The wide range of people contributing to this enormous work—including parents, educators, governments and academics—is easily confirmed by a look at the website of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), www.acecqa.gov.au. This time is full of optimism, new learnings, hard work, and challenges and in the lengthy transition stage there are also frustrations and, for some people, fears—what if we don’t get there in time?

The challenges of implementing the reforms are something that ECA discusses nationally, both with our own members and with colleagues in other peak organisations, including through the National Children’s Services Forum. We take all opportunities to speak with and hear updates from ACECQA, the Education and Child Development Working Group and senior officials from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. We are encouraged by the work of the Quality and Consistency Committee to identify and address differences around the country to achieve nation-wide consistency in the implementation of the National Quality Framework.

Early Childhood Australia remains committed to the implementation of the Council of Australian Governments’ reform agreement and to supporting ACECQA, governments and the whole sector in resolving the challenges involved. We know that this can sometimes seem like a very daunting task for everyone concerned. However, we also hear many stories of people having positive and rewarding experiences in the new system, and over time these will be in the majority. Through everything it is important to keep the vision of quality improvement for children in early childhood education and care strongly in mind. Governments committed to these reforms because they were necessary—our standards were not what they should have been.

In the long run it will help if we all continue to identify and notify issues and inconsistencies as soon as possible so that they can be resolved. We accept that only governments can resolve our reasonable concerns about transition, and it is essential that this is done in ways that give certainty for everyone involved. This is particularly so for service operators who (apart from the children of course) are the people most exposed when compliance matters are not clear.

In the last issue of Voice I paid tribute to our retiring, longstanding CEO, Pam Cahir, who has been such a key figure in ECA’s support for quality reform, and now I am very pleased to warmly welcome Samantha Page as ECA’s new CEO. There is an introductory message from Sam on page 5, and you can see why we are excited at the prospect of working with her.

The 28th ECA National Conference in Perth in early October 2012 will provide a welcome opportunity for delegates from all over Australia and internationally to reflect, learn and relax together. I hope you will be there and take the opportunity to say hello, meet Sam and speak with us on quality reform and other aspects of our shared early childhood journey.

Best wishes to all,

Margaret Young
National President
Early Childhood Australia
Malak Family Centre is a not-for-profit community-based long day care centre located in Darwin.
At the end of June, a group of nine Indigenous women from a crèche in Deewin Kirim, which is within Peppimenarti Community lands, came to visit our centre to observe how a long day care centre runs.

On the first day the women observed our environment and joined the educators in discussions about the intentions of these environments while engaging in play with the children. We found that their presence and relaxed nature affected the children as a group in a positive way. We also discovered that 'Deewin Kirim' means the 'moon and the land' in their language. On the second day, the Peppimenarti women offered to demonstrate ‘dot dot’ painting on a canvas for the children in the toddler’s room. All of the toddlers and educators were intrigued and, after discussions about how each painting tells a unique story, the toddlers decided to try their hand creating their own stories. On the final day of the visit, both the babies’ room and the kindy room had a turn at making a unique aboriginal dot dot painting with the Peppimenarti women.

Throughout the three-day visit so many stories and experiences were shared between our groups and we all discovered the vast similarities and differences between our settings. We share a common goal of improving the quality of our environments and professional practice and we discussed ways in which we can continue to share stories and examples of best practice. We also discovered that the community faces a range of daily challenges in areas that we can take for granted within our local community; just getting supplies can be a huge hurdle in this remote area.

By conducting some research after work, our educators discovered that Slim Dusty wrote a song called ‘Plains of Peppimenarti’. We found the song’s film clip on YouTube and when we asked the women about it, we discovered that many of them were filmed in this clip as children. We showed this film clip to the children in our setting, explaining that the children they were watching were the adults they saw today. This sparked a lot of discussions about growing up and the differences between being a ‘kid’ and being a ‘grown-up’.

When it was time for the women to return to their remote community we presented them with a hamper of craft resources and a huge card from the children, educators and families at Malak Family Centre. We hung our unique dot dot stories on our walls and we are ordering some large photo canvasses which will be hung with pride next to the artwork. One of the photo canvases will be sent out to the Peppimenarti community to be displayed in their crèche. There are plans for some of our educators to visit the Peppimenarti community and spend time helping in the crèche and we have invited the women to visit us at any time. We feel so blessed to have had this experience and we wonder where the events of this week will lead us ... only time will tell.

