



Cultural diversity and Accreditation

by Lyndsay Mundy

Two services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and families shared their achievements and challenges in their Child Care Quality Assurance journeys with Rebecca Gewandt, Shelley Marie-Sainte and Lyndsay Mundy.

We would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land where we are, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. We pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and recognise they are the first people of Australia.

Child care services with a high percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and staff can face additional challenges during the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) process due to cultural differences. This article follows two long day care centres from completing self-study through to receiving their Accredited decision, and gives an insight into ways other centres can successfully participate in CCQA.

Yawarra Community & Child Care Centre in Bidwill, New South Wales has been running for 31 years and Director Karen Minter has been working there for 11 years. About 40 per cent of the children at Yawarra are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. Karen is a Dainggatti woman and grew up in the area, three of the staff are Aboriginal, and others are married to Aboriginal men. Karen believes that having Aboriginal staff helps parents to feel at ease.



Yawarra Community & Child Care Centre, Bidwill, NSW

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.5 and 6.2

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3 and 3.1-3.3

QIAS Principles: 1.4-1.6 and 2.1-2.3

Kinta Kids Child Care Centre in Rockhampton, Queensland has also been running for more than 30 years and has a high percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Until recently the centre also had a high number of Aboriginal staff, thanks to a partnership with the local employment agency and a registered training organisation. This number has declined recently due to a reduction of Aboriginal women in the area looking for work. Director Lynne King credits her Aboriginal staff as a major reason that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are happy to entrust their children to the centre.

Encouraging staff through self-study

To prepare for self-study, Kinta Kids had regular staff meetings as well as staff-director one-on-one meetings to talk about self-study. Lynne found that staff had trouble assessing their own skills and were reluctant to write that they were achieving a high standard. To increase self-confidence in their work, and to improve their skills, staff regularly go on training courses. New staff at Kinta Kids are encouraged to participate in a Professional Support Coordinator Queensland (PSCQ) seminar within their first couple of weeks at the centre to help them feel involved and valued. Staff like to receive certificates of attendance and achievement as recognition of their professional development. Throughout the Kinta Kids self-study process, Lynne gave constant encouragement to her staff.

To ensure that the centre was meeting all of the indicators, Yawarra's staff split into pairs and each pair became responsible for working through an indicator.



Kinta Kids Child Care Centre, Rockhampton, Qld

This meant that they could understand what was involved in reaching the standards required for Accreditation. "We developed checklists to meet the indicators and someone would go around once every few months to make sure that everything is right", Karen says. In team meetings staff discussed what they had learned from going through the indicators. "We tied together all of the ideas that they'd come up with and discussed what our strengths were", Karen says. This helped staff to realise that they were doing a good job, increased ownership and responsibility and helped the staff to feel involved in self-study. It also made them less nervous on the day of Validation because they knew that everything had been covered.

Involving families

One of the main challenges both Kinta Kids and Yawarra faced was gaining family involvement in self-study and the centre generally. Both centres own a bus which picks up children from the surrounding area in the mornings and drops them home in the afternoons so many families do not come into the centre regularly. "I could go for months without seeing some of the families from the bus", Karen says about Yawarra's families. Every now and then Karen will drive the bus so she can stop for a quick chat with parents. It was important to Karen to find ways of including families, so Yawarra started to send portfolios home for families to see what their children had been doing while at the centre.

Kinta Kids uses phone conversations to keep families informed of what is happening, and if the family doesn't have a telephone, Lynne will invite

them to the centre or even go and visit them at home. These strategies ensure that families are kept up to date with what is happening at the centre and what their children are doing day-to-day.

Yawarra prepared parents for self-study by putting together a questionnaire about how the centre could improve. They invited parents into the centre to have a coffee. "A lot of our parents have low literacy levels, so we tried to keep it as simple as possible", says Karen. Staff were on hand to answer any questions and help parents fill in the questionnaires. Karen believes that by inviting the parents into the centre they got a better response than if they had sent the questionnaires home.

Kinta Kids applied similar strategies when thinking about how to meet the requirements of Accreditation, for example around healthy eating. Kinta Kids does not provide food but held a morning tea for the parents where they provided sandwiches and other healthy options as an example of what was good for children to eat at lunch. Lynne believes that if a letter was sent home with the children, it would have made little difference to the children's lunches. However, after the morning tea, some parents began to provide their children with healthy sandwiches.

Building staff confidence for the Validation Visit

Kinta Kids did a lot of role playing in the lead up to the Validation Visit to help staff feel less intimidated by the Validator. Each staff member played the role of the Validator meaning that not only did they get to step into their shoes, they could look at the service with a fresh set of eyes. In weekly meetings, staff were encouraged to give their opinions so that they would feel more comfortable answering the Validator's questions. There was a lot of success when staff pointed out what was wrong with a situation when they were playing the Validator and watching their colleagues, but staff often became defensive if they were challenged on anything that they were doing. It turned out that this was good practice for the actual visit.

Yawarra got ready for the Visit by continuing to build the staff's confidence. "We made sure we implemented the checklists so that the staff could see that we are doing the right thing", Karen says. "Staff were worried about being put on the spot and that they would be asked something

that they wouldn't know how to answer. I just reassured them that they do know all the answers and if they need time to think just say 'can you come back to me in 5 minutes, I need to have a think about that''. Staff were concerned how the Validator would be, but she was open and friendly which helped put them at ease. Karen checked in with the staff during their breaks to make sure that everything was ok, and reassured them that they were doing a good job. "No matter how much you prepare, you're always going to be nervous on the day when someone is there critiquing what you do and how you do it", Karen says.

Lynne stressed the importance of the Validator being aware of the centre having a high percentage of Indigenous children and staff and having a clear understanding of cultural differences. This would help to put staff at ease and present a fairer picture of the centre than if staff were highly stressed because of the Visit.

How did it feel to be Accredited?

Karen says, "When it finally arrives and everything's wonderful, it's like 'yes!' ... The girls were really happy with the outcome. They were proud of themselves. It just reinforces to them what I try to reinforce all the time – that they are doing a really good job".

At Kinta Kids there was so much focus on getting through self-study and the Validation Visit that when the Accreditation Decision arrived, "there was just a great big sigh of relief", says Lynne.

Maintaining quality in the future

One of the ongoing challenges faced by the staff at Kinta Kids is the lack of continuity in attendance. Families often don't inform the centre that their children will be absent for an extended period of time and so it can be difficult to plan programming and staffing levels. Kinta Kids has learned to take this in their stride: when families return they are welcomed.

Kinta Kids tries to maintain quality every day, but Lynne acknowledges that it is hard. Kinta Kids has recently been awarded the 2010 Workforce Innovation Award in the category of Cultural Inclusion in the Workforce by the Queensland Government, thanks to their recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. This recognition has further encouraged staff that their contribution is valuable.

Yawarra found the Continuing Improvement Guide very helpful as there were many things they could implement straight away. They are still working on ways to get parents more involved and will hold more morning teas to keep them updated about things happening in the centre and to celebrate events such as NAIDOC Week and Sorry Day.

Karen says that services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be as open with families as they possibly can. "The staff have built up really good relationships with families. If the parent needs a shoulder to cry on they'll say 'come on, we'll get a cuppa and go sit out the back'". To encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, Karen suggests "building their confidence. They tend to lack a lot of confidence in their skills and knowledge".



Yawarra Community & Child Care Centre, Bidwill, NSW

Conclusion

The process of CCQA can be challenging for any service. Yawarra and Kinta Kids have both found ways to work through difficulties related to cultural differences faced by services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and staff and are proud to have achieved an Accredited decision ■