

Quality Assurance without folders

Tillman Park Children's Centre is a long day care centre operated by Marrickville Council in New South Wales. The centre has progressed through the Quality Improvement and Accreditation (QIAS) system a number of times since the QIAS was introduced in 1994. Staff member Miriam Giugni has written the following article with the aim of encouraging other child care services to 'think outside the square' when considering how they can demonstrate their quality practices.

Getting the boxes ticked

Two and a half years ago Tillman Park Children's Centre went through the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) Validation process. Those were the days of 'the folders'. The preparation for the Visit was tense and time consuming. Staff at the centre wanted to do well and have the opportunity to show that on an everyday basis the centre ran at what we felt was high quality. The way to do it, we believed, was to have a set of folders (matching of course!) that laid out, in great detail, 'evidence' of what we did all day. These folders were bulging with 'evidence' for each indicator outlined in the QIAS *Source Book* (2001). While the process of compiling folders was tiring and oppressive, we believed these folders were a safe way to ensure that every box would be ticked.

When the Validator came, she didn't even look at the folders! Every box was ticked based on the information the Validator accessed from the well organised office, and her conversations with people at the centre.

Living with the QIAS Quality Practices Guide

If you walk into Tillman Park Children's Centre you will find four copies of the QIAS *Quality Practices Guide* (2005): one for families, one in the office and the other two on the staffroom shelf. They are tattered and worn because they get used every day by every staff member to support, question and critique.

As part of our preparation for the Validation Visit in early 2007, every staff member read the *Quality Practices Guide* again and wrote critical reflections about their own practice and the general practices at the centre. At the same time we read sections of the *Quality Practices Guide* with the children, who made profound comments

about which parts were and weren't relevant to them! Families too flicked through and made comments. These critiques shaped our *Self-study Report*, which took us seven months to write.

At the same time, we began thinking about how we were going to 'do Accreditation'. I glanced over at the ten immaculate folders, still on the shelf from 2004, and thought: what was the point? The ten folders sat untouched for two and a half years! We would have to re-order under the new seven QIAS Principles, change the names on the outside and spend hours finding 'evidence' of what we did every day.

With a deep breath and a nervous glance we looked at those folders and decided that the ten that sat there would remain as a reminder of what we didn't want to do. And that was a moment of reprieve. The folders are still on the shelf, which is affectionately named 'the relic of 2004'.

What, no folders?

Making the decision not to have special folders for Accreditation troubled our colleagues in the early childhood community. It was actually beneficial for us to have to explain our decision, because it helped us feel reassured that we *did* have all the necessary documentation, and that it was easy to locate in our centre, not just during the Validation Visit, but everyday. This process was a reminder of what QIAS looked like in the past for us and what we were glad to be free from now.

Finding help in research to move forward

Fenech & Sumsion (in press) have illustrated that early childhood teachers who live within the CCQA landscape can feel obliged to prepare 'evidence' in order to 'pass' Accreditation. This fear is often what drives us to undertake practices such as 'the folders', as I have in the past.

Our current experience has helped lift that fear to a degree, which helped us to begin looking at what we do every day, rather than what we will do on Validation day. 'Getting it right' is something that people who work with children aim for. MacNaughton (2005) suggests that if we engage in the daily practice of critical reflection on what we do every day, then we may be better equipped to make decisions that empower us in our work, rather than oppress us.

In a sense, 'the folders' may be seen as a kind of oppression that keeps people who work with children 'bound in'. Instead we have tried to take a 'loose leaf' approach to help rethink 'evidence' and Validation. We now believe that having separate folders for the purposes of Validation only perpetuates a performative approach to CCQA, rather than an understanding of quality everyday.

Critical imagination

Sumsion (2006) offers 'critical imagination' as a useful way of 'thinking about' and 'imagining' different ways in which we can work with CCQA in our everyday practice. These 'imaginings' might include ways that enable us to claim professional autonomy, to resist feeling fearful, and to engage with the CCQA process as a critical experience rather than a burdensome one. These 'imaginings' then, can help shape our actions and decision making in ways that are more relevant to us and our communities. It is a method of shaping Accreditation from the bottom up.

The Validation Visit 2007

It did feel 'risky' for a few minutes when our Validator first arrived for the Visit. Once the Visit began, however, we realised that the information at the centre was as easy to find as we had expected. One of the strengths of the 'no folder approach' was that staff were available to contribute to the Visit collaboratively and proactively.

In addition, we now have a process of continuation in our everyday quality practice rather than a start and a finish. Recognising everyday practice as evidence of quality in itself relieves us of the burden of feeling we need to gather evidence and place it into folders. We will never have those folders again. What a relief ■

References and further reading

- Fenech, M., & Sumsion, J. (under review). Promoting high quality early childhood education and care services: Beyond risk management, performative constructions of regulation. In *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.
- MacNaughton, G. (2005). *Doing Foucault in early childhood studies: Applying Poststructural Ideas*. London: Routledge.
- National Childcare Accreditation Council (2001). *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Source Book*. Surry Hills: Author.
- National Childcare Accreditation Council (2005). *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System Quality Practices Guide*. Surry Hills: Author.
- Sumsion, J. (2006). *Using Foucault to critically imagine new possibilities for the regulatory environment*. Presentation to the Critical Curriculum Communities Conference, Erskine Park, August.