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# Child Care Staff:

## Learning and Growing Through Professional

A practical resource for Children's Services staff based on findings from a national study commissioned by the PSC Alliance through funding from the Australian Government.



Australian Government  
Department of Education, Employment  
and Workplace Relations

# Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing Through Professional Development

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

## Availability

This publication and the research report it draws on are freely available online at the PSC Websites in each state and territory.

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## Photography

All photographs courtesy of staff, families, children and workshop participants at Lady Gowrie Child Centre South Australia.

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# Forward



Australia's future will be shaped by the support we provide for our children's development today.

In recognition of the critical importance of children's early years, the Australian Government is implementing a wide ranging quality reform agenda in early childhood education and child care. An important focus of the agenda is to improve quality in early learning and care services to support better outcomes for children.

Parents, extended family and friends, child care professionals, health professionals and the wider community all influence a child's early years.

For child care professionals, ongoing professional development can keep staff up to date with advances in early childhood education and care, improve skills and practice, thereby enhancing the positive development of the children in their care. The uptake of good quality professional development is consistent with the Government's quality reform agenda. For an individual, professional development is particularly important given that in some cases a single professional will care for and nurture a child's development over a number of years. More broadly, across the early childhood education and care sector, professional development can motivate, inspire and support professional networks.

*Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing through Professional Development* is an evidence-based, practical resource for child care professionals who plan and implement professional development and support within a child care service. The resource draws on the findings of a literature review and an analysis of the professional development experiences in almost 700 Australian child care centres.

This publication presents insights into innovative practice, practical ideas about how to support the professional development of early childhood staff and observations about how professional development can boost skills and knowledge whilst adding value to the way services are delivered. The information in this publication will be useful for service types including long day care, family day care, occasional care, outside school hours care and in home care.

*Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing through Professional Development* complements other professional development initiatives supported by Government in the early childhood education and care sector. In particular, the Professional Support Program funds Professional Support Coordinators in each state and territory. The Professional Support Coordinators provide access to range of professional development opportunities including mentoring, coaching, advice and information sharing for people employed in the child care profession. Professional Support Coordinators also facilitate the provision of flexible training and access to information and resources.

I encourage you to incorporate the *Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing through Professional Development* into your planning of professional development activities and also to explore the professional development options available to you and your colleagues through your local Professional Support Coordinator.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Maxine McKew". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**The Hon Maxine McKew MP**  
**Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care**

# Introduction



The contents in this publication interpret the research findings from the important national study *Practice Potentials: Impact of participation in professional development and support on quality outcomes for children in childcare centres* carried out by a team of researchers from Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University and published by Professional Support Coordinators Alliance, Access Macquarie and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

It aims to provide an accessible resource for child care staff and directors/managers to offer some possible starting points for reflecting on the professional development policies, practices and opportunities in their own settings.

The research was commissioned by the **Professional Support Coordinators' Alliance** (PSC Alliance) to provide recommendations to guide their work in the delivery of comprehensive and effective professional development and support services to the children's services sector, from funding through the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP), Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

**The national research study can be accessed online at the PSC Websites in each state and territory.**

Waniganayake, M., Harrison, L., Cheeseman, S., De Gioia, K., Burgess, C and Press, F. (2008) **Practice Potentials: Impact of participation in professional development and support on quality outcomes for children in childcare centres.** Canberra: Professional Support Coordinators Alliance, Access Macquarie and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

*Practice Potentials* is one of the first studies investigating the current context of Professional Development and Support (PD&S) available to child care staff working within child care centres, from a national perspective. During the study, 684 child care service directors/managers/owner-operators and staff across all states and territories, shared their views and experiences about the types of professional development they access and the ways they have incorporated their learning in working towards continual improvement in the quality of their programs. The findings are believed to be transferable to Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care and Long Day Care.

The study utilised a multi-modal approach and collected data via a national online survey, focus group discussions and individual interviews in selected case study centres from the community based and private/commercial sectors in each state and territory.

**The research was framed around three key questions:**

1. How do children's services directors/managers view the value of professional development and support and the relationship between professional development and support and quality outcomes?
2. What are the measures that are effective in supporting services to implement improvements / changes to practice?
3. What are the links between participation in professional development and support and achieving quality outcomes?

This publication, *Child Care Staff: Learning and Growing Through Professional Development*, records some of the insights and innovative practices shared by participants in relation to these questions. It draws on information published in the full report as well as records of unpublished case study interviews and aims to provide a useful and practical resource for staff who are planning and implementing Professional Development and Support in their services.

## **About the PSC Alliance (National Professional Support Coordinators Alliance)**

This group is made up of representatives of resource and training agencies around Australia, who receive funding from the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, to coordinate professional development and support services for Australian Government funded children's services. Each state and territory has an agency that is contracted by DEEWR to fulfil the role of PSC. Contact details can be found on page 2.

## **About the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP)**

The IPSP is an Australian Government program funded by DEEWR to provide support for all government approved child care services in providing high quality child care. The IPSP has three elements:

- Professional Support Program (PSP)
- Inclusion Support Program (ISP)
- Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS)

The PSCs in each state and territory are contracted under the IPSP to provide a range of professional development and support services to eligible child care services which include:

- Advice and support
- Flexible training options
- Resources
- Referrals to other agencies

Each PSC operates a toll-free support and information line and a web site. Further information about the IPSP is available on the Department of Education website: <http://education.gov.au/inclusion-and-professional-support-program>



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## What is Professional Development?

**Overall, 'professional development' was perceived as continuous learning that enabled practitioners to affirm existing understandings as well as acquire new knowledge and skills and thereby remain up-to-date with evolving developments in the field. Many participants also associated professional development with personal growth (Practice Potentials 2008, p119).**

Professional development is a term that means different things to different people. Workshops, conferences, inservices, training sessions and formal study often spring to mind. Whilst these indeed can be some of the activities associated with professional development, so too are the in-depth discussions, problem solving, sharing of ideas and reflecting critically on experiences that take place within our staff teams. During focus group discussions used in this research, participants were actively engaged in explaining what they understood in terms of **Professional Development and Support (PD&S)** and were in broad agreement in the way they used these terms.

**Overall, 'professional development' was perceived as continuous learning that enabled practitioners to affirm existing understandings as well as acquire new knowledge and skills and thereby remain up-to-date with evolving developments in the field. Many participants also associated professional development with personal growth (Practice Potentials 2008, p119).**

Participants also emphasised that professional development was important to all members of the staff, not just those with direct responsibility for the children's programs. The important role of PD&S for cooks and administrative / clerical staff was particularly highlighted (Practice Potentials 2008, p119).

For these directors/managers, what defined any activity as effective for the purpose of professional development was that both the aim and the resulting outcomes were related to changes that build the capacity of staff to be working towards continually improving the quality of the programs they provide for children and their families. Changes resulting from professional development might occur at many different levels and in any aspect of the service. Since the quality of programs is influenced by the interplay of so many related dimensions, the participants noted they had focused on a wide range of topics. Some of the topics were staff related, for example, teamwork, leadership, management, occupational health and safety (OH&S), health and wellbeing. Others were more program focused and covered topics such as relationships, communication, child development and learning, inclusion, guidance, curriculum, nutrition and environments.

**Professional support** was seen as playing an important part of professional development. Support was accessed in a range of ways and included:

- advisors and consultants such as inclusion support facilitators (ISFs), allied health practitioners and early childhood consultants and trainers
- professional networks and hubs
- resource centres, journals, newsletters and online materials
- formal and / or informal collaborations between staff

These activities were valued as important sources of information as well as opportunities for staff to offer support for each other through debriefing, sharing, encouragement and mentoring.

(Practice Potentials 2008, pp119-120)

One of the complexities in trying to define professional development and support in the child care field acknowledged in *Practice Potentials*, is the place of professional learning associated with study towards recognised qualifications. The availability of flexible modes of study and multiple pathways leading to credentialed early childhood courses, means that a significant proportion of child care staff are studying for formal qualifications part time. 25% of directors/managers and 27% of other staff indicated that they were engaged in further study at the time the research was conducted (Practice Potentials 2008, p120).

Whilst data used in *Practice Potentials* does include information related to the study being undertaken towards diplomas and degrees, the researchers emphasised the importance of treating and understanding the contributions of these two forms of professional learning separately. Formal qualifications provide the foundation for the professional status of children services staff. Additional forms of professional development not only maintain and build on this essential foundation but play an important role in lifelong learning. For untrained staff, professional development through mentoring, workshops, seminars and training sessions are an essential part of orientation to their role and can support them in acquiring basic knowledge and skills, inspiring interest and laying the foundation for ongoing formal study.

The researchers make particular note of the significant research evidence linking the **formal qualifications** of staff to **high quality** service provision.

There is a persuasive body of research literature which demonstrates correlation between formally qualified staff and high quality service provision in children's services (Taylor, 2006). Staff qualifications have been consistently identified as one of the key variables that can significantly influence the delivery of excellent quality outcomes for children in child care settings. Accordingly, we believe that it is essential that child care centre staff participation in PD&S that leads to recognised early childhood qualifications such as a degree or diploma must be strongly encouraged at all times (Practice Potentials 2008, p121).

Staff who access a rich array of professional development opportunities are well positioned to contribute to ongoing improvements in their own practice and make significant contributions to the quality of programs in their workplace.



## What is the Value of Professional Development?

Working with young children and families is complex and challenging work. Current research in the field of brain science and the developments in theoretical perspectives and approaches to early childhood education are rapidly expanding the knowledge and theory base that we can draw on to guide our practice.

Alongside the growth in research and theory are the forthcoming changes in our national early childhood system. These changes will impact on our licensing and accreditation systems as well as our curriculum and delivery models.

Whilst the amount of change and growth in our sector presents us with great opportunities for increasing the quality of our services, adapting to and working positively with change and trying to keep up to date with theory and research is indeed a challenge. **Professional development, when planned and implemented effectively, is a key tool that can be used to support us.**

This research, conducted through Access Macquarie on behalf of the PSC alliance in 2007/2008, demonstrated clearly that staff who work in childcare services that commit time and other resources to supporting ongoing professional learning and who also provide ongoing support for the process of implementing related changes, will be well positioned to create a work place in which staff feel confident and purposeful in their work. Professional development is central because it enables us to contribute to developing practices that are guided by current theory and research. Developing deeper levels of understanding about our work in this way, enhances our effectiveness in work with children, families and staff teams.

The contribution to developing practice through professional development can be a source of deep professional satisfaction - for both individual practitioners and services collectively. Through developing our capacity to link theory and practice, we deepen our understanding of the value and significance of our work. In turn, this sustains our commitment, our enthusiasm and capacity to keep growing professionally and personally.





## What Are The Features of Effective Professional Development?

Professional development happens in many different ways. Research has shown however, that whilst there may be differences in the types of professional development opportunities we have, there are common features that underpin the approaches that are most effective in supporting the development and enrichment of our day-to-day practices.

The features of effective professional development for this purpose are identified in the Practice Potentials Report (2008) and include:

- the extension of the professional development program over a period of time
- the involvement of staff in assessing their own learning
- the creation of opportunities for staff to apply new knowledge and skills in their own work settings
- the creation of opportunities for staff to have a trusted 'other' to discuss developing practice (Raban, Waniganayke, Nolan, Ure, Brown and Deans cited in Practice Potentials 2008, p128).

*Practice Potentials* also highlights the work of Linda Mitchell and Pam Cubey who completed a major review of professional development research for the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2003. Mitchell and Cubey's work emphasised the importance of helping us gain awareness of our own thinking, actions and influence when we want to enhance the quality of our practice. This involves participating in professional development activities that:

- provide opportunities for questioning our own experiences and views (not just simply validating them)
- provide opportunities for us to think critically about the values and assumptions underlying our practice and consider events and situations from different perspectives
- provide information and knowledge about alternative practices / perspectives at both theoretical and practical levels
- engage us in investigating real life examples in our own settings.

