EMPOWERING PRACTITIONERS TO CRITICALLY EXAMINE THEIR CURRENT PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

A Self-Assessment Manual (SAM) for early childhood practitioners has been developed around the previously reported framework (Raban, Waniganayake, Deans, Brown & Reynolds, 2003a), and this has been piloted in a number of early childhood settings. When engaging in self-reflection using SAM, practitioners collaborate with mentors from the Early Childhood Consortium Victoria (ECCV) to consider their past, present and future professional experiences. This process empowers practitioners to critically examine their current practice and plan for their future professional development in a more systematic way. SAM is seen here to serve dual purposes: on the one hand, it is an evaluative instrument that can direct professional development of individual practitioners. On the other hand, it is a research tool aimed at identifying theoretical assumptions underpinning professional practice, and allows a longitudinal approach to mapping professional growth and development. Either way, it has the potential to enhance the quality of early childhood experiences for preschool children regardless of the settings in which they may find themselves. This paper presents a formative evaluation of this work and discusses its potential for professional development planning.

Keywords: Self assessment, professional development, guided reflection

INTRODUCTION

As previously claimed (Raban, Ure & Waniganayake, 2003b), the early childhood sector is characterized by a diversity of providers with a range of philosophies, goals and approaches. In addition, there is no global consensus as to what constitutes *quality* in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs. Quality can be associated with aspects of ECEC that address issues of access, efficient administration, hours of availability and parental choice. Quality can also be related to educational and other outcomes for children and their families. However, these static models of 'quality' may well be reassessed through a more dynamic model of quality seen as 'processes' experienced by children and their families, through pedagogical practices and other interactions.

The quality of the ECEC programs, however defined, is important for all children's development (Phillips, McCartney & Scarr, 1987; Zaslow, 1991; Frede, 1995; Helburn & Culkin, 1995). Epstein (1993) argues that poor quality programs will be detrimental to the development of any child at any age and represent missed opportunities. Because of this it becomes increasingly important to address the complexity involved in capturing quality and assessing quality, as well as supporting professionals in enhancing ECEC settings through systematic and well-grounded procedures that take them through a process of professional development geared to meet their self-identified needs.

Research on quality in early childhood (Frede, 1995) has consistently shown that staff are the cornerstone of excellence, and that staff training makes a difference to services provided to children and families. There is also a growing awareness of the importance of adopting a planned approach to career development and that this begins with self-assessment, and can be enhanced through guided reflection with a mentor. Systematic research that explores these issues of professional development are however hard to find in the field of early childhood education. But, nevertheless, the relationship between 'quality provision' and professional development is clear.

QUALITY PROVISION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kagan and Neuman (1996) summarise national studies relating to staff training and child care quality. While they found that more training yielded higher quality, they were unable to identify the most effective dimensions of training to improve teacher behaviour or child outcomes. Pasha and Wesley (1998) also point out that the Cost Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team's 1995 report indicated that one of the most important discriminators between mediocre and good care was staff development and education. Epstein (1993) in a national USA study, Training for Quality, examined the relationship between initial qualifications, in-service training, program quality and children's development. The findings from this study indicated that in-service training over and above education and experience, was significantly related to program quality which, in turn, was related to young children's development. In a later analysis of these data, Epstein (1999) found, in addition, where teachers were able to experience observation and feedback from consultants familiar with their program, their subsequent activities impacted positively on both program quality and children's development. This emphasis on field specific in-service was found to be most effective. Epstein argues that training opportunities cannot improve quality unless that provision also supports adult learning principles. More recently, Hyson (2001) noted challenges within the early childhood profession, including insufficient teacher preparation, along with outdated teacher professional development approaches.

