progress notes that make change and quality improvement visible.</p> <p>There is evidence of collaboration and engagement of staff, families and children in developing and monitoring the QIP.</p> <p>QIP evidences a culture of quality improvement.</p>	<p>QIP is not a planning tool and is simply more paperwork.</p> <p>Critical reflection is not evidenced.</p> <p>QIP is too brief and offers limited detail and direction for educator learning and/or quality improvement.</p> <p>There are technical deficiencies in the QIP, including: a focus on tasks rather than building educator capacity; strategies are too general; tasks are too big; timeframes are open; there is a misalignment between goals, strategies, success measures and progress notes.</p> <p>No or few progress notes suggesting the QIP is not used as a planning document Progress notes simply claim improved practice, no evidence or examples.</p> <p>Collaboration is not evidenced.</p> <p>QIP has a compliance orientation and addresses minimum standards.</p>
A&R reports	<p>Detailed and comprehensive report that includes sufficient contextual examples to make practice visible and support the rating.</p> <p>Language is descriptive in that it uses adjectives to demonstrate the degree of success and improvement.</p>	<p>Limited information and evidence to support the rating.</p> <p>Language is compliance oriented; the report includes technical statements regarding observations undertaken.</p>

	<p>The report provides constructive pedagogical feedback and/or clear suggestions for improvement.</p> <p>The report captures progress and success in quality improvement clearly and tangibly.</p> <p>The report makes visible critical reflection within the service.</p>	<p>There is limited feedback; feedback is highly generalised and/or technical rather than pedagogical in nature.</p>
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A number of shared practice issues emerged consistently in both the QIPs and A&R reports, recognised as strengths or challenges in different services across jurisdictions. These included:

- service philosophy;
- educational program and practice; and
- educational leadership.

SERVICE PHILOSOPHY

There was wide variation in the quality of philosophy statements in the QIP and alignment between philosophy and practice evidenced in the QIP and A&R report⁹. The variations included:

- most statements communicated the service’s beliefs about children, early learning and/or quality ECEC;
- many were very brief, lacked coherence and provided no clear direction for practice;
- only a few had direct links to theory and research;
- some QIPs identified current strengths, examples of practices and areas for improvement that aligned to the service philosophy;
- some A&R reports included examples of practice that illustrated the service philosophy in action and/or included reflections on the association between the service’s philosophy and practice.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND PRACTICE

There were common areas of focus relating to QA1 in the QIPs and A&R reports, identified as strengths in some services and challenges in others (See Table 4).

Table 4. Common area of focus relating to educational programs and practices in the QIPs and A&R reports

Practice	Strength	Challenge
Critical reflection	Critical reflection appeared in QIPs as a consistent theme and goal for quality improvement	Often lacked detail on how this was actually enacted in the service. A&R reports often observed 'inconsistent practice' in relation to critical reflection and noted the need for whole-of-service approaches to support reflexive practice
Knowledge of individual children	Educators' knowledge of individual children and commitment to individualised planning and teaching was frequently identified as a strength.	There was often little evidence to support this and to show how it supported quality practice. References to issues of diversity, culture and inclusion was minimal in QIPs and A&R reports.
Child agency	A strong commitment to child agency was evident in the QIPs.	There were limited examples of how this was enacted in practice. Agency was often reduced to supporting children's interests and/or providing choices in the program.
Cycle of planning	Cycle of planning appeared in QIPs as a consistent theme and goal for quality improvement	Service strategies to support all educators to engage with the cycle of planning was missing in both the QIPs and A&R reports
Intentional teaching	Intentional teaching was frequently identified as a strength and there were quality examples of individualised intentional teaching in QIPs and A&R reports.	There was also evidence of some very formal and structured adult-led teaching approaches and activities promoted under the guise of intentional teaching.
Educational leader collaborating with educators	References were frequently made to the Educational Leader's role in QIPs and A&R reports.	Only some included examples of how the Educational Leader worked with individual educators and the team to inform the service's educational programs and practices.
Engagement with families and community.	Engagement with families was frequently identified as a strength. There were some examples of partnerships and collaboration with local schools and specialist allied health services	This was often more about approaches to information sharing than two-way communication. There were limited examples of collaboration with children and families in curriculum planning. There was limited attention to engagement with the broader community in the QIPs and very few examples of this in practice.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Positive outcomes for children and educators were attributed to strong and effective pedagogical leadership, by the service leader and/or Educational Leader. Some services noted the support Authorised Officers provided as well. While the focus on QA7 in the QIPs tended to relate more to governance, A&R reports identified strategies designed to support and strengthen pedagogical leadership within a service. These included:

Table 5. Common area of focus relating to educational leadership in the QIPs and A&R reports

Practice	Strength	Challenge
Leadership learning	Educational Leaders participating in leadership development programs.	Need to build leadership knowledge and skills of Educational Leader.
Time to fulfil the role	Allocation of regular time to enable the Educational Leader to work with educators.	Need for resources to realise the intent of the Educational Leader role.
Role is valued and supported	Evidence that the role was valued and supported by the Approved Provider	Need for support to realise the intent of the Educational Leader role.
Critically reflective approach	Educational Leader using a reflective and iterative approach to the educational program.	Educational Leader using a technical approach to planning with no evidence of collaboration
Effective leadership	Consistent leadership; building the leadership capacity of others.	Inconsistent leadership; Management approach to leadership.

NVIVO ANALYSIS OF QIPS AND A&R REPORTS

QIPS and A&R reports were analysed using NVivo. The analysis identified **factors** influential to quality improvement in Quality Area 1 (QA1) and Quality Area 7 (QA7), and the **strategies** characterised by evidence of proactive, consistent and embedded practice for quality improvement, including the role of the QIP. These **factors** and **strategies** are discussed below and include differences between services that improved to Meeting NQS and services that improved to Exceeding NQS.

QUALITY AREA 1 FACTORS

1. Child agency and rights

The majority of references from the QIPs and the A&Rs to child agency and rights in services rated Meeting NQS focused on opportunities for choice within the program, noting the importance of the environment in enabling this. Exceeding NQS services were more focussed on the rights of children, their agency and equitable ways to support engagement, demonstrating a deeper understanding of children’s agency and rights. For instance:

Children have developed their very own code of conduct, which gives them the control of what they can and cannot do whilst at the service. This has allowed the children the ability to have a voice around the classroom expectations (A&R_service 13).

2. Sustained commitment to improvement

Services that were Meeting NQS emphasised the ways they collected feedback and data to review the service philosophy, whereas Exceeding NQS services had a culture that included embedded systems for continuous improvement. For example:

This Educational Program Manual is a tool that allows educators to set intentions, record their reflections and assess their environment and practices... provide(s) genuine reflections and allows ways to improve on practices and outcomes (QIP_service 34).

3. Theories-research of learning¹⁰ - based on the child as a competent and capable learner

Overall, the majority of services that were Meeting NQS referenced approaches that could be attributed to one or more theorist or groups of theories. These included Vygotsky (Zone of Proximal Development); Bronfenbrenner (relationships impacting on child); the Reggio Emilia Approach (children are competent and capable); and child development theories (e.g., play-based, developmentally appropriate, active learners; and nature pedagogy). Services rated as Exceeding NQS were more likely to articulate the core of each theory, were able to provide detailed examples of their rich theoretical understandings, capitalising on the best aspects of various theories of learning and incorporating them into their teaching philosophy.