Participants in the Practice Potentials research study also highly valued a range of professional development experiences in which these features were embedded. These included activities such as action learning projects, reflective practice and practitioner inquiry projects.

For instance, one director described her strong preference for these types of PD&S opportunities that take place over extended periods of time and include developing skills in reflective practice.

*I very much believe that PD builds on what we already know and that knowledge jumps around, so even though it might not seem particularly useful today, it might be valuable ten years down the track. What it's given me is the ability to reflect on what's happening rather than just to make snap judgements about people and what's going on and about where we're going to. I think also my experience with professional development is that things take a long time to turn around, and the PD that I value for my staff team now is that stuff that has a component around critical reflection and thinking about their practices and thinking about theory, and how those two relate (Practice Potentials 2008, p83).*

PD&S of this kind creates a professional foundation for guiding our practice and strengthening our teams.





## Supporting Professional Development: The Director's Role



**One of the key themes emerging in the Practice Potentials research study was the central role played by the director in establishing a culture of professionalism and ongoing learning in their staff teams.** The leadership exercised by the inspiring directors/managers who participated in this research took many forms and operated on a number of levels.

At the **big picture level**, directors/managers who were committed to professional development in their services, were active in their own professional development and contributed significantly to the professional learning within the sector as a whole. At the **service level**, these directors/managers used a variety of strategic approaches to bring their service vision to life, placing professional development for their staff, high on the service agenda. At the **individual level**, these directors/managers established a range of methods to engage, motivate and support staff in becoming effective learners and reflective practitioners.

The multi-level approach to professional development used by these directors/managers demonstrates the many dimensions of skilled leadership that is needed to be able to cope with and initiate change in order to strive for children's services of the highest quality.

### 1. Big Picture Level

An interesting finding of this research was that of the range of directors/managers who participated, those with more experience and qualifications tended to spend more time engaged in professional development themselves. In turn, this group of directors/managers, were also the most likely to value professional development for their staff (Practice Potentials 2008, p51, p70).

The directors/managers who were highly engaged in their own professional development reported a range of activities that they valued. These included:

- active membership of professional associations (87.6% indicated memberships)
- attendance and participation in local, national and international conferences (62.2% indicated that their services supported staff to attend conferences)
- active participation in local hubs and networks
- active support of the work of professional associations through subscriptions to journals and magazines (87.9% of services had subscriptions )
- undertaking formal study (25% indicated they were currently engaged in some form of further study).

### Keeping abreast of change

These kinds of activities provided opportunities for keeping abreast with trends and changes in the sector at the big picture level as well as opportunities to contribute to

reviews and consultation processes about all levels of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system when opportunities arose. These activities were seen as a way of sustaining personal commitment to a long term view and vision for early childhood.

*I find that it really keeps me in touch with what the latest is and a whole range of issues around early childhood. I find that really interesting, and it gives me access to people who can get me out of the hecticness of child care and looking at the bigger picture and the long term view about what we want for early childhood (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

### Contribution at the training and education level

One director contributed to work at the bigger picture level, by providing feedback and raising concerns about an aspect of a course that was being delivered in her region, through her professional network. She felt that the course her staff were undertaking, needed to have an increased emphasis on the National Childcare Accreditation System and was able to work with other interested directors/managers in identifying recommended changes.

*I'm part of a network at the moment and we're trying to change the Certificate 111 because the way they've done it, you've got a qualified that runs a room, and then you've got the staff that work under the qualified - that's meant to be the support system.....*

*Certificate 111 [as delivered in her region], covers nothing about national accreditation, so how are we supposed to train our staff up and uphold the qualified when they (students) don't know anything about those quality areas? It doesn't make sense.*

*So I feel it's my job - which should really be the government's job - to say, no, those girls need to know first of all what is national accreditation, why they're here, what the quality areas are and they should be able to link the policies to quality areas- they need to know why they need to uphold this policy (Practice Potentials 2008, p87).*

### Advocacy

Directors/managers were making significant contributions at the wider community level and this was particularly evident in the work directors/managers were doing with committees of management. In their discussions with committees about the value of professional development, these directors/managers were raising community awareness about the importance of the early years and the links between high quality services and qualified and knowledgeable staff.



This advocacy had led to more connected partnerships between staff and families, as committee members grew in their appreciation of the complexity of working in child care, the professional knowledge base that informs practice and the dedication of staff striving to develop their skills and knowledge in the interests of children and families.

One parent for example, was enthusiastic about the professional development staff had been involved in because she could clearly see the benefit for her child and also commented that the staff had shared knowledge with her that she found useful in her parenting.

*Oh, it's fantastic [staff participation in PD&S]. It's made a huge difference. It's helped my son's development in his language area. And it's also helped his nutrition by encouraging him to eat fruit, which is always handy. And has made me feel more confident as a parent too. To approach them, knowing that they've attended these workshops and they have the knowledge to help me (Practice Potentials 2008, p115).*

Another parent who had been involved in a service for a significant period of time was also extremely positive about the impact of staff professional development, she observed under the leadership of a new director.

*I know that [this director] is very clear in identifying and encouraging professional development amongst the staff team, especially because a lot of them are quite young and even though they're qualified, they don't have a lot of experience as yet, which is great, and given the longevity that I've had with them [the centre]. I can see the difference that this focus makes in terms of their general interest in their job. Their focus, their commitment, they know why they're here, they know they can progress, they know there's stuff to aim for in the future, that gives them a lot of direction and focus I think (Practice Potentials 2008 p60).*

### **Contributions to wider professional learning communities**

Directors/managers who encouraged and supported staff involvement in action learning projects were also making contributions at the big picture level by contributing to research that would be of benefit to staff beyond their own services. One service described an action learning project undertaken in partnership with university staff that contributed both to the research of the academics and the rest of the field. At the completion of the project, this director made presentations to share their learning at both a major conference and to a group of interstate university researchers (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

### **Contributions to the community in general**

Other directors/managers demonstrated commitment to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) at the bigger picture level when discussing the dilemma associated with expenditure on PD&S and the reality of staff turnover. Whilst staff departures clearly created frustrations and impacted on the effectiveness of PD&S in bringing about noticeable changes, some directors/managers adopted a philosophical view that the learning of staff would be beneficial in any context.

*They can take that knowledge .. take it for the rest of their lives. It's not just \$950 worth. It's for so many more abilities to do other things as well. So I think its really important to set that up (Practice Potentials 2008, p117).*

*Yes, there are times when you get really depressed about that sort of thing, but you just can't think about it too much... Yes, it's frustrating, but then I guess it's a donation you make to the industry hopefully (Practice Potentials 2008, p116).*

Clearly all of these directors/managers valued and understood their role as having leadership dimensions beyond their own particular services, extending to the wider community as a whole.

## **2. Service Level : Strategic Planning, Budgeting and Resourcing**

The directors/managers who were effective in leading the professional development of their staff team, not only participated actively in the system wide level, but also possessed the skills and knowledge to enable them to be effective business managers. They were able to manage the complexities of budgets, rosters and all practical matters in ways that could maximise opportunities for professional learning and growth for their staff.



Some of these directors/managers prioritised time in order to seek additional funds through local government grants while others took advantage of opportunities to work with allied health staff available as part of broader government funded programs, such as the Communities for Children and Brighter Futures Programs. Others ensured that their service participated in community events organised through local councils or networked with other services in their local area, utilising these opportunities strategically, as springboards for professional growth. One of the many notable things about these directors/managers was the innovative ways they managed the common problem of limited funding, by creating opportunities through networks and seeking funding from other sources.

### Working with allied health practitioners

One owner/director who had been able to access support from speech therapists for children with high support needs through “Communities for Children”<sup>1</sup> explained the flow on benefits of multidisciplinary approaches across the whole service. She made the observation that because the speech therapists were in the service so frequently, other staff were able to learn in direct but informal ways from them as an ‘ongoing learning experience’ leading to increased confidence in talking with families, identifying specific needs of children at younger ages and in their knowledge of a range of strategies to support children’s speech and language development (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

The director observed that networks that she had worked with to establish contributed greatly to opportunities for professional learning

*to be able to network with them is just amazing, because we haven’t got that knowledge... and because we’ve built relationships up with them, we now have a far better way .. even if the Communities for Children’s program wasn’t there, we’d still be able to access them (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

### Using and establishing networks

Another director, working in a relatively remote location, explained how she had networked with the local kindergarten teacher who then assisted her by presenting a session to the staff on emergent curriculum which helped the staff team “to develop their knowledge about how they could integrate this into their practice” (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

She explained that she was also keen to negotiate with another service closer to a city to organise a staff exchange program, which she felt would have great personal and professional benefits for all staff and both services (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

### Tapping into community expertise

Several services mentioned the ways they utilised the expertise in their community to create learning opportunities for the staff team. In one service, parents with landscape design expertise were invited to work alongside a staff team in a playground redevelopment project and were able to help staff gain an understanding of design principles, construction processes and materials as part of the overall planning process (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

Similarly, another service discussed involving and learning from parents (a physiotherapist and occupational therapist) by inviting them to talk to staff and parent groups (Practice Potentials 2008, p89).

One director explained that she utilised her personal network to organise a financial consultant to assist the committee in developing a business plan for the service (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study). In another service, the director was able to get advice from parents with relevant expertise in human resources, workplace relations law and accountancy (Practice Potentials 2008, p89).

Another director described the value of mentoring from a parent who assisted her to reflect on her leadership and management experiences. His professional expertise in this area supported a small research project that assisted the director to consider her own professional development (Practice Potentials 2008, Case study).

In these services, the directors/managers had been able to establish true partnership approaches, where mutual respect, trust and shared commitment underpinned these powerful learning relationships between staff and community members.

### Clever ideas

Several directors/managers discussed some innovative ideas that combined professional development opportunities with acknowledging staff achievements and contributions.

- One service devised a creative reward system as a way of motivating staff and providing an opportunity for travel to an overseas conference.

*One staff member went to the childcare world forum in Malaysia .... and what happened was the staff were given the opportunity to earn tickets ....., and that was from attending staff meetings or they might do an extra shift. So they got rewarded in a ticket system and all their names went into a hat and one lucky person got to go [to the conference] (Practice Potentials 2008, p86).*

<sup>1</sup>“Communities for Children is a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development. Non Government Organisations (called Facilitating Partners) are funded in 45 disadvantaged sites throughout Australia to work with local stakeholders to develop and deliver tailored approaches to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children and families across 5 key action areas of early learning and care; child-friendly communities; supporting families and parents and family and children’s services work effectively as a system. All service delivery is grounded in the principles of community development, partnerships and evidence-based practice” <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/family-support-program/family-and-children-s-services#cfcc>



- Another director described the way they paired existing staff to enable an exchange of skills and knowledge that one had and another wanted to develop. This offered important affirmations for staff who were recognised for their particular talents and strengths.
- Another director established a professional development policy that provided staff with the opportunity to 'save' their entitlements to enable them to attend international and interstate conferences.

### 3. Staff Level: Motivation, Inspiration & Team Building

Having made a personal commitment to the profession as a lifelong learner, the directors/managers of these services were able to establish a culture of professionalism in their staff team. They acted as role models, mentors and facilitators, combining their commitment to the big picture level, their skills in management and business, with their knowledge of their staff's needs as adult learners and individuals. With this sound professional framework as a basis, these directors/managers were able to seek or create opportunities they knew that staff would find valuable and were able to mentor individuals in their own learning journeys.

#### Mentoring young staff and facilitating learning

One director, expressed concern about the quality of what was happening in the off-campus study some of the service staff were involved in. These staff were facing the demanding situation of combining study with fulltime work, and had at times become disengaged in their study. In response, the director decided to facilitate a study group to support them in developing deeper level understandings and confidence in themselves as learners.

One young staff member explained how much she valued the support in learning and leadership from a new director in her service.