There is now available a body of literature (Fullen, 1993a; Gusky, 1996; Joyce & Showers, 1983; Winton, 1990) suggesting that greater chance of change is possible when individuals in an organisation;

- receive on-going staff development over an extended period of time,
- are involved in assessing their own learning,
- have opportunities to apply their new knowledge and skills in work settings,

- have a trusted 'other' to discuss their developing practice

In our work, this is the organizational context within which SAM is situated and activated. That is, SAM is operationalised over a period of time (minimum of three months) and begins with self-assessment that is then validated and adjusted with the assistance of a mentor, taking into account both individual practitioner and service needs .

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Steffy and Wolfe (1997) argue that to maintain professional growth, teachers must develop an orientation to their work that includes reflection and renewal. In the absence of these factors, their work can become too automatic, which can undermine its effectiveness. In line with this view, Marsick and Watkins (1992) agree that reflective practice in the workplace is compatible with a focus on continuous learning for continuous improvement. However, the existing experience of the practitioner, as Williams (1998) suggests, is an important source of knowledge, and the ability to reflect on and share experience is a powerful form of learning. Boyd and Fayles (1983: 100) offer a useful definition of reflection, suggesting that it is;

> "...the process internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective."

Boud and colleagues (1985: 34) point out, however, that reflection should lead to action, for;

> "...while reflection is itself an experience it is not of course an end in itself. It (prepares us) for the new experience. The (results) may include a new way of doing something, the clarification of an issue, the development of a skill or the resolution of a problem."

Lyons (1998: 113) defines reflective practice as;

> "...a weave, a threading together of experience, of making connections. This construction of meaning is in part directly in the service of making conscious a teacher's knowledge of practice..."

Stange and colleagues (2003) comment on the work of Epstein (2003) in the field of medicine, illustrating how tacit and personal knowledge can indeed be made explicit and used creatively to inform and improve the quality of care a patient receives. In addition, reflective practice learning journals have been noted by Hancock (1999) to be a valued teaching and learning tool in nurse education. In effect, reflective learning is an essential element of teaching and learning, regardless of the discipline or professional orientation of the individual practitioner.

SELF-ASSESSMENT, PORTFOLIOS AND MENTORING

Goodfellow (2004) shows clearly that we can assist others in describing their current reality by encouraging self-assessment using appropriate assessment instruments along with portfolios of professional work completed. Self assessment, Lones (2000) argues, rather than external assessment by others, is critical in that through self assessment one develops the ability to see one's current reality more clearly and not just get a snapshot of current reality today with no means of describing it in the future. Sheridan (2000) found that comparing self evaluation of quality of preschool teachers in Sweden to an external evaluator using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harmes, Clifford & Cryer, 1998), there was a moderately high percentage of agreement between teachers and evaluators and among teachers at the same centre. This finding suggests that self assessment is a highly reliable method of reflecting actual practice.

Findings from Ellsworth's three year study (2002) in elementary schools indicated that portfolios were an important mechanism through which teachers come to a deeper understanding of their professional practice. Schulman (1998: 37) has identified a portfolio as;

> "...the structured, documented history of a set of coached or mentored acts of teaching, substantiated by samples of (they're) work, and fully realised only through reflective writings, deliberation and conversation."

Wolf (1996) adds further that portfolios provide teachers with opportunities for self-reflection and collegial interactions on documented episodes of their own teaching. He further indicates (Wolf, 1991: 130) that portfolio assessment is dynamic in;

> "...that the richest portrayals of teacher performance are based on multiple sources of evidence collected over time in authentic settings."

Leithwood and Steinbach (1992) contend that on-the-job experience by itself will not produce expertise, rather staff need to receive adequate support and be actively engaged with professionals who can talk about and model expert problem solving. They claim substantial evidence exists which indicates that when practicing professionals are provided with a systematic, well-designed program aimed at developing their cognitive abilities, they measurably improve their reflective and problem solving abilities.

