

# Australia's quality child care journey

*Sonja Tansey interviewed some of Australia's best known and highly regarded early and middle childhood education and care experts about their recollections of the development of Australia's first child care quality assurance system and their expectations for the future of child care.*



**Associate Professor June Wangmann** has played a significant role in the development and analysis of early childhood services and policy in Australia. She has served on many Commonwealth and State councils. She played a major role in the development of the national accreditation system for children's services in Australia and served as a member of the Interim National Accreditation Council and NCAC from 1993 to 1996. In recent years June has been involved in a research/consultancy project in Chile.

## The most challenging period

I was involved [in quality assurance] right from the very beginning. I did the Consultancy Report for the Hawke/Keating Government, and I spent time with the NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children] in America. So my memories go right back to all the committees that I sat on from the beginning; the Crawford Committee into the Interim Committee and then into the NCAC Committee. I certainly see [the development of the Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems] as the most challenging period in the history of children's services in this country. The decision to extend what was then called 'fee relief' to the private sector actually changed the whole nature of child care in Australia – and we're still in that process of change.

The strong point I want to make about the early committees and Council, is that people were prepared to work together and to make compromises to make a difference for Australia's children. To me that was exciting and was what kept us going – if you wait for a perfect system you'll never go forward. What we've seen that accreditation has done has been to bring together the professional interests and the political imperatives.

## Early courage

Those first long day care centres, followed by the family day care schemes and outside school hours care services, that participated in the system in the early days opened their doors and showed a tremendous amount of courage. I had enormous admiration for them. What they were prepared to do and continued to do was very much a part of the accreditation story and its success, and was a significant contribution.

I remember those first services were terrified about what was in store for them but they were prepared to do it. And I think that says an enormous amount about the child care field in Australia.

## The question of quality

As we now move into this new part of quality assurance, the question is 'Should quality be revisited?' To me it depends on the purpose of the journey. I think it's dangerous to revisit quality as a guide to a way forward because I think it's a very dynamic concept – it's not static and it does change. We need to look at quality as a very evolving concept with a focus on the actual context. So how quality was looked at ten years ago and how we look at it now is very different. Our image of the child has changed a lot in the last decade and what we have in this historical period is very different.

The other thing that I feel very strongly about is that you cannot legislate for quality. Once you have to legislate for quality, you then have the pressure to go to the lowest denominator, and that higher level of quality that comes through professionalism and the quality of the interactions with children and so on gets missing from that debate. What you can do, is that you can put in place elements that make it more likely that good quality will happen – like the changes to the ratios and the importance of training.

What I see as one of the main challenges for ongoing improvements to quality in Australia is that quality costs. We have had no recognition or contribution to that in this whole decade of debating about quality from our government. It's part of government rhetoric that the early years are important, but in terms of the percentage

## Reflections from the field

of our GDP that goes into this area, we are the second lowest of the OECD countries and yet we are one of the wealthiest countries in the world. So we've got to get the political parties to take the next step whilst they now recognise the importance of the early years.

### A decade of achievement

When you look down the quality assurance road and consider where we started and where we are, a tremendous amount has been

achieved in the last decade. I believe that those achievements have only been possible because of the commitment and hard work of many groups like Early Childhood Australia (ECA) but also very significantly, and perhaps the most important, has been the work that NCAC has done. I think they have made a tremendous contribution to those achievements. And I don't think we'd be in the position we are in now, 10 years down the track, without what's happened through NCAC ■



*Kym Groth has worked in the early childhood field for 21 years. She is currently the Professional Development and Support Manager for the Family Day Care Association Queensland. Kym is responsible for the management and supervision of trainers and plays a key role in developing learning materials, resources and training packages specific to the family day care early childhood community within Queensland.*

### An exciting start

When I first read the quality assurance document for family day care I was excited and relieved that it was targeted at what we were actually about; it had a family feel to it. For family day care, it was like the light came on about what we really were and what we were providing to the community. It took us to the next step in ensuring that what happens for children is appropriate and meets contemporary thinking about what's good for children and the different ages we were caring for. One of the struggles was that, in the process of quality assurance, some carers got lost in trying to be more like centres rather than embracing that concept of what family day care could be in a small group environment within a home. But I'm seeing a return to that, particularly in the last couple of years where there's been a focus on natural environments and we're asking ourselves 'what do we know about what's good for children?'

### Focus on core beliefs

In 2001 I joined a new family day care service that was merging into the first round of Family Day Care Quality Assurance. One of the things they were doing was looking at their philosophy, and they had all these lovely words on a piece of paper and they all agreed with those things. I

remember the debates about 'What really was our core belief? What was our higher purpose?'. After a few long discussions it really became clear that our higher purpose, the core of our existence, was about children. The staff and carers came together to collaborate on a statement of practice that embraced our new understanding. In essence, this became the guiding principle for the service, assisting stakeholders to see past the day to day operation and focus on making decisions that placed children's interests at the forefront of all our actions. Whenever we came together to make decisions that statement was at the core of all the things we did. A core statement bonds people together and brings them to the same point so that everyone is looking through the same lens.