*XXX is the best director we've had at this centre. She's responsible for our training. I trust her to do her job and support us. You can go and talk to her and she gets you to think about what you want and helps us to choose what's good for us (Practice Potentials 2008, p83).*

#### Helping staff sustain their commitment

Other staff members talked about the way the professional development they negotiated with their directors/managers helped them sustain their commitment and build confidence.

*Just the fact that we're given the opportunity to do it and it gives us a new lease on life. We're doing this everyday, day in and day out, and I love my job, but you get stuck in a rut doing the same things every day. When you go to workshops and professional development, its gives me new ideas and gives me that extra little push just to continue with it. It's good that way. (Practice Potentials 2008, p112).*

Not only did staff comment on the impact of professional development on their morale, team spirit and motivation, this was also a strong theme in the comments from parents.

*I know XX (director) particularly, she's a great leader and she's always looking for new moving forward stuff and I think that she will always be on top of things and likes to be. But she seems to get all her staff on with it. They are just 'Yes, Yes... Lets DO this!' That's the one thing I've found, that they're really close and they seem to take changes enthusiastically and they've got a good bond. It's nice, because you know that there's no tension, bringing your kids in (Practice Potentials 2008, p83).*

#### Understanding adults as learners

To achieve these positive outcomes, these directors/managers were proactive in selecting or creating the opportunities for staff that would be a good match for their learning styles and level of experience. For example, one director felt that practical, hands on experiences were the most useful for her staff team.

*I've always thought that practical works a lot better when people go into workshops than the sitting down and looking at the board, type thing. I've always noticed that my staff get more out of practical work. Whereas the others, I don't know, - maybe they see it and learn it for that session and don't go back and implement it as much....Whereas the hands on gives them the confidence in being able to do that (Practice Potentials, 2008, p113).*

Another director explained how important it is to provide opportunities for people to pursue their own interests as part of the professional development program in her service.



*I'm very passionate about continuing learning and promoting learning, because I think it brings motivation. And if you're following your interests ... like we do with the children, you'll learn more (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

Another director/manager emphasised the need to deliberately create opportunities for follow up discussion and support over time, so that staff could get maximum benefit from their opportunities. Her service had a formal requirement that staff provide a report of their learning at staff meetings, make all print material handouts and references available for other staff in a central file and share relevant aspects of their learning with the service community through the service newsletter. These activities not only prompted other interests, but helped expand and deepen the staff member's understanding, because they required staff to reflect on what they have learnt and what it might mean in the workplace.

### **The value of customised in-centre professional development**

The orientation of directors/managers towards learning opportunities that had a direct applicability to staff in the day to day practice was one of the main reasons given for their keen support for in-centre professional development, customised to match the needs and interests of the staff team at the time. By combining customised in-centre sessions with ongoing support through mentoring in one form or another, directors/managers were able to ensure that staff could learn at their own levels, in the style best suited to them. This meant that the full potential of the professional development was more likely to be realised and benefits would spread to individuals, teams and the service as a whole.

### **What about professional development for directors/managers?**

The contributions to the professional development of staff made by child care service directors/managers who are skilled leaders, has clearly made a significant impact on staff morale, commitment and professionalism.

One of the important findings from this research however, was that whilst there is compelling evidence about the importance of effective leadership in our current context, 'there appears to be limited systematic PD&S strategies that support experienced directors/managers to sustain and advance their own leadership potentialities' (Practice Potentials 2008, p125). In this time of change in the sector, we look forward to creative solutions to filling this gap that will emerge from the collaborative work of universities, technical and further education institutions and other agencies that provide professional development and support. The researchers made several recommendations to support this perspective and the details are presented in the full report in Chapter 8.







**Staffing and staff retention is one of the biggest challenges we face in providing high quality services. The quality we are able to achieve in our services is linked fundamentally to the expertise and commitment of the staff team.**

## Improving Staff Retention: How Can Professional Development Help?

### Part A: Study Support and Attracting Applicants

**Staffing and staff retention is one of the biggest challenges we face in providing high quality services. The quality we are able to achieve in our services is linked fundamentally to the expertise and commitment of the staff team.**

Continuity of staff is vital in establishing supportive attachment relationships with children, effective partnerships with families and strong professional orientations in staff teams. Many services however, are experiencing significant difficulties associated with high staff turnover and a lack of suitably qualified and experienced applicants to fill vacancies as they arise.

Whilst there are many system wide factors contributing to this problem, some of the staff and service directors/managers who participated in this research identified the very real difference that a planned approach to professional development opportunities had made in helping them retain staff. Professional development was seen as a key factor in making the workplace a place that staff wanted to stay in. Through prioritising support for the professional learning of their staff, directors/managers had been able to achieve goals in program improvements at the same time as building relationships in which staff felt valued and respected. In these services, the directors/managers had adopted a range of professional development strategies which were chosen particularly because of their potential to meet a specific need in their own setting.

#### Support for staff undertaking study leading to formal qualifications

*(Certificate 111, Diploma of Children's Services and Bachelor of Early Childhood).*

One of the notable findings in this research was the level of staff participation in formal study for qualifications. 25% of service directors/managers responding to the online questionnaire for example, indicated that they were engaged in further study. 27% of staff interviewed for the case studies were also enrolled for study, undertaking either Certificate 111, Diploma or Bachelor degrees (Practice Potentials 2008, p120). Whilst these participants also valued other forms of professional development, study leading to credentialed qualifications, was a current priority, as this was seen as the main vehicle for advancing career prospects.

Alongside the clear individual benefits to staff members, the report highlights the substantial body of evidence indicating the strong relationship between levels of staff qualifications and outcomes for children. Supporting staff in ongoing formal study, is an important strategic priority in building the capacity of our early childhood workforce to deliver programs of the highest quality.

Whilst there is much work ahead at the system-wide level in creating real pathways for staff in early education and care settings, innovative strategies relevant for our current context, which have been adopted by some services, are described below. In each case, the strategy was aimed at creating a positive context for staff who were facing the challenge of combining work and study.

#### Financial assistance

One of the services participating in the research had particular difficulties in attracting qualified staff due to their remote location. In response to this problem, the service budgeted to allow for some of the costs related to study via distance to be reimbursed to a staff member on successful completion of each unit of study. Once the full qualification was achieved, the staff member was automatically progressed to the relevant award level. This strategy positioned the service to attract a wider range of applicants who remained committed to their employer because of the financial support they received in working towards longer term career goals.

#### Staff entitlements

Other services found that by advertising access to other kinds of professional development opportunities as part of their staff entitlements they were able to attract more applicants to vacancies.

*"..... if we're looking for new staff, it's a good enticement ..because presumably there are a lot of services where it isn't perhaps as much of a focus...that's a selling point for us... and we've used that in ads recently and we've really noticed the difference in the response that we've had. It [the ad] specifically mentioned the phrase "professional development" and people expressly asked "What do you mean by that, what are you offering?" , so that has really grabbed their attention ... it's been very interesting (Practice Potentials 2008, p62).*

#### Recognition of the need for flexible working conditions for staff who are studying

Another service highlighted the success of the approach they adopted in utilising the funds paid to the service through the traineeship program that a number of their staff were engaged in. The funds were pooled into an existing professional development fund and used to provide additional non contact time for staff to work together in study groups in a dedicated space provided by the service. This helped staff complete the requirements of the course through the mutual support of other staff undertaking the study and the availability of dedicated time during normal working hours. Some of these funds were also used to provide professional development opportunities on top of the formal study that included other staff in the service.



This meant that the service achieved a dynamic workplace culture that recognised learning as integral to quality practice.

Opportunities to share some of the learning from formal study alongside the practical focus of other professional development, was a powerful way to help all staff make links between theory and practice. This undoubtedly sustained the level of commitment and enthusiasm necessary for successfully combining the challenging day-to-day work with young children and the demands of study.

One of the participants in the research highlighted the way a study group assisted her to stay on track.

*Otherwise, she said, “you sit at home and find other things to do instead of studying. Having it here, you’ve got to sit down and do it and if you get stuck, you can ask the others” (Practice Potentials 2008, p60).*

Another service, also keen to support staff who were studying, had actually incorporated study leave into their staff entitlements (Practice Potentials 2008, p126). In this service, eligible staff had three days study leave that could be taken to provide time for completing assessment requirements.

#### **Study support – resources and publications**

One of the services described the value of resourcing their staff who were studying by subscribing to early childhood journals and other publications. This service also provided membership for staff to a specialist professional library through their PSC which was accessed both by staff who were studying as well as other staff who were looking for support and information in general. Other services also clearly valued subscriptions and membership as part of their approach to professional support with 87.6% of services indicating that they were members of professional

associations and 87.9% reporting that they subscribed to professional journals and publications (Practice Potentials 2008, p83).

The chance for staff to have easy access to reference material beyond that made available directly through their course, added depth to the understanding staff were developing. Professional reference materials made available in the staff room, was also seen by this director as an effective way to expose staff teams to perspectives they may not have considered before. Interesting features of the resources were drawn to staff attention and later discussed at staff meetings. This simple strategy proved to be one vehicle for inspiring several staff who went on to suggest and plan for changes and improvements in their programs.

#### **Study support – mentoring**

Mentoring staff was seen as a particularly important strategy for ensuring that staff members develop confidence in themselves as learners. Many of the staff undertaking courses whilst working are returning to study after a significant time. Mentoring established in a formal and organised way, provided a “new to study” staff member a colleague who could provide both practical assistance and encouragement. Mentors, who were able to help others see the link between theory and practice, made a particularly strong contribution in the learning process. Helping colleagues see real life examples of the idea/concepts being studied in their own work-place was seen as one of the most useful supports that more experienced qualified staff were providing to their team members.

#### **Recognition and acknowledgement**

Many staff commented on the importance of being recognised and acknowledged for their work and linked the service director’s/manger’s personal enthusiasm for professional development to feeling committed and motivated.





*I think because it's such a good centre that it puts an impact on the children and there's just so much going into the centre, like resources, training. She (owner / manager) looks after us and that makes us enjoy being here I think. And just a whole appreciation. I think that's what every worker needs just to keep going, basically. To have that appreciation saying, 'Oh, I'm doing a good job'. You've got some centres out there ... you just do your job and that's it, whereas here, we do get that encouragement, and if we do something good it's always acknowledged. It just makes you feel good about your job and that you know your'e doing the right things and doing a really good job.*  
(Practice Potentials 2008, p60).

### **Building the skills of leaders**

One important strategy directors/managers utilised to build and sustain staff commitment was identifying opportunities and providing mentoring for staff to take on leadership roles. This strategy acknowledged staff experience and knowledge and generated commitment through creating a sense of ownership for what happened in the service.

One director, recognising a particular passion of a staff member, supported her to deepen her expertise through providing training within her own service and then to go on to offer training more widely. Through this experience, she was able to develop as a leader in their local network.

*Over the last 18 months, most of the professional development came about when one staff member attended a state-funded 4-day session on emergent curriculum and came back so inspired she took this on board and not only instigated it in my service, but became like the trainer in our local network, and ended up running her own sessions in the local council. It's really changed the way quite a few centres in the area do their program planning*  
(Practice Potentials 2008, p84).

Other directors/managers adopted a careful approach to succession planning, ensuring that the skills staff would need to move to leadership roles in the service were built up over time. These directors/managers were strategic in the way they created opportunities for staff to grow into roles and were able to match staff interests, talents and strengths to particular areas of responsibility. These responsibilities included a wide range of opportunities, including things such as supervision and mentoring of students on placements, leading special interest groups (eg sustainability) and taking responsibility for specific requirements, such as OH&S across the service.



## Getting Off to a Good Start - Professional Development to Support New Staff



**“We often lose potentially great members of staff, not only because of inadequate wages, but because we throw them into a deep, Olympic sized swimming pool without giving them carefully fitted goggles and a clear life support system. How can they become long distance swimmers if our orientation and staff development is focused only on treading water?”**

( Margie Carter cited in Albrecht 2002, p84).

The image painted by Margie Carter of new staff members struggling to survive is a powerful reminder of the complexity of our work and the professional learning that underpins our development from ‘struggling’ in the earliest phase of our careers to a place of more confidence and competence, sometimes referred to as a stage of professional ‘maturity’.