4. Planned critically reflective approach

References illustrated services that were Meeting NQS were engaging in some reflection processes but were often at the very beginning and were often implementing new programming processes. For example:

Reflections sighted mainly referred to whether children enjoyed the activities or not, and if educators should change the environment (A&R_service 25).

Educators in services rated as Meeting NQS used a reflective planning cycle but relied more on conversations and informal discussions. Exceeding NQS services were also reflecting on children's behaviour, the environment, philosophy, teaching practices and their own pedagogy. However, these services adopted a strategic approach whereby all of the educators across the service were involved in formal meetings. For example:

Educators regularly engaged in critical reflection. Team meetings are often used as professional development opportunities...The coordinator and manager explained that changes to routines, practice and programs were researched, reviewed, trialled and changed if necessary (A&R_service 24).

5. Approved Learning Framework and how the Early Years Learning Framework leads improvement

Services that were Meeting NQS focused on supporting children's learning and development by considering the five learning outcomes linking decisions clearly to the EYLF. Exceeding NQS services made reference to learning outcomes, but also to the EYLF principles and practices. Exceeding NQS services also described how the EYLF guided curriculum decision making and generally had a more holistic understanding of the EYLF - that it not only guides experiences, but also intentional teaching and educator practice.

6. Alignment with service philosophy

Meeting NQS services had evidence of the philosophy as a living document reflective of the stakeholders and "educators regularly demonstrated practice that mirrored the service's philosophy" (A&R_service 3). Going one step further Exceeding NQS services focussed on how the philosophy was visible in their curriculum decisions and documentation. For example:

The philosophy is consistently evident in all aspects of the service's operations and consideration is given to the philosophy in the daily program planning. Documentation confirmed that links to the philosophy are noted on the program indicating specifically which paragraph it relates to. It was also evident through observation that the philosophy is embedded and is reflective of everyday practices (A&R_service 54).

QUALITY AREA 1 STRATEGIES

1. Involving families – communication approaches

This included service-to-parent, parent-to-service and two-way communication strategies that encouraged families to be involved. All Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services in the sample communicated in a variety of ways with families including sharing documentation, children's portfolios, and conversations at drop off and/or pick up. However, Exceeding NQS services facilitated varied opportunities for families to discuss their child's learning and what was happening in the overall program, and these were planned and regularly diarised. For example, these services noted that they listened to the child, communicated among educators within the service, and spoke with allied health professionals (when appropriate):

Programs were planned based on information provided by families about their child through a variety of sources that included family and child information pages; the enrolment form; discussions with educators; communication books; and through families' contributions to the services electronic program (A&R_service 33)

2. Maximising learning opportunities for children

Strategies that Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services implemented to maximise learning included listening to children, intentional teaching, relationships that were responsive to children and using routines as opportunities for development and learning.

Children were not rushed during routines and educators ensured routines were adapted when necessary to meet individual needs (A&R_service 30).

Meeting NQS services emphasised choices for children in the program, long periods of uninterrupted play, responding to children's requests/interests and investigating these in sustained projects. Exceeding NQS services were more likely to embed inclusive practices, for example, understanding the child's background context and the importance of including this in the program. For instance:

Documentation and observation revealed the intent of the service to increase each child's learning in the areas that rated poorly in the Australian Early Development Census data for the community (A&R_service 33).

Educators co-program with the children. Their voices are recorded in the 'Children's voice book' (questions, mind mapping, morning meetings where they are asked what they'd like to do today, what have you enjoyed, want to do again, want to learn about and want to change/ fears" (AR_service 21).

3. Educator practices – ways they collaborated and engaged in critical reflection

In Meeting NQS services educator practices included collaborative critical reflection, collaborative teamwork, and the Educational Leader played a key role in developing a work environment that supported collaboration between staff in the service. Educators engaged in varied ways of discussing practice in Meeting NQS services. However, Exceeding NQS services' reflections involved the whole service which resulted in a systematic approach to change and targeted training for the educators. The Educational Leader played a key role in developing a collaborative work environment, which included providing educators with examples, templates and systems to support adult and child learning as well as meeting regularly and individually with the educators. However, in Exceeding NQS services the Educational Leader was more intentional in terms of feedback and support, co-constructing goals with educators, and mentoring individuals.

4. Involving local community

There was little evidence of this strategy in QA1. Two way communication was minimal and there were minimal differences between services rated as Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS. School transition was an example used to illustrate ways of working with the community. Working with Elders as well as engaging with allied professionals was only mentioned by Exceeding NQS services¹¹.

QUALITY AREA 7 FACTORS

1. Established systems- procedures and policies that were transparent to stakeholders

Both Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services had clearly described systems in place to manage the implementation of policies, with delineated leadership roles to manage the day to day operations. Procedures included clear governance, established and well defined roles and self-assessment processes *and the operations of the service is communicated to each new educator, volunteer or student (A&R_service 1)*. Services Exceeding NQS had more comprehensive systems in place for regularly reviewing policies, changes being implemented that reflected all stakeholders' voices, and the staff, families and children were integral to the self-assessment process, whereby the QIP was regularly reflected on. Grievances from families were also dealt with and were communicated up the chain of command as needed.

2. Professional growth and learning systems

Factors for professional growth and learning in both Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services provided systems that supported pedagogical leadership by the Educational Leader, critical reflection and mentoring by an experienced staff member. In services Meeting NQS the systems supported the Educational leader to work directly with educators, meeting with them regularly, and educators were provided feedback on their work with the children in relation to the program. For instance:

The Educational Leader advised she researches new ideas. The room leaders get one day of non contact per week...The Educational Leader uses this time to discuss any relevant matters with the educators and assess the daily journal and children's observations (A&R_service 60).

Critical reflection as a team was an important factor for all services, which was led by the Educational Leader and/or Service Leader. Internal and external professional networks were common, and the induction of educators was a key factor in the findings for all services.

Only a few services (both Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS) identified the importance of educators being supported to gain formal qualifications. For example:

Opportunities for educators to expand their learning and gain formal qualifications are very important to the service. We believe that ensuring educators are highly skilled will provide better learning outcomes for children (QIP_service 3).

All team members are encouraged to regularly consider their professional development needs and interests and supported in undertaking this through payment of attendance and/or time off to attend (QIP_service 28).

Exceeding NQS services were more likely to have an early childhood teacher in the Educational Leader role as well as a more systematic and embedded approach to leading the pedagogical program, mentoring educators and reflecting on their role. Exceeding NQS services were also resourced to engage external support to evaluate their critical reflection approach and *are used to develop training opportunities for the educators, are referenced in the QIP and provide support for their yearly pedagogy reviews (A&R_service 38)*.