Since the visit by the Peppimenarti women, the unique dot paintings and children’s interpretive paintings have been displayed within our service and we have ordered four photo canvasses to be displayed in our service and the crèche to celebrate and showcase the process of these artworks being created. Our intention is to ensure that this experience and the lessons within are not merely forgotten as educators and families inevitably move on. The older children have also revisited this experience and the skills they gained by creating a range of artworks to display in their room for NAIDOC week. We are working on setting up an ongoing support network between our two services so that we can regularly share ideas.

Zoe Davis
Director, Malak Family Centre

Images courtesy of Zoe Davis, Malak Family Centre
That’s one of the comments we received recently from a parent survey we conducted. It was in response to the question ‘How would you describe our service to someone new in town or new to early childhood?’, the final question in a series of 10. It summed us up in a simple sentence and we knew that families ‘got us’ and what we were about.

So back to the start. We, like everyone else, are busy with our journey through the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Standard. In our Quality Improvement Plan, we felt that focusing on how we connect with families, ourselves, children and the broader community could be worthwhile. Communication sits at the core of relationships—how we value our message and each person we connect with.

One of the strategies we chose this year was to change how we asked families to engage around feedback (we are big on feedback)—but we wanted something that could be fast and also provide a level of anonymity for those taking part. We opted for the Survey Monkey approach: 10 multiple-choice questions (with options for multiple responses) and the ability to add additional comments. Increasingly, more companies are using electronic surveys as one of the tools to elicit information from customers. It’s effective, fast and best of all collates the results—essential for us.

Our questions sought to find out: how do families get their feedback from staff? (newsletter? face to face?); do they get enough feedback?; is it helpful?; what other ways would families prefer?; what could we do better?; what else could we do?; and how would families describe us? We hoped for positive and negative responses—we can’t change if feedback is always gushingly good.

The response rate was excellent—the best we have ever had, and much better than paper survey response rates—in fact, two thirds of our families (roughly 63) responded within four days. The clues were in the questions: simplicity, focus and time. It took around 5–10 minutes for most to complete, depending on how detailed their comments were. This approach doesn’t negate other ways of asking for feedback, but it gave a voice to families that was practical and quick.

Some feedback from our survey

‘Staff are always friendly and professional and freely offer feedback on my child’s day including problems, behaviour and level of enjoyment.’—Parent response on feedback

‘AMAZING!! I didn’t know what the big deal about Dot Waide was but since changing from another centre, I can honestly say it is amazing. My children settled very quickly and they love coming there!’

—Parent response on how they would describe us to someone else.

‘The greatest opportunity you can provide to your children for care and development … social, emotional, physical and intellectual. You can leave them and know they are safe and secure (like with your own family) however, at the same time know they are receiving the best opportunity in life in all aspects. The children love it!—which says it all.’

—Parent response on how they would describe us to someone else.

‘How the hell I fluked getting my children into Dot Waide I don’t know but I am ever so thankful we are there. The environment is just awesome. I have never felt uncomfortable and my children love going to ‘school’. The staff genuinely love your kids and they care. Staff always seem happy to be there and are caring, loving people. I cannot praise Dot Waide’s staff enough, I am forever thankful that you are a part of our lives and get as much of a kick out of my kids’ personalities as I do.’—Parent response on how they would describe us to someone else.
We got excellent feedback from the survey, with comments on things we knew we could improve, gaps in our communication strategies and pats on the back. We were able to identify new ways of thinking that will save time, providing more time for us to focus on children. We did discover a few things too—for example, our menu had disappeared from the sign-on desk!

Parents are increasingly connecting to us via our website and Facebook page, as well as through the emailed newsletter, with its additional links to resources and videos. We discovered that some of us are better at communicating and sharing the daily stories than others—parents were concerned about inconsistency.

The big message, though, is nothing beats face to face. Connecting with parents in real time, each and every day (if possible) is crucial to building relationships. Email, Facebook, notes sent home and newsletters pale when matched against taking time to talk to parents and share with them in an honest and open way.

So what’s next? Online surveys will be added to the arsenal of how we ask families and the broader community for input into what we do. This will enable us to conduct targeted surveys of families on particular issues and subjects, and will provide us with timely feedback. If we change aspects of what we do, we will be able to get feedback on whether the new approach is working in the way it was intended. The ultimate aim is to ensure that we have more time to be with the children, and more time to connect with families in meaningful ways.

Neville Dwyer
Director, Dorothy Waide Centre for Early Learning

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INTRODUCING SAM PAGE, INCOMING CEO OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA

It is very early in the morning in a cosy ‘hutte’ in Jindabyne as I pen this introduction. I mustn’t wake Sophie (aged seven) or Zac (aged nine) because I will be in trouble for ‘working’ during our snow holiday week, so I am typing very quietly and ignoring the coffee cravings—to boil the kettle would give me away!