An interest in the professional learning and growth of staff in teaching roles has led to several authors proposing developmental models of professional growth. Lillian Katz, for example, describes the sequence of professional growth in four stages (Katz 1995). Although there are limitations to conceptualising learning in ‘stages’, this model can be useful when considering the professional development needs of staff members in child care settings at varying levels of experience.

### Lillian Katz - Developmental Stages of Teachers

#### Stage 1: Survival

During this stage, the staff member is predominantly focused on themselves and their own needs. Surviving the daily challenges of their role and getting through from day to day is the main concern. Many staff at this stage, question their personal and professional competence and in doing so, their desire to continue to work in their role. The survival stage is associated with being new to a role, so therefore may be re-experienced in times of change, either because of moving to a new role or because of new initiatives in the service.

#### Stage 2: Consolidation

During this stage, new staff will have developed ways of working each day that they find effective and so begin to broaden their focus to include developing deeper understandings of their role and the characteristics of individual children.

#### Stage 3: Renewal

In this stage, staff members are highly competent in their day to day work and begin to look for new challenges and ways of extending their expertise.

#### Stage 4: Maturity

This stage is characterised by continued interest in extending expertise coupled with deepening interest in ideas, philosophy and the bigger picture aspects of the profession as a whole.

### Functioning in Survival Mode – What’s It Like?

It’s not hard to put ourselves in the place of ‘just trying to survive’ and recognise the thoughts and feelings that accompany it. Uncertainties about how to manage day-to-day happenings go hand in hand with the transition in our learning from having theoretical understandings and commitments to philosophical ideas (**the whys and the shoulds of practice we believe in**) and the gap created by our inexperience (**the how**).

When we’re operating in survival mode, it’s not uncommon to have a sense of being constantly in the mode of reacting. It can feel as if we are just putting out spot fires, never having time to think things through or be engaged with others for satisfying periods of time. **Reacting** to daily events **rather than responding** is a key part of the experience of things ‘being out of control’.

Whilst it goes without saying that individuals manage this experience in different ways, it’s not at all uncommon for problems to be rationalised as belonging somewhere outside of ourselves. For example, staff who are only just surviving, may blame children for what’s not working in the group or particular families as the source of tensions. Having little sense of control can also be accompanied by a kind of denial that blocks our ability to even recognise problems. A staff member may for example, claim that “everything’s going well” when clearly they are not or say that they know what to ‘do’ but that it won’t work because of the children, the room, the parents, the equipment etc.

Staff who manage the challenges of ‘being new’ in a positive way, do so because of a combination of their own resilience and commitment to ongoing learning within a supportive work context in which skilful mentoring and leadership from more experienced staff is provided. When staff get stuck in survival mode because of the stresses related to a lack of professional support in their roles, some make a decision to leave while those that don’t can become ‘shut down’, losing motivation and the ability to contribute to their full capacity. Performance issues undoubtedly arise, morale in the rest of the team suffers and difficult times for everyone involved emerge.

### What professional development approaches can help?

Recognising the needs of staff who are new to their role is key to effective professional development support in this area. In survival mode, we all need help that is targeted to the practical level of how to do things.





Services that tie this practical support closely with their service vision, philosophy and broad goals, help new staff integrate into existing teams forming collegial work focused relationships. This helps sustain a work culture that is reflective and professional. In this kind of workplace, staff understand that the source of 'how' to do things is intrinsically linked to the 'why'. This understanding is central to high quality services because the practices of staff are grounded in current theory and research.

Many of the directors/managers who participated in the research, highlighted the importance of the role of professional development in working towards their services vision or mission statement. 44.9% indicated that they allocated funds specifically with these outcomes in mind (Practice Potentials 2008, p52).

### **Mentoring and coaching.**

The participants in this research highlighted the value of mentoring and coaching as a key mode of professional development for staff new to their role (p83), especially when provided by staff who were highly qualified.

*More qualified practitioners in a centre appear to play an important role in the professional development and support of other staff. They both inspire others to participate and provide a role model and mentoring relationship. It's interesting to observe through the case studies and focus group comments that where highly qualified practitioners are employed at a centre, they are often a source of rich advice and information for less experienced staff dealing with the complexities of childcare. It is perhaps noteworthy that topics like behaviour guidance, programming and working with children with additional needs (in particular, language disorders) are often requested by services with less qualified staff. Where highly qualified staff are present, these topics may be less requested. (Practice Potentials 2008, p103).*

One of the focus groups reported that mentoring and coaching was so highly valued for professional development that special positions had been created so that staff had support from someone qualified and skilled in fulfilling this role.

Some services have created positions of an early childhood support specialist for that organisation or for that centre.

*So they put their resources into that person, almost like being a constant coaching mentor type person to different meetings and different teams... ..it comes down to the qualification capacity of the service. A lot of training is required because of the lack of qualified individuals or those that are acting whilst still training. (Practice Potentials 2008, page 84).*

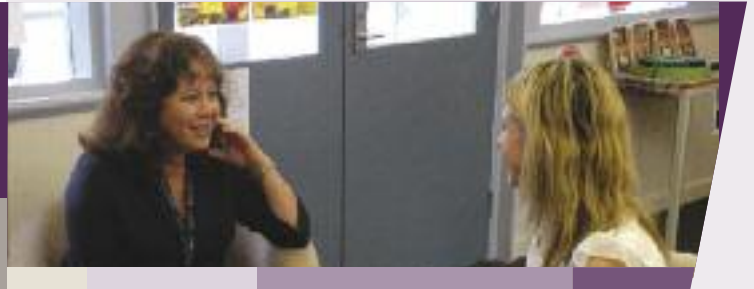
### **Mentoring systems not only benefit the new staff member, but offer rewarding professional roles for experienced staff.**

Findings from this research suggests that services that develop mentoring systems as part of their professional development strategies are able to create united staff teams who are interested in developing and enhancing their practice in an ongoing way.

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# Mentoring



The benefits and value of mentoring in supporting professional growth is often identified in discussions and research related to PD&S. There was compelling evidence from this research that many service directors/managers and experienced staff members were playing significant roles as mentors to other staff in their services.

The literature reviewed for this research pointed to several findings that may provide a helpful starting point to guide planning for mentoring programs to become part of the suite of professional development opportunities offered to staff in our services.

## 1. Participants need to have a shared understanding of what is meant by the term mentoring

Whilst the term 'mentoring' is commonly used, it is helpful to distinguish the range of different kinds of activities associated with this term. In some cases, it refers to **formally established relationships** where participants are matched to each other through a deliberate selection process. Informal program participants may either be from with-in the same service or from different organisations. In these programs, mentors and mentees form a learning partnership and may adopt a reflective practice approach to learning.

In other cases, the term mentoring is used to refer to **informal supportive relationships** that emerge between colleagues who get along well and have different kinds/levels of experience or knowledge to share with each other. Mentoring can also describe short term help/advice and guidance organised in a specific situation and can also be more supervisory in nature as an approach to help staff gain new skills or overcome specific difficulties.

## 2. Participants need to be clear about roles

Roles of mentors and mentees vary depending on the purpose of the mentoring and whether it is informal or formal in nature. **In programs that aim to promote professional growth and change to practice, a learner centred approach is often considered to be the most effective. The mentor, rather than taking on the role of 'expert' who simply explains, shows or tells the mentee about practice, acts more as a facilitator to help the mentee construct their own understanding.** Through this process, both mentor and mentee deepen their understanding of their work. Whatever approach is used, however, it's important that all participants have a shared understanding about the learning goals and the strategies that will be used.

### The four phases of mentoring

In the text, "The Mentors Guide", Lois J. Zachary (2000) outlines an approach to mentoring that is structured in four phases.

These phases are identified as :

- **preparing**
- **negotiating**
- **enabling**
- **coming to closure.**

According to Zachary, these phases exist in all effective mentoring relationships whether they are formal or informal in nature. Taking any of these phases for granted or skipping over them "can have a negative impact on the relationship. Simply being aware of them provides significant signposts" (Zachary 2000, p50).

### Preparing

During this phase both mentor and mentee prepare individually and in partnership. Both reflect individually on their expectations, skills, goals, motivation and readiness and come together to explore the possibilities of the prospective relationship.

### Negotiating

Negotiating is the phase in which partners come to agreements and shared understanding about learning goals and ways of working together. Boundaries and limits are identified. Confidentiality and responsibilities are discussed, as are arrangements in relation to time and place.

### Enabling

This is the longest phase as it is during this phase that what has been negotiated is implemented. This phase also has a creative aspect as new ideas and possibilities emerge. Interactions during this phase usually revolve around reflective conversations and feedback. An active commitment by both partners is fundamental to reaching successful outcomes.

### Coming to Closure

Closure involves evaluating, acknowledging and celebrating the learning that has occurred for both mentor and mentee.

Mentoring offers enormous potential for professional growth for both participants. Each phase of the process leads to many rich sources of learning through reflection, study and investigation. It is a process that helps us see beyond what we currently know and know how to do, to imagining and working towards truly fulfilling our professional potential.

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**The effectiveness of professional development as part of a staff retention strategy was also validated by many of the parents.**

## Improving Staff Retention: How Can Professional Development Help?

### Part B: Sustaining Commitment

High staff turnover and the serious shortage of qualified staff are well known problems facing the child care field. The costs of recruiting new staff and time needed for orientation to integrate new staff members into a team create budgetary pressures and barriers to making progress towards changes and developments of the service.

Participants identified PD&S as an effective strategy for dealing with these issues because it was seen as contributing significantly to staff commitment and engagement. One director explained that she gave a high priority to learning opportunities for staff, with this outcome particularly in mind.

*I'm very passionate about continuing learning and promoting learning because I think it brings motivation (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

Similarly, many staff members acknowledged that the opportunities that came from PD&S was a key factor in their overall job satisfaction and motivation, making them feel a sense of ownership for the success of the service's programs. One staff member commented that the director's/manager's vision and commitment to high quality practices coupled with the encouragement she had received led to her enrolling to undertake study for a formal qualification.

*I think it really helps having an owner who has high expectations, that likes things done properly. The main thing is, I like getting up in the morning now to come to work (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

### **The effectiveness of professional development as part of a staff retention strategy was also validated by many of the parents.**

*I can see the difference that focus makes in terms of their general interest in their job, their focus and commitment. They know what they're here for, they know they can progress (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

*..they [know] they are valued and that what they already know is worthwhile, but that we value them enough to say we want you to go and do this (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

### **Increasing staff's influence - belonging through participation**

Leadership theorists tell us that one of the factors that influences employees level of commitment to their workplace is the level of participation and influence they have in the service overall.

In situations where staff are encouraged to keep abreast of and contribute to the work being done at the leadership level, it is possible to create opportunities for staff and management to develop an appreciation of each others role which creates a climate of mutual respect and value.

One service described the benefits for staff and their committee of management, using a planned approach to professional development. Staff in this service had participated in a workshop outside their service to develop understandings of different forms of program documentation. The focus adopted for team meetings once back at the service revolved around ensuring that each team leader would continue to reflect on the new information they had learnt. The director/manager invited each room to provide a brief power-point presentation to the committee of management about their program and the key things they work towards as a team. The purpose was to help parents understand the reasons behind the way the programming was approached in each team.

This required staff to think reflectively about what they did from day to day and this prompted a review of the principles learnt during the workshop. The requirement to present something prompted discussions to refine thinking, clarify ideas and check understandings. As well as the professional learning through this dialogue, the whole project turned out to be a great team building exercise. Staff built different kinds of relationships as they shared skills in computer technology, critiqued each others presentations and supported each other through the familiar nervousness when developing skills and confidence in speaking to a group.

