



Quality educators – It's more about the person than the place

Dr Brenda Abbey > Childcare by Design

The introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF), with its emphasis on quality learning environments, has led to an abundance of workshops, articles, and resources on this topic. However, the focus of these has been largely on the physical environment, and this may have given the misleading impression that quality learning environments are synonymous with quality physical environments.

They overlook the pivotal role that educators play in any successful care and education setting. Educators are more important than the environment and resources. Your effectiveness as an educator also depends on your personal characteristics, as well as your practices.

Understandably, the recruitment of educators focuses on the regulatory requirements of formal qualifications, experience, positive working with children checks, current first-aid, asthma and anaphylaxis training, and child protection training. Other requirements emphasised include: knowledge of the Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011, National Quality Standard 2011, Belonging Being Becoming, and My Time, Our Place 2011; ability to relate to children, families and other team

members; enthusiasm; and a stated passion for working with children.

Once employed, their professional development focuses on topics such as programming and documentation, intentional teaching, reflective practice, collaborative partnerships with families, effective teamwork and guiding children's behaviour. However, a quality educator needs more than these.

Haim Ginott, the child psychologist and parent educator who wrote *Teacher and Child* (1972), identified that the essential characteristic of quality educators is the ability to recognise that they have enormous power over the children in their care, and the responsibility this places on them to use this power appropriately. Educators can determine the type of day the children will have. They can

influence how children feel about themselves. They can also affect how children feel about and treat each other.

Other researchers have also identified important characteristics for educators, such as being kind, authentic, empathetic, caring, compassionate, creative, adaptable, a life-long learner, forgiving, inspirational, organised, resilient, patient, resourceful, positive, accepting of mistakes, a good listener, able to negotiate and solve problems, persistent, fair and equitable, consistent, able to cope with ambiguity, and balanced in our own lives. Further, educators need to have the life skills of 'a positive attitude, teamwork, cooperation, constructive use of the imagination, perseverance and determination, pride in our

work, communication, acceptance of diversity and a multi-cultural society, recognising opportunities, setting goals, facing challenges, coping with change ...' listed by Peter Price as those that need to be introduced to young children (Early Edition Winter 2004, p. 2).

These lists contain some of those dispositions from the Learning Frameworks (Outcome 4) that we want to facilitate in children. It would be reasonable to expect that educators possess and model these. 'Children develop dispositions for learning including curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination, and reflexivity' (BB&B, 2009, p. 34; MTOP, 2011, p. 33). 'Children also observe and develop a range of skills and processes, including problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching, and investigating' (BB&F, 2009, p. 35; MTOP, 2011, p. 34).

What would we see from quality educators using these positive characteristics? They would:

- Recognise and seize opportunities to build resilience in a child who spills their lunch and cries – instead of the educator's focus being on stopping the child crying, it would be on how the child will deal with the problem of what he/she will now have for lunch.
- Use encouragement rather than praise – it takes a moment to use and is subtle, but it values the child more.
- Skilfully respond to a parent speaking in disparaging terms about their child in front of the child – a quality educator also knows how to manage a parent who is criticising another educator or suggests that the educator can discipline their child inappropriately.
- Communicate with a parent, wanting to leave an unwell child at the service, in a way that educates the parent about the busy day their child has at the service, and how difficult that might be for the child when they are unwell, even if they have been playing at home. They would be able to reference them to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) requirements and the service policies and procedures, the rights of other children and educators not to be exposed to illness, and the legal requirements for this.
- Inspire children with purpose, with that walk and look of 'I know what I am doing. I know what I am about.'
- Model inclusion when recognising that a child has difficulty joining the group or being accepted – a quality educator might note a group of children playing bakery shop in home corner and invite the child to go to the shop with her to buy some bread. The educator would then receive an imaginary phone call and ask if the child would continue to buy the bread for her and hand her pretend

money, saying to the children in the shop, 'I'll be back in a moment; my friend is going to buy the bread for me.'

- Share information with a parent about a child's dispositions – for example, 'He is really imaginative and a great problem-solver. He was upset but then found a toy he enjoyed so he self-soothed. It is so good that he has the ability to sort out his problems. His curiosity will be very helpful to him as he continues with his learning. He was very resourceful today.'
- Delay aspects of their response to a child exhibiting inappropriate behaviour until the child is ready to receive the guidance – and this guidance is not witnessed by onlooking children.

Quality educators provide quality physical environments. However, they contribute far more to the learning environment by being determined to be the best person they can be, as well as the best teacher. That is the essence of a quality educator.

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