It is an absolute privilege to be taking up the role of CEO with Early Childhood Australia (ECA). ECA is very highly regarded for its achievements in advocating for the quality education and care of young children. ECA’s projects and publications that support professional development are cutting edge and well supported within the sector. The organisation clearly has the active engagement and support of its members—which is critical to the effectiveness of any peak body.

The strength of ECA today is the result of many years of hard work. I would like to pay tribute to Pam Cahir, who has brought the vision of ECA to life through her leadership and energy. I will be working very hard to achieve a smooth transition without any loss of momentum. Pam and I have had a number of conversations about the work of ECA; I am grateful for her generosity and insight.

I am coming into this role with an established commitment to the wellbeing of children and families and a broad perspective on the interaction of different service systems. For the past five years I have been the Executive Director at Family & Relationship Services Australia (FRSA), the peak body for services funded through the Federal Government Family Support Program, which includes three streams—parent support, family strengthening and family law. Prior to this I have held various social policy and management roles with NGOs, government departments and two management consulting firms. During this time I worked on policy frameworks spanning early childhood care and education, social inclusion, homelessness and support for people with a disability and their families.

A feature of my work across settings has been to actively engage people with different skills and perspectives in the development of shared goals and strategies to achieve them. My approach to the leadership of ECA will reflect this and I will be looking to engage with members in a variety of ways—I am planning to get around the country to branch meetings and local events but also to use ECA’s online presence and social media channels. To borrow from The West Wing, my ‘first 100 days’ will be focused on consultation to identify the top priorities for serving the broader vision of the ECA network. In partnership with the National Board, I will be working to achieve these priorities.

I am confident that the team at ECA is highly capable and doing a fabulous job. I am expecting to hear that ECA is doing excellent work within the early education and care arena and I look forward to engaging with this and supporting it into the future. I can also see the potential for collaboration and interaction among early childhood educators and a variety of other professional disciplines supporting young children and their families, and I am looking forward to exploring this.

I look forward to meeting members and stakeholders over coming months, learning from them and developing strategies for ongoing communication.

Samantha Page
CEO, Early Childhood Australia
ENVIRONMENT MAKEOVER: TURNING A NEGLECTED EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRE INTO AN INSPIRING SPACE FOR LEARNING AND PLAY

Thinking about improving the physical environment in your setting? Follow this ECA project for ideas and inspiration.

Campbell St Children’s Centre Inc. in Queanbeyan, NSW, is working with Early Childhood Australia to focus their Quality Improvement Plan on the physical environment: the playground, rooms and spaces that the children and educators work and play in. After careful planning, Campbell St has decided to work towards a complete overhaul of the centre’s setting: a full ‘environment makeover’.

Starting in March, the makeover has involved the whole staff team, discussion with children and families, engagement and support from the local Queanbeyan business community and from educational resources provider MTA, while being guided by early childhood education and care consultants Luke Touhill and Judy Radich. The project is based on the premise that a well-organised learning environment has the potential to underpin good practice across all Quality Areas in the National Quality Standard and the five Learning Outcomes specified in the Early Years Learning Framework.

Inspired by the television program *Grand Designs*, ECA is filming the makeover process and producing a series of documentaries tracking the remarkable journey of the service as the educators develop, implement, review and modify their Quality Improvement Plan. It explores the initial challenges faced by the service, including its impoverished and inadequate resources and facilities, and captures the inspiring resilience, goodwill and commitment of the staff. Over time, we will see how the changed environment demands that educators think differently about their teaching and learning practices, develop real engagement with the board and connect in new ways with the wider community.

We have already seen how this project demonstrates the power of a plan to improve quality and how, over time, changes can be made that have benefits for everyone. It is much more than a creative, cost-effective makeover of the service’s physical environment—it is a story of change and the positive impact of the project on the everyday experiences of children, staff and parents. As one educator said, ‘I now feel like coming to work. I feel like an educator, not just a “policeman”’.

The Environment makeover documentary will be shown over several episodes in the ongoing Talking about practice series, part of the National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program (NQS PLP). Watch the ECA website for each new episode—it will be worth waiting for!

We welcome the ECEC community’s input on this project. You will be able to pose your questions, comments and thoughts through the NQS PLP online Forum and Facebook page. We hope this will help many educators be inspired and invigorated to use your Quality Improvement Plan to make change and real improvements in how you support young children’s ongoing learning.

This series is part of the Commonwealth-funded National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program. The project was initiated and is managed by Early Childhood Australia.

**Judy Radich and Luke Touhill**
Early Childhood Consultants