One member of a management committee who contributed to the research commented

*...from a management committee point of view, we support professional development and I think it's in two ways. One - to support the development so that child care workers are providing greater quality of care for children, so there's a benefit on outcome there, but it's also, in part, used as a reward in the way of retaining our staff as well, by giving them opportunities to develop and understand what's happening in a child care sense and [also] in their own personal development (Practice Potentials 2008, p62).*

The work ethic and positive climate in services that had an active interest in professional development was clearly evident during this research. Professional development played an important role in the success of these services in creating workplaces that sustain the commitment and enthusiasm of staff. Whilst PD&S requires careful management of budgets and staff rosters, the outcomes and benefits described by these services provides a sound rationale for giving professional development a high priority.

One of the most consistent messages from services participating in this research was the benefits and value of organizing in-centre professional development customised to the specific interests and needs of their own service.



## Keeping Switched On: Customised In-Centre Professional Development

One of the research questions investigated in this study concerned the professional development experiences that participants had found ‘least useful’. One key theme in response to this question related to the difficulty of finding PD&S which met the needs of qualified and experienced staff.

### Training focusing on the most basic level

Several participants commented that for staff who have been working in child care for many years, they sometimes find “the material presented does not offer them anything new” (Practice Potentials 2008, p101).

Whilst acknowledging that there is a need for training at introductory levels for staff that are inexperienced, there was a concern expressed that the kinds of opportunities through commonly available ‘standardized or generic training’ were not always able to meet the needs of those with more experience and qualifications.

### Keeping up to date with OH&S training and mandatory reporting

Another related area of concern expressed was that the current high turnover of staff experienced in many services led to a primary focus on professional development opportunities in areas related to compliance. This meant that priorities were given to training in areas such as first aid, food handling, EpiPen administration and asthma management, meaning that there was less opportunity to support staff in doing the things that staff ‘would [otherwise] love to do’ (Practice Potentials 2008, p99).

### Getting the balance back through customized in-centre professional development.

**One of the most consistent messages from services participating in this research was the benefits and value of organizing in-centre professional development customised to the specific interests and needs of their own service.**

These services had recognised the limitations of approaches that focused on looking for ‘recipes’ and ‘quick fixes’ and had experienced the benefits and professional growth that came about through working together to construct understandings at deeper levels over time.

*At our centre, we tend not to go to workshops that are held, because I’ve got a lot of very experienced staff .... I find that the ones that have experience, the titles that are offered, they think its “rehash, rehash. We’ve been there. ... and the younger ones, they’re just training, they’re already covering those topics in their training. So again its re-doing. So what I’ve been doing, I’ve been spending my training dollars in looking for the gaps in their day to day work... outlining myself the training I want to do (Practice Potentials 2008, p79).*

Learning together as a whole staff team was seen as the most effective way of working towards and integrating changes across a service. Participants felt that if staff members just attended things offered outside their service individually, it was often hard to generate enthusiasm from other staff when back at their services. Sometimes this situation was seen as arising because of difficulties in retaining a lot of information from workshop type sessions or in developing a deep enough understanding to convey the information and ideas meaningfully to others (Practice Potentials 2008, p101). This can limit the likelihood of instigating and sustaining changes in practice, because individual staff members would then more or less have to work in isolation. As one participant commented “one person can’t do it all themselves” (Practice Potentials 2008, p102).

Recognizing these limitations, services reported that when they were interested in developing a particular aspect of their service or wanted to make changes to the way they did things, they used professional development approaches that could help them gain new information as a whole team.

*It’s sort of a holistic approach, rather than two people knowing all this new information and then trying to use it, with everyone going “What are you talking about?” Not understanding where you’re coming from. Whereas, if everybody does it together, you’re all learning the same thing, you can all bring it back to your staff meetings, sit down” “OK, how can we incorporate this into our everyday programs or everyday policies” (Practice Potentials 2008, p74).*

*To be able to involve all the staff we’ve had consultants come in to us so that allows everybody to have input and contribute where it’s been about topics or areas that we’ve all agreed on that we would like to find out more about (Practice Potentials 2008, p75).*

Services that were utilizing this form of professional development also reported some of the ways they maximized the benefits of these opportunities.

- Some services had established a policy of **annual closure days** and the program for these days included guest presenters in the morning on a topic of importance to the service and small group work throughout the afternoon for team discussions and planning.
- Other services had a **series of half day sessions** on the weekend, offering time in lieu to acknowledge staff commitment.





- Another service planned a **whole of centre session that included families** when they were working through a problem that had emerged with biting. This service particularly valued the input from a guest speaker because it helped staff develop and maintain a consistent approach and supported them in working with parents who were finding the situation quite stressful (Practice Potentials 2008, p74).
- Services in rural and remote locations also utilized this form of professional development by working and planning together. This spread the costs involved and established closer networking relationships between their services. The services that worked together this way had the added bonus of expanding their professional support base.

#### **Leadership and learning for experienced staff**

Seeking training opportunities that are customised and offered to whole staff teams as described above, means that the topics and activities are not only directly related to the concerns and interests of particular services, but can also provide a challenging and satisfying way of involving more experienced staff in leading the work and integration of new ideas and understandings across a service.

Experienced staff can, for example, be involved in identifying areas of interest that are emerging in the field, planning for sessions, negotiating with training providers, identifying scenarios for discussions, facilitating follow up meetings, reporting on progress and so on. They can also be teamed up as mentors to less experienced staff to assist them in deepening their understanding of the topics covered as well as working out what this means on a more practical level.

These kinds of leadership responsibilities provide a context for learning and understanding at deeper levels and therefore offer broad opportunities for professional growth for experienced staff.

#### **Learning Communities: Working together for change**

Utilising customised professional development is a powerful way of developing a work culture in services that can achieve “observable changes in professional practice and effective outcomes for children and their families” (Practice Potentials 2008, p123). Whole of service approaches generate enthusiasm and motivation for ongoing learning. Working together towards shared professional goals, underpins a professional work culture where staff feel a deep sense of shared responsibility for the quality of the programs and the experience of children and families.

With customised in-centre professional development as a back-drop, staff can support each other in

- deepening their understanding of new and existing ideas
- evaluating and fine tuning the implementation of changes to day to day practices
- reflecting on the learning through the achievements and challenges along the way
- building professional relationships within their teams.

- Another service **incorporated a social occasion** by taking the opportunity for all staff to attend a ‘twilight’ open evening in two other services combining this with a progressive dinner. These visits were planned by the director who was new to the service; as a catalyst for the whole staff team to consider ways to enhance the aesthetics of their rooms (Practice Potentials 2008, p76).
- Another service employed a **consultant as a follow on from training** sessions they had attended to help staff plan and implement strategies they had learnt about. This director explained that the consultants work within their service, made a significant difference to the understanding of the staff and their capacity to adopt the new approach.

*“so they’re in that room with that group of children and they take a totally different perspective to it now, that support is actually relevant to them and having someone come to the workplace made the difference (Practice Potentials 2008, p74).*

## Adult Learning Principles : The Key to Motivation For Ongoing Learning.



One of the areas of investigation in this research related to the features of professional development opportunities that staff felt led to the greatest positive impact in their services. Researchers identified the range of professional strategies services accessed in two broad categories. These were:

- **on-site provisions** such as staff meetings, child free days and mandatory training sessions and
- **external provisions** such as conferences, hubs and networking, further education and involvement in projects.

Whether the professional development opportunity occurred on-site or externally, there appeared to be several factors that were important in determining whether or not the activity undertaken was professionally rewarding and useful.

Not surprisingly, these factors relate closely to what is well understood as **principles of adult learning**. Understanding of how to support adults learning effectively has emerged from the work of Malcolm Knowles and other adult learning theorists. Knowles identified the characteristics of adults as learners. This work offers a useful guide for directors/managers when planning for and providing professional development opportunities.

### Principles of Adult Learning

- **Adults have to consider it important to acquire the new skills knowledge or attitudes.**
- **Adults need to know why they should learn something and how the learning will help them in their role.**
- **Adults have a need to be self-directing and decide for themselves what they want to learn.**
- **Adults become motivated to learn when they experience a situation where they recognise their own 'need to know'.**
- **Adults adopt a task-centred or problem-centred orientation to learning. (Simons, Harris & Smith 2006)**

### Applying adult learning principles

Several directors/managers participating in this research described the way their approach to professional development in their services, reflected these principles.

#### Team mapping day

In one service the director described their team mapping day, which was the beginning phase of a focus the service had in their goal to grow and develop as a learning organisation.

*We've had this team mapping day now, and there's a big report coming back on it...each person does a questionnaire and then it shows you their traits and then it's got the wheel of what a perfect team is. We've all worked out that we've got one person from every peg on that wheel, and the report coming back and its going to have who that person is and how to interact with them so that it's an effective communication (Practice Potentials 2008, p76).*

#### Liasing with training providers

Another director in a rural service described the way she liaised with a training provider and her staff team in planning for professional development.

*At staff meetings I sort of said "okay, what sort of training do you want us to look at this year?" and then they'll do a list up of what they'd like to have and then we go through that list and send the information off to the training organisation, you know to say "this is the sort of training we want to be remembered. They've linked in with us and said "Right, there's someone coming up the coast" (Practice Potentials 2008, p79).*

One staff member explained the way the service staff team utilised training calendars and other advertising materials the director accessed for them to plan what would be most useful. In some cases, this led to individuals attending courses, but at other times this developed into a whole of service opportunity, with the training provider coming to them.

*"Basically, the director just puts a lot of things on the table in the staff room.. and when people see something they're interested in, they go and see her (the director), and if she only gets one or two people interested , she just sends those people individually. If she sees that, you know, there's five to ten of us interested, she'll try to get them to come out here for one of our staff meetings (Practice Potentials 2008, p 59).*





### Staff appraisals

Many directors/managers also explained the central role that staff appraisal systems had in identifying professional development opportunities to respond to the needs and interests of individual staff members.

*Basically, [planning for PD &S] starts with staff development meetings, which we hold in January, February, every year. And that sort of kicks off the year on a really positive note. So it's an opportunity for the staff to meet with me for an hour or so, confidentially, and we go through a set of questions that give an opportunity to do a self evaluation on themselves. And I evaluate their work performance as well. And we get together and we look at similarities and differences, and we work towards any goals that may need to be achieved. And they're recognised for their positive work, their high quality work, contributing to the centre. And they talk about things they'd like to achieve for their rooms. Things that could make the workplace a better workplace. Any policies or procedures or routines they'd like to see improved and then give me feedback on how they think it can be improved. And one of the questions is about professional development. So any information I've received and sourced on any training that's available. They sit down with me and we look at what they would like to enrol in and why (Practice Potentials 2008, p59).*

In all of these services, ongoing learning was understood as an important professional responsibility of both individual staff and employers. By sharing the responsibility for identifying goals for this learning, staff approached the learning opportunities with purpose and motivation.

### Reference:

Simon, M., Harris, R., Smith, E. 2006, *The Certificate 1V in Assessment and Workplace Training: Understanding Learners and Learning Support Document*, NCVER, <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1665.html>

## Reading Together to Learn: A Strategy for Professional Development.



Support for professional learning was accessed by many services through newsletters, subscriptions to journals and resource services. Many services also reported that as part of their professional development policy, staff were responsible for making readings and handouts from workshops and conferences they attended available for other staff. This was seen as a way of getting ‘more for your money’ when supporting one or two staff members’ attendance at conferences and workshops.

To get the most out of these opportunities, services found it useful to have specific strategies in place so that staff could share their thoughts and ideas about the articles and information they had provided. In some services, this was achieved by inviting staff to write about their learning for newsletters and other publications, and in others, by inviting staff to present their ideas in staff meetings or to facilitate discussion groups.

Several directors/managers commented that it can be difficult however, to get discussion going at a deep level when the information and ideas are really new to everybody. There were several factors identified that contributed to this difficulty.