3. Positive culture

The service philosophy with clear and high expectations, a commitment to continuous improvement and effective teamwork were considered critical factors that contributed to the positive culture of both Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services. Services that were Meeting NQS noted the importance of the service philosophy driving their program, but often the philosophy statement was brief or included broad statements that were difficult to demonstrate. In all Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services the leadership team was described as a factor in driving expectations for high quality and the Nominated Supervisor and/or Educational Leader were pivotal in leading these high expectations. Effective teamwork was also important and the individual strengths of staff were recognised, as well as having (or working towards) a shared vision.

In Exceeding NQS services, the philosophy statement was more detailed with high expectations for all stakeholders, demonstrating systematic approaches to the revision of the philosophy together with all stakeholders.

4. Supportive workforce factors

No differences were apparent between services Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS; the workforce factors

included staffing arrangements, valuing staff, structural factors, and time for planning. These services also described being resourced to provide above ratios, more qualified staff than required, using regular relief staff, and support for the Educational Leader role as important aspects of effective staffing arrangements. Accommodating staff needs were also seen as critical. For example:

The service promoted the continuity of all educators. The Director discussed that she recently negotiated with staff who desired to work part-time to gain further work/home life balance. Timetabling was considered to ensure the Director could meet this need of her educators while maintaining continuity for children and families. At the end of each year, educators were given the opportunity to suggest other educators and age groups they would like to work with in the following year. They are afforded at least one of their choices (A&R_service 29).

These supportive factors contributed to low staff turnover. All services, Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS, noted the role of administrative support as a critical factor. Services that were a part of a large organisation also commented on the support they received from head office/state office in terms of additional staff they could liaise with, for example area managers, administrative officers to do the financial bookkeeping, and team managers.

QUALITY AREA 7 STRATEGIES

1. Professional learning – leading learning

All services Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS had systems in place for an annual review as well as monitoring quality throughout the year. All services supported educators to attend professional development and strategies included completing a certain amount of professional learning each month or going to targeted training that met an identified need in the service. Individual goals were seen as critical to the process and appropriate training was targeted based on these.

Staff appraisals are done annually. They are based on the quality areas and educators with the nominated supervisor rate themselves on how they feel like they are going in each area. From this they set professional goals to be achieved throughout the year (A&R_service 19).

Services discussed using a critical friend/consultant as a strategy for professional learning, which allowed for changes to be implemented into the program. Mentoring by the Educational Leader was an emerging strategy. The services noted how the Educational Leader found opportunities in their day to undertake this mentoring, for example during room meetings, staff meetings and in programming and planning times to support their practices and provide opportunities for educators to rethink what they did.

Exceeding NQS services had additional levels of critical self-reflection embedded, and educators had agency to drive their performance review and goals, which included strategic professional development. For example:

The appraisal process enabled self-evaluation and goals to be set with professional development supported for performance improvement. The formal appraisal process took place twice yearly and consisted of an opportunity for staff to self-reflect on practices and, in conjunction with the nominated supervisor, acknowledge their strengths, areas for improvement and opportunities for professional development (A&R_service 50).

2. Systems leading quality improvement processes

Systems leading quality improvement processes were a key strategy for all Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services. There were systematic processes for revising all policies and procedures. Strategies that supported this included checklists, annual survey, staff meetings, and room meetings which were then used to drive change. For example:

The nominated supervisor uses a number of checklists and an annual survey to assess the quality of the service, this information is used to set out quality improvement goals in the QIP document (A&R_service 1).

Educators were clear about their roles and responsibilities. Systems were in place that provided for dissemination as well as evidence of discussion of systems and policies within the service, for example staff meetings, one on one meetings and other induction strategies:

All staff members are provided with their position descriptions during their induction process. Staff responsibilities, expectations and conduct is documented in the educator handbook. These are also discussed throughout the year through general conversations and at staff meetings (A&R_service 35).

Educators' diversity was recognised as a strength, for example sharing their particular skills or capabilities, including culture and language to enrich the program for the children, and embedding sustainability practices within the service.

We have a fortnightly educator of the week process that ensures we are recognising, appreciating and displaying the wonderful achievements of that particular educator (QIP_service 58).

3. Induction processes

Both Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS services had clear induction processes for new staff, casuals and, to a lesser extent, new families. This included time to shadow the staff person they were replacing, being buddied up with another staff member and the Director and/or Educational Leader checking in on them regularly. The Nominated Supervisor also played a key role in the induction process. Services that were part of a larger organisation were required to complete online modules as well. Following up with the new staff member was a common strategy implemented to ensure the induction was effective.

4. Collaborative partnerships

Collaborative partnerships with staff was a common strategy for all services that were Meeting NQS or Exceeding NQS. Staff provided feedback to management:

Educators complete regular surveys which includes things such as their expectations on management, service strengths, programming, what topics would you like professional development on, WHS, NQS, Philosophy. The surveys are then discussed at staff meetings and implemented into service practice (A&R_service 21).

Collaborative partnerships with families and the community (to a lesser extent) was also evident.¹² All services had evidence of communication strategies for families. There were opportunities described for families to have input into the service, including the QIP. Strategies included email, surveys, signage in the foyer, involving children, and parent meetings. Only one service that was rated as Exceeding NQS had evidence of partnerships with the community.

The management team has an advisory board which consists of key community stakeholders, leaders and university representatives. The board meeting quarterly (A&R_service 14).

LEXIMANCER ANALYSIS OF QIPS

Leximancer conceptual analysis and theme mapping analyses demonstrated similarities and differences between QIPs developed by services that improved to Meeting NQS versus those that improved to Exceeding NQS. Maps were created separately for QA1 and QA7 documents and analysed independently of each other. Key features of these maps are Node Size and Node Placement. The conceptual relationships that were highlighted are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Summary Key for Leximancer 4.5 map interpretation and appendices