These collegial interactions are supported by the research reported by Shreders (1990) whose findings indicated that childcare centre staff increased their knowledge of child development, their confidence in their ability to teach young children, and their professional attitudes, when professional development was delivered through on-the-job mentoring. Ashburn and colleagues (1987: 1) see a successful mentoring relationship as a dynamic process, not static and defines it as;

> "...the establishment of a personal relationship for the purpose of professional instruction and guidance."

In addition, Barnett (1995) suspects that mentoring other educators positively affects the mentor's own attitudes and beliefs about professional development. As Clutterbuck (1991) suggests, it is this type of two-way positive impact that can make mentoring so motivating and professionally rewarding for all concerned.

DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY

From our analysis of this literature there are some common threads that emerge. It appears that there are elements of adult learning that need to be taken into account if professional development is to impact on the quality of practice. The processes of reflection and renewal leading to essential transformations of thought and practice are achievable through appropriate mechanisms. Mechanisms such as self assessment with supported mentors over time, coupled with the development of portfolios of work for reflective dialogue have been found to be powerful elements leading to these transformations. In our work, reported below, these elements of the process of professional transformation were found to be highly integrated, rather than discrete, activities. The thrust of this work is trying to address these issues through the development and evaluation of a suite of Quality Assurance measures for use by early childhood practitioners designed specifically to address issues of service quality through continuing professional development.

Our continuing work addressing the issue of quality, reported in earlier articles (Raban et al., 2003a; Raban et al., 2003b) have been enriched by advice from critical friends as well as participants in the project (see Acknowledgements). The underlying theoretical framework has been enlarged to include a sixth perspective concerned with the psycho-social development of the child. (See Table 1). In order for these perspectives to inform and also critically review the practice of early childhood practitioners, amplification across a broader view of activity commonly found in early childhood settings was needed. This has been achieved by reviewing issues addressing quality, reported elsewhere (Raban et al., 2003b) and arriving at a consensus of three major dimensions that describe early childhood settings. These have been identified as: the Environment, Pedagogy and Planning, and Partnerships with children, families and colleagues. The components of these dimensions have been further refined to give us 20 components (see Table 2) that were seen as amplification of these three dimensions. This has given rise to our Excellence in Early Childhood (EECh) instrument.

TABLE 1

EARLY CHILDHOOD PERSPECTIVES LEADING TO OUTCOMES

Theoretical Paradigms:	Maturational Biological Models of Development	Behaviourism Social Learning Theories	Psycho-Dynamic Psycho-analytic Theories	Developmental Developmental Psychology Theories	Socio-Constructivist Psycho-Social Cultural Theories	Ecological Systems Critical Theories
Major Theorists:	Gesell 1925	Skinner 1957 Bandura 1986	Erikson 1963	Piaget 1950 & 1952	Vygotsky 1978 Rogoff 2003	Pence 1988 Bronfenbrenner 1979
The Role of the Professional:	Manage: Monitor and intervene only where necessary for safety	Direct: Assess and provide what is necessary in response to children's behaviour	Discuss: Acknowledge & draw on children's feelings & thoughts	Guide: Observe, assess & support children's development with reference to developmental milestones	Engage: Scaffold & transform learning in response to children's prior understandings	Frame: Monitor, review, evaluate & determine actions & future progress of children, in partnership with others
Outcomes for Children:	Maturation: Grow & develop in their own time	Acquisition: Gain attitudes, skills & knowledge with practice	Personal Growth: Achieve autonomy through a growing sense of self	Independence: Build independently knowledge in line with age & stage of development	Co-construction: Create their worlds through interactions with more knowledgeable others	Cultural Embeddedness: Experience knowledge being shaped in the context of cultural expectations & societal roles

TABLE 2

EXCELLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD (EECH): A DESCRIPTIVE FRAMEWORK