*Some staff feel hesitant to share their learning in any depth with other staff. They make notes available, but it's up to staff to take an interest in their learning and this is not always taken up.*

*Staff do not retain as much information as would be useful and need help to relay the information gleaned on the course back to their colleagues at staff meetings*

*When all staff do not attend, it's difficult to share the knowledge and enthusiasm*

*Not enough follow up because of busy work schedules (Practice Potentials 2008, p102).*

**Time for reflection and working together is clearly an important requirement, but without effective strategies for getting deep discussions going, important opportunities can be lost.**

Staff working in New Zealand shared an approach to discussing readings they have found effective in reaching deeper levels of understanding and professional dialogue on the website, New Zealand Curriculum On Line. This strategy may be one that could offer potential when a staff member comes across an interesting article or brings back handouts and readings from workshops or conferences they have attended.

### Reading together strategy

1. Participants form groups of about four.
2. Each person reads the article, highlighting text that means something to them, or that they have a thought or opinion about.
3. First person reads out something they have highlighted in the text without comment.
4. Each person around the group makes a comment or an observation about the part of the text that was read out, without comment or interjection from the group.
5. First person then summarizes what each person has said and then has their say.
6. The next person in the group now takes on the first person role and reads out a section the text they have highlighted without comment.
7. The strategy continues until each person has had a turn as first person.

Staff using this strategy commented that the strength of the approach for them has been that “ideas can be presented without interjection and are critically examined as participants are listening to listen, *not* listening to speak. Perhaps, as well as providing a structure to get deep discussion going, it could also be an effective way of helping quieter members of staff teams to contribute alongside their more vocal and confident colleagues.

Given that we are about to go through many changes in our ECEC system overall, this approach could be a great starting place in the process of getting to know and understand the new National Early Years Learning Framework when it is released in 2009.

### Reference

Garmston, R., *Final Word Strategy, Strategies for Getting Started*





## Making Ideas Reality: Inquiry Approaches and Working Together for Change.

**Leadership and management theorists have highlighted the need for learning on many levels to take place to be able to make changes that are sustainable over time. To embed new practices, learning needs to occur individually, in teams, and at the whole of service level.**

**If you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.**

**Lewis Carroll**

These famous words of Lewis Carroll provide wise guidance about the ways of working that have the most potential for achieving change. In the complex work of delivering high quality programs and services for children and families, many factors come in to play. As Lewis Carroll suggests, being effective in making changes and improvements starts with having a clear idea of where you want to go and identifying the possible pathways. When it comes to making changes to practice, professional development is the key pathway.

**Leadership and management theorists have highlighted the need for learning on many levels to take place to be able to make changes that are sustainable over time. To embed new practices, learning needs to occur individually, in teams, and at the whole of service level.**

Whilst changes to some things nearly always involve learning new skills, changes to the way we work with children, families and each other also requires learning at a much more complex level to be effective. This is because change to what we do on the outside comes from changes to how we think about and see these things from the inside.

Deep level learning takes time, commitment and support. To learn effectively, we need other people to bounce ideas around with, to challenge our thinking, to check our understanding with and to help us grow in our capacity to see things from different perspectives.

Professional development opportunities that work at this deeper level of learning are usually associated with longer term projects that adopt an action learning approach. Rather than stopping at the level of imparting new information or demonstrating new ways to do things, these kinds of projects focus more on staff constructing an understanding of ideas and developing their practice through a process of reflection and inquiry.

These kinds of projects, sometimes referred to as practitioner inquiry projects or action learning projects, have the benefits of customised training mentioned earlier, in the sense that the focus of the work develops from interests specific to the service as well as the benefit of colleagues learning together. They usually involve staff teams who support each other in implementing the desired changes across the service and often involve mentoring and facilitation by people who have expertise in research.

Several services participating in this research, particularly highlighted the value of their participation in these longer term projects for the way they inspired staff, strengthened teams and led to positive changes in practice.

### **Innovations Group - Program Planning Project**

One service was involved in an 'Innovation Group' that focused on an investigation of new approaches to program planning and reported that this led to a total change in the way the service approached this aspect of their work. At the beginning of this project, only the service director was involved in the Innovations Group, working with other directors/managers. This was followed on with planning for her staff's professional development, which included attending workshops on the topics of emergent curriculum and then working together as a team to implement new practices.

Staff and families were enthusiastic about the changes evolving in the service as a result of this project, as the comments below reflect.

*This has been a new challenge for me now and it's exciting. It's motivated me. Change is motivating (team leader).*

*It certainly inspired people to feel happier and excited about doing planning. It's brought us together as a team (centre director).*

*It means that I can see a lot more of what is going on with my child (parent) (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

### **Practitioner Inquiry Project**

Another service took a proactive approach to establishing a year long project by working with two other services. This enabled them to engage two university academics to facilitate the development of centre based projects using action research strategies. Each centre developed research questions of particular interest to them and were guided in the cyclical process of gathering data, reflection and planning. The project included a range of professional learning activities including meetings, workshops and readings.

Together the range of activities helped staff make links between theory and practice and to identify the learning that was emerging through the project. Staff used the knowledge they were constructing to reflect on their current practice and to plan for and implement desired changes.

Again, staff involved were enthusiastic about the benefits of working this way and described the impact on many levels. Despite some misgivings in the first instance, one staff member described the excitement and confidence that grew as the project got underway.



*For most of us at the beginning we were a little bit, “Oh God, more work”. Once we got stuck into it, it wasn’t. It was, but it was exciting and we started to see the value of it pretty quickly, and created a lot of confidence (assistant director).*

Another staff member commented on how effective the approach was for her particular learning style. She had found the opportunities to review and discuss video footage of the program in action very useful.

*Because I find I learn so much more from watching than I do from just a book, I learnt so much from that project. It was crazy. I didn’t expect to learn as much as I did (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

Flowing from this project were other professional development activities that included staff giving presentations about their work at conferences and for an interstate university group. Although the staff members involved may have found this somewhat daunting, the resulting personal and professional esteem was a significant outcome. Building confidence in this way was seen by the participants as making a major contribution to developing a professional culture in the centre.

One of the staff commented:

*It made staff realise that they had skills to do so much. In the beginning they were saying “how can we do research and work with university people?” And to discover that actually they could collect data and put it together and interpret it. That was really great (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

Many of the research findings that are guiding our understanding of practice emerge from projects such as the ones briefly described above. Making the decision to commit to longer term projects such as these, is not only worthwhile for the service and staff, families and children involved, but a way of making invaluable contributions to our ongoing professional learning within the sector.

### **What is Action Research?**

The goal of action research is to improve practice by bridging the gap between theory and practice. It is a way of working with others to define and understand problems as well as to generate new and more effective ways of doing things. Gillian Rodd outlines the steps in action research identified by Wadsworth, Kemmis and McTaggart in her discussion of leadership and the research connection as follows:

#### **1. Identifying problems of mutual concern.**

*The present problems are brought into focus through the processes of observation and reflection by all the members of the team.*

#### **2. Analysing problems and determining possible contributing factors.**

*The ability to diagnose the determinants of a problem is required. The existing situation is monitored using recorded, uncensored and uninterpreted observations from members of the team.*

#### **3. Forming tentative working hypotheses or guesses to explain these factors.**

*At this point, questionable assumptions are eliminated. Decisions are made about the form and method of interpretation of data to be collected.*

#### **4. Collecting and interpreting data from observations,**

*interviews and relevant documents to clarify these hypotheses and to develop action hypotheses. Accurate details of events need to be recorded in order to avoid erroneous or superficial influences.*

#### **5. Formulating plans for action and carrying them out.**

*Plans are experimental, prospective and forward-looking, and may involve the acquisition of new skills or procedures in order to implement the plans.*

#### **6. Evaluating the results of the action.**

*The processes of observation and reflection are used to critically assess the effects of the informed action to make sense of the processes and issues that unfold during the implementation phase. Collaborative reflection provides an opportunity to reconstruct meaning out of the situation and establishes the basis for a revised plan.*

#### **7. Introducing a revised cycle from step 1 to step 6.**

(Rodd 2006, p214).

#### Reference

Rodd G., 2006, *Leadership In Early Childhood*, 3rd ed, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW.





## Being Open to Change:

**Becoming a reflective practitioner involves taking responsibility for our own professional learning and provides a deeply rewarding method for generating new and creative ways of working.**

Reflective practice is central to sustaining high quality programs. It offers a way of bringing theory and practice together to enable learning from experiences and to adapt and develop practices in light of new understandings.

**Becoming a reflective practitioner involves taking responsibility for our own professional learning and provides a deeply rewarding method for generating new and creative ways of working.** People who approach their work reflectively have several recognisable qualities in common, most notable of which is an openness to change.

Reflective practitioners are willing to ‘stand outside’ and observe themselves at work in order to understand their actions better and determine the strengths and weaknesses of their current approach. This means that “reflective practitioners **examine** their experience rather than just live it” (Amulya 2004). In doing so, reflective practitioners are constantly looking for ways to improve.

### What is reflective practice?

Reflective practice is a process rather than a discrete task. It operates as a continuous ‘cycle of inquiry’ that includes stopping to think about how and why we’re doing things the way we are, examining our answer to these ‘how and why’ questions from different perspectives and using the deeper understandings we develop through these first two steps as a reference point for deciding what actions or changes we want to make. As we implement change we continue with this cycle.

### What skills are needed?

There are a number of skills we need to develop in order to build our capacity to learn from and initiate change through reflective practice.

Angela O’Connor and Cathy Diggins, New Zealand authors of the 2002 text, *On Reflection: Reflective Practice For Early Childhood Educators*, describe the skills that are integral to reflective practice as follows:

- **describing your practice** – recounting a particular event with all relevant details about the adults and children present, interactions and the environment
- **identifying your feelings** – recounting how you reacted emotionally to an event, so that you can explore how the event affected you
- **investigating your values** – recognising those aspects of living that are important to you so that you can understand how they influenced the event
- **moving towards self-awareness** – recognising your assumptions and identifying the impact on your practice, understanding your own culture, valuing what you know and recognising your needs for further learning

- **gathering theoretical knowledge** – integrating new knowledge into your practice, even though it may challenge your thinking and using theory to help explain an event
- **having reflective conversations** – exploring the events and theories that affect your practice with colleagues
- **changing your thinking and practice** – developing new ways of thinking about different aspects of your practice and planning carefully for the changes you will make to your practice
- **asking reflective questions** – using questions to begin your reflection and link theory to your practice (O’Connor & Diggins 2002, p33).

Each of these skills take time and practice to acquire. Several directors/managers shared the ways they were providing opportunities to support their staff team in developing a reflective approach to their work.

### Becoming critical thinkers

Reflective practice leads to a type of thinking often referred to as critical thinking. Critical thinking involves making judgments about the ideas and information we come across, rather than just taking things on face value. In this process of judgement we reflect on our own values, experiences and professional knowledge to determine whether or not the idea is one that we agree/disagree with and whether it provides a perspective that we feel we could/should learn more about.

One director was keen to help her staff become critical thinkers and described the way she began the process during her first six months as the new director of the service. One of her strategies was to provide material for staff to look at, asking for their feedback and then using the feedback from staff as a starting point for initiating reflective conversations.

In these conversations, she was prompting staff to begin the process by considering ideas from different perspectives.

*I’ve brought some books out for them to look at different set ups and environments.. common books that people like to use..... and I put a sheet with it to say.. Can I have some feedback please? ... Feedback is not only necessarily to give me feedback, but for them to reflect on what they think they see in these books. Then one of the young girls came to me and said to me “Oh, I’m going to try one of your ideas” from one of the book I left out there. I said “Oh yeah, what are you trying?” and she said “Ah , for messy play, for sensory play, I’m going to put flour in a tub” And I sort of thought, ah do I dig myself holes*

*what? I said, "What made you choose that?" "Oh, it just looked nice. Something different, a different feel". I said "Ok. Have you thought about the implications of using food in your program?" (Practice Potentials 2008, p81).*

In this situation rather than giving specific information immediately, this director encouraged the staff member to reflect on the ethical issues around the selection of 'food' as play material. She was then able to engage in conversations with her more deeply at the level of personal and professional values and principles.