### Enthusiasm for the future

I feel enthusiastic about the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia* – I think that people have done some amazing work around these. I feel proud that we're moving to a place where children are the focus for us – the *Frameworks* guide us and gives us a foundation for thinking, 'Can we do better for children? Are there better ways for us to do this and can we do it in different ways?' ■

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**Tonia Godhard AM** is an Early Childhood Consultant. She has held a number of positions including National President of Early Childhood Australia (ECA), inaugural chair of the National Children's Services Forum and is currently a board member of the National Investment for the Early Years (NIFTeY). Tonia was a member of the NCAC Board for two terms from 1995 to 2001, a Moderator for many years and, more recently, a member of the Quality Advisory Group.

## The very beginning...

My involvement was before the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) was set up because I was on the AECA [Australian Early Childhood Association] (now ECA) Board at that time. It had been on people's minds for a while so we started having quite heated debates about whether we should have a system and what it should look like. Then it moved into the more political phase where we were committed to trying to convince people and meeting with politicians. Significant for me was that we got state government money to bring Sue Bredekamp out from the NAEYC in America. It was good in many ways to have an overseas speaker that really knew how it could work and the benefits it could bring, and to meet with government. She also trained us as Reviewers in the American system and we then piloted that in NSW. We had a huge amount of goodwill and commitment to do that with no support really, except the field establishing its own support groups. The passion and commitment to having a quality improvement process was fantastic at that time.

## Past wisdoms for the future

My next memory is Quentin Bryce – the leader she was! Quentin always used to make the statement that, "We don't talk about QA [quality assurance], we talk about QI [quality improvement] and QA". Early on we always talked about the two together. And that is now one of the dangers – that we don't lose quality improvement. I'm less interested in a system against a standard if it isn't based on quality improvement. I think if you don't have that philosophical underpinning then what you have is a regulatory system.

The QIAS did lots of things and quite unusual things – it brought the field together in terms of service types. Having the NCAC Board comprised of community based and the private sector has

improved the dialogue, so that's been really positive. As I look back on my years in advocacy there's much more togetherness of service types and recognition that we're all different and we all offer something different to families, and that's fine.

## Current challenges

I am concerned that the processes used in developing the new system have involved very limited consultation with the field. Whilst there have been information sessions with some ability to raise questions or write submissions there is a sense in which the field lacks any real involvement and hence ownership of the changes. One of the significant challenges I see resulting from this will be the need to engage the profession in endorsing the new system with a belief that it will result in significant improvements for children and their families. In part this challenge needs to be met by well-resourced professional development and other forms of professional support.

Another challenge is to ensure that in 'raising the bar' we have a focus on the quality areas dealing with the program, relationships and interactions. Again this involves ensuring sound professional development for those working with children but also highly skilled assessors who understand what to look for in the implementation of the program and the nuances of different rating levels. It would be helpful not to lose the expertise of current staff of NCAC who have developed skills and expertise around observing programs and working in a nationally consistent manner. Assessors need not only training in observational assessment and report writing but also a deep and current understanding of early childhood education and care programs. At this time I understand there is no commitment to having Assessors with early childhood expertise and this for me poses challenges for the credibility of the system and its acceptance by the profession ■

## Reflections from the field



*Dr Fran Press is a senior lecturer in early childhood teacher education at Charles Sturt University, where she has taught since 2005. Dr Press recently completed her PhD: Sociology at Macquarie University on early childhood policy. She teaches and researches in areas related to early childhood policy, sociology and leadership.*

### Early quality assurance memories

I was working at Community Child Care NSW just before accreditation was introduced. I was lucky enough to be working with June Wangmann for some of that period. June was instrumental in getting the early childhood field to think about the potential of an accreditation system. Amidst the controversy that the introduction of the system generated, there was an incredibly unifying aspect as early childhood advocates coalesced around the importance of focussing on the experience of children in early childhood programs. That was very exciting.

In Community Child Care I was involved in management training around the implementation of accreditation. In the mid 1990s I went up to the Northern Territory. These were really different contexts, yet in both, accreditation moved people forward in thinking about the purpose of early childhood programs.

### Important developments

Quality assurance legitimised the great things that were happening already in many programs as well as pushing and inspiring a lot of services and staff to do better. For many years the big

child care debates were 'getting more child care places' and 'keeping fees low'. The idea that you actually care about the experiences of children was marginalised in those discussions. Accreditation gave validity to the argument that there's more to child care than providing a million more places or keeping fees as low as possible – we really do have to attend to what's important for children within these settings. The introduction of accreditation was catalytic, a very important development. It was terrific when it was extended to family day care and outside school hours care.