Dimensions of Quality	Descriptive Components
A. Environment	1. Buildings and grounds 2. Teaching / learning spaces 3. Display of children's work 4. Teaching / learning resources 5. Routines and transitions 6. Environmental Health and Safety 7. Collection and storage of resources
B. Pedagogy & Planning	1. Use of theoretical knowledge 2. Organisation of children 3. Interactions with children 4. Curriculum planning 5. Curriculum implementation 6. Curriculum evaluation 7. Assessment and evaluation of children
C. Partnerships – with Children, Families, Communities and Staff	1. Children's emotional and social well-being 2. Continuity of care 3. Interactions with colleagues 4. Information exchange with families 5. Assistance to children with additional needs 6. Staff professional development

The EECh instrument takes each one of the Components in Table 2 and presses them against each theoretical perspective in the framework shown in Table 1. For instance, if we take the dimension Pedagogy and Planning, and look at the component No. 3, "Interactions with Children", the participant is asked to respond to six statements (that reflect the perspectives shown in Table 1) to complete the stem "In my work I..."

- Acknowledge and act upon children's feelings and thoughts. (Psychodynamic - Discuss)
- Actively foster engagement through dialogue between staff, children and families. (Ecological Systems - Frame)
- Initiate discussions with children by asking thought provoking questions. (Socio-constructivist – Engage)
- Interact and respond to children mostly in a group. (Behaviourism – Direct)
- Interact with children primarily for the purpose of giving instructions. (Maturational - Manage)

- Support enquiry based discussions amongst children and between children and staff. (Developmental – Guide)

Participants were required to place the code '1' against the statement that best describes their practice and the code '2' against the one that comes next nearest to a description of their practice. By making choices from the options presented for every component in Table 2, participants revealed the major theories that informed their practices.

SELF-ASSESSMENT MANUAL (SAM)

With further work, EECh has now moved from being a research tool into being a tool to support professional development. EECh has been embedded within a Self-Assessment Manual (SAM) that has specifically been designed to serve the purpose of assisting practitioners to deliver excellence in program quality for children and families, through promoting their professional advancement. In the Manual, participants are presented with a series of guided self-assessment tasks designed to assist them in identifying what works and doesn't work for them. For instance, focusing on factors that help or hinder their professional advancement, and designing a professional development plan that would match their personal needs, interests and ambitions. Hence, many of the tasks contained in SAM require participants to think about their past, present and future growth as an early childhood practitioner. The material in the Manual is organised under three sections:

- Section 1:Understanding My Professional Career   (Past)
- Section 2:Understanding My Current Practice   (Present)
- Section 3:Charting My Professional Advancement   (Future)

The first section is concerned with the documentation of professional careers to date. In addition participants were asked to record their current beliefs and values with respect to their current professional philosophy. They were given 9 statements to complete like "How children learn – I believe that..." and then required to reflect on their completions of these stems and summarise where they think they have traveled during their career to date. Finally in this section, they were required to identify any professional needs they could identify as a result of these reflections. In the second section (developed from EECh) they were provided with an opportunity to systematically review current practice, based on the perspectives and components of quality identified in Table 2 above. This was achieved by taking each component within each dimension and providing them with a stem statement "In my work, I..." and then, from a choice of six statements they could choose one that was the nearest match to their practice, and they could choose a next nearest matching statement, using the codes 1 and 2. The third section gave them the opportunity to use this information about past and present in a strategic way to prepare an Action Plan to chart future growth and development. The aim of working through this process is to empower participant's to become active in their own awareness of who they are as early childhood practitioner, what they want to achieve, and how they propose to set about this.

Individual's were assisted in setting realistic and achievable goals for themselves and also encouraged to see the notion of planning for professional development as an ongoing process. In total, we found the process to evolve across 8 weeks to completion, and comprised visits to support participants at various stages throughout the process.

PLANNING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Early childhood practitioners were invited to join with team members as they worked through and completed the Self-Assessment Manual. Participants included preschool teachers and childcare workers accessed through invitation via an advertisement in newsletters of major early childhood stakeholders. Each service nominated participants and the number and age range of these participants varied between services. For instance, participants came from private for profit and not for profit long day child care centres, preschools and a private for profit early learning centre.