Another director explained how valuable professional development that helped staff become more reflective had been in her service. She described the way learning to be reflective had enhanced the staff capacity to learn from other workshops they had attended.

*For me, I like to have feedback from staff. I love having professional conversations with staff. And when they go to a course and come back enthusiastic and can verbalise what they saw and what they thought would work, what they thought wouldn't work, and some of the critiques too. So professional conversation where you can sit down and discuss theories. We were talking about something the other day-it was after the Pikler seminar - and one of the staff that went came back and said she saw a lot of good in it, but there were bits that weren't. And another staff member said, "Oh but that's because we have always looked at Vygotsky's ideas". So it was good to see that professional conversation happening in a staff meeting where I could sit back and say, "Wow, it got through to them. They can critically analyse what they're learning." They're not just going along and saying .. "Oh yes, we'll do that", or "I don't like that idea". They could critically analyse why they didn't like it. (Practice Potentials 2008, p114).*

### Using video as a reflective tool

The use of video as a reflective tool has proven to be a very effective strategy for professional learning in many different contexts. It provides a way of seeing and interpreting events and interactions we are involved in from an observer's point of view, helping us to pick up on important things about ourselves and others that we may otherwise miss.

In one service, the director had made a video camera available for staff and commented on the different ways they use video to enhance their practice. The staff were sometimes using it to reflect on the program with the children, and at other times, to get clearer information about particular aspects of development. They had also found it a very useful way of reflecting on particular struggles and challenges as part of planning how to respond to and support specific children.

*I think they've got more creative with what they do. I was in there a few minutes ago and [staff member] was reading stories and then playing it back to them (the children), so they could see themselves reading stories. It's giving the children more idea of what they're doing and to be able to see themselves doing things. As I said, we've got some children in there with speech issues.*

*We can actually hear it and outside we can sit down and look at it and think, "OK, what's triggering that?" And behaviour wise too. We've got children with behaviour issues. We film it and then we can look at it later and say, "OK what's triggering this behaviour," and we can pick things up, hopefully. We don't always. It's just been such a great tool (Practice Potentials 2008, p112).*

### Developing a professional orientation

One of the key outcomes from developing a reflective approach is the way this can contribute to our sense of engagement in our work. **Reflective practitioners working together, generate a dynamic professional culture in which striving for high quality programs is central.** One staff member commented that for her, "it's keeping in touch with what you're doing that makes you professional".

*Because things change around and you really need to know... and you feel better that you're knowing.. and it keeps you in touch with what you're doing. You're not just going to work and coming home.. I suppose you become a professional (Practice Potentials 2008, p116).*

Another commented on the positive professional atmosphere that is created when staff engage in reflective, professional dialogue.

*I find this place really interesting, I can't put my finger on what it is, but there's a really good atmosphere here encouraging peoples' ideas. Even though everybody's got a very strong personality... with strong opinions, they still respect each other's ideas and try things out and listen to the ideas of people (Practice Potentials 2008, p62).*

### Creating the conditions necessary for change

Reflective practice provides a powerful way to deepen our professional knowledge. It is an effective way of identifying areas for change whether for individuals, teams or across the whole service. By working together in reflective ways, we build supportive relationships with colleagues and develop the shared understandings needed to move purposefully forward together.

### References

- Amulya J., 2004, **What is Reflective Practice?** <http://www.communityscience.com/images/file/What%20is%20Reflective%20Practice.pdf>
- O'Connor A. and Diggins C., 2002, **On Reflection: Reflective Practice for Early Childhood Educators**, Open Mind Publishing, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. Aotearoa, NZ.





## Hubs, Networking and Professional Associations

**Participation in local hubs and networking was described by participants in this study as one of the most beneficial activities for supporting professional development.**

The opportunity to discuss current practices with others working in similar or related roles was highly valued as both a potential source for new ideas as well as a way of checking in with others and developing confidence through affirming their own practice and approaches.

Networking and memberships of professional associations was also seen as a powerful way of staying up-to-date with changes occurring in the field and keeping informed about conferences and other opportunities that are coming up.

Networking was achieved in a variety of ways. Many services indicated the value of networking informally, as part of their attendance at workshops and conferences. Discussing the ideas being presented either within the sessions or in breaks was seen as very helpful in broadening perspectives and deepening understandings. Other services mentioned the rich learning opportunities available through networks, hubs and interest groups established specifically for relatively informal ways of sharing ideas and expertise.

### Interest groups

One service described the establishment of an interest group, having met staff from other services in their state when they attended an interstate conference.

*When we went there [Reggio Emilia conference], we discovered that there were about five centres from our state, so we are getting together every couple of months to, more than anything, help each other with documentation and “what are you doing” and just get some feedback, which is really good. The last time we got together, we talked about this year we’re going to go to the art gallery and make an exhibition of children’s work. So that’s pretty good. The centres here are getting together and sharing and having feedback. That will help each other learn from everyone else (Practice Potentials 2008, p85).*

Having identified a common interest, this group had found a way of working together in exploring what ideas mean in practice. The mutual support helped sustain enthusiasm and created a learning context that generated innovation and creative developments to practice.

Another service described the benefit of being involved in an interest group related to child protection, when they were describing the range of professional development and support activities they found useful.

*I think the other thing we rely on a lot are local networks. So we have a local Child Protection Interest Group that meets monthly, so our organisation is involved in that (Practice Potentials 2008, p86).*

By tapping into interest groups such as these, staff had opportunities to learn alongside others and to contribute to the development of richer understandings.

### Visiting programs

Participants in this research also reported how valuable they had found the opportunity to visit other services. This gave them a chance to affirm their own practices as well as gather new ideas. One staff member explained the benefits of seeing the way others approach things this way:

*I find it really helpful in a professional capacity ... just to be able to see - firstly just to validate, “Oh I do that as well”, you know its good to see other people doing it too and then just [seeing] things I didn’t even think to do that way .. you know what a fantastic idea ( Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).*

In one case, a local council organised a visiting program where the participating services opened up for each other on an evening, travelling by bus to the different locations and sharing a progressive dinner along the way.

A visiting program can also be an effective way of developing relationships and shared understanding between staff working in different types of centres and settings. In the *Linking Schools and Early Years Project* in Victoria for example, staff working in child care, preschool and the first year of school have been spending a day in each others services as part of their work towards the goal of helping children and families transition smoothly between early years centres and schools (Linking Schools and Early Years Project Newsletter June – August 2008).

Visiting programs don’t necessarily have to be organised so officially, however. They can also be established on a much smaller scale and still be highly beneficial. Services interested in working together this way, could consider making contact with other nearby services and teaming together to create this opportunity for each other.

### Hubs

Hubs were recognised in this research as playing an important role in networking as well as providing a source of information through newsletters and opportunities to hear guest speakers on topics of interest to the group.



Some hubs were formed as networks for specific types of services (such as Outside School Hours Care for example) whilst others operated as networks for people working in similar roles such as a local directors group.

Other hubs aimed to bring staff together across disciplines so that perspectives of staff working in areas such as health, social work, community development and early childhood education and care can learn from each other and build local links and networks that can assist them in their day to day work.

Whatever the composition of a hub group, to be effective and sustainable it needs structures for leadership, planning and communication that can keep interest alive by being responsive to the needs and interests of the participants. Everyone needs to contribute and make a professional commitment to working this way for them to succeed.

#### **Professional associations**

Membership to professional associations was also recognised as important for networking and keeping informed. For information about associations, interest groups, hubs and networks in each state, services can contact their PSC.

#### **Online connections**

In our time poor world, it can be hard to stay up to date with everything that's happening. One strategy that can be useful is to link in to the many national and international agencies and associations that provide email alerts and updates.

Many research groups, policy bodies, government departments and peak bodies now have cost free email subscriptions and use this method to circulate new publications and other forms of information. Services interested in utilising this way of keeping up to date, might consider appointing an information officer who monitors the information from sites you subscribe to and passes on information of interest.

#### **References:**

Linking Schools and Early Years Project Newsletter June – August 2008  
[http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/lsey/2nd\\_Edition\\_-\\_LSEY\\_Newletter\\_June-August\\_2008.pdf](http://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/lsey/2nd_Edition_-_LSEY_Newletter_June-August_2008.pdf)

### **Useful email subscriptions for child care services could include:**

#### **National web sites**

**Australian Government Website for families**  
<http://www.mychild.gov.au/>

**ECA Web Watch**  
<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/>

**Australian Early Development Index**  
[http://www.rch.org.au/australianedi/edi.cfm?doc\\_id=6211](http://www.rch.org.au/australianedi/edi.cfm?doc_id=6211)

**Australia Policy Online**  
<http://www.apo.org.au/>

**Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth**  
<http://www.aracy.org.au/register>

**Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care Updates**  
<http://deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/about/news/atoz/subscribe.html>

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#### **International Websites**

**Child Care Resource and Research Unit (Canada)**  
<http://www.childcarecanada.org/index.shtml>

**The New Zealand Curriculum On Line**  
<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/>

**Child Care and Early Education Research Connections**  
<http://www.researchconnections.org/content/childcare/listseries.html>

**National Institute for Early Education Research**  
<http://nieer.org/>





## Fitting Compliance Related Training Into the Mix

One of the challenges in planning a professional development program is in finding ways to incorporate learning opportunities about these areas of professional responsibility, whilst at the same time leaving funds and time available for professional learning in other areas.

Most services participating in this study clearly made a major commitment to their staffs' professional development. One of the significant findings was that the time made available was equivalent to around five days per year per staff member (Practice Potentials 2008, p70), with 88.8% of directors/managers indicating that their services had an annual allocation of funds for professional development and support. Directors/managers' estimates of the proportion of their annual budget allocated for this purpose is shown in the table below.

### Annual Budgetary Allocation for Professional Development and Support

	N	Percent
No funds allocated to PD in budget	51	11.2%
Funds allocated to PD in budget	406	88.8%
More than 16% of annual expenditure	16	3.9%
Between 11-15% of annual expenditure	45	11.1%
Between 6-10% of annual expenditure	86	21.2%
Less than 5% of annual expenditure	131	32.3%
No access to that information	100	24.6%
Not applicable	28	6.9%

(Practice Potentials 2008, p52).

### Payment arrangements for professional development and support

To investigate the financial arrangements for professional development and support directors/managers were asked to indicate the extent to which payment was met by the staff members or the service. Results are set out in table below, showing that the most common arrangement was for payment to be fully met by the service (77.3%). About one-quarter (27.2%) of services sometimes or regularly used shared payment arrangements between the service and the staff member.

Payment arrangements	Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Regularly 4	N
Paid in full by staff member	60%	18.6%	13.3%	8.1%	457
Shared between staff member and centre	53%	19.7%	22.2%	5%	436
Paid in full by centre	3.1%	3.7%	15.9%	77.3%	458

(Practice Potentials 2008, p53).

### Compliance related training

Whilst there was considerable variation in the range of activities undertaken, it was clear that one area of priority during the time available related to training in response to compliance requirements. The basis for allocation of funding for professional development is shown in the following table.

At my centre, allocation for funding for PD activities is based on:	N	Percent
Individual staff goals	171	38.2%
Our centre's vision / mission statement	99	22.1%
Meeting our centre's accreditation and licensing needs	102	22.8%
Funding obligations	18	4.0%
Other	58	12.9%
Total	448	100%
Missing	87	
<b>Total</b>	<b>535</b>	

(Practice Potentials 2008, p52).

### Compliance related topics

The topics services focused on in this area included:

- **Health** – eg asthma, diabetes, hygiene, allergies, safe sleep, immunisation
- **OH&S** – eg manual handling, staff immunisation, back care
- **First aid** – eg CPR, Epi-pen, anaphylaxis
- **Quality Assurance and Accreditation** - eg self study reports, quality areas
- **Child protection** – eg protective behaviours, mandatory reporting
- **Regulations** – eg duty of care, risk management

One of the challenges in planning a professional development program is in finding ways to incorporate learning opportunities about these areas of professional responsibility, whilst at the same time leaving funds and time available for professional learning in other areas.