### New system challenges

Effectively collapsing regulation and accreditation into one system will be challenging and great care will be needed to ensure that baseline standards are upheld. At the same time, really great practice comes from serious thinking: 'What do we believe in? Why do we do what we do? What philosophy underpins practices at the setting?' Hence, assessment in the new system requires professional, reflective observation and discussion as well as documentation. The background of Assessors will be critical as will ongoing research and evaluation alongside the implementation of the new system ■



*Margaret Young is a social worker who worked as a trainer, program developer, and manager in early childhood education and care services for many years, most recently as CEO of the Sydney Lady Gowrie Child Centre (now Gowrie NSW) until 2008. She now works as a consultant, continues her commitment to ECA and its advocacy as National President, and chairs the National Children's Services Forum.*

### Early yearnings

Memories of my early days with Gowrie and ECA certainly include hearing the yearning for quality improvement for young children expressed by many in our sector. The strength of this voice, and the vision and commitment of those promoting

the introduction of accreditation and those working to establish the NCAC – in the face of fear and even threats from some – were inspiring. For me personally, working at a Gowrie centre and being part of the delivery of QIAS training, support and information was a highlight. The enthusiasm of family day care and outside school



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hours care services to join the quality assurance system was very important, as was NCAC's embracing of these sectors.

Experience with the quality assurance systems has encouraged widespread understanding that quality requires structural elements such as good staff ratios and qualifications as well as curriculum frameworks and good practice. We have learnt the importance of ongoing improvement and that this applies everywhere - in regulations, quality systems, services, and in our practice as individual professionals. We have also learnt the importance of educating parents about quality. NCAC has been a leader in this, and we must now expand and enhance this work.

## Acceptance and commitment

To me one of NCAC's most important achievements has been establishing and

operating the quality assurance systems across the three service types. Participation in quality assurance is now accepted and expected in the sector, and this provides tangible evidence of a broad commitment to quality and the base for further improvement.

## Forward focus

It is very important to focus on the wellbeing of children and the deep significance of experiences in their early years, and to work to really integrate early education and care. We must achieve well qualified staff, provide early childhood teachers across the day in long day care centres, stay abreast of the evidence, improve our individual knowledge and practice accordingly, and build the voice of parents for quality. We should be vocal in expecting services and governments to maintain and even strengthen their support for ongoing improvements ■



**Ros Cornish** has worked in the early childhood education and care sector for over 30 years in various roles including teacher, educator, long day care centre director and, in more recent times, as the CEO of Lady Gowrie Tasmania. As Deputy National President and National Treasurer of the organisation, Ros is passionate about her advocacy role and her commitment to ECA has been an important aspect of her professional life. Ros represents ECA on the National Children's Services Forum.

## Memories and foundations

I remember the varying levels of support for the system from child care providers, particularly between the community based and private sector. My other key memory was the view that any such system would be duplicating the existing state/territory based regulations/licensing processes. It is ironic that there remains varying levels of support for the new National Quality Framework and the distant thoughts of duplication have been addressed through integrating the two processes into the one framework.

## Changes and improvements

There has been a distinct change in the provision of education and care, and quality assurance became the tool used by many leaders in the sector to influence changed practice. The *Workbooks* and *Quality Practices Guides* became the 'bible'! The systems provided benchmarks

for quality which supported leaders in their role of fostering continual improvement – everyone became more accountable.

There is no doubt that the introduction of quality assurance in Australia has contributed significantly to improving the quality of service provision and influenced the way in which educators have undertaken their roles and responsibilities. The resources and support mechanisms provided by NCAC and the Australian Government have complemented and supported improved practice in the early and middle childhood sector.

## Better outcomes

The requirement to demonstrate what you did and why you were doing it not only resulted in educators using personal reflection to improve practice, but it also supported increased understanding by families of the importance of positive early and middle childhood experiences.

## Reflections from the field

The requirements of the systems also contributed to improving the status and standing of the profession within the broader community.

Some of the quality indicators within the systems focussed on ongoing professional learning, which has translated into services having an increased understanding of the important role professional learning plays in supporting better outcomes for children and families, and indeed the professionalism of educators.

### Ambitions and aspirations

The National Quality Framework which incorporates licensing and quality has the potential to support an increased focus on improving outcomes for children. To achieve this,

the focus must be on ensuring there is an early and middle childhood workforce who are suitably qualified, skilled and knowledgeable to support the aspirational intent of the framework.