Team members were assigned to each of eight centres in pairs in order to ensure that responses and observations were analysed with validity and reliability with respect to the instruments that were used. An initial visit was arranged and ECCV team members spent time with the early childhood professional discussing the process of the professional development program we were engaging with. They were presented with the Self-Assessment Manual (SAM) and invited to complete Sections 1 and 2. When completed, participants were given a stamped addressed envelope to return it to the ECCV who worked in pairs as mentors to the participants.

On return of completed Sections 1 and 2 of SAM, the mentors put the information together in the form of a report. This report summarised the information practitioners had provided on their career to date in Section 1 and added an analysis of their responses to descriptors in Section 2. This analysis reflected back to them how their decisions concerning their practice could be revealed at a deeper level of operationalising their theoretical beliefs and understandings with respect to their work with young children.

A further visit was arranged with each participant and the mentors returned to their centre to discuss this initial report at some length. In addition, during this visit, the team members observed the participant while they worked with children. The observation notes took the form of a running record of conversations, children's activities, participant's movements and interactions etc. against an actual time of day. These observations lasted for one hour. The mentors then placed these observation notes against the perspectives framework (in Table 1) and judged the range of perspectives the participant drew upon during the flow of their practice. Team members completed this task separately and then compared their analyses for comparability. It was interesting to note that little discrepancy was found at this stage between the two observers.

A Final report was prepared for each participant that revisited and summarized the main findings of the Preliminary Report and presented the major theoretical perspectives, again in summary form, thus enabling the participant to see their practice within the context of a broader framework. Part of the running record taken during the observation was also included in this Final report, inviting the participants to write their reflections on this vignette of their practice. In addition, having identified the perspective(s) that best represented their practice, further information was provided about those perspectives and suggestions made for further reading. This Final report was posted back to participants and a further meeting to discuss this with them was negotiated.

During this final meeting, issues raised by the Final report were discussed and questions in the third section of SAM were addressed. Table 3 below gives the critical pathway addressed

by these questions that led to the development of an action plan and the identification of possible mentors who could support each participant in their further professional development. Participants were advised to develop a portfolio of information to record this journey towards their continuing development, using the Preliminary and Final Reports generated by SAM as the first pages of this documentation. They were encouraged to think of items that could be incorporated in this portfolio and that it could include for instance, examples of children's work, records of meetings, clippings from journals and newspapers, along with their own reflections on different experiences.

TABLE 3

PLANNING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Critical Pathway	Action
What I need	Document professional development needs
What I want to achieve	Reflect on these needs and then rewrite them as personal goals
What I plan to do	Develop an Action Plan where all possible strategies and methods of achieving the goals are noted
What I actually did	Write down actions taken when implementing strategies to achieve goals
The effect of my actions	Reflect of the impact and effect of actions taken
What I want to achieve next	Review and revise personal professional development goals for the future

On all occasions when participants were presented with profiles of themselves as practitioners through the feedback they received from their Consortium (EECV) mentors, they were able to either confirm that the findings matched their own beliefs about who they were as practitioners or helped to reveal underlying beliefs and assumptions concerning child development. An example of this was when one participant stated, "Yes! That's me" when shown that the developmental perspective heavily influenced her profile.

RESPONDING TO THE EXPERIENCE

Staff in participating centres were invited to complete an evaluation survey with the assurance that feedback about their participation in the project was to be provided anonymously. However, some participants chose to disclose their identity to thank the team personally for the guidance and support they provided. Responses were also compiled during visits to centres when participants would begin freely discussing what their involvement in SAM had meant for them.

