Now that the National Quality Framework (NQF) has been implemented for a while and the quality areas of the National Quality Standard (NQS) are beginning to roll off the tongue like our favourite song, it seems timely to examine our understanding of one of the key principles of the reform.

Alongside the desire to deliver the best possible outcome to every child in Australia, the reform agenda invites services and the professionals who work within them to commit to best practice in the provision of education and care services. For those of us who might have skipped over this section in your eagerness to read the standards and elements, here they are in their entirety.

The following principles apply when making decisions about operating education and care services, and working to achieve the NQS and improve quality at each service:

- the rights and best interests of the child are paramount
- children are successful, competent and capable learners
- the principles of equity, inclusion and diversity underly the National Law
- that Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued
- that the role of parents and families is respected and supported
- that best practice is expected in the provision of education and care services (ACECQA, 2011b).

Best practice is a broad and at times daunting term. The wisest voices in early childhood education have written extensively about what it is and isn’t, what it looks like for infants or older children and how it plays out in everyday practices from routines to outdoor play. The Early Years Learning Framework captures many of these ideas and explores aspects of best practice that deliver outcomes to children and families. But, for me, best practice is more than articulated strategies and key ideas, although these are critical. At the heart of best practice is the notion that we are interested in being “the best” and that we value the development that this entails. It is a commitment to, as the NQF puts it on multiple occasions, continuous improvement. For some of us, making such a commitment is obvious and exhilarating. For others it represents uncertainty and an unnecessary fixation with what might be.

It is worth noting here that this quest is not about perfection. Many of my colleagues accuse themselves of wanting no less and get lost in the details.
The NQS process does not call for flawlessness but rather that, at our best, services seeking excellence should be able to ‘demonstrate [their] commitment to continuous improvement by documenting how [they] will maintain current quality practices and progress them to the next level’ (ACECQA, 2011a p. 6).

So what might a service or a team of educators do to establish and energise a culture of continuous improvement? Below is a collection of different strategies—some grand and far reaching, to be pursued over time; others simple and targeted for quick results.

**Vision**

Establishing a vision that captures our aspirations for children and families lies at the heart of improving quality. It is the engine of quality improvement and helps us all to lift our gaze from the technicalities of doing things right to making sure we deliver services that are meaningful and transformative.

For children’s services, the vision is most effectively articulated in a philosophy statement. It may be timely to re-examine the philosophy in terms of continuous improvement and best practice. Does the statement commit the service to improvement? Are there ideas in the statement that inspire action and answer questions about practice?

Services might also consider including questions about quality improvement in the recruitment process. Asking potential candidates a question about quality reinforces the service’s commitment to best practice.

**Understanding**

At the risk of stating the obvious, reading the NQF documentation is an essential place to start. Understanding the rationale for reform and the processes that support improving our practice are critical if we are to commit to change. Knowing why and how improvement works will help us all to participate.

A number of services are making this a permanent feature of their staff meetings. They are dedicating significant time to examining all aspects of the NQF, including the quality areas and the way they plan for and assess their progress.

**Planning**

Effective planning processes translate our commitment and understanding into action. The Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) helps us to identify the areas where improvement is required and map out how we might proceed to address them. Without an achievable plan we are at risk of continuously thinking of things we need to change but never quite getting to put our ideas into action.

Now that most of us are looking to develop our second QIP it’s worth considering how the process includes everyone in the service, both those who use it and those who provide it. The QIPs that are developed through collaboration and broad discussion are easier to implement. Likewise, plans that prioritise actions are more likely to succeed.

**Communication**

Quality improvement needs a cheer squad. A commitment to best practice may not be automatically understood. Educators and those who lead teams need to talk about improvement every day with children, families, communities and each other.

Services have designed some innovative ways to share quality improvement with everyone:

- A noticeboard in the foyer highlighting key action against the quality improvement plan with room for progress updates and comments from families.
- Regular updates in the newsletter.
- Explanations about quality improvement in the family handbook and mention of the processes at enrolment interviews with families.
- Establishment of process that seeks children’s perspective on improvement. Some services have developed opportunities (formalised meetings for example) for children to comment on aspects of the service and to seek out the opinion of other children.

**Leadership**

Leaders drive a culture of continuous improvement. They use the strategies mentioned above to ensure a commitment to quality stays on the agenda. Embracing continuous improvement as part of a leader brief means that our decisions are orientated towards becoming better, not just about pleasing everyone or about what is easy.

Pursing the best education and care services for children is a task for the long haul. It should not be undertaken lightly and cannot be done without significant effort. A continuous improvement approach allows us to work at a steady pace and creates a culture where learning by everyone, with everyone, is the goal as well as the means to achieve quality.

**Catharine Hydon**

Early Childhood Consultant
Hydon Consulting Pty. Ltd.

**References**


www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au