An increased focus on pedagogy will be a key success of the new system. The inclusion of early years of school has the potential to heighten the credibility of the early and middle childhood sector and effective transitional arrangements between this sector and formal schooling.

Attention must also be given to leadership – leaders will be required to support and guide their colleagues through processes of reflective conversations and inquiry to ensure an environment of continuous improvement ■



*Robyn Monro Miller has 20 years experience in the school age care sector in a variety of roles including Service Co-ordinator for community based services and local Government, TAFE teacher, trainer and as a member of a parent management committee. Robyn is Chair of the National Out of School Hours Services Association and CEO of the NSW peak body Network of Community Activities. She has represented the sector on a number of national and NSW state reference groups, most recently in the development of My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia.*

### Optimism from OSHC

From an Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) perspective we were always keen to join the quality assurance system. We lobbied forcefully to say, "We've got quality assurance for other child care sectors, how about we have it for OSHC?" We had the optimism that we could move into the system and function really well within it.

Quality assurance gave the OSHC sector a new baseline from which to function. For many people quality assurance allowed them to say, 'this is what we're doing' – it allowed them to articulate a vision for quality and it recognised those services that were doing really good things. It also had an impact of influencing those services that were perhaps not functioning so well – it was really bringing people up to standard. I was amazed by how many people openly embraced quality assurance when it came on board. We didn't have resistance or bad media attention. We had a lot of people saying, "Yes, this is long overdue".

### A challenging area

One of the areas that the sector felt most challenged by was the 'links with the community' requirement of the Outside School Hours Care Quality Assurance system. However, although there were a number of people who felt challenged by that, it was something that quality services had always done well. I had a lot of feedback from people that didn't like it at first who turned around later and said, "You know that link to the community? That's fantastic, it's made such a difference for our service and we're actually doing so much more now than we ever did before".

### A positive response from parents

In my own service, when we were just about ready to go through accreditation for our first time, we were putting up all the information that we had done for each of the quality areas. Our parents were reading it, and I remember a parent coming up to me and saying, "This is amazing I never knew you did all this before!" They just assumed (our service) was somewhere

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they dropped their children and that was all. When they read what we had actually done for each quality area, they were suddenly looking at us amazed at what happened in the centre. Behind what looked like chaos and mayhem was actually a very carefully thought out and well-planned program of service delivery that encompassed a holistic approach to children's wellbeing.

## Broad scope for the future

At one stage I believe the sector lost its way a little bit as there was a tendency to adopt a checklist mentality with the quality assurance system that tied down every word. We've got

the potential now with the new system and its broader scope to allow people to apply quality within their own context. We're in a position to look at things in a whole new way. We've matured and we've come past the checklist point as a sector and we are now ready to look more broadly at quality within our own service context.

We were frightened before accreditation came in, and there were a lot of people creating alarm bells. It is time to show maturity and leadership and say, "Change is frightening but we can influence it and we can make things more positive as a result of it" ■



*Judy Atkinson has been involved in education and child care since 1975, initially teaching for the South Australian Education Department where her focus was on early childhood education, equal opportunity and anti bias environments. Judy was a board member of NCAC for four years. Judy operates four child care services and two outside school hours care services in South Australia. She is also the CEO of Child Care Services Training, which is an industry based RTO delivering Certificate III & Diploma of Children's Services.*

## Bringing the field together

In the early days there were many people that embraced quality assurance and took it upon themselves to form hub groups – people got together and worked together. This was the first time that the private and community sector really worked together in South Australia. We all felt we were on a level playing field embarking on something very new. These hub groups met every week and we moved from being really guarded about what we were doing, to having open and frank discussions – admitting we're not up to the standard that we should be and asking each other, "What are you doing to do this?" I can remember at one of the meetings sitting back and thinking, 'This is really how it should be; it shouldn't be who you are, it should be [asking] what are we going to do together to improve?' People were sharing policies, they were sharing practices, they were even doing staff swaps to benefit from being in a different work place so they could share what they knew and take good practices back to their own centres.

## Catalyst for raising the bar

There is no doubt that quality assurance caused a lot of reflection on practices and that it definitely

improved what was happening in child care. I personally feel it was the catalyst to raise child care from a cottage industry to a really valuable community resource and an acknowledgement of its role in supporting families in the community. The quality assurance system has evolved and it has continued to raise the bar; it keeps challenging providers.

## Let's celebrate and move forward

For the future, what I'd really like to see is a celebration of what's happened and how far the existing system has brought us. I have some real concerns about the negative media that seems to be coming through at the moment – it almost discounts all the good the quality assurance systems have done up until now. I think it's really sad and we're not sure where it's coming from. If people want us to embrace the new system they need to acknowledge the good things that have happened before and the existing system, and see that this is our next logical step. In the new system I do think it is important to focus on actual engagement with children – it's time we took that step ■