As well as the need to plan for professional development related to broader service goals, services reported that it is also important to incorporate opportunities for individuals to pursue personal professional interests and build on strengths.

Planning for professional development then, is clearly a complex job that requires careful consideration of many competing demands. It's a process of balancing cost effectiveness with broader goals relating to support for individual staff and the overall vision of the service.

All of this needs to be weighed up in light of the contextual day-to-day realities in individual services. Additional factors such as travel time, availability of relief staff, and resources available in the local area all impact on the planning decisions, particularly in rural and remote services. Many of the services in the study had adopted innovative approaches to respond to some of these complexities. These strategies enabled services to maximise the breadth and scope of professional development opportunities they could provide.

### Minimising Costs

In the overall planning for professional development for the year, services reported that they find it useful to build in as many low cost opportunities as they can.

#### Ideas included:

- utilising already scheduled staff meetings, either by inviting specialist presenters for short presentations or by involving current staff with particular areas of expertise or passion as facilitators
- taking advantage of the easy access to information available online from authoritative sources such as SIDS and Kids, Worksafe, NCAC etc
- accessing information and fact sheets from Associations with particular expertise that provided well researched information and using these to establish a reference collection for staff
- purchasing one or two conference tickets for the service and then enabling staff to share the opportunity and negotiate their attendance at specific events and workshops in the program
- networking with other local services to spread costs for in-centre training
- participating in local hubs and networks
- accessing support from willing parents who have relevant specialist knowledge and skills
- setting aside ongoing funds in the annual budget to provide a conference fund.

### Getting the most from each expenditure

Services also reported that part of successful planning also includes finding ways to get as much as possible from every cent that is being spent.

#### Ideas included:

- shared responsibility agreements where staff contribute to the costs of professional development (eg staff pay for registration because this can be claimed on their tax and the service pays for the staff member's time)
- professional development policies that require staff who have attended workshops and conferences to share some of their learning with other staff and write short articles for the service newsletters
- maximising the value of subscriptions to professional journals and magazines by having team leaders use them to plan discussion topics for team meetings or more general staff meetings
- ensuring there is adequate proactive follow up and support so that staff don't 'go off the boil' losing enthusiasm or motivation for making changes. This can be cost neutral by having staff members team up and work in partnerships on small steps at a time, however services indicated that where follow up support is facilitated by an outside consultant, this was extremely effective in supporting staff to make the most of the learning opportunities they had been offered.

### Scheduling and timing

Difficulties associated with scheduling professional development opportunities are another area that requires careful consideration. Finding and/or paying for relief staff, the need to provide continuity for children and families, costs associated with travel time and demands on staff for out of hours work are some of the potential barriers to overcome.

#### Ideas included:

- scheduling in-centre training on weekends, offering either time in lieu that can be added to annual leave to minimise the disruption to children and the impact of the shortage of available relief staff, or paying at time and half which saves on relief costs
- scheduling closure days and planning a range of opportunities over the day
- scheduling a series of shorter evening sessions to cover a particular topic and providing dinner, some social time for staff networking and acknowledgment of staff achievements
- recognising the out of hours demands on staff through above award conditions such as increased annual leave entitlements
- encouraging and paying for staff time to access online training opportunities outside of work hours
- scheduling shorter training sessions to start at 5pm for some staff, repeating the session at the same time on another day for the rest of the staff.





### Encouraging participation

Many participants noted the complex and demanding nature of work in child care settings, commenting that whilst professional development is essential to high quality service provision, so too is the need to recognise the emotionally and physically demanding work loads staff carry, which can be a barrier to enthusiastic participation in professional development opportunities. Services adopted a range of strategies to encourage and acknowledge staff engagement in professional development opportunities.

#### Ideas included:

- offering interest free loans to staff to pay for their own studies – the service pays the fees up front for the staff member and an agreed amount is deducted from each fortnight's salary to pay back the loan. Staff accepting this support agree to remain in the service for at least 12 months after completing their qualification
- allocating a certain amount per year per staff member for professional development and allowing staff to carry some of this over so they can 'save' for attendance at overseas or interstate conferences and events
- acknowledging the achievements of staff on completion of studies through newsletters and notice boards offering financial incentives for staff to undertake training for qualifications which are paid on successful completion
- acknowledging outstanding staff contributions to the learning journey of a service through awards, certificates and public recognition in newsletters
- allowing staff to make their own choices about the PD session of interest to them
- encouraging staff with particular knowledge / experience / passion to facilitate service meetings / interest groups and committees.

### Seeking special funding

Funding professional development was recognised as one of the most significant challenges of all. On top of budget planning from usual sources of income, several services had a proactive and creative approach that assisted them in this area.

#### Ideas included:

- Applying for grants available through local and state government for projects that included a component of professional development
- Applying for local government assistance to fund a visit from an overseas specialist who worked alongside staff in the child care service through the day. The service recovered some of their costs by charging registration fees for a series of evening seminars of interest to staff in other services and nearby schools and kindergartens
- Organising sessions in conjunction with other local services so the cost is shared and networking opportunities are also provided

## Bringing Your Vision to Life: The Role of Professional



**Programs that stand out are not only focused on checklists of quality indicators and best practices, but they have their eye on the prize- a clear vision of where they want to be (Carter 2003).**

Services such as these are characterised by a culture of organisational growth and a commitment to ongoing professional learning. This forward looking, dynamic culture is created by visionary leaders who often utilise a strategic planning process to unify the efforts of the service team.

The strategic planning process is rich with opportunities for professional growth and development because it requires us to reflect critically on the nature and purpose of our work. The resulting strategic plan also helps to build a picture of the strengths within the staff profile as well as areas in which skills and knowledge need to be built, so that the vision can be achieved. This may include establishing individual professional development plans with particular staff or learning goals for the whole staff team.

A strategic plan creates a framework for the service which guides the work of staff in identifying short and long term goals. As part of the process, staff work together to clarify their 'mission' or purpose, asking "who are we, what do we do and for whom do we do it?" Alongside this work, a vision of what is possible is created in which staff imagine the way their ideal service would be experienced by the adults and children within. This work helps to identify the services core values and the principles that will underpin the way staff work towards the service goals.

One of the ways to approach this kind of planning is to engage a facilitator in the initial phase who can guide the staff team through the process of identifying the service vision, mission and core values. One director explained how valuable this approach had been in her service, commenting that the service vision had become a central resource for her in her work and an important professional development experience for all involved. The service vision had also proved to be a powerful ongoing professional development tool because the staff were able use it to challenge themselves when reflecting on their practice. This, she said, was pivotal in creating a sense of ownership and commitment to the service (Practice Potentials 2008, Case Study).

Considering the role of professional development in implementing a strategic plan involves thinking about the goals identified, who should be involved and the kind of professional learning activity that is most suitable for the purpose.

This research identified a vast array of PD&S strategies adopted in child care services that directors/managers can consider as they approach the task of developing a PD&S plan.

Determining which approach is most suitable for the intended purpose, goes hand in hand with decisions about who should be involved and possible strategies that will assist the integration of new practices or desired changes across the service. The lists below, drawn from the range of approaches participants in this research discussed, may provide a useful starting place for directors/managers who are developing a PD&S plan for their services.

### Planning for PD&S – Why, Who and How?

#### WHY - What is the purpose, outcome, goal, reason for the PD&S?

- Supporting an interest identified in an individual development plan
- Building leadership capacity in particular members of the staff team
- Leading a change in practice (individual, team or whole service)
- Preparing for anticipated changes in system (eg National ECEC framework)
- Keeping up to date with current research and trends
- Supporting reflective practice
- Strengthening program and skills in specific curriculum areas
- Achieving short or long term service goals
- Working towards formal qualifications
- Performance issues identified in appraisal process
- Ensuring compliance
- Relationships, communication and team work



## WHO - Which people need to be involved?

- Individual staff member
- Team leaders
- Program staff (eg OSHC, Playgroup, LDC)
- Staff new to role
- Families
- Admin staff
- Gardening / maintenance staff
- Directors
- Room team
- Assistants
- Age group teams
- Experienced staff
- Committee of management
- Cooks
- Staff who are studying
- Managers /Owners/ Licensees

## HOW - Which strategy is likely to be the most effective?

- In-centre orientation package / process
- Guest speaker
- Internal facilitator – eg workshop
- External mentor – following workshops / presentations etc internal
- Guided discussion / shared reading
- Internal mentoring - experienced staff with new staff
- Internal project – interested staff team
- Visiting programs
- On line resources, newsletters
- Journal subscriptions
- Conferences
- Community networks, resources
- Staff meetings
- External facilitator- eg workshop
- External facilitator – customised in-centre training
- Inquiry project / action learning project– link with external mentor, researcher, facilitator or expertise of available
- Formal study leading to qualifications
- Internal mentoring- staff linked with others who have special, interests, passion, skill
- Staff exchange program
- Hubs and networks
- Resource centre membership
- Leadership mentoring
- Interest groups
- Reflective practice – video reflection, journaling etc

There are many factors that determine the ultimate decisions about a service's PD&S plan. Budget, time and availability of relief staff, location and accessibility all impact significantly on plans.

Some forms of professional development require a commitment to a long term view and may be most effectively achieved through a range of strategies that are built on over a sustained period of time. For example, achieving the goal of developing a reflective disposition in staff teams, may involve several strategies. Some of these may be individual pursuits supported by mentoring (eg learning to use journaling as a reflective tool) others may be whole of service activities such as becoming involved in action research projects. Some of the activities may be externally facilitated (eg learning how to use video as part of the reflective process), some may be internally facilitated (eg discussing program documentation in staff teams).

By contrast, in situations where a need has been identified for training that is compliance related, it can be efficient and cost effective to engage an external trainer who presents a one off session to a whole group of staff. One off sessions can also be a great springboard for inspiring an interest in a particular aspect of work and be the start of a series of professional development activities 'in house' led by staff with an interest or expertise to share.

Clearly, many forms of PD&S can contribute to the quality of our services. An active approach to planning for PD&S can ensure that services become dynamic learning communities with committed staff teams learning and growing together.

### References

Carter M., 2003, *Growing a Vision, Growing Your Staff* in Neugebauer B. & R., *The Art of Leadership: Managing Early Childhood Organisations*, Exchange Press Redmond, WA.

### **Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP)**

The IPSP is an Australian Government program funded by DEEWR to provide support for all government approved child care services in providing high quality child care.

The IPSP has three elements:

- Professional Support Program (PSP)
- Inclusion Support Program (ISP)
- Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS)

The Professional Support Coordinators(PSC) in each state and territory are contracted under the PSP to provide a range of professional development and support services to eligible child care services which include:

- Advice and support
- Flexible training options
- Resources
- Referrals to other agencies

**Each PSC operates a toll-free support and information line and web site.**

#### **QLD PSC**

*Health and Community Service Workforce Council Inc*

**Phone:** 1800 112 585 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.pscq.org.au>

#### **NT PSC**

*Child Australia*

**Phone:** 1800 138 662 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.pscnt.org.au>

#### **NSW PSC**

*Children's Services Central*

**Phone:** 1800 157 818 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.cscentral.org.au>

#### **VIC PSC**

*Gowrie Victoria*

**Phone:** 1800 103 670 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.gowrievictoria.org.au/PS>

#### **WA PSC**

*Child Australia*

**Phone:** 1800 783 768 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.pscwa.org.au>

#### **ACT PSC**

*Communities at Work*

**Phone:** 1800 228 772 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.actpsc.com.au>



#### **SA PSC**

*Lady Gowrie Child Centre Inc*

**Phone:** 1800 129 606 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.pscsa.org.au>

#### **TAS PSC**

*Lady Gowrie Child Centre Hobart*

**Phone:** 1800 647 718 (toll free)

**Website:** <http://www.psc tas.org.au>

**Further information about the IPSP is available on the DEEWR website:**

**<http://home.deewr.gov.au>**