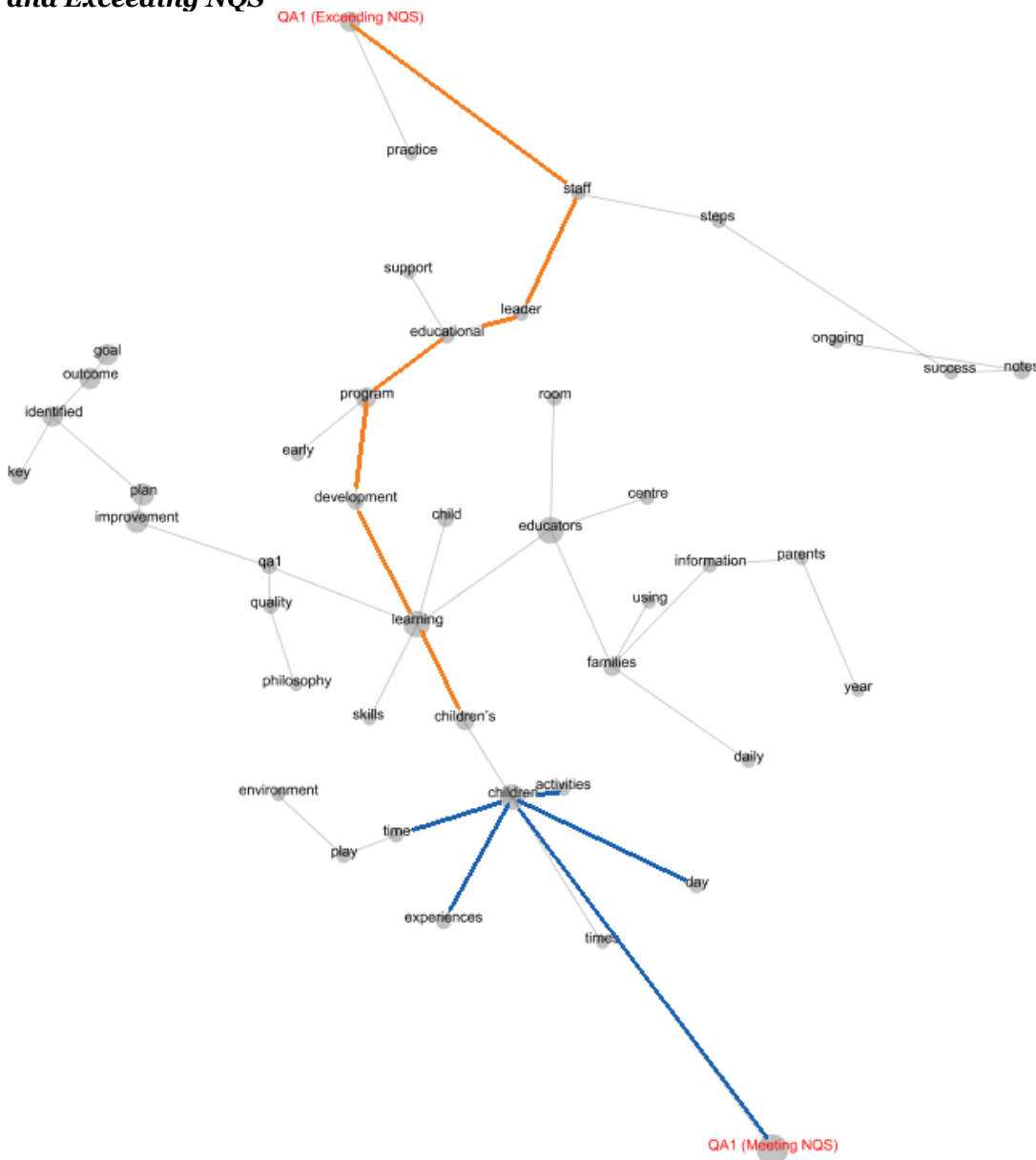
Feature	QA1	QA7
Node size	<i>Educators, children and learning</i> are the largest nodes, indicating the key importance of these concepts for all the QIPs analysed.	<i>Educators and staff</i> are the largest nodes, indicating the key importance of these concepts for all the QIPs analysed.
Node placement	<p><i>Educators, children and learning</i> are located close to each other and centrally within the map for all the QIPs analysed.</p> <p>Nodes representing the bundled Exceeding QIPs and Meeting QIPs are located closest to the concepts of most relevance within those QIPs as groups. The diametric positioning of the Exceeding NQS and Meeting NQS nodes suggests distinct differences between these groups of QIPs.</p>	<p><i>Educators and staff</i> are located close to each other and centrally within the map for all the QIPs analysed.</p> <p>Nodes representing the bundled Exceeding QIPs and Meeting QIPs are located closest to the concepts of most relevance within those QIPs as groups. The diametric positioning of the Exceeding NQS and Meeting NQS nodes suggests distinct differences between these groups of QIPs.</p>

QUALITY AREA 1

Conceptual visualisations for QA1 of the QIPs are presented in Figure 3, which showed that children’s learning and educator skills were key concepts in plans for improvement. Direct pathways are evident between children, learning and educators. The presence of staff, children and families within the clustering of these concepts around the core concepts of children and learning demonstrates the inclusion of a range of stakeholders and their contributions to children’s learning in services’ thinking in the QIP process.

Services that improved to Meeting NQS (blue lines) placed more emphasis on the day to day activities and experiences. Services that improved to Exceeding NQS (red lines), on the other hand, placed more emphasis on the specific role of the educational leader and their role beyond the day to day focus of the program. The educational leaders were provided with additional time and support to think beyond this planning the everyday experiences and program development. This aligns to the importance of management and leadership through recognition of the role of the educational leader in relation to program development and children’s learning.

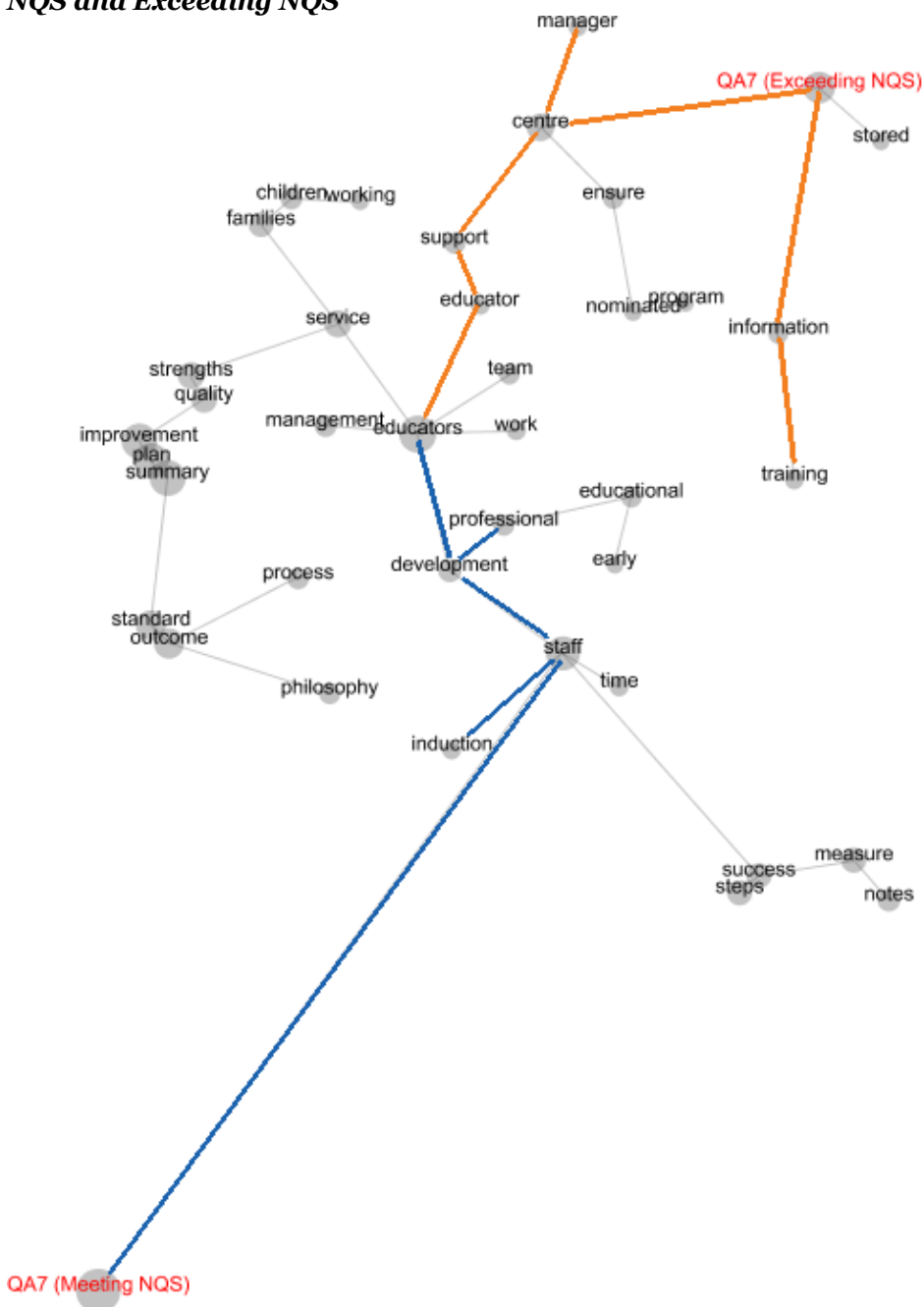
Figure 3. Concept map: comparison of Quality Area 1 QIPs for services rated as Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS



QUALITY AREA 7

Conceptual visualisations for QA7 of the QIPs are presented in Figure 4. The concepts of educators, management, and professional development were emphasised in plans for improvement. QIPs for services that improved to Meeting NQS seemed more focused on the management of staff, their inductions and professional development, within the themes of educators and staff. QIPs for services that improved to Exceeding NQS had a more systemic view of the processes encompassed by QA7 - how the management of the service and information supports the work of educators, with much stronger links to leadership roles (the manager, the nominated supervisor), within the service and information themes. These themes include concepts directly related semantically to management roles, training, support and information.

Figure 4. Concept map: comparison of Quality Area 7 QIPs for services rated as Meeting NQS and Exceeding NQS



KEY FINDINGS – PHASE 3

In line with the overarching aim of the research project, Phase 3 concentrated on exploring factors related to quality improvement in the Educational Program and Practice (QA1) and Governance and leadership (QA7). There was a shared view amongst service leaders and educators that QA1 was the most challenging area within the NQS, but also the most important as this provided the foundation for nearly all of the other quality areas. Most participants also recognised the role that leadership played in facilitating and sustaining quality improvement, and there was a focus on building the capacity of leaders in designated positions (e.g. Service Director, Educational Leader). This was particularly evident in services that were operated by larger Approved Provider organisations, where there were dedicated people and resources to assist service leaders in quality and operational areas. Some standalone services had engaged an external mentor/expert to assist with leadership development. Notably, some services were consumed by their focus on other quality areas, and there was less focus on developing and supporting leadership.

QUALITY AREA 1: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM AND PRACTICE

The following factors were identified as both enablers and challenges to quality.

1. The depth of educators' knowledge and understanding of the Early Years Learning Framework.

This included understanding of the language, concepts, underpinning theory and content of the learning outcomes, and interrelationships between these. Concept knowledge included deep understanding of pedagogical practices, for example, the complementary nature of play-based learning and intentional teaching. Several service leaders talked about going back to the basics of the EYLF and described this as the most influential factor in enhancing practice.

2. Service approaches to program planning.

The case studies revealed a diversity of planning approaches, reaffirming there is no one right way to plan and document learning. There was a clear trend towards the use of digital platforms which was generally viewed as a positive development supporting documentation and communication with families. Three particular challenges relating to program planning were highlighted:

- *The connection between the service educational philosophy and team practice.* Across the case studies, there was limited evidence to indicate that planning decisions were informed by the service philosophy. In some cases, there seemed to be a disjuncture between the espoused service philosophy and practice directions. For example, a philosophy statement that promoted the benefits of play-based learning set against more teacher-directed learning experiences with an academic focus.
- *Supporting children's agency.* While the majority of participants talked about child-led planning, understanding of how to build on individual interests to extend thinking and learning was not always evident. There was also less evidence of child agency and voice in curriculum decision-making. In one Exceeding NQS service, the service leader reflected on the need to shift educator mindsets and for teams to rethink how children are involved in the program and routines to truly enable child agency.
- *Facilitating family engagement and voice in service decision-making.* There was a strong sense of pride in relationships with families in most of the case study services. However, facilitating meaningful family engagement in service activities and decision-making was identified by many participants as a continuing challenge and a focus for quality improvement. Some services and educators appeared resigned to limited engagement, while others appeared more proactive in facilitating family engagement, trialing and tailoring engagement strategies to suit their families.

3. Educator understanding and enactment of the assessment and planning cycle.

Engagement with the assessment and planning cycle was frequently identified by service leaders and educators as a key focus for quality improvement, often prompted by feedback in the A&R report. There was a perceived lack of connection between child observations, planned experiences and interactions and the EYLF learning outcomes. Interestingly the term 'assessment' was rarely mentioned by participants, regardless of role.

4. Program documentation.

The case studies revealed that documentation continues to be a source of anxiety for many service leaders and educators, both in terms of quality and quantity. This was seen as “*evidence*” of the program. As noted, the majority of services had shifted to a digital platform to support planning and documentation. While generally perceived to be a positive change, there were some differences in views and experiences, often linked to initial training and support. There was also evidence of some considered decisions, where services used a mix of approaches to suit their families and educators.

5. Critical reflection skills.

In addition to the assessment and planning cycle, a focus on strengthening critical reflection emerged as a recurring theme for quality improvement, with the impetus for this often linked to the most recent A&R report or introduction of the new Exceeding NQS themes (ACECQA, 2018). However, the concept of critical reflection was not always well understood. There was often little differentiation between reflection and critical reflection as defined in the EYLF, and limited consideration of theory, research, multiple perspectives on practice and/or issues of power, social justice and equity. Several leaders spoke about the need to support the development of this skill through mentoring, structured learning experiences and time to critically reflect with colleagues during work hours.

QUALITY AREA 7: GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

While QA1 was the focal area for the majority of services, there was general acknowledgement that strong and effective leadership was needed to drive quality improvement. The following factors were identified as both enablers and challenges to quality.

1. Focus on strengthening leadership within services.

Many services identified a focus on strengthening leadership, most often concentrating on positional leadership roles such as the Service Director or Service Manager as well as the Educational Leader. While this was evident across the range of services, it was particularly visible in services operated by larger organisations where there is often a multi-tiered organisational structure. Organisational support was generally acknowledged as a significant contributor to quality improvement. However, in some cases, there was a lack of clarity with respect to different organisational roles and remits and how these came together to support quality improvement. For example, it was suggested that operational and educational priorities sometimes seemed at odds. There was also evidence of tension between organisational and local leaders in some services, and resistance to top-down directives that were not always seen to support quality or be appropriate within the local community context. Regardless of service size, the leadership role of the Approved Provider was acknowledged as important. There was a shared view that the Approved Provider needed to resource and support Service Leaders to achieve and maintain quality practice.