It was apparent from the evaluation surveys that by working through the specially designed Self-Assessment Manual (SAM) combined with support provided by the ECCV mentors, participants were able to clarify their understandings of who they were as practitioners and

systematically advance their future professional growth and development. The following comments taken from the evaluations illustrate participants' thoughts as to why involvement with SAM will impact on their professional development:

- *After reflection and discussion it has allowed me to set myself some new goals for my future career in childcare both in the workplace now and further down the track.*
- *Has me thinking about current practice, how this related to different theories and where my philosophy fits in.*
- *I have more clear goals.*
- *It has made me interested in further education in the childhood field.*
- *Explained where I was at and my concerns and working with different teachers and programs.*

All participants indicated that they had benefited by their participation in the process with 71% rating the experience as benefiting them 'a lot'. Likewise 85% rated the impact on their own professional development between having 'some impact' to 'a very big impact'. Benefits of participating were recorded as follows:

- *It opened my eyes to what my practices are and what direction I am heading.*
- *My teaching style has been identified and I can explain to parents why and how I do things.*
- *Feedback was great as I don't receive feedback from other professionals.*
- *It made me step back and reflect upon where I am headed.*
- *It was good to sit back and think about my work and areas that are important to me.*
- *To clarify my goals.*

From analysing the data through a process of propositional/content analysis certain themes began to emerge. The importance placed on gaining clarity about their own practice became one of the obvious benefits for participants, with the use of guided reflection being a feature of the process as the above comments clearly show. Most participants also rated the self-reflection aspect as one of the most significant parts of participating in the process. Self-reflection allowed the early childhood professionals to reflect on their own practices, beliefs and philosophies with 67% of the answers mentioning this fact. The most satisfying aspects of working through SAM were recorded as follows:

- *Self-reflection of my work, worth ethics and where I am at the present time in my career.*
- *Brainstorming ideas for my future.*
- *Made me think about where I have been during my career and how much I have developed as a person.*
- *Time to talk to Uni staff about my practices and personal philosophy.*
- *Reflecting upon what I thought my goals were.*
- *Taking the time to think about what my philosophy and beliefs are.*
- *To actually think about what I really want to do with my life and to challenge myself with what I believe.*
- *Having professional staff put into words and explain and reflect on my method of program planning.*

While time was an issue for many participants, for example, finding the time to sit down and think, and for the successful completion of SAM, they recognized that this was a necessary requirement for successful engagement with the process. That is when participants did make the time, positive results were ensured. As one participant commented "I feel it is always good to assess myself and where I am headed...I was given some wonderful feedback which is something that you do not get from colleagues."

Participants were also encouraged to comment on possible ways to improve the process. When looking at the responses two emerging themes become apparent. These were:

- more opportunities for discussion – time was a consideration here,
- more direction for the future – supported mentorships proved to be a significant need.

The ECCV mentors also experienced similar feelings in that there was a need to develop further links with the participants to keep the momentum going. This will be addressed with the development of the next stage of the SAM process – where it has become clear to the team that professional portfolios will be of assistance to these participants to encourage their developing control over their own professional development.

CONCLUSION

While the project proved to be time consuming for both participants and ECCV mentors, we believe that the benefits for everyone was worth the investment, and that self-assessment through guided reflection is an effective strategy for professional development of early childhood professionals. This sentiment is also echoed in the participants' responses when asked to comment on the comparison of this form of professional development to others they had been involved with. All responses pointed to the fact that SAM was more relevant as it was targeted towards their individual requirements. Participants commented:

- *SAM is concerned with you, the individual, and where you are at, how you can further yourself.*
- *This is more detailed and specific to individuals.*
- *Only one that reflects and evaluates your own personal program planning on an individual basis in your own kinder.*

This study has added significantly to the further development of the theoretical framework of perspectives through practical application in a variety of settings. It is now possible to group real examples of practice to illustrate and illuminate each perspective for professionals to identify with their own work with children, colleagues, families and communities. The experience of taking time to focus on their practice, with a tool framed by familiar child development theoretical perspectives, gave these early childhood professionals the opportunity to identify critical aspects of their work with young children and to plan a means of developing themselves further as professionals. They found this experience unique and professionally fulfilling.

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