2. Understanding and support for the role of Educational Leader.

The role of Educational Leader was widely regarded as critical in driving quality improvement. However, there were significant differences in how the role was conceptualised and understood. There were several influences on the effectiveness of this role, in particular, who was appointed, their qualifications, personal qualities and leadership skills, and the training and support they received. The role is about pedagogical leadership and there was a sense that those with an early childhood teaching degree were generally better equipped to fulfil this role in comparison to those with a vocational qualification. However, there were diverse views in relation to this; for example, services that had an early childhood teacher had appointed a vocationally qualified educator to the role. In addition to deep knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, the Educational Leader was seen to need well developed leadership skills, with emphasis being placed on their ability to collaborate with educators to support quality practice, to address poor practice and to lead and manage change. Several Educational Leaders also acknowledged the importance of a supportive Service Director. Another key influence on the success of this role was the training, resourcing and support provided by the Approved Provider, including time for the Educational Leader to collaborate with educators.

3. Team collaboration.

A collaborative and unified team approach was seen to be critical in achieving genuine and sustainable quality improvement. Key to this were leaders creating a work culture and environment that cultivated positive team relationships and effective teamwork. A number of factors were seen to contribute to this. Continuity of staff and keeping the team together was identified as a key factor in establishing a strong team approach. So was the importance of welcoming and inducting new staff members to the team. Where collaboration and teamwork was strong, it was clear that educators felt able to speak up and participate in service decision-making, and this supported a sense of shared accountability for quality practice. Several leaders and educators identified the importance of clarity of roles and expectations, alongside team members who pitched in to help each other as needed. Enabling effective teamwork required the provision of time and opportunity for team members to come together to share perspectives on practice, including during work hours.

4. Strategic and sustainable approaches to professional development.

Access to quality professional development was seen by service leaders and educators alike to be a key contributor to improved service provision, in particular, the provision of quality educational programs and practice. Services rated as Exceeding NQS tended to draw on a broader suite of professional development approaches. These included:

- professional conversations and collaborative critical reflection facilitated by the Service Director or Educational Leader;
- coaching and mentoring (peer and expert models);
- engagement in organisational and/or local networks;
- professional reading;
- participation in face-face and online professional learning activities (engaging individuals, colleagues and sometimes the whole team).

In a few services, service leaders and educators articulated strategies to support the translation of professional development into enhanced practice. This included strategies to encourage shared learning and a community of practice. While all services appeared to encourage staff to pursue further education and training, some were going further to provide more meaningful support to enable educators to combine work and study, including study time during work hours. Once again, there was some evidence to suggest that services operated by larger organisations had greater access to mentoring, networking and professional development opportunities. However, some standalone services were engaging external mentors and creating their own local networks to support quality improvement.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE A&R PROCESS TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Phase 3 also explored service experiences of the Assessment and Ratings process, and invited participants' reflections on the contribution of the QIP and the A&R process to continuous quality improvement. The following factors were seen to be influential in supporting improved quality and/or an improved A&R outcome.

1. The service's approach to the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

As was noted in Phase 2, analysis of the case studies revealed considerable variation in how the QIP was developed and used. This included who led the QIP, who had voice and how the QIP informed and supported quality improvement. In some services, responsibility for the QIP lay with a designated leadership position, most often the Service Director or Educational Leader, and educators had limited understanding of QIP priorities. In others, service leaders implemented strategies to engage the team in planning and reviewing the QIP, and the QIP was seen to be a shared strategic planning tool. Where there was an emphasis on genuine collaboration, the QIP was identified as a catalyst for strengthened teamwork, improved practice and a positive A&R outcome. While there was increased emphasis on team input, there were not many stories of success in engaging children and families with the QIP. Educators often pointed to passive strategies, for example, general invitations to parents to have input into the QIP, with low engagement. However, some services were trialing more proactive engagement strategies. For example, leveraging digital planning platforms to make the QIP more accessible to families and establishing an informal leadership role to facilitate child and family input into the QIP.

2. Preparation for Assessment and Rating.

Several service leaders and educators spoke about the stress and anxiety they felt in relation to A&R. However, there was a strong sense that experience had led to greater knowledge which supported increased confidence and better preparation within services. Some educators described intense preparation upon receiving the notice of assessment, while others spoke of focused training that commenced well before the date of A&R. Across the board, emphasis was placed on building educator knowledge and confidence to engage with A&R, and helping all team members to articulate and provide evidence of quality practice. Many services reported the contribution of consultants who provided advice, facilitated professional learning and sometimes undertook mock assessments. This was most common in services operated by larger Approved Provider organisations, although some standalone services reported use of an external mentor to gain another perspective on practice. While all services engaged in some preparation for A&R, there was also a strong sense that A&R should be about everyday practice and needed to be seen as part of the quality improvement journey rather than simply an isolated event.

3. The Authorised Officer's approach on the day of the visit.

The manner and approach of the Authorised Officer was seen to be highly influential in supporting educators to engage with the A&R process and, thereby, the outcome for the service. Educators spoke warmly of Authorised Officers who helped them to feel comfortable and facilitated their engagement in the process. Particular emphasis was placed on Authorised Officers focusing on what mattered (i.e., process quality factors), asking questions and engaging educators in conversations about their practice. In a few cases, service leaders made special mention of Authorised Officers who had telephoned well in advance of the visit and invested considerable time talking through the A&R process with the service leader. This information was shared with the team and helped educators to feel more comfortable and prepared for the visit.

4. A&R as a key driver for quality improvement.

There was consistent evidence across the case studies that engagement with the A&R process provided a platform for quality improvement, influencing priorities for ongoing learning and practice change. Several educators commented on the A&R process and report as a driver to support continuous quality improvement. A distinguishing feature of some Exceeding NQS services was the ability and willingness of educators to accept and take on board feedback in the A&R report. One of the Exceeding NQS services reflected that engagement with A&R had strengthened teamwork at the service which had enabled real and sustainable quality improvement.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEETING NQS AND EXCEEDING NQS SERVICES

Given the small sample size of case study services in this study (n=15), it was neither possible to generalise these findings, nor to point to what definitively made the difference for services that achieved the higher rating outcome. However, across the Exceeding NQS services, some themes stood out. These included:

- an unwavering focus on building educators' knowledge and skills to provide quality educational programs and practices, including engagement with theory and research;
- a strong sense of collaboration and teamwork with educators involved and exercising voice in service decision-making;
- evidence of highly skilled leaders (most often the Service Director and Educational Leader) working together to drive practice change;
- a supportive Approved Provider; and
- a positive organisational culture at the service that supported all team members to critically reflect on practice, to accept constructive feedback and to commit to continuous quality improvement.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Table 7. Summary of Key Findings from Phases 1, 2 and 3

Theme	Key points
Role of the Approved Provider and organisational support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Approved Provider was key to ensuring the service could focus on quality improvement. They enabled the Educational Leader/Service Director and educators to lead the program and provide the time to do this, for example, release from face to face teaching to focus on goals and strategies for improving practices. There was evidence of greater support for quality improvement in larger services and services operated by larger organisations.
Service Leadership	<p><u>Service Philosophy</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The service’s philosophy was a critical document for driving the program, but was variable with many services providing brief statements with minimal demonstration of how the statements would be enacted in practice. Exceeding NQS services’ philosophy statements were more detailed, involved all stakeholders and demonstrated systematic approaches to the revision of the philosophy. <p><u>Supportive workforce factors</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This work was often led by the Educational Leader, Service Leader, Approved Provider or the Area Manager in larger organisations. Services that had a strategic approach that supported educators to focus on quality improvement was important and supported a positive work culture. Links between longevity of staff and quality improvement and rating was evident, as well as the contribution of effective leadership on teamwork and professional practice. <p><u>Role of the Educational Leader</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exceeding NQS services tended to have an Educational Leader with an early childhood teaching¹³ qualification who was effective as a pedagogical leader present at the service. Employment of staff who understand pedagogical practice and can enable others to develop their skills and knowledge about play-based learning is highly beneficial in delivering high quality early childhood programs. <p><u>Individual educators</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual educators were involved in quality improvement strategies and were committed. This was evident in the culture of the service, including strong teamwork approaches.
<u>ECEC Assessment and Rating Tools</u>	<p><u>QIPs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> QIPs were varied in content, length and format, with some being very brief and others very detailed. There was also wide variation in the quality of the service philosophy statements. Critical reflection appeared in QIPs as a consistent theme and goal for quality improvement, but often lacked detail on how this was actually enacted in the service. Reference to diversity, culture and inclusion was minimal in both QIPs and A&R reports. <p><u>A&R process</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was noted that there were differences in approaches to A&R, in particular, the nature and detail of the A&R report. Phase 3 in particular noted that the information and advice the Authorised Officer provided, supported services in identifying strategies and goals for achieving improvement, noting the Authorised Officer’s interpersonal and communication skills and ability to help educators to feel at ease and to engage with the A&R process.

CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS

The study findings, which are based on a comprehensive investigation of a large representative sample of long day care services, show that genuine and sustained quality improvement is the result of collaborative effort, and therefore needs to be seen as a shared responsibility. Reflecting on the summary of main findings (Table 7), this final section identifies priority areas to support and sustain quality improvement evidenced by improved A&R outcomes. While promoting the need for a 'team approach', the findings place emphasis on the need for leadership at all levels of service delivery and ECEC policy. For this reason, this final section speaks to the particular role of key stakeholders in driving and realising quality improvement. Recognising diversity, innovation and the importance of community context in the provision of quality long day care, this is not intended to be a 'how to list'. Rather, the *Observations for critical reflection* offered below provide a focus for collaborative critical reflection to support self-assessment and to plan and prioritise areas for quality improvement.

APPROVED PROVIDER AND ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

Quality improvement within services requires organisational leadership, support and resourcing. This spans the recruitment and retention of qualified and skilled early childhood teachers and educators, support for professional learning, resourcing of the learning environment and the creation of a positive work environment and conditions that promote and enable professional practice. There was evidence of greater support for quality improvement in larger services (more than 60 children) and services operated by larger organisations which provided access to advisers, mentors and in-house networks. There was evidence of smaller providers creating their own local service networks and/or engaging external mentors to strengthen support and drive quality improvement.

Observations for critical reflection:

- The Approved Provider's vision for quality practice, and resourcing and support to realise this vision was a key enabler in achieving quality improvement.
- Support provided by larger organisations was widely appreciated by service leaders and staff and seen to contribute to quality improvement and improved A&R outcomes. However, there is a need to ensure that organisational leadership and support builds and enables agency and decision-making at the local level to support programs and practices that are relevant and responsive to community needs.

SERVICE LEADERSHIP

LEADING THE SERVICE PHILOSOPHY

The service educational philosophy provides a foundation for quality improvement. When developed in collaboration with educators, families, children and other community members, it provides an important reference point for leadership, educational programs and practices and supports team building and family engagement.

Observations for critical reflection

- Service educational philosophies that were seen to be more effective were informed by theory and research and used by service leaders to underpin critical reflection on practice.
- While larger Approved Provider organisations may develop an educational philosophy which articulates shared organisational beliefs and values, it remains important for service leaders to work with their ECEC community to develop the individual service philosophy. There was evidence of some disconnect between organisational philosophies and local philosophy and practice.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE

Creating and maintaining a positive and supportive workplace requires concerted effort by all, however, the role of the Service Leader is critical. Working with the Approved Provider, the Service Leader needs to create and maintain a work environment that enables professional practice and drives continuous quality improvement.

Observations for critical reflection

- The provision of time for educators to meet during work hours to collaborate on educational programs and practices is a key enabler for quality improvement. Importantly, this includes regular and protected time for the Educational Leader to meet face-to-face with the team and individual educators.
- Supporting access to quality professional development opportunities is another key enabler for quality improvement; specifically, professional learning that extends beyond mandatory training requirements. The study identified reflective practice and pedagogical leadership as two areas that need attention, and the level of training needs to be matched with staff qualifications and experience. In practice, this means offering a mix of foundational learning opportunities alongside advanced learning opportunities leveraging individual strengths, interests and needs and supporting peer mentoring within services.
- Services that provided mentoring support systematically relied on experienced staff at their service. Learning to become an effective mentor requires adequate training and emerging research offers useful avenues to explore (Langdon et al., 2017; Nolan, 2016; Wong, Hadley & Waniganayake, 2020).
- Opportunities to engage with other relevant professionals were seen as supporting improvement. Educators valued visiting other services, working across their organisation and/or with other local community services and drew on expertise of critical friends/consultants to examine their practices.
- Services that had moved away from a compliance approach to A&R towards embedding a culture of continuous quality improvement tended to demonstrate Exceeding NQS qualities.

ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER

Effective educational leadership is essential to the provision of quality educational programs and practices. Recruiting the right person to be the Educational Leader and supporting them to be effective in this role is key to continuous quality improvement and improved A&R outcomes.

Observations for critical reflection

- The Educational Leader role is one of pedagogical leadership. It is therefore not surprising that Exceeding NQS services tended to have an Educational Leader with an early childhood teaching qualification.
- While deep knowledge and understanding of curriculum and pedagogy are essential, the effectiveness of the role is also dependent on the Educational Leader's ability to lead learning, collaborative critical reflection, teamwork and practice change. Many services were investing in leadership development programs for Educational Leader's to support their effectiveness.
- Focusing on QA1, the study identified some common areas for educator professional learning and development. These included:
 - The need to strengthen understanding of child agency and to rethink programs and routines to incorporate child voice and to facilitate child agency.
 - The need to strengthen understanding of the curriculum planning and assessment cycle, and to help educators to connect child observations, curriculum planning, critical reflection and assessment of learning to inform and support effective teaching and learning.
 - The need to build deep understanding of the EYLF, including theory, concepts, pedagogies and learning outcomes.
 - The need for more structured and scaffolded approaches to teach educators how to engage in critical reflection, drawing on theory, research and practice wisdom to drive enhanced practice.

The Educational Leader has an important role leading learning and development in these areas, and ensuring this learning is visible in service planning (e.g., QIP) and practice.

- Effective approaches to professional learning identify service and individual strengths and needs, respond to both, and are underpinned by understanding of praxis and the role this plays in driving educator learning. Educational Leaders need to get to know individual educators and work with them to support professional growth and individual career aspirations.
- In Exceeding NQS services, it was evident the Approved Provider valued and supported the role of Educational Leader, providing training, resources and time to ensure the intent of the role in leading quality improvement was realised.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATORS

Continuous quality improvement is based on shared learning and effective teamwork. All members of the team need to be proactive in their own learning, support the professional learning of others, engage in critical reflection of practice and embed continuous quality improvement in their day-to-day practice.

Observations for critical reflection

- No matter how committed and skilled, one person alone cannot drive quality improvement. In the Exceeding NQS services, this was clearly a team effort. While qualified and skilled Educational Leaders provided direction and support, educators spoke about quality improvement within the service as a professional responsibility, with all team members accountable to each other. There was evidence of an embedded culture of shared learning, critical reflection and commitment to continuous quality improvement across the team.
- While the Approved Provider maintains responsibility to provide access to professional learning opportunities, including funding and time to support participation, educators also have a professional responsibility to invest in their own learning.

NQS ASSESSMENT AND RATING TOOLS

The study findings provide further evidence that meaningful engagement with the A&R process provides a platform for continuous quality improvement. The study highlighted key influences on the impact of A&R on quality, and areas for further improvement at service and public policy levels.

QIP

The QIP provides an important strategic tool to plan, prioritise, monitor, evaluate and evidence quality improvement within the service. Some services were using the QIP effectively while others perceived it simply as paperwork required by A&R. There was also variability in how well the QIP was written impacting its usefulness as a strategic planning tool. Opportunities to improve the quality and use of the QIP include:

- Further training and resources to support service leaders to develop the QIP, including guidance on a page limit, the use of SMART goals (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria) and ensuring sufficient time for reflection and evaluation of progress and achievements towards quality improvement goals.
- Using the QIP process as a practice scenario in leadership development programs and related resources. Specifically, using this practice example to build knowledge and skills in relation to collaborative leadership and the benefits of this in driving quality improvement.
- Services including brief examples of proactive change strategies and/or evidence of quality improvement in the QIP; for example, if promoting child agency is a priority goal, including an example of practice change and child outcomes. If strengthened engagement with families is a priority, identifying the practical strategies to be used. If the focus is building critical reflection skills, identifying how these skills will be scaffolded and supported.
- Services implementing proactive approaches to support the collaborative development of the QIP, facilitating team engagement and input from children and families, and make this visible.

- Services including examples in the QIP of how the Educational Leader is working with individual educators and the team to inform educational programs and practices (i.e. brief examples of leadership and collaboration in curriculum planning with children, families and community)
- Strengthened consideration of diversity, culture and inclusion in all aspects of curriculum decision-making, and greater visibility of this in key documents such as the QIP (and A&R Report).
- Services keeping the QIP up-to-date, with regular progress notes and periodic evaluations of progress towards priority goals.
- In many cases, there was little alignment between the service QIP and the A&R final report. Further guidance could be provided for Authorised Officers to reflect on the QIP and to use this as a guide for specific aspects of practice they may focus on during the visit. It would be beneficial for AOs to provide constructive feedback on priority areas identified in the QIP.

A&R PROCESS

Meaningful engagement with the A&R process was generally acknowledged as a key driver for quality improvement, informing priorities for ongoing learning, critical reflection and practice change. The study identified several factors that supported meaningful engagement, and, thereby, better outcomes for all concerned.

- A distinguishing feature of some Exceeding NQS services was the ability and willingness of educators to accept and take on board feedback provided in the A&R report. Sharing feedback with the team and using the report as a catalyst for practice change was identified as a challenge by some Service Directors and Educational Leaders, with some seeking training and/or greater organisational support in this context.
- Leaders within Exceeding NQS services tended to value and leverage the A&R process to strengthen teamwork, understanding that collective action is needed to achieve and sustain quality improvement.
- The relationship between the service and Regulatory Authority has the potential to influence educators' engagement with the process. For example, some Service Leaders reflected on an established positive relationship that supported two-way information sharing. The Authorised Officer's approach to A&R was also mentioned, in particular, interpersonal and communication skills, ability to help educators feel at ease and to engage with the A&R process. Service Leaders and educators commented on the importance of Authorised Officers asking questions about practice, including the rationale underpinning observed practice.
- There were observable differences in the volume and nature of information and advice that was provided in A&R reports. Reports that described and contextualised practice, and included ideas and suggestions to support quality improvement provided a solid platform for reflection, planning and quality improvement.

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END NOTES

¹ ACECQA provided the research team with a data set for the full sample of LDC, Preschool / Kindergarten, Outside School Hours Care, and Family Day Care services that had at least two NQS assessment dates between 2012 and 1 January 2019. The data set included 3,433 LDC services, 1,936 of which were rated as Working Towards NQS at the assessment prior to the most recent assessment date.

² Multinomial logistic regression is a form of logistic regression that is used when the dependent variable has multiple, non-ordered categories that may not be equally spaced. In this case, the dependent variable was three levels of improvement outcomes: No Change from Working towards NQS, Improvement to Meeting NQS, and Improvement to Exceeding NQS. Logistic regression analysis explains the relationship between a binary dependent variable and an independent variable as the 'odds' or probability of the outcome. The unit of measurement for the odds of an outcome occurring ranges from 0 to 1.

³ Logistic regression tests describes the difference in the outcome for the test condition compared to the reference condition as an Odds Ratio (OR). An OR = 1.00 indicates no difference; an OR > 1 indicates the outcome is more likely to occur in the test condition compared to the reference condition; and an OR < 1 indicates the outcome is less likely to occur in the test condition compared to the reference condition.

⁴ Proportional stratified random sampling of the improvement sample of LDC services selected 43 (72%) services that had improved to Meeting NQS and 17 (28%) that had improved to Exceeding NQS. The sample was representative of six service characteristics identified in Phase 1. State /Territory representation was: 19 LDC services from NSW; eight from Queensland, Victoria, and Western Australia; five from South Australia; four from the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Tasmania.

⁵ Leximancer 4.5 produces several types of content analytic visualisations, in the form of concept maps, as well as tables of statistical information about the concepts in the documents. The key visual image created by Leximancer is the concept map. The map is based on calculated frequencies of concepts' occurrence in documents. These calculated frequencies determine the placement of concepts on the maps. The term *concept* in Leximancer is not just a count of the use of an individual word, rather it is a statistically calculated representation of a group of keywords that are summarised by that concept label.

⁶ In two cases studies, a member of the research team supervised an early childhood colleague who visited the site and conducted the interviews.

⁷ This person supported the research project by asking provocative questions to ensure the data were analysed through another lens by bringing an informed external perspective.

⁸ Jurisdiction, location, community advantage/disadvantage, type and size of Approved Provider organization, size of the LDC service, and transfer of ownership.

⁹ It is acknowledged that services document and present philosophy statements in a variety of ways. These findings reflect information presented in the QIP and A&R reports we analysed.

¹⁰ Theories provide ways to understand how children learn.

¹¹ QA6 was not included in this study so it would be assumed that working with the local community would be captured in that standard.

¹² We did not analyse QA6 for this project

¹³ We note caution must be given to this finding due to the small sample size

